

After the Death of Ivan Ilyich by Sonja Srinivasan

I

After the last guest had tearfully departed and the last crumbs wiped from the tables, after Gerasim had swept the flecks from the muddy boots off the floor and the housekeeper had scraped up the molten wax that dripped onto the woodwork,

Praskovya Fëdorovna retired to bed upstairs with a glass of tea with jam. It would give her a few hours to stall the inevitable: her husband's funeral, the interment, and the aftermath. Her maid Nadezhda had implored her to get some sleep—"Madame, you must! You have been awake non-stop for two days!"—but sleep evaded her, drifting in and out of her body like a phantom, not allowing her to remain coherent and conscious or completely at rest. But one could not sleep well in one's home when things would no longer be the same.

Pasha had cried the amount required for a socially-prominent widow of a well-known and respected husband, shaken hands, thanked guests for saying their goodbyes to her Ivan in his last moments, and murmured the prayers along with the priest. The rancid smell of the candles, along with the stuffiness of the room, had made her head spin. Pasha had watched as the guests—some of whom she did not know—bowed their heads and made the sign of the cross, shedding small tears that indicated both their grief for the dying man and his soon-to-be widow, and their own fears of mortality. Her Ivan now lay, waxen, in his bed, at peace with his death in a way that would take her years to achieve.

Lisa and her fiancé Fëdor Petrovich had promised to escort Pasha to the funeral, and Vasya had been spirited away by an uncle for a brisk walk in the park and the promise of a pastry afterwards. With the children gone, and the cat prowling around the kitchen in hopes of being given scraps from the servants, Pasha was on her own. She sat on the edge of her bed, massaging one foot, then the other, attempting to revive them after being embalmed in her tight little black boots. Her crinolines rustled in rhythm and were so slippery that they nearly made her slide off the bed. Pasha heard the priest's phaeton drive away, though she could not see it when she peered out the window. On the ledge was a small nest, and for a moment she took solace in studying the small brown structure, its stiff twigs bent with great skill into a round shape by a master weaver that operated on instinct.

In his last three days, her husband had screamed nonstop, a deathly wail that never seemed to end, like a Siberian wind howling over the steppes. It became a tangible part of their home, like the upholstery or the wallpaper or the curtains that Ivan had hung by himself. But now it seemed that noise was preferable to quiet; it filled the space, provided a distraction from oneself, from feeling what one did not want to feel. Pasha was desperate for a

sound—the scratching of a mouse, the shout of a child, the drumming of rain on the eaves, anything at all.

The doctor had given her some pills, discreetly slipping them to her and saying, “In case, for later,” with a bow. She had given him a contemptuous smile in return, but now, she took the tiny paper packet in which ten pills were folded and poured one into her hand. It was the size of a child’s fingernail, round and white, a promise of an opiate slumber.

Pasha was not sure where the voice was coming from. She first thought it was Ivan, and then her daughter. The voice sounded blurry, as though echoing in a cavern. “Who is it?”

“Me, Madame—Nadezhda.”

Pasha rolled over in a pool of black chiffon, her eyes red, her hair undone from its once-neat bun. “What do you want? I’m not hungry.”

“No, Madame—it is time for the funeral,” the polite voice insisted. Nadezhda knocked on the door again and entered. “I don’t want to hurry you, but everyone is waiting,” she said, and

proceeded to help her mistress with the slippery dress, which Pasha had put on upside down. Nadezhda sat Pasha at the dressing table and styled her hair into a tight chignon while Pasha powdered her face in a cloud of white.

Pasha frowned at herself in the mirror. “But where are Lisa and Vasya?”

Nadezhda finished pinning the last strand. “They came for you earlier, but you were sleeping, so they went ahead. But Lisa sent the carriage back.”

The maid found Pasha’s small black hat on a chair under some stockings. She placed it on Pasha’s head and pulled down the veil that caged her face in netting, as though she were a sad animal not allowed to escape her fate.

“I cannot do this.”

Nadezhda leaned back in horror. “But Madame, you must!”

“I cannot, I cannot,” Pasha slumped on her stool. “This is not supposed to happen!”

“I’ll help you,” Nadezhda boosted her by the arm.

“No, I cannot go to the funeral...” Pasha repeated, as the maid led her by the arm down the corridor and down the stairs,

one step at a time, to the foyer where Dr. Chernyshevski was waiting to take her in Lisa's carriage. "No, no, I cannot go..."

II

Everybody was waiting at the church when Pasha arrived with the doctor. All the expected society were present. There were Ivan's colleagues: Peter Ivanovich, Fëdor Vasilievich, Ivan Egorovich, Schwartz among them, and government officials to whom he had tipped his hat over the years. Members of the lesser nobility and distant relatives whom Pasha scarcely knew. Friends from their social circles with whom they played bridge (such as Mikhail Mikhailovich) or went to the opera. Guests who were of fashion at the current moment: a chamber orchestra conductor, an actress, an Italian painter. The ceremony felt interminable: endless prayers recited, candles lit, incense burned. Now and then Pasha heard weeping or sniffing, especially from Lisa, who had been close to her father. But Pasha could not register anything, feeling that this was all a blur of sights and sounds and smells, everything gold and hazy, with myriad icons observing the rituals from the walls. She put her arm around Vasya, not so much for his comfort, but to remind herself that he was there, that this was indeed a real occurrence and not a hazy dream in

which she might float up to the dome, up to the apostles conjured in beautiful mosaic.

It took a nudge from her sister-in-law for Pasha to follow the procession. The priests intoned prayers to ensure that Ivan's passage from the mortal world to the afterlife would be a holy one. How strange that the day of the burial would be a relatively pleasant one! Pasha always associated funerals with gloominess and rain. But a pleasant day with a minimum of clouds and a sun peeping out and a light breeze made her husband's funeral feel all the more cruel. Everyone else was either looking down with tears or gazing as the coffin was lowered. But Pasha was observing the couples—too many to count, including her own daughter who rested upon the arm of her fiancé, Fëdor Petrovich. Lisa's face remaining composed until the moment when the coffin was laid in the ground. Pasha longed to comfort her, the sobbing daughter who had belonged to her and Ivan since she had emerged, mewling and puking and pink. But instead, it was Fëdor who patted Lisa's arm and squeezed her hand. After the last prayers were said, it was final—Ivan was thus laid in the earth, never to return.

The friends and attendees and family embraced Pasha, offering their condolences before they returned to their carriages. Vasily Glazunov, the banker, bowed, and his lips twitched under his black curling mustache. “So sorry, Madame. Your husband was a very well-respected man, and I am aware he was suffering for quite some time.”

“Thank you, Vasily Igorovich.”

“But I’m afraid we must talk soon, some matters to discuss about the—” he offered a hand gesture, refraining from mentioning, out of delicacy, any direct reference to the estate.

“Was there a problem?”

“Would you come on the 17th?”

Pasha nodded and dabbed her tears. “Yes, we shall meet shortly.”

Glazunov handed her his card with an elegant twirl from his fingertips like a magician that contradicted the ominous look in his eyes.

The day was calm and still as Pasha rode home. The air felt like a balm, warm with a slight cool edge, and the sky was an immaculate blue punctuated by gray-white puffs. *Clip-clop, clip-clop* the horses trotted along past all the buildings that looked

pristine and clean and immutable; they would outlast many generations of human life. Dr. Chernyshevski sat opposite her, observing her as she stared out the window. Pasha clutched a gold-embroidered handkerchief Lisa had left behind in the carriage, her glazed eyes gazing at the scenery.

Though she was in no mood to do so, she invited the doctor to supper, as she had already invited Mikhail Mikhailovich and the elderly noblewoman of Kazan. As they ate, they reminisced about Ivan, and the old lady chattered that one's social position always depended on one's husband, and it was best for widows to live with their children or relatives. "Of course, a big house such as this would feel empty with just one person rattling around in it," the woman remarked. Pasha chewed her cake stiffly and relished the extra spoonful of cream the cook had given her. It was true the old lady was half senile. But how she would carry on now was indeed a mystery to Pasha.

III

As Pasha readied herself to see the banker, she remembered the happy times before Ivan's demise, before the house reeked of illness and the stench of death had come. Lisa had begun the preparations for a lavish wedding. Ivan had even told her "I shall indeed be better in time for your marriage, my Lisette. Money should be no object. Just a few more pills and syrups from the doctor, and I will be good as new." Though Pasha had her doubts as to Ivan's health, given his cadaverous appearance and wails of pain, she held her tongue so as not to upset her daughter. Even little Vasya was overjoyed at the thought of riding in a carriage and seeing his sister in a beautiful dress and eating all the honey cake he wanted.

"*Maman! Maman!* I think I have found my gown for the wedding," Lisa called to her mother one afternoon from her place on the low pouffe that was always her favorite, with her skirts spread out around her.

"Yes, dear?" Pasha set down her embroidery and hurried to her daughter, who was surrounded by magazines and prints, poring through them with great delight.

“What do you think about this? Or this?” Lisa pointed to a couple of drawings of the latest fashion in bridal gowns embroidered with flowers.

“But we must first plan for the ceremony and the feast and invite the guests.”

“*Maman*, there is a tailor who apprenticed in Paris. He is very popular, all the brides want to go to him, so he must make my dress!” Lisa exclaimed, throwing her hands in the air.

“You had better get an appointment quickly,” Pasha said. “I will talk to the Cathedral soon.”

“And then we’ll have the grandest celebrations, and food—from Marchand’s of course. I just love their oysters and we must have dozens and dozens!”

Pasha scanned the array of dresses in the pictures spread around. The neckline in this one might elicit a comment that it was vulgar; the train on that one might cause a guest to trip over it. “That one is funny!”

“But I like that one!” Lisa pouted.

“You must look elegant, my dear.” Pasha flipped through a magazine. “It looks like a peasant dress made in silk satin.”

Pasha recalled this scene as she finished powdering her

face and gave her neck an extra mist of perfume that smelled of jasmine and tuberose. She had to present herself in a respectable way to Vasily Glazunov. Besides, widowhood did not preclude attempts at elegance. The black chiffon was so tiresome, so humorless, that when she was alone in her room, she preferred to remain in her bright white, starched petticoats with a butter-colored cashmere shawl draped around her shoulders. She screwed the pearl drops into her ears and adjusted them while glancing in the mirror. She should not give him reason to think she was less informed about these sorts of affairs than her husband, though it was true. Pasha had no intention of being spoken down to just because she was now without a husband. For all these years, she had managed a household with a minimum of help from Ivan, so she could still do it now that he was departed.

The morning was clear, and so Pasha decided to walk to Banker Glazunov's office instead of going in the carriage. She had refused an umbrella, despite being pressed by the housekeeper to take one in case the expected light morning rain became snow. As she exited the house, she noticed that some of the hedges by the low wall needed to be trimmed, and there was a dead

forsythia shrub in the corner the gardener needed to remove. One of the stones encircling the small pool was missing. If Ivan had noticed this, he would have summoned the gardener to fix it within two hours, making everything look perfect and neat again. It was too much for her to keep up house maintenance now, given her state of mind.

She hoped that all would be well with the visit to Glazunov, but there was one thing that weighed on her mind. The lawyer Kozlov had come to her house a week ago and sat her down at the desk. He laid an endless stack of papers before her to sign: documents related to the house, the deed to the estate, papers about their dacha and the surrounding farmland, the inspector, the coroner. And he said her husband's pension would not be released unless she found a particular certificate, but that could be God-knows-where, perhaps in Ivan's desk or the chest of drawers or even the cat's cozy bed for all she knew. As soon as he was gone, Pasha searched the entire upstairs and the desk downstairs, but the certificate was nowhere to be found. She prayed that Glazunov would be able to remedy this problem, as he had attended to their finances.

She turned onto Morskaya Ulitsa, where the little church's bells were pealing. How strange that, in his last moments, Ivan had accepted God. For all their married life, he had been scornful of religion, mocking it as social convention. "If you want a new hat to show off, my dear Pashka, I should be glad to buy you one for your own enjoyment. You needn't suffer through sermons to purchase new *vêtements*." And there were other times when he was apt to dismiss any spiritual philosophy. "That is all good and well, Mikhail Mikhailovich," she heard him say while shuffling the cards. "But on a day-to-day level, for those of us who are not peasants, who live in great comfort, who have a certain degree of control—what use is it to pray to an icon to deliver some miracle when we know well we determine our lives? Will God give us 13 spades here as we play if we pray to Alexander Nevsky?" Ivan laughed a hearty rasping sound that bubbled up from his lower abdomen, making his body shake like jelly, a laugh that Pasha thought made him look and sound like a country bumpkin.

She reached the bank and went up the staircase of the large building. Banker Glazunov's office smelled like burnt coffee and old books and leather, and its lack of light made the

atmosphere all the gloomier. Her legs quivered, but she drew a deep breath, ready to face the morning's ordeal.

"Please, sit down, Madame Golovina," he pulled out a chair for Pasha.

"How do you do, Vasily Igorovich? I decided to walk here today because I could do with some fresh air and exercise. Ivan always said my figure was too robust and that I needed to—"

"I'm afraid we haven't got time for chitchat," Banker Glazunov said, pouring her a cup of tea.

"Yes, thank you," Pasha said, twisting her fur stole in her hands. This was not going to be a warm interaction, despite Glazunov's hospitality.

"It seems your husband had been in some trouble before he passed away."

"Oh yes, he had been suffering for many months: a terrible pain in the side which the doctors could not explain for the longest time, and then they prescribed too many medicines and..."

"I am not talking about that kind of trouble. He was in financial trouble."

As Pasha sat back in her chair, a feeling came over her as

though stung by an insect whose venom starts in the arm or foot, then spreads slowly throughout the body, resulting in paralysis.

He produced a ledger and showed Pasha the dwindling numbers in red ink. A bad investment here, a loss of money there, a loan taken and not paid off soon enough.

“By and large, people find out after it is too late. Once too much money has been spent.” Glazunov refilled their cups with the steaming amber liquid. “He owed considerable money on the house, not to mention the debts he had from some unfortunate investments in mining—”

“Mining? We had farmland!”

“Farmland as well, and from horseracing, and so on, not to mention all the costs of the funeral.”

“How did this happen?”

“As it always happens, Madame Golovina—through the mismanagement of one’s finances.”

“But Ivan assured me that we were financially sound. He always said we were prosperous, could afford the finest things, and that I would always be looked after. He has a pension—I just need to find the certificate, it is lying in the house somewhere. We own property and have our investments and if you put it all

together, that adds up to quite a lot.”

“That may be all very fine and well when said, but the reality is that you will not be able to keep your house.”

From here, Pasha produced a monologue. “You must know of my husband’s endless hard work, how we had paid all the bills for Lisa’s ball (save one) in full, we are a good, respectable family and not people of questionable repute who drink in taverns till all hours of the morning...You say that without the certificate for my husband’s pension I will not get the money, but you know how he was a pillar of the community, known by everyone and how can you think of forcing me out of my own house when we entertain so many guests there!” The banker listened without blinking an eye, until finally Pasha exploded into a fit of tears, saying that she had never felt so humiliated in her life and where could she go now, as a poor, penniless widow with a daughter to marry off and her husband’s pension not yet released due to a missing certificate, a document that some bureaucrat had to stamp while he drank his tea, a document that would save her situation?

Glazunov drew a deep breath and responded in a calm, even tone, “I am not here to humiliate you, Praskovya Fëdorovna;

rather, I must do my duty and alert you to your grave situation. You shall not be punished for your husband's mistakes. However, according to the law, you must live within the monetary means you do have and arrange your finances. I assure you and your family will not be put out on the street or be forced to leave your house until you have found a suitable living situation for everyone. We shall schedule an appointment with you in three weeks' time to discuss the next step regarding your husband's estate."

That night, she could not sleep. All the lights were off, save one candle. Death was more than enough to handle; now, she was also saddled with debt and insolvency. Which was worse, the loss of her husband or the impending loss of her assets?

Pasha had known many days of plenty and nights of luxuriousness, gowns and goblets and feasts, a habit that had started long ago. It made her cry now to think that on her life had once been glamorous. She got up and opened the drawer of the small table Ivan had brought back from Kazakhstan, where there was a variety of cards and programs that she had saved from special occasions over the years. She looked at the one from the evening at charity event where the Tsar was in attendance. It had

been lovely, but then Ivan excused himself from her, where they had been sitting under the sparkling chandeliers and spent the evening talking with a couple of governors while sipping glass after glass of French cognac. Pasha had consoled herself by gorging on dessert, consuming too many profiteroles and éclairs.

Pasha sighed. How would she tell Lisa the bad news? She remembered another conversation with her daughter before Ivan died and while he was still ailing, as they sat by the fire embroidering and looking at pictures of dresses.

“We must ask Father Petrov about the day to make sure there are no holidays when you want to get married. There is a lot of planning to be done quickly. We have to be certain that the guests have nothing else on their social calendar that day.”

“Oh, Fëdor and I have spoken about the guests. And Madame Boykova told us she would allow us to rent her mansion at half the cost!”

“Madame’s mansion may not be large enough, my dear.”

“Father Semyon can perform the ceremony, and Father Yurovich should—oh, *Maman!*”

Pasha’s expression remained unchanged. Her glazed eyes took in all the pretty pictures of jaunty young ladies in the prime

of their youth, ready to be given away as brides. Flowers, pearls, plump arms with skin as smooth as a new leaf, soft curls tucked around the ears. It was all a reminder of what one had lost, the freshness and vitality and vigor that belonged to adolescence.

“I know it’s true, Papa won’t be there,” Lisa sniffled. Her face threatened to collapse, joy giving way to despair. “If only...if only...”

Pasha nodded. Though she longed to put out a hand to comfort her daughter, she could not bear to touch that soft, supple skin. The girl shone with the sort of radiance that comes from being in love, the love that makes one delight in all the little details that otherwise would seem ordinary. How she looked like her father when she was upset! The turned-down corners of the eyes, the way the lower lip jutted out, the high breath in the chest.

“Come, darling, let’s ask the cook to make your favorite chicken dumplings for dinner,” Pasha said, gathering up the various drawings. “Perhaps that dress you liked with the flowers is a good choice after all. Modern yet at the same time old-fashioned. And you’ll have to make sure to talk to the cobbler about the shoes. Straps are best. We shall have to give sufficient

notice to my great-aunt Tatiana who is in Yekaterinburg, for it is a long train journey to..."

They walked arm in arm down the hall past the various paintings of family members and nature scenes. Lisa chattered away about the apartment Fëdor planned to buy for them and how she would decorate it, how they would have rooms for their children, and how she longed to have children, at least three but four or five would be preferable, more girls than boys. Pasha listened but remained silent. It was not that she lamented that her husband would be absent from their daughter's nuptials; it was that she remembered her own, the very day that led to her life with Ivan Ilyich. She started to tell Lisa about her own wedding day, but the girl eagerly skipped ahead to the kitchen.

Now in bed, Pasha lay in the dark, listening to the sound of her own breath entering and exiting her nostrils. Perhaps Lisa's wedding would restore a sense of position to the Golovins, remind society that they were not a debased family without a paterfamilias. But how could it take place now that their finances were in jeopardy? And did Lisa even want to embark on such an ordeal, Pasha wondered, when her own marriage to Ivan had brought her to misery? It might seem tender and amorous at the

beginning, but then it would devolve into bitternesses, spats, miscommunications, and frustrations. How had this strange trajectory of her life begun, the one that had landed her here, alone, widowed, and insolvent in a cold bed?

IV

She had gotten a hold of the stiff white card with the silver lettering before any of her sisters. The invitation read, “We request the courtesy of your presence at the winter soir e, February 10, 9 PM, Bereza Manor,” but its brevity was to belie the evening’s lavishness. *This* ball promised to be better than the usual ones, for it was at the local governor’s house and there were rumors of some visiting government officials who would be in attendance. Pasha—who was called Pauline back then, in the French fashion—was tired of the local young men: provincial, puerile, and peasant-like in their unrefined manners, going off to drink with the peasants in local taverns late at night. At various balls and occasions, Pauline and her four sisters had danced with them while her mother eyed their potential quality as suitors as she sipped her champagne. For a girl in a remote country town, any chance to meet a suitor from elsewhere was a desirable opportunity.

Before balls and womanhood, the young Pauline enjoyed running in the meadows after the peasants had mowed the hay, climbing trees, studying the birds that had alighted in their

nests. Often her mother would scold her for going barefoot and leaving a trail of mud in the house: “You can’t expect the maid to sweep up after you!” When it was time for meals, a servant would have to search high and low and call after Pauline, only to find her reading a book under a tree. She disliked having to dress up for church and sit still with her mother, who would always be examining the other ladies’ finery, and her sisters and brother Bogdan, one of whom would always be kicking the other. Holidays would be spent making jam or picking mushrooms, swimming in the river that was fed by a cold stream.

On cold winter nights, she and her sisters would be huddled together in bed to preserve the warmth. They told each other stories and fairytales, dreams that they had for their future, how they would marry the Tsar’s son and live as a princess in a palace, about ghosts and werewolves and witches. Sometimes they talked about far-off lands that they had read of in books. If you traveled to the end of Russia, there were golden pagodas and cities of jade. If you went south, far past the Crimea, there were elephants in jungles. Pauline had read of the locomotives and trains that were able to travel ten times faster than a carriage and could go great distances; did they travel as far as China? As

she had yet to see one, she remained suspicious yet curious about this new phenomenon.

As she grew older, Pauline filled her days with her studies of French and Latin and practicing the piano and flute. Once, a great-aunt took her on the train to St. Petersburg, and never once in three days did Pauline avert her gaze from the window, except to sleep. The countryside seemed to fly by, and everything that looked so distant before was now near. Upon arriving in that grand city, Pauline took in everything with greedy eyes. Everything was big and magnificent! She marveled at the opulent concert halls where she heard Mozart and Rossini, enjoyed the lavish meals of many courses and delicacies, some of which were brought from Western Europe.

Pauline regaled her mother and sisters for weeks with stories of the great city once she returned home and longed to go to St. Petersburg the following year. But her great-aunt was stricken ill and confined to a wheelchair, and thus Pauline resigned herself to reading the magazines and newspapers that featured stories from far away and abroad. She made sketches of buildings and places she remembered from her trip. She read novels by French writers that she had purchased in a bookshop

in St. Petersburg. “I will go to Paris one day,” she vowed one night before bed, making the sign of the cross. Pauline worked on her French and adopted little airs and graces that would be appropriate as her future husband would be a French aristocrat—or diplomat, at least. Though not conventionally pretty, Pauline had bright blue eyes that darted to and fro and saw everything, curly brown hair with glints of gold in it, a quick smile that revealed perfect, even teeth, and a petite figure that was voluptuous in the right places. Everyone in their circle admired her. “She has a fine mind—a lovely girl too!”

“Yes,” her mother would sigh. “But when is she getting married?”

On the night of the ball at Bereza Manor, all was lit in a beautiful glow with countless candles, and there was the perfume of a bounty of flowers imported from some warm region to decorate the mansion. Even before she had unwrapped herself from her woolens, two local men asked for the first dance, and Pauline refused both—one was a notorious gambler (albeit a devout Christian who fasted for several months during the year), and the other was rumored to have gotten a maid pregnant. But there were also members of the best society from their region

there that evening, and it was to them that Pauline turned her attention.

It was in the middle of the quadrille when her partner got a cramp in his leg and called to his friend. “Vanya? Vanya? Come here and finish the dance with this nice young lady!” Pauline was joined by an unexceptional man who was around ten years older than she was, with brown hair, a round face with moderately pleasant features, a brown beard, not too fat or too thin, and not too tall or short. He bowed to her and took her hand, resuming the dance.

“I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss...?”

“Praskovya Fëdorovna.”

“I am Ivan Ilyich. Good evening, Miss Pasha.”

“No, they call me Pauline, *à la mode française*.”

“Good evening, Mademoiselle Pauline.”

She smiled triumphantly.

After the set of dances, Ivan offered to get her an ice, so they sat and talked for a while. He asked about her family, the town, and her interests. He told her of his work, that he had come to this area because he was offered the post of examining magistrate, a chance to advance his career.

“I can’t imagine what it’s like to live in different cities. I’ve only lived here. But I long to see St. Petersburg again, and then travel. To Switzerland, Italy–Paris!”

Ivan laughed with a touch of condescension. “Yes, one wishes to travel when one is young.”

“I should wish to marry a diplomat who is stationed all over. That way, I’d get to see the world.”

“Well, you may wish to marry a diplomat, but would you wish to dance again with a magistrate?” Ivan stood up and offered her an arm.

And so, over the next several months Ivan called on Pauline. He courted her at dances, parties, and picnics. He was, after all, of marrying age. And Pauline was indeed an attractive girl: enthusiastic, witty, and bright, she came from a good family whose social standing matched Ivan’s. Pauline’s sisters were beautiful, and her little brother Bogdan a clever rascal who enjoyed showing off his toys. Her own father was of very minor nobility and a respected judge, and the family lived in a grand house with 50 acres of land. She enjoyed impressing him with her French, her knowledge of music, and most of all, her social graces. Her parents—though reluctant that their daughter was

being courted by a suitor from far away whose family they did not know—had warmed to him and embraced him as though he had been one of their own since he was born. Yet despite this unanimous approval from everyone else, he had yet to suggest the idea of matrimony to Pauline herself.

On one balmy afternoon, when the two of them went off for a walk on their own while at a picnic, an afternoon where the sun hung overhead with a polite dignity in an immaculate blue sky, Ivan raised the matter. She had been admiring some of the birds that fluttered through the wood and landed on a branch where they had constructed a nest.

“I can’t see into it, but there might be eggs in the nest. What sort of bird do you suppose it could be?” Pauline tried to climb up on a large tree stump to peer into it.

“I am no expert on birds, *chère* Pauline. Come down,” he offered her assistance. Ivan retained the little hand even after she was back on the ground.

“You know I am well-established in my position now,” he began.

“Yes.”

“And when one is well established, one thinks of one’s

personal situation.”

“Do you mean your house?”

“No—well, in a sense, yes. Rather, who is in it.”

“Do you want us to come visit you, Vanya? Bring you homemade jam and bread and some mushrooms from our woods?”

Ivan laughed. He put an arm around Pauline, and she sat down next to him.

“Dear Pashka, the time has come when I must propose marriage to you. We have been spending time in each other’s company and seem to get on very well. I adore your family, and they welcome me. It seems that everyone knows but you. Everyone knows that we should be together, forever, husband and wife.”

Pauline stared at the ground with her mouth in an O, her blue eyes lit up with a combination of amazement, incredulity, and delight. She wondered if she would laugh or cry if she looked at him. Not knowing how to answer, she picked at a small weed next to her hip.

“You are such a dear little thing, and to live without you would be foolish.” He took her hand and pressed it and stroked

the locks on her forehead.

“You want to marry me?” It was more an eager statement than a question.

“Yes, my dear, I do. I will give you a very happy life, with all you ask for. I will even take you to Paris!” Ivan kissed her.

“Paris!” Pauline exclaimed. “Oh, it’s what I dream of, to get away from here, from this village, the country, and to see people and art and beautiful clothing instead of trees!”

“But there are trees everywhere,” Ivan said with great gravity, taking her remark too seriously.

Pauline burst out laughing. “Of course, you silly man! What I mean is that here, there is nothing but woods and forests, the same people, drunken boys, nothing to look forward to. I want to be in a big city where I can be seen, where people know me—to be a great lady, instead of a country girl!”

They talked in the following weeks about the plans for the wedding, their house, and their future together. Pauline asked if it were possible that they could live in Moscow or St. Petersburg; Ivan said yes. He, too, wanted to return to a bigger city, where there would be greater possibilities for him to advance. She wanted to live in a metropolis, she told him over tea, to see

galleries with magnificent works of art, and then travel to Italy to visit palazzi surrounded by manicured gardens, and attend Parisian salons where the best composers and painters met. Whenever he came for dinner she showed him pictures from magazines of beautiful dresses made by St. Petersburg's best tailors and notes on the debutante season, all the dukes and duchesses and their furs and finery. In time, she knew this would all be hers.

V

What struck Pasha about the ceremony was the glow from the candles, the watchful icons above, and her family's faces. Everything glittered, including the beautiful gold and pearl necklace and bracelet set Ivan had given her for a wedding gift. Later, Pasha would remember how heavy the crown was when placed atop her head, how constricted her breathing was inside the corset of her wedding dress that her mother and second sister had to double knot to keep in place. But at that moment, she reveled in the glow reflected in the faces of the wedding guests, who smiled and nodded in approval. The celebrations went on for hours, even after Pasha and her new husband retired to their chamber.

Pasha enjoyed setting up her new house, which was quiet and clean and comfortable. But what she had delighted in most was all the activities in bed. Her own appetite seemed to exceed Ivan's. Soon, she wanted to sleep all the time, eat all the time, and on some mornings, she was overtaken by a wave of queasiness that threatened to knock her onto the ground. An old Romani woman with psychic powers took one look at Pasha in the

market and pronounced her pregnant. And sure enough, Pasha felt her belly growing, her ankles swelling, and her breasts engorging.

Before long, conjugal caresses were replaced by sour moods and snappish remarks. Ivan was contemptuous of her increasing appetite and lack of attention to her appearance. They did not yet have enough money for a housekeeper, and the peasant girl who came every day did a poor job of sweeping and scrubbing, so Pasha would redo the tidying up and then collapse onto a stool, ready to vomit. She began to realize that marriage was not a romantic ritual, but an irreversible condition for life to which she had obliged herself in her foolish naïveté. She was alone with Ivan and would be for the rest of her life. He preferred working to spending time with her in her weakened state. She noticed his contempt for her pregnant body. In the rare moments when he desired her, she would push his hand away, afraid that one of his stout-fingered caresses might send her body into convulsions that would propel the baby out much sooner than necessary.

Pasha gave birth to a rosy-cheeked, smiling, gurgling girl, but she remained morose, feeling isolated and overwhelmed with

the baby. She begged Ivan to stay at home more often, and not to take trips to neighboring villages for his work that left her alone. But he told her, “I am a government official, and I must perform my duty as expected.” The truth was, when he was home, it was worse. He annoyed her by complaining about the food and found fault with the baby crying through the night and disturbing his sleep. The same pattern would repeat itself with Pasha’s next baby and, again with the third. The more their family expanded, the more he wanted to work. Pasha knew that domestic life would not be easy, and it would involve a lot of responsibility; what she had not anticipated was a husband who put no more importance in love than he did in his investments and his wardrobe. With his loss of enthusiasm for her came her lack of enthusiasm for married life. The vivacious Pauline had disappeared, dissolved into a harried matron.

“It seems that I married a different man,” Pasha said one evening, when it was still light out at 10 PM and she sat embroidering a pillowcase.

Ivan looked up from his cigar, which had been smoldering and emitting a musty perfume. “Was it not me on the marriage certificate?”

“The man I married promised he would take me to Paris. He was romantic. This man I am now married to demands a good meal, smiling children, and wife to satisfy him in bed.”

“Should not a husband expect that of his wife? Just as a wife may expect of her husband that he provides for her and her children?”

“While you are free to do what you like at the office and after, go for dinner with your colleagues and have nice wines and meals, I am left to take care of the rest—sobs over scraped knees, pots of kasha that have burned and so the children are left screaming with hunger, sick horses that have to be put down.”

“We cannot afford to go to Paris, my dear Pasha,” he said in a calm, even tone that she knew was used to provoke her. “Unfortunately, we cannot live like the Romanovs. Just because I promised to take you out of your village did not mean I would elevate you to the status of a countess.”

Pasha’s face fell; she was ready to cry but said nothing.

“Besides, travel doesn’t suit me. Strange foods, contaminated water, uncomfortable beds...It all threatens to give me indigestion, or bouts of vertigo. I feel more comfortable in my own home with my own wife.” With this, Ivan got up, kissed her

on the cheek, and headed up to bed.

Three years later, once Ivan was promoted to Assistant Public Prosecutor, things eased a bit. The Golovins were now able to afford a permanent housekeeper and servant. Some of their previous affection was rekindled and Pasha was noticeably jollier and more radiant. She had become a grand matriarch with a finer house and stylish clothes from Western Europe. Resigning herself to the fact that she might never live in a big city like Moscow or St. Petersburg, or visit the Continent, at least she had a home of her own and the freedom to choose what she liked and command others to take care of her every whim.

But after some time, typhoid swept the area. The Golovins sent away their oldest child Lisa to a distant relative until the fever passed. They did not tell her the news of her younger brother and sister's decline, of how the sweat dripped from the boy's forehead at 2 o'clock in the morning, of how the little girl's body had shrunk to half its original size. Pasha forbade anyone other than immediate family from coming to the funeral, wanting to grieve in private without all the requisite pomp and ceremony and attention to guests that Ivan wished for. "Can't you see, I don't want to meet anybody!" she screamed. "Let me

grieve in peace. They can eat gruel and drink kvass for all I care, leave me alone!”

When Pasha gave birth to a son two years later, Ivan became slightly more attentive to his wife and child. Her eyes beamed with tenderness every time she saw her husband take baby Alexei in his arms, cooing to him and singing him folk songs. But once the child was old enough to walk, Ivan disappeared into his old routine, often staying up late with their ledgers. He would return to his office the next morning and come home even later. When Pasha protested, Ivan would snap like an angry wolf and ask her if she wanted any less luxurious of a lifestyle.

The Golovins quarreled behind the scenes, but in public, their image was untarnished. “Such delightful people,” some commented after seeing them at a baptism. “Lisa is always so well-behaved, and Alexei so handsome and studious,” they said after a name day party at their house. “Ivan is a marvelous host. Mrs. Golovina never looks less than elegant in her Parisian dresses. And how pious she is—never missing from a church service, always weeping while lighting candles to the icons.”

Sometimes, after social functions, Pasha would take a

walk in the small woods that bordered the nearby park, being careful not to muddy the pom-poms on the hem of her dress. The peeling, lichen-coated tree bark, the chattering birds fighting for a branch upon which to land, the bumpy ground with its gray rocks that were tumbled this way and that—it cleared her head. Pasha wished for a book so she could sit and read under a tree for a few hours as she did as a girl. Then, life had been very free, no pressure for time, no appearance to maintain, but instead the quiet solitude in which to dream of far-off places and grand reveries under the canopy of a verdant forest.

And thus, their life continued until several years later, when Ivan received a position at the Department of Justice with a magnificent salary. It was the opportunity they had dreamed of for years. And so, with their boxes and bundles and packages, Pasha, Lisa, and Alexei boarded the train to begin their journey to St. Petersburg to meet Ivan, who had gone ahead a month earlier. After two days, they arrived at the city's main train station, where Ivan met them in an elegant carriage, gleaming black with golden wheels. "I have something grand to show you," he said, beaming at Pasha and the children.

The carriage pulled up to a building with a grand façade

on a leafy street with freshly-painted houses, and the coachman began to unload their bags. “Is this our inn?” Pasha asked as Ivan helped her out of the carriage. Without saying a word, Ivan opened the front door and led Pasha in to a black and white-tiled marble foyer with a small chandelier made of glass rather than crystal hanging above. She gasped and called to her children, who came running in. “Lisa, Alexei, look and see! The staircase—look how elegant, the way it curves, and the balcony above...Lisa, one day you will come down those steps in an elegant gown and all the men will see you!”

The drawing room was spectacular, elegant pale green walls with white moldings, fit for nobility. Ivan had furnished the dining room with a long table that could seat twenty, and the dark wood gleamed with polish. Next to the dining room was the ballroom, with parquet flooring in a crisscross pattern, a grand piano ready for a pianist, and enough room to hold both a small orchestra and dozens of guests. Upstairs, Ivan proudly showed each of them their bedrooms—one for each of the children, as well as separate rooms for Pasha and Ivan. Pasha loved her room at first sight, the elegant yellow walls, the ornate framed mirror above the dressing table, and three armoires to hold all her

dresses.

At last they had *arrived*, she had attained her goal of escaping the country for the city. “At last, you have delivered what you promised,” Pasha said, hugging and kissing Ivan, squeezing him. “*C’est mon petit Versailles!*” It was not long before they felt the house had always been theirs and that they would live in it forever.

VI

With the new house, Pasha became the Lady of the Manor, the châtelaine of Lipa Street. She had so much to keep her occupied that her marital troubles were pushed to the background; ironically, her relations with Ivan improved. They maintained their social calendar (the evenings with the Gruzdevs could not clash with the Krushelnitskys, which could not clash with dinners with the magistrates, nor with the rare invitations from Nobleman So-and-so), attended church functions, and prepared name day celebrations for her family and relatives. Ivan expected everything to flow with ease. If the fish they served to their guests of good social position was not hot enough, he would send it back with an angry scowl. Pasha would then turn to another guest and continue the conversation, ever the gracious hostess. It was the nature of their dynamic.

It was after one of these occasions, when Ivan was finishing the last of a rare vintage Bordeaux, that Pasha quarreled with him.

“Isn’t it strange that you are good-humored on just these evenings? The rest of the time, you are like a machine—no, like an

army sergeant for whom everything has to be in place.”

Ivan turned to her with his eyes agog. “What’s the matter? Aren’t you happy with the house? The children?”

“Yes, that is all fine and well, but I am sick of your dull habits.” She snuffed out a candle.

Ivan straightened in his chair. “What is this outburst of emotion, Praskovya Fëdorovna? Something not to your liking?” Though it was a question, it was in fact a criticism.

“The last time we had a proper discussion was to talk about the children’s schooling. They have fine minds, you know, just as I did. I want them to have an educated life in St. Petersburg, even if I don’t.”

Ivan laughed with a sneering expression. “Ah, you were a great scholar, were you? My dear Pashka—*Pauline*—perhaps we should send you with those young radicals off to university!”

“Perhaps it would be better to associate with young radicals rather than deal with your day-to-day routine—your tea at nine sharp, your eggs cooked to the exact second, your supper in its correct proportions—even the sound of your voice is so measured, proper, correct. Everything according to schedule. Hmph—you are more punctual than the trains at the central

station!”

Ivan shook with laughter, that detestable laugh like a country bumpkin. “Yes, you carp on me, don’t you? And who, may I ask, has bought you this house, and these surroundings, and provided for you and the children over these years?” He rose and walked down the dining room toward the hallway, stopping just in front of his wife. “Good night, Madame,” he bowed deeply, but Pasha knew this was no gesture of respect.

Things continued as such until the Golovins met with an unthinkable tragedy. On his way home from a chess club meeting on an icy January day, Alexei’s carriage met with a small truck that was loaded with grain for the marketplace. The carriage overturned and Alexei was killed right away. When her son was buried, Pasha felt a part of her was buried too. During those dark times, Pasha ate her meals in her room while Ivan returned to his routine of meetings, bridge games, and socializing with well-placed people. Pasha did not notice poor Lisa, who wondered what had become of her mother: kind servants took pity on the girl by slipping her extra cream cheese buns or playing games with her or putting her to bed. Pasha nurtured her grief instead of her child; the presence of her daughter did nothing to make up

for the loss of her son. Often, she would fall on her bed, sobbing, clutching the lone photograph of Alexei till she fell asleep. It took a few months for her to be able to talk to Ivan about her grief, about the loss of their beloved son. “I, too, grieve, Pasha for what we have lost,” he said briefly, but his eyes expressed so much more in those rare moments he spoke with her.

A year later, things seemed to return to a degree of normalcy in the household, but Pasha found herself with headaches throughout the day and an upset stomach in the mornings. Ivan thought her mood swings were worse than usual. The doctor was summoned, and after doing a brief examination, pronounced her pregnant. When their son Vasily was born, healthy and kicking, Pasha and Ivan’s grief felt erased by the arrival of this newborn. They never knew how a new joy could ease their old anguish, bring cheerfulness to their lives. The sight of his little toes, the tender curl of hair—it delighted one’s soul. They felt like a happy young couple in love who had just met their firstborn. But soon after Vasya’s birth, Ivan returned to his usual stiff dutifulness, as though Pasha had fulfilled her obligation to replace their lost son with another.

Pasha preoccupied herself with the *bien-être* of her

children: making sure they were getting the best education they could afford, well fed on nourishing soups and broths, dressed in their neat velvet coats brushed by Nadezhda, mindful of saying their prayers every day and kissing the icons. They grew into fine young people and were admired by everyone who saw them. By the time she was 17, Lisa (who was not a conventional beauty) was considered attractive because of her good manners and good breeding. Pasha heaved with pride whenever someone complimented her daughter, saying that she was indeed a good catch for a suitable young man.

She consulted with Ivan late at night, after the children were asleep. “We must arrange an elegant ball for her!” said Pasha with great delight. They would hire musicians from the symphony, and make sure of an ample supply of eligible young men. Ivan agreed without hesitation. Only the best for their Lisa: and if St. Petersburg did not have enough choices, then handsome suitors would have to be imported from abroad.

And so, on a February night, the Golovins held a ball for their beloved Lisa. While she danced away in a pale lilac dress with black lace, Pasha’s eyes followed Lisa around the oval of the dance floor like an astronomer fixing his gaze on the orbit of the

sun. The girl was enjoying herself, chatting graciously with all the guests and available men. Pashchenko was handsome and prosperous, though too vapid. Samat was wealthy, well-read, and charismatic, but rumor had it that he would be transferred back to his native Uzbekistan. Either of the Aminev brothers could be a potential match. But Lisa dismissed them all.

“I’m afraid Lisa did not find any of the suitors appealing,” Pasha told Ivan on the way home in the carriage.

“Then it was a nice waste of money.”

Pasha glared at him. “You seemed to be enjoying yourself very much. Dancing with Madame Trufonova and indulging in the madeira till you staggered through the mazurka!”

Ivan shrugged. “How often does one get to dance with a princess and be the envy of all men? I’m hungry. I hope we have some good things left over from the servants. A cutlet of sorts, perhaps?”

“There are plenty of your *cakes!*” Pasha spat out the last word.

“And what if there are? I paid for them.”

“I told you not to order anything else!” she shouted. “We already had enough confections and sweets! And do you know

how much the confectioner overcharged us? It was enough to buy a new dress!" Her face was beet-red with rage. "There is nowhere to put them, and they will all spoil soon. I can't eat cake morning, noon, and night!" Their quarrel continued so ferociously until the driver knocked on the window to make them stop.

When they arrived home, there were no leftovers from supper, so Ivan contented himself with a late-night meal of cakes and confections. He ate with such an appetite that Pasha felt it was to avenge her. When he complained of a pain in his side the next morning, urging his butler to call the doctor, Pasha laughed with delicious contempt. "Yes, you've no doubt eaten your money's worth!"

Not long after the ball, Lisa fell in love, ironically, with someone she met at a friend's house: Fëdor Petrovich, a young merchant and the son of Dimitri Ivanovich Petrishchev. Over a simple evening of parlor games and poppy seed rolls, Pasha's daughter became enamored of the calm, soft-spoken, dutiful young man, and they arranged for an outing the next day. Though hesitant at first when Lisa invited him to tea, Ivan became enthused when he saw the young man also had

ambitions to advance, and Pasha delighted in the fact that he was the sole heir to his father's modest lumber fortune. It was not long before Fëdor proposed, and soon enough, Lisa was wearing a shiny ring from the most fashionable jeweler.

Though their decision to unite was quick, Pasha encouraged Lisa and Fëdor to take their time with a lengthy engagement. "There is no need to set up a house so soon," Pasha told them while looking up from her needlework. "It's a lot of responsibility to run a household. You may as well enjoy your romance before you marry."

How much hope one bestowed on one's wedding day, only to find that it was wasted energy! One day of candles and orange blossom crowns and rustling silks that would give way to births and feedings and bills and promotions and quarrels and ceremonies and sickness and, eventually, death. Pasha longed to warn her daughter of the drudgery that lay ahead.

VII

With the dismal notice from Glazunov in one hand and Ivan's ledger in the other, Pasha sat at her late husband's desk with a sense of despair. She could not find the certificate needed to release her husband's pension anywhere in the house, and none of the bureaucrats would budge to make an exception. Damned law and rules! Pasha muttered to herself as she left one office after another.

"Here I am a widow and ruined, and none of you has the kindness to help me?" she asked one bureaucrat.

"We are not here to be kind, madame," he replied.

To another: "Please, you must understand, I have children. Do you not have children of your own?"

"I do. And if one has children, then one cannot be profligate with one's spending on unnecessary expenses as you and your husband were."

To another: "I beg you, do not reduce me to a life of suffering!"

"I am sorry, Madame Golovina, but if I make an exception for you, I will have to make an exception for everybody. That is

just not possible. I must follow the law.”

She hated officials, rules, and regulations—all artificial constructs of man that favored the correct and bypassed the heart.

Pasha dreaded breaking the news to Lisa that the wedding could not go on now as planned, or if it did, the number of guests would have to be pared down to family and a few close friends, the cakes made by their own cook rather than their favorite baker. Or she could counsel Lisa and Fëdor to wed in a Russian church overseas and avoid St. Petersburg entirely. How could she have known that the family would be in such devastation? Ivan had run up more debts than she had realized, large ones from when they had redone the parlor and public areas of the house. There was still even an unpaid bill from Lisa’s ball a year ago.

Pasha had written her brother about her despair, how Ivan had not only left her widowed but also in debt, and her living situation was in jeopardy. But rather than offering to help with her financial situation, her brother proposed an unexpected solution:

“Dear Pauline, as you know, I must tend to the land and the crops and the animals. It is indeed tragic to

leave your home, which, as I remember, is quite magnificent. However, as you sort through your current condition, may I offer you lodgings here and a place to stay? There is plenty of room in the house, but if you so wished, you could occupy the cottage. I remember that you and Ivan had spent time here some years ago and had a most pleasant experience. Do come, dear sister—much comfort awaits you. Your dearest Bogdan.”

Pasha folded the letter back into the envelope and wiped her eyes with her sleeve. Back to the country! Was this what she had to do? Leave this place and this turmoil? No, it was impossible. They had built their lives here, established a position here, been respected as much as her husband. Yes, a season in a village cottage was acceptable, fashionable, even, when done by choice; but to be forced to do so—she could not demean herself by going to the country.

What she would not keep would be auctioned off or sold. Though his steel-blue eyes revealed little emotion, Glazunov had promised to get the best offers on everything for her, and not to

accept less than she deserved. She would have to go through the house room by room, deciding whether this mirror should stay or that table should go with her. Dismantling their home was like dismantling the memories of their marriage, as Ivan had worked so hard to select the furnishings and create a grand home. Nonetheless, she had a place to go to for a while, until she decided whether to come back to St. Petersburg or remain with her brother. Lisa's life could work itself out. It was poor little Vasya, then, who would suffer the most, as he would not have his old house to return to during holidays from his Gymnasium. First the loss of a father, now the loss of a home.

Pasha looked outside the window at the twitching branches of the trees that were dusted with snow. She had always longed for spring since she was a girl, had loved watching the baby bunnies exercise their minuscule legs for the first time and hop to and fro, the smell of the rain-muddied earth that squelched under her boots when she walked in the woods. With the arrival of spring, the sun seemed to brighten in the sky and say, "Acknowledge me, here I am at long last!" When the weather was warmer, she would go down to the small creek at the bottom of the hill in the woods and take off her shoes and dress and wade

in her petticoats in the shallow water that reached up to her calves. The sunlight would make fractured patterns on the rippling water, illuminating the small gray rocks and pebbles underneath. What pleasant times in one's youth! Those were the days when one could be unburdened and free from the stresses of children and social obligations and running a household.

“*Maman! Maman*, look what I have here—the tailor will use this on my dress!” Lisa came running into the room and thrust a handful of ivory-colored Belgian lace into her mother's hand.

“Yes, such good work on the finish,” she said.

“And that's not all. The tailor's best client, Yekaterina Gavrilova, has said we can—”

“I'm afraid I have bad news for you, my dear.” Pasha set the lace down and took off her glasses. “We'll have to cut down the scale of your wedding. In fact, we may even have to postpone it altogether.”

Lisa gasped and stepped back, as though knocked by a wintry gale. Fëdor stood right behind her, his eyes downcast.

“You see, Papa did not—there is not much money left behind. Not only that, but I'm afraid we are in debt. In great

debt.”

Lisa’s mouth hung open, and her brows furrowed over her wide eyes. “What are you saying, *Maman*?” she murmured.

Pasha handed her daughter the notice from Glazunov and watched as Lisa read the letter, her lips moving silently as her brows furrowed more and more. When she came to the line about selling the house, she let out a small yelp and clutched her chest.

“We cannot sell our house, by no reason! And we will not cancel the wedding!” Lisa repeated.

“We shall pay for it, my family will pay for it—” Fëdor offered.

“Even if your family were to...” Pasha looked for the right, tactful word, “*Contribute*, I don’t think it would be sufficient to cover the cost of all the guests and the festivities you wish to have. The dress alone—why, that could pay for Vasya’s tuition for the semester.”

Lisa turned pink and her breath quickened. “You cannot bear to see my happiness in your sorrow, *Maman*, can you, and so you don’t wish for me to be married. I understand it! Never mind my shame when I tell everyone there is no wedding.”

“It has nothing to do with my unhappiness. It is a question of finances,” Pasha said in a rational, even tone, as she used to do when Lisa begged for fancy new dolls and toys as a child. “You shall indeed be married, and not too far into the future. But for now, you must try to understand—”

“How *could* you? When we have so many memories here, the house that Papa bought?” Lisa became hysterical, and her fiancé had to restrain her by the elbow. “This won’t do! Would you leave this house and leave poor little Vasya nowhere to go?”

“My dear, marry Fëdor at church with the minimum of people; then you can move into his family home. Vasya is at school, and over the holidays, he can go to Ivan’s cousin Yelizaveta’s house.”

“But *Maman*, my wedding, *my* plans!”

“We have no means for extravagances. You would not be able to have a trousseau. The house must be sold, and no further expenses incurred.”

“But Vasya—”

“Meanwhile, I have decided I should go to my brother, where we stayed when you were young and before we moved

here. I intend to return to St. Petersburg sometime, but this is the best decision for the time being. There is no alternative.”

Fëdor nodded, still grasping Lisa’s elbow. Lisa looked tragic and ugly with rivulets running from her eyes and her nose. Pasha knew that the happy couple had already announced the wedding to their friends and family. Even in church, friends of the Golovins had asked her about the impending matrimony. Though Fëdor spoke little of it, he, too had a light shining in his eyes whenever he spoke to his colleagues of settling down with Lisa, of the home they would make together and having little girls and boys in whom they would delight. In rare moments, Pasha had thought of the joys that Lisa’s marriage would bring her: namely, grandchildren and the sense of security that came from knowing her daughter had married well. But she also knew that married life could make a romantic young girl suffer, how her hopes would be dashed, and how married life would not be all she desired it to be.

Though she tried to sleep, Pasha was kept up all night by one of the broken shutters flapping. Ivan had left her with nothing in terms of companionship, and with much in terms of debt. But worst of all was the legacy of dishonor of having one’s

position reduced in society due to a lack of funds. Her daughter could not be properly married now, and the family was losing their grand residence. Their acquaintance Countess Demidova had also met with a similar misfortune: she lost her home, a St. Petersburg palace, due to a distant relative who inherited the estate. But she was still a countess even though she had moved to an apartment overlooking the Black Sea in Yalta and she continued to entertain nobility from here and abroad. Pasha sighed, recalling when she had first laid eyes on Ivan at the country ball, her grand dreams that he would whisk her off to Paris as a diplomat. Her husband had brought himself to ruin and now he had brought her to ruin as well.

VIII

The process of giving up her home had begun.

Pasha was left to do it alone: Lisa had not come home and was staying with her godmother. As Pasha began to take down some of the wall decorations, the tears started falling. But she did not weep for the reasons one might expect; rather, she cried because the objects felt so lifeless in her hands, they carried very few memories. This silver frame was just a silver frame, not something that commemorated a painting given on an anniversary or birthday. Several of Lisa's old dresses were bundled away into a sack without her knowledge and given to the cook to take to the peasants in her village.

The items Pasha would need immediately were packed into a couple of trunks and suitcases that would be sent to her brother's. The furniture would be put up for auction, and she did not even need to be here for that as Glazunov was very capable of arranging everything. "This mansion that once rang out with gay laughter—what do I hear now? The thud of cartons being packed up, boxes filled, furniture dragged," she said to herself. One of the gilded mirrors was peeling, exposing the dull gray wood

underneath, and she told the workmen not to pack it up but to dispose of it instead.

The worst task was sorting through items in Ivan's room. There were endless papers and mementos. There were his medals and various awards with which he had been honored over the years. Pasha wrapped them in cloth and put them in a special box as if to bury his exalted status. How could someone so honored die such a humiliating death? She remembered the way his skin color had changed over time, how his decorous manner had given way to screams and groans and contortions that were so ugly she could not bear to look at him. She wiped away a tear, then resumed going through his desk and then his bookshelves. It was an interminable task. Through the things he left behind, Ivan was still alive.

After a week, Pasha went to Madame Chelyabinskaya's to seek her daughter, on a cold, snowy night.

"And he just will not stop talking, my little Bijou," the old woman gestured to a large parrot that was chattering away.

"Yes, funny how birds will do that," Pasha smiled. "But how is Lisa, will she not talk? I know she is upset about the wedding but—"

“...Even when I cover his cage, he still manages to chatter away, and do you know what he did the other night? He started to sing!”

“Yes, please, Sofya Dimitrova, you see, I must talk to her, there is so little time before I leave and she is angry, but I don’t want us to part this way. I must be practical, and it hurts her desires. I cannot give her what she wants, but I want to talk to her. Where is she? When can I see her?”

As the old lady rattled on, Pasha wore a polite smile and reminded herself that Madame Chelyabinskaya was half-senile. Madame Chelyabinskaya concluded by telling Pasha that Lisa was at a chamber music concert and would be invited to a supper with one of her friends afterward. Pasha drew a deep breath and bade Madame Chelyabinskaya goodbye, trotting down the steps with her head held high and her pride wounded.

The banker was true to his word and found buyers for various items of furniture in the Golovins’ house. Pasha received what she considered a fair value for the items and prayed that Glazunov would keep his promise not to reveal who the seller was. Little by little, the house became emptier, so that when she tapped through the house on her heels, her footsteps echoed

loudly. Pasha had telegraphed the headmaster at Vasya's school to inform him of the upcoming changes; later, when she had a free minute, she wrote a brief note for her darling son.

“Maman loves you very much and apologizes that you cannot come back to your childhood home. Some things have changed for us since papa's death, and we will not be able to live in the same fashion as before. But please know, darling, that in time everything will work itself out. For the holidays, you will go to Cousin Yelizaveta's, but once I am settled, I will have you with me during the summer. I miss you very much.”

The sale of the furniture paid off one debt, and after they sold the carriages, another one would be paid off too. The sale of the house would take some time, but once that happened, Pasha would be free, and there would be a reasonable sum of money left over with which to buy a modest home. But Pasha felt unsure about returning to St. Petersburg; so much of her social life had depended on Ivan's circles. Since they were Ivan's friends, they were hers; now that he was gone, she felt less inclined to maintain contact. They in turn, would view her with a degree of

condescension: she was an impoverished widow whose careless late husband had left her in this degraded state. But what else could he have done? Pasha thought with great anger. If only they had seen him in his last days, reduced to a howling animal, not a man but a body that was emptying itself of its soul. They had not borne the pain of seeing Ivan dying, suffering so, until he chose to be redeemed. She had no need for their society, no!

It was not long after Lisa's engagement that Ivan first began complaining about the pain in his side. "You've eaten too many sweets again," Pasha scolded. "Did you not finish the leftovers from Lisa's ball? You don't sleep at all, and when you come home, you gorge yourself."

"This is not the time for one of your foul jokes, Praskovya Fëdorovna," Ivan said, doubled over at the edge of his bed. "Call the doctor!"

This would be the first of many times that Ivan complained about something, but it was not from overeating. Sometimes, he would describe the unpleasant taste in his mouth like a metallic spoon. His ill health made him more quarrelsome: the rice was too salty, Vasya's hair was not combed right. There was one particularly embarrassing incident at the opera, where

he bickered with her about the soprano.

“My dear Madame Golovina, she sounded like a goose.”

“How dare you call her a goose? She spent many years studying at the Conservatory and in Dresden! Why, you didn’t even see the Tsar’s son standing up to applaud her!”

The others in their box leaned forward in their chairs slightly so as not to betray their improper interest.

“She does sound like a goose, just as you do when you warble along with Nadezhda to those folk melodies.”

Pasha’s mouth snapped shut and her face went blank, as though she had been slapped. And of course, the gossip went around that something was not well with the proper Mr. Ivan Ilyich. Nonsense, Pasha said whenever asked, it’s influenza. Ivan has eaten something that did not agree with his stomach. He had a headache after a bad day at work. But it became more difficult to hide his sallow appearance, and his once-rotund figure decreased in size by a third while hers increased in robustness.

Sifting through the last items in his office, Pasha knew that Ivan’s instinct would have been to save all his papers, as was fitting with his officious, dutiful personality. But what use would they be now? Stack after stack, she dropped them in the fire, and

they crackled away with a vengeance, the flames in their untamed fury burning up all the man-made rules. Who could have known that illness could render one so helpless? Disease did not follow a planned, predictable trajectory, but instead took its own course, like a stream in the woods. She recalled a conversation they had one night, after she had insisted on inviting his friends to come play bridge to cheer him up.

“They all look so well, don’t they?” he said. “Healthy, and in the prime of life.”

“You looked like you were having a good time, my dear.”

“I do not want to be seen by others anymore.”

Pasha set Ivan’s robe down on a chair. “Ivan, you must see people. You cannot suffer alone.”

“Pasha, I cannot bear it. Ow...no, not there, rub the liniment a little higher. They are all well while I suffer.”

“It will be just a few short months, you will be well soon. Perhaps all you need is to take the waters in Baden-Baden. All the best society takes their cures there.”

“What would be the point? I would have to see more people there, and people I don’t know.”

And Ivan continued to reject suggestion after suggestion

that she offered him, leaving Pasha no hope, except to turn to God. Ivan refused food, friends, any form of entertainment; his servant Gerasim was the sole thing he asked for with any enthusiasm.

When Pasha realized the end was inevitable, that her path would continue while Ivan's would dead-end, and that his soul needed to be protected once he expired, she begged him to take Holy Communion. "Imagine what people would say if you died a sinner!" Ivan begrudgingly accepted, and the priest came to hear his confession. Pasha peeked through the door under the pretense of asking the priest they wanted some tea and saw her husband confessing through his tears and professing his desire to live.

"If I shall live, Father, I vow I shall be a reformed man! Should God take away this pain, I will dedicate my life to His service, to His children. I will believe! Can you accept my confession, Father?"

"It is not a question of whether I accept it, Ivan Ilyich. You must make that entreaty to God. And if you are sincere, then when you leave your body, you shall not have lived in vain."

"But I do not want to leave my body! I wish that this

miserable pain, this damned pain, should leave!”

“Yes, yes, I understand. Let me offer you the sacrament, and let God help you as he will, whether it be the release of pain or release from life.”

“May God release me from this pain so that I may live once again, as a Christian man.”

But once the priest had left, Ivan returned to his miserable self, and shouted to Pasha to leave him alone. She shut the door without a word and told herself there was no more she could do: Ivan was now in His hands.

IX

The last of the packing crates sat in the foyer, which was littered with sawdust and the footprints of wet boots. Fëdor had come that morning in a sleigh to collect the last few items belonging to Lisa. One of the servants made a sharp remark that Lisa should have come herself instead of sending her fiancé. Pasha looked at Fëdor imploringly, but ever the diplomat, he shrugged and wore an expression that said, “Yes I agree, but what can I do?” He bowed to Pasha and took his leave.

And then the day came to leave the house on Lipa Street. Pasha sat on top of a suitcase, surveying the emptiness around her. She had said goodbye to everyone at church last week, and many people had expressed a proper degree of sorrow for her situation. The priest had blessed her with the sign of the cross, saying “God be with you,” and given her a small icon to take on her journey. Gerasim had even sold the last the glossy steed that morning. Mikhail Mikhailovich had promised to fetch her to take her to the train station. The 11:03 train for Moscow, then several hours there before the next train, and then one more. Two more

hours by coach, and then another short distance to Bogdan's estate.

Everything was silent as the horses trotted away. A cloudy gray sky watched life below from overhead, refraining from depositing snow on the landscape. Mikhail Mikhailovich had the sense to leave her alone and not offer banal remarks to soothe her departure. How she would miss these houses, these trees, this worn cobblestone here that always made the carriage stall, the crooked shutter on the corner house that should have been fixed years ago! As soon as they turned into the square, dozens of carriages and horses and merchants and pedestrians impeded their way.

There were not so many people on the platform, as more passengers preferred the early train. Some of her luggage had been brought earlier and Pasha kept a constant eye on it, wary of any thieves who might avail themselves. There was a tap on her shoulder, and when she turned around, she saw Fëdor, bundled up in a thick brown coat and Cossack cap, nudging Lisa toward her.

Pasha gasped. "My Lisette, my Fedya!" she exclaimed, opening her arms. Lisa looked at Fëdor for a moment, then

turned and fell into her mother's arms, sobbing without saying a word. "There there, my darling, *Maman* is just going away for a short while," she said, as though talking to a small child whose mother was going to the symphony for the evening.

Lisa clung to her mother, while Fëdor offered an explanation. "It started last night, while she was having some jam they made last summer...she remembered how you used to make jam together when you were in the country...she said, 'We must go see *Maman* tomorrow before she goes.'"

Pasha nodded, patting Lisa on the back. "Thank you, Fedyà. Once I'm settled, you must come to see me."

"We will go to a small church outside the city, the village where my mother is from, to be married. Father Semyon will be there," said Fëdor.

Pasha's face flooded with delight, and she clasped her future son-in-law.

"Of course, we will not hold the grand ceremony until you return."

Pasha stroked each of their cheeks, extracting a promise from them to make sure to have a wedding that was to their liking. "It is better you wait to have a ceremony that you will

remember for years to come, rather than one done in haste to fulfill an obligation.”

Fëdor nodded. “Perhaps we will not have such a large celebration, but...”

Lisa smiled, unable to speak, but grasped her mother like a small child.

There was a shout from the conductor, and the last passengers scrambled to get their belongings onto the train. Pasha released Lisa from her embrace with a kiss on each cheek. They said their goodbyes, and she mounted the steps into her carriage. Once she was seated, she waved as the train jerked and puffed and whistled its way out of the station. The train clicked and clacked, its passengers swaying from side to side. St. Petersburg dwindled into the background.

X

Bogdan met her at the station three days later, full of hearty cheer. His wife Katya had prepared an ample dinner and welcomed Pasha with a smile and joy that twinkled from her bright blue eyes. She looked rather like a peasant herself with her cap on her head, her ruddy cheeks, and rough hands. There were so many little children around the table that Pasha did not know who was who: nieces and nephews, Katya's relatives, or the servants' children. All was full of laughter in the house, as well as mud—the two hunting dogs ran in and out at their whim, depositing wet earth wherever they went. The children delighted in the little gifts and sweets Pasha had brought from St. Petersburg.

When they were finished eating, Katya led Pasha upstairs with an apologetic smile. "I know this may be simpler than what you're used to, dear Pauline, but it's no trouble for Bogdan to prepare the cottage for you instead, if you like."

The bedroom had hand-hewn wooden floors scrubbed clean with not a speck of dust, a headboard painted with pretty wildflowers that matched the wildflowers embroidered on the

pillows. It was all so inviting that Pasha took one look around the room and said, “This shall be quite fine for now, dear Katya.”

“I can’t imagine what this is like for you, after having lived in the city. I’ve never lived anywhere else but the country. But it is cheerful here.”

“Yes it is. Perhaps the fresh country air will be good for me.”

“Bogdan tells me that Ivan left you in a difficult situation,” Katya said delicately. “You may stay as long as you like. We’ve plenty of room here, and there are always lots of fruits and vegetables come summer, not to mention fresh dairy and an endless supply of eggs. In fact, the children complain that they eat nothing but eggs!”

Pasha laughed. “Sounds like your hens are very active! I am quite fond of eggs.”

“And do tell Lisa and Fedya to come,” Katya implored. “It’s been so long since I’ve seen her, she was a girl. Though they are not fancy, we have rooms for everyone. If there’s anything at all you need, do ask.”

“Thank you, dear Katya. But I’m afraid what I don’t have any more is peace of mind, and that is something you cannot give

me.”

With this, Katya promised her a hearty supper and bade her good night with a sympathetic smile.

Pasha unpacked a few of her things, hanging a couple of dresses in the cupboard and putting her petticoats in the drawers. She stretched out onto the large featherbed, luxuriating in its clean comfort after the sooty train rides. As she lay there between wakefulness and sleep, she thought back to earlier days when she and Ivan had lived in the country before moving to St. Petersburg. But no matter where she was, Ivan would no longer be with her. He had often been a source of difficulty, and it had not always been happy, but to feel this, this gaping void, was unbearable. As he screamed in pain on his deathbed, Pasha had done what she could to muffle the noise: close all the doors, stay in a room on the far side of the house, even plug her ears with some soft wax when she tiptoed by his door. “Anything but this, anything, anything at all!” She repeated this silent prayer to herself. “We are husband and wife, we are bound to each other through God’s holy law, he cannot leave now.”

XI

The winter had been unseasonably mild, but there was still a marked difference when spring arrived. The crocuses began rearing their heads through the muddy ground while birds and animals awoke from their invernial slumber. With this release of energy from the earth came an unleashing of emotions deep in Pasha's soul. She would pace the hall at night, unable to sleep due to thinking of Ivan, remembering both good and bad times. Some days she was disoriented, unsure when she woke up if she were in her brocade-papered bedroom in St. Petersburg or somewhere else. Her stout figure started to wither away, and at meals she had no appetite for anything more than broth and bread.

Sometimes, Pasha missed the finery in her house, the gilded mirrors and marble floors. She missed the grand shops with the latest hats in the window, their feathers extending from the brims. There was no opera or symphony to dress up for, and it was with great disdain that she put away her magnificent burgundy silk dress from Paris. One afternoon, after quarreling with the dairy maid that the milk had gone bad, Pasha went back

to her room and fell onto her bed, writhing. She imagined the blank face of Glazunov telling her about her debts, observing with a sinister smile as the workmen carried off the furniture from her house. In her dreams, she saw all manner of frightful visions. Lisa trying on wedding dress after wedding dress, going progressively from white silk and lace to poplin until she ended in rags. A St. Petersburg diplomat asking her to dance at the Bereza Manor ball as her mother and sisters watched smiling, who whirled her around and around through the hall and out the doors and into the dark woods and all of a sudden, she was dancing with Ivan. The chandelier came crashing down during a dinner at their mansion.

And one night, one of the children screamed when they found Pasha muttering in French while sleepwalking around the sitting room. A doctor was summoned the next day, and after checking all her vital signs and evaluating all manner of symptoms, concluded that there was nothing of note ailing their peculiar relative. Bogdan made sure the children stayed quiet so that their aunt could remain in bed without being disturbed. Katya prepared special soups and teas for her sister-in-law that would calm her nerves. She took it upon herself to read Pasha's

correspondence and attend to any of her business matters that were urgent.

When she did manage to rouse herself, Pasha would wander among the reeds by the marsh, thinking of her daughter and son, and the children she had buried. At other times, she would gaze at the fire for hours on end, reflecting that her whole life had burned up before her. Once, Pasha put on her fanciest dress and a black crocheted collar, pearl earrings, and ruby bracelets from her mother that were among the few pieces of jewelry she had not sold and then came down to dinner. No one commented on her overdressing, only acknowledging with their eyes that Praskovya Fëdorovna had once been a lady of St. Petersburg who was now confined to life in the country.

The days got longer, and buds started to appear on the trees. Baby birds began to dart to and fro amidst the flowers, and it was now warm enough to walk outside without a shawl. The peasants had started to get the fields ready for planting, and at lunchtime, Pasha could see them sitting together outside with brown bread and fresh cheese and jugs of kvass. Once, one of them came toward her with his hands cupped. Pasha shrank, afraid he had brought something with which to threaten her. But

then she looked down and saw in his palms a downy yellow chick peeping loudly. They looked at each other and smiled.

Over time, she missed the St. Petersburg house less and less and appreciate the country more and more. The air was fresher here, there was time to read books and not worry about various social obligations, and there were all the children, eager to play and sing and keep her entertained without fail. Still, it was not St. Petersburg, and an emptiness ate away at her. Letters from friends, filled with news of their latest activities, went unanswered: country life would not be interesting to city folk.

Pasha usual route through the woods every morning went under the swaying birch trees that loomed in the sky past the gardener's cottage. But one day, she noticed someone had cleared away some dead branches and a new path was now exposed. She could not resist—though she did not know where she was going, she trusted it led somewhere. And indeed, it did: Pasha came upon a small white structure with a door and two windows. When she put her hand on the doorknob, to her surprise, it gave way. She entered what was a small, dilapidated chapel with several honey-colored chairs and an icon; it was unclear if it had been de-consecrated. And though a little bit of dust and one

cobweb on the side window indicated that nobody had been inside for quite a while, there was a sense of cleanliness that made the space inviting.

Pasha sat down on one of the chairs and drew a deep breath. The piney aroma of the woods was still present in the chapel. She looked at the faded gold halo of the icon of The Mother of God, and at her rueful yet nurturing eyes. It was an image that would welcome her every time Pasha came into the little makeshift chapel. Sometimes she would sit in silence, and at other times she would pray. There was no priest, but Pasha knew that her religious entreaties were no less holy, that God heard the humblest of prayers and could alleviate the greatest despair and anguish.

“Father, please hear your humble servant Praskovya Fëdorovna, who has suffered so. Must I live like a pauper, a beggar at the mercy of her relatives? I know the meek shall inherit the earth, but I still cannot forget the grandeur of my life before. Less money I could have endured, but the loss of face...Please help me to ease my sinful pride!”

No one else heard her cry, and she could remain in her shameful state alone, murmuring her prayers over and over.

Pasha rather liked this tiny chapel, so unlike the grand churches in St. Petersburg, for here, one could immerse oneself in complete holy silence.

One day during her meditation, her peace was interrupted by a rhythmic rustling noise. It was odd because she had not heard anyone enter. But she turned around and found an old woman sweeping.

“Go on, go on and pray, don’t mind me.” The woman continued to sweep, humming a hymn quietly.

Pasha continued for a few minutes, and when she was done, she made the sign of the cross. She turned and looked at the woman, whose figure was so broad-boned, taut, and muscular that it looked as though there was not an ounce of fat on it. Her face was broad and worn, leathery wrinkles gathering around her lips and eyes. But the eyes, underneath her hooded lids, were bright blue.

When the woman finished sweeping, she looked up at Pasha and smiled. “Mother of God takes care of us, eh? Night and day, she hears the simplest prayers.”

“What is your name, *babushka*?”

“My name? Asya. Wife of Pyotr, mother of Dmitri,

daughter of Cheskov, sister of Agafya.”

“And what do you do here, Asya Cheskovna?”

“I’m afraid I don’t see very well,” Asya walked toward Pasha. “Do you like this chapel, lady? My Pyotr built it with his own two hands years ago. He never finished it because he died.”

“I am so sorry. Are you a servant on this estate?”

Asya sat down. “Many years before, my Pyotr came to this estate, and the master of the house was very good to him. When he married me, he brought me here. We’ve lived here ever since. Our son was born very late, mind you, but he was a joy.”

“Where is your son now?”

“Alas, an accident in the woods in Bleshnikov. He and my Pyotr died together.” She paused. “I was glad to have them.”

Pasha nodded without taking her eyes off the woman and offered a compassionate smile.

“I miss them very much, how Pyotr would slurp his porridge and Dmitri would always stomp his boots. I enjoyed preparing lunch for them when they came back from chopping down trees. It was hard work.”

Pasha looked down at her hands. “I, too, have lost a husband lately. I buried three children, and I have also lost my

house. I am reduced to nothing, a simple widow who must live alone.”

“That is why you pray.”

“Yes. And I am sorry for what you have lost too, *babushka*.”

“But do not pity me, lady, for you see, I am very rich.”

“Oh?”

“Some people live in palaces, some in mansions, but this chapel is my castle, and these woods are my kingdom. I have all of Nature to me, it is a glory of irreplaceable value.”

Pasha looked at her with curiosity.

“Nature is your kingdom too, lady, if you open your eyes to her majesty. All the riches in the world could not tempt me away from seeing my birch saplings grow.”

“I always loved the little rabbits,” Pasha smiled. “Tasting the first berries—stealing them away from my sisters!”

“You see, even when everything dies, it is born again in nature. God sees to it; He is working through Nature, and all of creation exists thanks to the Mother.”

“Yes.”

“You are not poor, for the kingdom of God lives not only inside you, but also outside you. You will be rich if you are in Nature,” Asya resumed sweeping as she walked toward the door. “Mother Nature is our Savior, the Savior of mankind!” she exclaimed, and then she was gone.

Pasha never saw the old woman again. No matter how many times she returned to the little chapel, or inquired among the other peasants, she never saw Asya. She asked Bogdan and Katya, who shrugged and said there were so many peasants that it was impossible to know all their names. Once, she even went to the nearby village to ask if anyone had seen this woman, but there was no such person. And yet, Pasha waited for the old woman every time she went to the chapel, sitting a while after her prayers in hopes that Asya would appear. There might be a rustling noise, but it would just prove to be the wind rustling in the branches, or a tiny mouse darting into a crack in the wall.

XII

As the days grew longer, the children became more and more restless, and the only places that could sate their curiosity and hold their energy were the yard and the woods. Katya was so often tied up with domestic matters that Pasha volunteered to lead the children on various outings: to the meadow to gather flowers, watching the migratory birds as they returned to the marsh, showing them the warrens where baby bunnies were hidden, their little noses twitching. She even took them to the barn to see a calf being born, emerging from its mother all soggy and matted. Later, when the children were exhausted and settled down for afternoon naps, Pasha would recount the morning's adventures to her sister-in-law over a cup of tea.

“Yes, they are quite a handful, aren't they? They seem to be interested in everything, I'm amazed that you have so much energy! But are you not bored with all this? Such simplistic entertainment, showing the children dirt and earthworms?” Katya would ask.

“No, no, it’s quite funny and enjoyable. Just yesterday, little Oleg got too close to the horse and, shall we say, the horse decorated his shoes!” Pasha laughed.

“Do you not think of going back? I mean, are you not bored here? I should be so sad if you left, but I understand that a lady of your position might feel this is all a little too pastoral?”

“I am not a farmer, Katyusha. I don’t have to attend to the menial things. I am fed so well, and the house is so cheerful and comfortable.” Pasha said. “There is so much to do in summertime that I have little time to brood. And in the few moments of quiet after the children go to sleep—well, though one wouldn’t assume it of a house in the country, the library is quite sizable, and I have quite a few books to choose from.”

“Well, should you ever need a diversion, there is always someone to take you to the train if you would like to spend a few days in the city, or at least to go to the nearby town for the day. I hear there is an inn with a very good restaurant with French wine.”

Pasha smiled and thanked her sister-in-law and assured her that she would let her know if that were ever the case. She,

too, needed a nap, and she had better go now before the children were up.

One morning, after playing a game with the children outside, holding their hands and running in a circle, Pasha was seized with an idea.

“Bogdan, I must walk to the village!” she burst into the house, where Bogdan was still enjoying his morning meal.

“I can ask Ilya to take you. I’ll have him fetch the carriage. He needs to deliver a sack of grain.” Bogdan got up immediately.

“No, no! I would like to walk. It is so pleasant.”

“Where do you plan to go? Again, if it is far—”

“I am going to send a telegram to my son, tell him how much I miss him and send my love. Then I’m going to write a letter to the headmaster, tell him I want to withdraw Vasya from the school and bring him to live with us. I’ll find the best tutors I can, and if need be, I will have some sent for. He can be here with all the other children and me, with all of us in this house, surrounded by nature!” She dashed upstairs before Bogdan could respond.

Pasha walked to the village at a brisk pace. First she sent the telegram to her son. Then, she gave the letter to the

postmaster: it would take a week to reach the school. The day was bright and sunny, the sort of day that makes peasants pause during their work, break out a jug of mead, clap their hands and sing and dance on the grass. Pasha felt that impulse deep within her, the urge to celebrate one's existence, of being alive. She took the long route home, along the stream. The branches that had been denuded in winter were now florid; it was as though the dressmaker had attached little tulle flowers. Nowhere in St. Petersburg had she seen such a magnificent display. Though it had rained yesterday, the path was now dry, and she did not have to worry about muddying her dress. Recently, someone had cleared away the stones, making it easier to walk or ride on it. The stream was full today, though not overflowing. It was perfect, just as in a painting, with the right amount of water. Further ahead, there was one spot where the water detoured into a nearly perfect circle shaded by trees: an ideal swimming hole.

It was secluded, and nobody could see her, as there was a small ridge one had to walk down to reach the water. Pasha undid her bonnet and took off her dress, laying them with care over a low branch. She loved the feel of the earth under her toes after she took off her shoes. There was a sharp chirp, and she

noticed a pair of birds alighting in a nest. The heady smell of the leaves and plants was intoxicating. Pasha put one foot in the water an inch at a time, and then lowered the other one into it. The water was perfectly cool, not cold, and very refreshing on this sunny day. She felt the water seep up her petticoats until they blossomed out around her in a circle. It was as though she were given wings to float through the water, her arms stroked through, and she submerged her head. When she came up and shook out the water from her hair, she smiled with great delight, as though she were a child again.

Hadn't it all been beautiful somehow? Even the struggles, the dark times, they had all held a sort of beauty in them, for they were part of the wholeness of life. She thought of Lisa and Fëdor, of their young happiness, how they would embark on a journey of ups and downs. Little Vasya still had much to learn, was as tender as the birch sapling that Asya spoke of. Pasha dunked her head under the water again and came up, enjoying the feel of the rivulets run down her face and neck. Ivan. Her dear Ivan had taken her on a journey of life, from marriage to birth to death. He had proposed to her in the woods, married her under the glow of the icons, made her a conduit for bringing life into

the world. Two birds chirped above, and then chased each other in the air, floating higher and higher as though they would ascend to the firmament. She thought of him, lying still in the earth, as she swam and moved in the ripples and eddies. But while his journey had ended, hers must carry on. The canopy of green leaves, little wildflowers, whispering insects around her ensured that Pasha would continue in the stream of life.



Sonja Srinivasan holds an MFA in fiction writing from the Warren Wilson program. She has published the stories “The Mathematician’s Daughter,” “Almahdi,” and “In-Flight Entertainment,” which was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Sonja writes a non-fiction blog, thewomenofletters.com, on arts social issues. An opera singer and polyglot, she is also a graduate of Stanford and Columbia Universities. She is currently revising *The Senator’s Wife*, a novel retelling of *Anna Karenina*.