

Miro Gavran

## Chekhov says good-bye to Tolstoy

Cast of characters:

TOLSTOY

62 years old

SOFYA

48 years old

CHEKHOV

30 years old

OLGA

30 years old

At Yasnaya Polyana, the estate of great Russian writer Leo Nikolayevich Tolstoy, in early June, 1890.

### **1. a.**

(Tolstoy, Sofya)

SOFYA: The cook promises that lunch will be ready in half an hour.

TOLSTOY: I wish it were ready now.

SOFYA: We can have a drink here with the guests, and then move to the dining-room.

TOLSTOY: I wish lunch were ready now.

SOFYA: It's only one o'clock. We never have lunch before two. It's not the cook's fault.

TOLSTOY: Then it must be yours.

SOFYA: I told her to be ready a half an hour early.

TOLSTOY: You should have told her a full hour early.

SOFYA: But you told me yesterday that he'd arrive at one; lunch was to be ready at 1:30.

TOLSTOY: At one.

(Silence.)

TOLSTOY: Damn it, what are they waiting for, why don't they come down, they said they'd put their things away and be right down.

SOFYA: They're worn out from the journey. You must be more compassionate!

TOLSTOY: They're young! What's it to them? And I'm hungry. And I don't like waiting for anyone. Leo Nikolayevich Tolstoy waits for no-one, not even the Emperor. And I hardly intend to wait for some upstart writer and his wife.

SOFYA: It's only been ten minutes since they arrived.

TOLSTOY: Fifteen.

(Silence.)

TOLSTOY: What's for lunch?

SOFYA: Wild boar.

TOLSTOY: Marvellous.

(Silence.)

TOLSTOY: This Chekhov fellow seems quite different in the flesh than in his picture. He seemed much more ordinary in the picture.

SOFYA: He looked quite dashing.

TOLSTOY: What do you mean by that?

SOFYA: What do you mean, what do I mean?

TOLSTOY: What did you mean when you said that he looked quite dashing in the picture? What did you have in mind?

SOFYA: He strikes me as dashing.

TOLSTOY: As a man?

SOFYA: ... Yes, as a man.

TOLSTOY: Balderdash.

SOFYA: Why?

TOLSTOY: He doesn't look at all manly. He's frail, translucent.

SOFYA: Luminescent, perhaps?

TOLSTOY: No, colorless. I can sense no manly resolve in him, no strength, no guts.

SOFYA: And you gathered all this in the two minutes we talked to him?

TOLSTOY: You know that I don't need much time to judge who's who. I am surprised that Chekhov struck you as... well sort of...

SOFYA: Dashing.

TOLSTOY: Yes, handsome. What does beauty mean in a man? I can't imagine where you got the idea that one can describe a man that way: dashing or dull.

SOFYA: All right! ❖ Chekhov is not dashing!

TOLSTOY: Why change your tune?

SOFYA: Because, it's what you want to hear.

TOLSTOY: And why do I want to hear it?

SOFYA: Because you, my dear, were never dashing. Even many centuries ago when I married you.

TOLSTOY: You could have told me this earlier.

SOFYA: You had a symmetrical body and proportionate features, but you were still ugly. You also insisted on being so resolute, and were so irritating and persistent in trying to show that a vast masculine strength seethes within you every single day of your life. It became pompous.

TOLSTOY: It strikes me as pompous that you'd see a man like Chekhov as dashing.

(Long silence.)

SOFYA: Did you explain why you invited him in your letter?

TOLSTOY: I did not.

SOFYA: He'll be surprised.

TOLSTOY: Perhaps.

SOFYA: He surely has no inkling.

TOLSTOY: I wrote him that he should come and stay for two weeks. Nothing more. Come and spend two weeks with us at Yasnaya Polyana.

SOFYA: So he doesn't know.

TOLSTOY: That's right.

SOFYA: What if he turns you down?

TOLSTOY: I doubt it. It will be a great honor for him. I am certain that he will agree at once.

SOFYA: What about his wife?

TOLSTOY: I happen to know that she has no obligations in the theater until September. Her season has just ended. She can spend the entire summer with him. If she's in a new play in the fall she can study her lines while she's here. She'll have ample peace and quiet.

SOFYA: An actress. Hmmm. I've never liked actresses.

TOLSTOY: Why?

SOFYA: They've always seemed far too confident to me.

TOLSTOY: Olga strikes me as so charming and pretty.

SOFYA: ❖Charming❖? ❖Pretty❖? Nonsense. How can you...

(Steps can be heard approaching the door.)

TOLSTOY: They're coming.

(Chekhov and Olga enter the room.)

## **1. b.**

(Tolstoy, Sofya, Chekhov, Olga)

CHEKHOV: Forgive us for taking so long.

TOLSTOY: Oh, certainly, think nothing of it.

SOFYA: How do you like your room?

OLGA: It is lovely. I do love rooms with large windows.

CHEKHOV: We were detained a few minutes struggling to open one of the suitcases.

OLGA: Anton left the key in Moscow.

CHEKHOV: I can't imagine how it happened. It simply slipped my mind.

SOFYA: Should I summon a servant to help?

CHEKHOV: That won't be necessary, I've already...

OLGA: He managed to pry it open.

SOFYA: How?

OLGA: With a knife.

CHEKHOV: Yes, with a knife. All I wanted was to open it, but the entire lock came unglued from the leather. The bag is open now, but I won't be able to close it and lock it again.

OLGA: Anton is sad because the suitcase was a gift from Mother.

CHEKHOV: From Olga's mother... I'm really sorry, my sweet, the knife was only supposed...

OLGA: It's not important. We'll get it fixed.

CHEKHOV: I'm afraid it won't be fixable. *(To Tolstoy)*.

You know, I've never been handy with repairs.

SOFYA: What do you mean?

CHEKHOV: I'm terrible at fixing things.

TOLSTOY: Such things are better left to the servants.

CHEKHOV: Well, unfortunately... we have no servants.

TOLSTOY: We do. You should have summoned Mikhailo and he would have seen to it expediently. In the future, whenever you need something, Mikhailo will be at your service. And now, please sit down. Let's have a drink before lunch.

CHEKHOV: Thank you. I think I will.

*(Each takes a glass.)*

TOLSTOY: Welcome to Yasnaya Polyana.

*(Tolstoy clinks his glass with Olga.)*

SOFYA: Welcome.

*(Sofya clinks with Chekhov.)*

TOLSTOY: To your health.

(Tolstoy clinks with Chekhov, Sofya with Olga.)

OLGA: To you, dear.

(Olga turns to clink glasses with Chekhov, but she misses his glass and spills a little of her drink on Chekhov's coat.)

CHEKHOV: Oh no!

SOFYA: It's all over your suit.

OLGA: I'm so sorry, darling.

CHEKHOV: Don't worry, don't worry.

(Chekhov quickly wipes the spill off his dress jacket with a handkerchief.)

OLGA: I missed your glass.

CHEKHOV: There's nothing wrong, dear, it's just a drop. Perfectly all right.

OLGA: You know, I'm a bit near-sighted.

SOFYA: Ah, all of us are near-sighted.

TOLSTOY: Well, yes, once again: welcome. I hope you will enjoy Yasnaya Polyana.

CHEKHOV: Oh, yes, it really is... lovely.

OLGA: I like the meadow... and the woods.

TOLSTOY: It's the finest place in the world. The finest. I wrote War and Peace here, and Anna Karenina, and almost everything else. Only surrounded by such splendid nature can one have uplifting thoughts.

OLGA: I read Anna twice.

TOLSTOY: Only twice?

OLGA: I mean over this last month, since we received your invitation. I read it many, many times before that.

TOLSTOY: How many?

OLGA: Nine! Nine times.

TOLSTOY: Yes, that novel must be read closely time and time again in order to penetrate to all its many layers. Time and time again.

SOFYA: Leo wrote seven versions of *Anna Karenina*, you know, before the book was finally published. (*To Chekhov*). I'm sure you polish and re-work your stories in much the same way.

CHEKHOV: Well, it all depends.

OLGA: Anton writes everything in a single draft.

SOFYA: Whatever can you mean... in a single draft?

OLGA: He sits down and writes it out.

SOFYA: Don't you polish your stories?

CHEKHOV: Well, to tell you the truth, I don't.

SOFYA: You publish that first version?

CHEKHOV: Usually.

TOLSTOY: So typical for a young, inexperienced writer.

SOFYA: But your stories seem so deliberate, so polished, so perfect. I cannot imagine how you manage to write with only one draft. Leo struggles so with each sentence. He has never found it easy to write.

TOLSTOY: Now, Sofya, we mustn't...

SOFYA: Why not?

TOLSTOY: No need to dwell on how I write. All that matters is that I am the best writer in all of Russia. It doesn't matter how I go about it.

SOFYA: Fine, we won't talk about how difficult it is for you to write.

(Long silence)

SOFYA: Just before you came down, I was asking my darling husband why he has invited you here, to *Yasnaya Polyana*.

CHEKHOV: What do you mean, why? We were invited here to spend our vacation.

SOFYA: You were not invited only for a vacation, my dear Chekhov.

TOLSTOY: We'll discuss it later.

SOFYA: Why later? I am curious to hear what Chekhov will say, and whether Chekhov will accept.

CHEKHOV: Accept what?

SOFYA: Leo's proposal.

TOLSTOY: Sofya, these people have only just arrived.

SOFYA: Precisely. You must tell them at once that they have not been invited for rest and relaxation but for something else. So that they don't think that the great Tolstoy invited them for no reason.

TOLSTOY: Sofya, you are being difficult.

SOFYA: Direct, my dear, direct.

(Silence.)

TOLSTOY: There... since Sofya has broken the ice. Chekhov my man, I would like to propose something. Something that would extend your stay here through the summer.

OLGA: Through the summer!

SOFYA: He has a job in mind.

TOLSTOY: It would be a job to an ordinary man, but a joy for a real writer.

(Silence.)

TOLSTOY: I assume you have read Eckermann's *Conversations with Goethe*?

CHEKHOV: I have.

OLGA: I haven't.

TOLSTOY: (*to Olga*). It is a book in which this Eckermann, Goethe's secretary, jotted down many of Goethe's sentiments on all aspects of life from art to politics. Every night before he went to bed, Eckermann would note whatever Goethe had told him during that day, and this is how he wrote the book. Only, of course, if he felt that Goethe had said something wise or intriguing that day. Goethe was the greatest German writer of all time, and it is only thanks to this book that we know as much as we do about him and his way of perceiving the world around him. Goethe's thoughts from sixty year ago have been preserved for us, thanks to Eckermann's book.

SOFYA: Leo had something along those lines in mind.

TOLSTOY: Don't interrupt me. (*To Chekhov*). I have read your stories in several magazines, and I feel that you are not without some talent. It occurred to me that you and I could do the same thing that Eckermann and Goethe did.

CHEKHOV: You thought that...

TOLSTOY: Precisely.

CHEKHOV: You feel that I could?



TOLSTOY: Why not?

CHEKHOV: A book of conversations?

TOLSTOY: Yes. It would be a shame not to give the Russians what Goethe gave to the Germans, and more. Undoubtedly much, much more.

(Silence.)

TOLSTOY: So, young man, my proposal has not doubt surprised you and you are at a loss for words.

CHEKHOV: Ah, yes, I am.

TOLSTOY: No need to thank me. I realize what an honour this is.

CHEKHOV: But, I am not sure...

TOLSTOY: What are you unsure about?

CHEKHOV: About how, and when. We were only planning to spend a couple of weeks here.

TOLSTOY: I didn't imagine that this would take only two weeks.

CHEKHOV: You didn't?

TOLSTOY: We have the whole summer before us.

CHEKHOV: Yes, but...

TOLSTOY: I know that it is a huge job. I will pay you well; two thousand rubles, but I insist on retaining all royalties for myself. I am sure that the book will sell well, and all of Russia will want to know what I am like in my everyday life, in ordinary conversation. Do you accept my offer?

CHEKHOV: I must admit I'm a little startled.

TOLSTOY: I didn't ask you about your present mood! Do you accept?

CHEKHOV: Must I give you an answer immediately?

TOLSTOY: Well, what do you prefer?

CHEKHOV: I'd rather wait until tomorrow, if I may.

TOLSTOY: Why?

CHEKHOV: I would like to give it some further thought.

TOLSTOY: Thought?!

CHEKHOV: If I may.

TOLSTOY: ... You may.

CHEKHOV: This is all so sudden, you know.

TOLSTOY: Fine, give it some thought.

SOFYA: (*to Chekhov and Olga*): Would you like another drink, or shall we go in to lunch?

TOLSTOY: We'll eat now.

## 2

(Chekhov, Olga)

(About ten hours later, some time before midnight, Chekhov and Olga get ready for bed)

CHEKHOV: Just the two of us, at last.

OLGA: At last. This has been a hard day. How did you like Tolstoy?

CHEKHOV: I don't rightly know. Different than I'd imagined. And I had imagined him through his books, which is always risky.

OLGA: They don't seem to care much for each other.

CHEKHOV: Apparently.

OLGA: I cringe at the thought that we may be like them when we get to their age.

CHEKHOV: In what way?

OLGA: That we'll be... so harsh.

CHEKHOV: We won't.

OLGA: Ever?

CHEKHOV: Never.

OLGA: Do you promise?

CHEKHOV: I promise. Why do you even ask? You know that we'll always be good to each other.

OLGA: I know. But I love to hear you say it.

(Silence.)

OLGA: What do you intend to do about Tolstoy's proposition?

CHEKHOV: Well... I'd like to accept.

OLGA: Then why did you say that you wanted time to consider it until morning?

CHEKHOV: He took me by surprise. And I wanted to have time enough to consult with you. I didn't want you to feel that you had to spend the rest of the summer here with me if you weren't looking forward to it. We waited all year for the theater season to finish, with all your rehearsals and performances, so that we could spend at least the summer together.

OLGA: I hope that we will have enough time. As far as I can tell, we'll be with Tolstoy most of the day, perhaps taking walks in the afternoon, and you will jot down the most interesting parts of the conversation every evening for an hour or so.

CHEKHOV: But the note-taking will be a little peculiar. I hope that I'll be able to catch his words accurately. I don't know whether I'll be able to remember everything.

OLGA: I'm sure he won't be piqued if you change things just a little.

CHEKHOV: I hope you're right.

OLGA: And those two thousand rubles would certainly come in handy. You won't have to publish the stories you aren't satisfied with yet, and I won't have to take the roles in the theater that I don't want. Listen, if you don't enjoy the thought of doing this job, if it seems like it will be a strain, then don't.

CHEKHOV: What do you mean, don't?

OLGA: If the book of conversations with Tolstoy keeps you from writing your own stories, if it makes you unhappy, then turn it down.

CHEKHOV: How can I turn him down and stay here two more weeks without doing anything, on vacation, when he invited us because of the book?

OLGA: Anton, we promised one another that we would only do the work we wanted to.

CHEKHOV: It's not as bad as all that.

OLGA: It is, Anton, I know that you don't feel comfortable with your last two stories. You published them so we could get the money we needed to come to Yasnaya Polyana.

CHEKHOV: Well, you didn't have the highest opinion of the last play you you were in. You suffered from headaches every time you went to rehearse.

OLGA: My head didn't ache because of the play.

CHEKHOV: Oh, yes it did.

(Silence.)

CHEKHOV: I can't fathom why Tolstoy chose me to write this book of conversations with him. I am still a young writer, starting out. He could have chosen someone more experienced, more famous. No-one in Russia would have turned him down.

OLGA: I know. No-one. And yet you asked for a day to discuss it with me.

CHEKHOV: And to think it over.

OLGA: It struck me that Tolstoy was quite surprised when you said you would think about it until morning.

CHEKHOV: I noticed that, too.

### **3. a.**

(Tolstoy, Chekhov)

(The next afternoon, Tolstoy and Chekhov sitting at a desk covered with papers.)

TOLSTOY: Perhaps we ought to organize the conversations by subject.

CHEKHOV: What do you mean, by subject?

TOLSTOY: In one place you write down all I have to say about literature, in another the comments on religion, and in the third, everything on politics.

CHEKHOV: And how many subjects would there be in all?

TOLSTOY: I don't know. Let's try to think of all the subjects that might come up.

(Chekhov dips his fountain pen into the inkwell and writes down Tolstoy's words.)

TOLSTOY: Marriage could be one, serfdom in Russia, or the ties between Russia and France for example.

CHEKHOV: Perhaps you could call that the influence of France on the development of Russian culture and society from Napoleon to to the present.

TOLSTOY: Perhaps. I'll have a lot to say about that. Then: what about the subject of love?

CHEKHOV: Did you have the general, or the individual, in mind?

TOLSTOY: What do you mean by general, or individual?

CHEKHOV: Well, I was wondering whether you'd be referring specifically to your own... well, you know what I mean.

TOLSTOY: No, I don't.

CHEKHOV: Do you wish to speak from your personal experience, or more broadly?

TOLSTOY: From my own experience.

CHEKHOV: With living and breathing examples?

TOLSTOY: Naturally. Do you find that odd?

CHEKHOV: I could never do that.

TOLSTOY: What?

CHEKHOV: I don't know how I could speak of the women I've loved, I don't know how I could speak of them publicly. I couldn't do it.

TOLSTOY: You, of course, are not Tolstoy. I am permitted a great deal more than most ordinary people.

CHEKHOV: How will your wife react when she reads it one day... with the names of the women who were in your life?

TOLSTOY: She will despise me, she'll envy me. And that is what I want. A woman must despise the man who dominates her, and a man must dominate the woman who despises him then the circle is complete. Don't you agree?

CHEKHOV: Well, to be frank...

TOLSTOY: You aren't writing down my words.

CHEKHOV: Which words?

TOLSTOY: On domination.

CHEKHOV: At once.

(Chekhov studiously writes it all down.)

TOLSTOY: Do you succeed with your own wife?

CHEKHOV: In what?

TOLSTOY: In imposing that state of dominance.

CHEKHOV: It would never occur to me to try.

TOLSTOY: In other words, you fail.

(Silence.)

TOLSTOY: A great job awaits us, you know, with this book of conversations. Eckermann's book is a thick one, but my conversations with you must be even more substantial. Don't you agree?

CHEKHOV: If you say so.

TOLSTOY: Our book must be over a thousand pages long. It must have a monumental appearance! It must reflect my vast personality!

CHEKHOV: Perhaps a thousand pages would be a bit much for such literature.

TOLSTOY: Too much? Did you say too much?

CHEKHOV: Well, I had in mind... perhaps, you see, after giving the matter a little thought... a more concise form... with clarity of spirit ... yes... I agree with a thousand pages.

TOLSTOY: At least a thousand for all I have to say.

CHEKHOV: Fine, of course.

(Silence.)

TOLSTOY: I wanted to talk to you about the first page.

CHEKHOV: What first page?

TOLSTOY: You know, the first page of our book. I am sure you will agree that the first page of every book is the most important page. Along with the last one, of course! The first page is much more than a hint of things to come, more than an introduction. It must entice the reader and keep him reading the book to the very end. It must hint at a secret that the book will only disclose on its last page. The first page must convey a feeling for all the subsequent chapters, all layers, all relationships hidden in the book. The

first page is the hardest one for the writer. Once the first page is skilfully written, the book more or less writes itself. Don't you agree?

CHEKHOV: ... Oh,... yes, undoubtedly so.

TOLSTOY: This is more pertinent, of course, to a novel; ours is to be a book of conversations. But nonetheless the first page in our book will also be terribly important.

(Silence.)

TOLSTOY: Have you imagined the first page?

CHEKHOV: Well, to tell you the truth, it might be best to... yes... on the first page... I haven't had time to give it adequate thought.

TOLSTOY: You haven't had time?

CHEKHOV: No, I haven't.

TOLSTOY: Don't you think that the first page should capture the moment when the two of us first met? When you stepped down out of your coach yesterday, came over to me and shook my hand?

CHEKHOV: I suppose that would be the best place to start.

TOLSTOY: I, too, feel the book should start with our first meeting. Your description will draw the readers into the book. Your words will entice the readers on through the full thousand pages where I talk to them about so many different things. How does that strike you?

CHEKHOV: That's fine with me.

TOLSTOY: Wonderful.

(Silence.)

TOLSTOY: How would you portray our first meeting?

CHEKHOV: In what words?

TOLSTOY: Precisely.

CHEKHOV: Well... I'd have to give it some thought.

TOLSTOY: We haven't much time. This summer will be over before we know it. We must have that in mind.

CHEKHOV: Certainly.

TOLSTOY: You have no clear idea about how to begin?

CHEKHOV: Well... in fact... not right now.

TOLSTOY: Too bad. We're so pressed for time.

(Silence.)

TOLSTOY: Last night, uh, when you'd gone to bed, I thought about the beginning for a while, and then I took the liberty of writing it down, exactly as you, no doubt, would have written it if you'd had the time.

(Silence.)

TOLSTOY: Shall I read it?

CHEKHOV: By all means.

(Tolstoy picks up a piece of paper.)

TOLSTOY: This is merely my suggestion for the way the book should start. If you don't like it, drop it, or phrase it differently. I'll read it. It's written as if you wrote it, in your name.

*(He reads:)*

◆The carriage neared the ambling, secretive mansion accompanied by the muffled sound of jingling bells. I knew that in just a few more moments I would be making the acquaintance of the greatest Russian writer who had ever lived, Count Leo Nikolayevich Tolstoy. We had nearly reached our destination, and I could feel that new adventures were soon to begin, if only Tolstoy would agree to my plan. A sojourn in Tolstoy's universe, a journey to the source of his ingenious soul. I still wasn't sure whether he'd allow me to write this book of conversations. I shuddered at the thought that he might turn me down, because by doing so he'd be rejecting not only me, but that great army of readers out there who deserve to get a glimpse of the wealth of his spirit. At last the carriage pulled up before the entranceway to his home. My wife Olga and I were stepping down from the coach when a noble figure appeared framed in the great front door. It was he. My heart trembled. Tolstoy looked deep into my eyes with his penetrating gaze and offered me his hand. We took hands like the oldest of friends. From that moment on he won my heart with his friendliness, candor and warmth. Before me stood a man who had probed all the secrets of the human soul.◆

(Pause.)

TOLSTOY: How does it sound?

CHEKHOV: I think it's... well... it's very good.

TOLSTOY: Yes, I, too, think it sets the stage for the beginning. We can always go back to it later and polish it.

CHEKHOV: Certainly.

TOLSTOY: Do you really think it needs polishing?



CHEKHOV: I guess...

TOLSTOY: I like it as is. What didn't seem to fit?

CHEKHOV: Nothing.

TOLSTOY: We leave it as it stands.

(Silence.)

TOLSTOY: We must keep the full thousand pages, the real quality and quantity we hope to attain in this book, firmly in mind right from the start.

(Voices are heard outside, and Sofya and Olga soon enter. Olga is holding three roses.)

### **3. b.**

(Tolstoy, Sofya, Chekhov, Olga)

CHEKHOV: Back so soon!

OLGA: We only went to the edge of the wood. Look what I brought you.

(Olga gives Chekhov the roses. Chekhov reaches out and takes them but winces and drops them immediately.)

CHEKHOV: Ow!

SOFYA: What's wrong?

CHEKHOV: I pricked my finger! A thorn!

OLGA: I'm sorry, darling, I didn't mean to.

(Olga leans down to pluck the roses up from the floor, but she, too, winces and drops them.)

OLGA: Ow!

SOFYA: Now what?

OLGA: I pricked my finger, too.

TOLSTOY: Never in my life have I seen a woman give a man a rose.

OLGA: Anton's so fond of flowers.

TOLSTOY: Ridiculous.

SOFYA: *(Confused silence.)*

TOLSTOY: How has it been going?

SOFYA: May the two of us listen?

TOLSTOY: By all means. Chekhov asked me: ♦ Tell me, Leo Nikolayevich, what are your thoughts on marriage? ♦ Repeat the question and we'll proceed with our work on the book.

*(Chekhov dips the fountain pen into the inkwell and begins to write.)*

CHEKHOV: Tell me, Leo Nikolayevich, what are your thoughts on marriage?

*(Tolstoy settles comfortably into his armchair and begins talking freely, with an air of pleasure.)*

TOLSTOY: Marriage ♦ that fraudulent word, that illusory state of happiness for the naive and uninformed, for the lonely, the miserable, the wretched. The treacherous oasis of complacency of which everyone has such high expectations, yet get such precious little. I have always held a low opinion of marriage.

SOFYA: Even before you married?

TOLSTOY: Don't interrupt. *(To Chekhov)*: Where were we? Ah, yes. Marriage is a state in which one person gradually yet systematically drives their spouse berserk.

SOFYA: I agree.

TOLSTOY: The way to madness is paved with laughter and good intentions. A woman is like an invisible leech with a hundred heads. She clings to her man with her soft pliable body, sucking away all his strength, will, humor, hope, bit by bit. Sucking at him like that for years she deforms him, mangles and destroys him. The weaker ones put up with it. Luckily those who are strong-willed with firmly entrenched personalities such as my own, soon sense this leech-like quality in their wives, this destructive urge to ravage their husbands. The men wrench free from the clutches of these lustful beasts ♦ hold the vixens off from their blood but live on in the proximity of this blood-sucker, feeling her chill, her lust and her bloodthirst. They feel the breath of the vampire at their necks. Free of her clutches, yet never entirely free.

SOFYA: Do you suppose you are amusing?

TOLSTOY: No.

SOFYA: You are not... Do you intend to print what you've just said? In your book?

TOLSTOY: With the greatest pleasure.

SOFYA: You shall not.

TOLSTOY: I shall.

SOFYA: You shall not.

TOLSTOY: Oh, yes I will.

SOFYA: That remains to be seen.

(Silence.)

TOLSTOY: Shall we continue our conversation about marriage and my wife?

CHEKHOV: If you wish.

SOFYA: I will not permit this in the home we have shared for so many years. I will not permit you to speak of me in this way under this roof.

TOLSTOY: You won't permit it under this roof?

SOFYA: I will not.

TOLSTOY: Fine. Then the two of us will go out onto the terrace and continue our work. You two can stay here under the roof.

(Tolstoy gets up. Chekhov follows him, taking the paper and inkwell. They leave, in silence.)

### **3. c.**

(Sofya, Olga)

SOFYA: The beast.

OLGA: I am sure it wasn't intentional.

SOFYA: Undoubtedly. Pure coincidence. No, people only say things like that on purpose. When they hate someone with their whole heart. But I'll get back at him, oh yes I will.

(Silence.)

SOFYA: These writers. Egotists. Your Anton is probably no different.

OLGA: ... I think he is.

SOFYA: He may merely seem different to you. Life with a writer is hell for a woman. Doesn't Chekhov insist that you tiptoe around the house while he writes?

OLGA: No.

SOFYA: No? Doesn't he forbid you to interrupt him while he is working?

OLGA: No. He says that he loves me more than any of the stories he writes and that I should always make a point of interrupting. By all means.

SOFYA: Those are nothing but empty words. I'm sure he makes all the decisions himself, without asking for your opinion.

OLGA: He asks me about everything.

SOFYA: Doesn't he have an opinion already formed about what would be best for you?

OLGA: He never interferes with my work.

SOFYA: ... and never misses an opportunity to tell you that without you he would have written much more?

OLGA: He has never told me anything of the sort.

SOFYA: All writers are the same.

(Silence.)

SOFYA: You heard what my husband said about marriage, about me! He is writing this book to shame me, to ridicule me publicly. I know him. He must be proving incessantly that he is above everyone else, incessantly! My day will come.


OLGA: Whatever do you mean?

SOFYA: Your husband is writing a book with Tolstoy in which Tolstoy has only the worst to say of me. The only fitting revenge would be a book of conversations that you'd write with me where I could say what Tolstoy is really like. A book in which I would strip him naked before the world and show him as he really is!

OLGA: But I've never written.

SOFYA: All I'd need would be a little help.

OLGA: I don't know whether I'd know how.

SOFYA: Imagine  our book would be much more widely read than theirs! Our book would be more interesting!

OLGA: We're not writers.

SOFYA: Don't turn me down until you've had a chance to think it over.

OLGA: But I am an actress. And when an actor writes a book he is invariably criticized for not limiting his sights to the world of the stage.

SOFYA: That is of no consequence whatsoever. What matters is that in our book of conversations I will say things that will shock all of Russia. You must understand: you and I have a chance to write the most-read book and the most fascinating book in the entire country.

(Silence.)

OLGA: And how will we divide the royalties?

SOFYA: You will receive a thousand rubles from me, and I will retain all rights to the royalties.

(Silence.)

OLGA: I might agree if there were royalties, but I must give the matter serious consideration.

SOFYA: What percentages did you have in mind?

(Silence.)

OLGA: Thirty percent to me, seventy percent to you.

SOFYA: You seem to demand too much. The book will sell because of what I have to say, not because of you. I might be willing to consider ten percent.

OLGA: But I would not.

SOFYA: Don't turn me down until you've had time to think it over.

#### **4.**

(Chekhov, Sofya)

(Two days later, Chekhov and Sofya happen to find each other alone for a moment.)

CHEKHOV: Will your husband be down soon?

SOFYA: I fear that he won't. He had a bit too much vodka to drink, collapsed on the bed and fell asleep. He announced that you were free for the afternoon before he dozed off.

CHEKHOV: What a shame. Olga went out riding alone.

SOFYA: Why a shame? This is a chance for the two of us to spend a few moments together. You are always engaged in conversation with my husband or your wife whenever I see you.

(Silence.)

SOFYA: Do you believe in this book of conversations?

CHEKHOV: In what sense?

SOFYA: Do you believe it will be good?

CHEKHOV: It might be interesting.

SOFYA: I think it will be boring.

CHEKHOV: Why?

SOFYA: Because the most frequent word in it will be *me*.

(Silence.)

SOFYA: Tolstoy's decision to write such a book can mean only one thing.

CHEKHOV: What?

SOFYA: That he has said everything he has to say as a writer... Tolstoy is no longer a writer... He is a former writer. Don't you agree?

CHEKHOV: I have always admired his literary work.

SOFYA: His earlier work. Everything he's written that was any good was written many years ago. His imagination has vanished, his brain has dried up, he is out of ideas. If he were still a real writer, he would be writing novels and stories, not the drivel of an old man.

CHEKHOV: Perhaps he simply feels a need to find a different form of expression.

SOFYA: This other form of expression has nothing to do with art. Ask him what he intends to write about in his next novel and you won't get an answer. In the old days, while he was still a real writer, he always had at least one more novel in mind and several stories he was planning to write. Now, when he has no more great artistic ideas, now he ought to keep an honorable silence. But he doesn't know how. He wants his voice heard, no matter what the cost, and instead of his intriguing stories, he'll offer readers the savage bile of an old man, a hurtful text meant to harm and belittle all he can: from his wife to other writers, politicians, the church. He will be in the foreground again with this new book, but as an old woman who gossips about anyone who comes to mind, without a sense of measure or critique, and not as an artist. Tolstoy will be writing an utterly worthless book for the first time, and you will help him do so.

SOFYA: You have nothing to say?

CHEKHOV: ... I will say nothing.

(Silence.)

SOFYA: Do you know why he chose you to help him?

CHEKHOV: No, I don't.

SOFYA: Because he has found great talent in your stories. He knows that one day you will become much more than a young, promising writer as you are today. Tolstoy has become destructive, and he will destroy your talent in the process. You are truly gifted but, thanks to Tolstoy, you will always be remembered as the man who wrote a book of conversations with him readers will forget that you, too, were a writer.

CHEKHOV: I cannot imagine why you see things in such a light.

(Long silence.)

SOFYA: Because I understand literature a great deal more than you think, and also know how important some paltry things can be to art. Over the year I have watched with my own eyes how Tolstoy became Tolstoy, and how many other writers, certainly as talented, were ruined and vanished. Strange are the ways of greatness. Some become famous, others anonymous. Believe me, quality does not necessarily decide the issue.

(Long silence.)

SOFYA: We really should be talking of more pleasurable things.

CHEKHOV: Must pleasurable and serious things be mutually exclusive?

SOFYA: I think they must.

(Silence.)

SOFYA: I was so looking forward to these few moments alone with you. I felt they could be something very special. I do enjoy your company.

(Silence.)

SOFYA: It is so nice to be alone with such a dear man. I hope I do not strike you as unappealing.

CHEKHOV: You see, I... well, in a way... I am not sure whether you will understand... I haven't a poor opinion of you, but... I hope you see what I mean... I simply...

SOFYA: Anton, if it is God's will for us to spend this summer together, don't you believe that we ought to be spending it in the most exquisite way possible?

CHEKHOV: Why, certainly!

SOFYA: We could have such a masrvellous time, the two of us. All it takes is for us to want it. It would be unsurpassed.

(Silence.)

SOFYA: Anton. I am not talking about the book. I am talking about you. I have been longing to meet you ever since your photograph came out in the Literary Herald two years ago. And now, here you are, before me. Every bit as dashing as you appeared in the picture.

CHEKHOV: It was a terribly photograph, taken in a rush.

SOFYA: It would be such a shame for this summer to pass in irksome conversation and tiresome note-taking of such preposterous stupidity. I can offer you much, much more. What a waste to let it slip away.

CHEKHOV: Terribly sorry, really, but my wife and I...

SOFYA: Forget about your wife for a moment. I know that I have shocked you. Give it some thought. I will give you time, though not much, because we mistresses, too, have our pride. You must never think that I would allow you to humiliate me with your hesitation.

(Sofya and Chekhov stare long and silently into each other's eyes. Chekhov look down. Sofya leaves the room. Chekhov remains alone, he sighs deeply and shrugs his shoulders.)

## 5.

(Chekhov, Tolstoy)



(Chekhov sits at a paper-strewn desk with an inkwell. He is writing down Tolstoy's words with his fountain pen. Tolstoy is seated comfortably in an armchair.)

TOLSTOY: ... and in most similar cases, the Church is wrong in its approach to the peasantry. It is my opinion that the Church is not so much mistaken in its understanding of the problems as it is intentionally feigning ignorance.

(Silence.)

TOLSTOY: Did you get those last words?

CHEKHOV: I did.

TOLSTOY: Do you disagree with me on this point as well?

CHEKHOV: Regrettably, I do.

TOLSTOY: No matter. It makes no difference for the book. I know that you are aching with the desire to tell me your opinion on the Russian Church.

CHEKHOV: I'd be happy to, if you are interested.

TOLSTOY: I'd rather leave that for the end of the summer... When the book is done, I will give you a chance to tell me all that you disagree with.

CHEKHOV: But if we do that, this will not be a book of true conversations.

TOLSTOY: What will it be, then?

CHEKHOV: ... A book of monologues.

(Silence.)

CHEKHOV: Perhaps it would be better for me to say right off where I disagree with you. That would give you a chance to further reinforce your arguments and the book would become a true conversation.

TOLSTOY: I will instruct you where I feel it appropriate for you to inject a little comment or two, or where your opposing opinion might enhance things, of course only without damaging the basic flow of my own ideas.

CHEKHOV: As you wish.

(Silence.)

TOLSTOY: I would like you to ask me how I define friendship.

CHEKHOV: (*writing and asking*): Tell me, how do you define friendship?

TOLSTOY: Friendship to my mind is a great fabrication. It is only possible between two equals with like tastes. Yet life so rarely tosses two similar people together. Interestingly enough the weaker personalities have less need for friends. They need to talk to someone from time to time, to mingle, to find a crowd. Great people, on the other hand, have such a difficult time finding someone equal to them in stature ♦ and friendship, as I said, is only possible among equals.

(Silence.)

TOLSTOY: Did you get that down?

CHEKHOV: I did.

(Silence.)

TOLSTOY: Well, now that I think of it, perhaps it would be better to throw out what I just said about friendship.

CHEKHOV: Perhaps.

TOLSTOY: I can't seem to capture precisely what I had in mind in a simple way. I'm feeling somewhat tired.

(Silence.)

TOLSTOY: You don't like that part about friendship, do you.

CHEKHOV: No, I don't.

TOLSTOY: Well then, we shall leave it in.

## 6.

(Sofya, Olga)

SOFYA: In our book of conversations you will ask me, as one woman to another, about my relationship with Tolstoy. Ours should be a perfectly ordinary sort of conversation about a man. As I imagine it, the book should be divided into three large sections. The first section would be about the days before we married, about how Tolstoy courted me, about how he proposed; and finally, a description of the wedding. The second chapter would describe the first year of our marriage. In that first year he was different than he is now. At times he resembled a normal man. And the third chapter, the longest, will describe events related to our life together, starting from our first anniversary and going on to the present. What do you think of my plan?

OLGA: It's not bad in essence. Though I'd separate each of the larger chapters into smaller episodes. I think that every event ought to be presented as a separate whole. Perhaps even at the beginning of each episode there ought to be a heading to help the readers find their way through the

book after the first reading. We must assume that there will be many who will go back later and read only selected chapters a second time ♦ and we must help them find their way through the mass of facts and events.

SOFYA: Good idea. We should definitely do that. I wanted to suggest that we start work today after lunch.

OLGA: But we still haven't finalized the royalty arrangements.

SOFYA: I stand firm at giving you ten percent.

OLGA: And I still demand thirty.

SOFYA: I stand firm at ten.

OLGA: I still demand thirty.

SOFYA: I'd say you're out of line. It would be easy to find someone who would do the job for me for under two hundred rubles.

OLGA: Don't make me laugh. We both know that the book will be worth more because you are conversing with the wife of the man who wrote the book of conversations with your husband. And furthermore you know there are plenty of people out there who admire my work as an actress and would buy the book out of curiosity to find out about me.

(Silence.)

OLGA: So, do you agree?

SOFYA: I confess: you are right. And perhaps I will agree to more than ten percent royalties for you. But we must play to the end with open hands.

OLGA: What do you mean by that?

SOFYA: I mean that my book can only succeed if it approaches the topics of my husband's book in a different way.

OLGA: What does that mean?

SOFYA: The manuscript of Tolstoy's book will be in your husband's possession. In other words only he and you have will have access to it. We haven't much time. His book must be finished by the end of the summer and ours must be nearly done, too. Our book must appear in the bookstores a week after theirs, that is the only way to do it. If we take too long with publication, we'll lose everything.

OLGA: So you're suggesting...

SOFYA: I am suggesting that neither Chekhov and Tolstoy must have any idea of what we're up to. And I am suggesting that you must peek into their manuscript daily.

OLGA: But that's underhanded. I can't spy on my own husband.

SOFYA: Not even for twenty percent of the royalties?

OLGA: ... not even twenty percent.

SOFYA: Not even for twenty-five?

OLGA: ... not even for twenty-five.

SOFYA: But that's a quarter of the sum. I simply cannot give you more than that. What will it be?

OLGA: I need to think about it.

SOFYA: Think, but do it quickly.

## 7.

(Tolstoy, Olga)

(Olga is alone. Olga looks up and sees him.)

OLGA: Ah, you are awake!

TOLSTOY: Why should that surprise you?

OLGA: You usually sleep at this hour.

TOLSTOY: Perhaps it is your fault that I am awake.

OLGA: Mine?! Why?

TOLSTOY: My wife has gone to a neighboring estate, your husband is out riding by the mill, so you must be alone. Reason enough for me to be awake.

OLGA: You didn't have to relinquish your slumbers because of me.

TOLSTOY: You are far more attractive than my slumbers.

OLGA: In your place I'd rather be asleep.

(Silence.)

TOLSTOY: It is such a sad thing ❖ to be a young writer. One never knows whether the young writer will be great one day.

OLGA: I have profound faith in Anton.

TOLSTOY: I was not referring to him. My words were more general. I think it a sad thing to be a young writer. Like grape-juice no longer at the must stage but still not wine. Young writers, unlike ordinary people, already know something about writing, but as a rule in those years, in the young years, they have no real experience behind them. They are still traveling toward something monumental which, chances are, they'll never reach ❖ because: there is only one Pushkin, one Lermontov out of thousands, and there is only one Tolstoy. The rest go on writing if they haven't the luck to die young, but their works grow paler, more mediocre, and with each new book they bury themselves further and further. Their youthful promise is betrayed.

This happens to those who do not give up in time. An entire army of young writers cease writing literature after their initial, promising pieces. And they write something that is neither here nor there. The years pass, they live steeped in the conviction that they will get down to the real writing when the time comes, while convincing even those around them that they haven't quite reached the pinnacle of their life's work yet, because they're short of time. That's the lie that saves them. I tell you: it is a sad thing to be a young writer, because every young writer is so very promising, yet we know from experience that only one in thousands...

OLGA: I believe in Chekhov.

TOLSTOY: Well, believe then, if you will.

(Silence.)

TOLSTOY: Have I mentioned that I saw you in the theater three year ago?

OLGA: Really?

TOLSTOY: Oh yes, really. You were simply marvellous. You are very talented.

OLGA: What role was I playing?

TOLSTOY: Anna Nikolayevich.

OLGA: Ah, one of my favorites.

TOLSTOY: You thrilled me, both as an actress and as a woman.

(Silence.)

TOLSTOY: Now I wonder how you managed to appear so decisive on stage, so firm, while in your private life you really are quite different, in fact you seem awkward, fetchingly so, of course, yet nonetheless awkward.

OLGA: I feel much better on stage than I do in real life.

TOLSTOY: Do you?

OLGA: Yes. Everything is set on stage, safe. There are no surprises. That is where I get my strength and assertiveness. While ordinary life is all so unpredictable and unsure, so full of unsettling developments.

(Silence.)

TOLSTOY: We are alone in the house.

OLGA: And?

TOLSTOY: It would be a shame to pass up this chance.

OLGA: What chance did you have in mind?

TOLSTOY: Our chance to get to know each other.

OLGA: To talk?

TOLSTOY: That, too, but more. Completely.

(Silence.)

TOLSTOY: You are lovely.

OLGA: I merely seem so to you.

TOLSTOY: Allow me to take your hand and say a few words.

OLGA: I will hear your words but you cannot have my hand.

TOLSTOY: Why so shy? You are a grown woman! Appealing, desirable. It is your fault that I cannot resist you.

OLGA: We will forget everything you have said as if it never happened.

TOLSTOY: How can you possibly forget that Leo Nikolayevich Tolstoy could not resist you! Can you forget that he said you're a beautiful woman?

OLGA: Don't over-do it, Lev Nikolayevich. I am nearsighted, pigeontoed and my left breast is smaller than my right one ♦ which you will have to take on faith because I will not give you the chance to find out for yourself. And if you give all these drawbacks due consideration I am sure you will conclude that I am doing you a favor by not becoming your mistress.

TOLSTOY: There has never yet been a woman who could resist me.

OLGA: I suspect you chose the easier ones, and I recommend that you continue to do so.

(Tolstoy clasps Olga's hand.)

TOLSTOY: Olga, don't be a child.

(Olga jerks her hand back from his.)

OLGA: Leo Nikolayevich, please do not injure my excellent opinion of you. Forgive me, I am tired.

(With firm steps, Olga hurriedly leaves the room.)

## **8.**

(Chekhov, Olga)

(The next day Olga and Chekhov are alone together after breakfast.)

OLGA: I have wanted to talk to you.

CHEKHOV: By all means.

OLGA: We've been here for ten days...

CHEKHOV: Mmmm?

OLGA: Do you follow me?

CHEKHOV: I'm trying.

OLGA: I'm not at all... sure that it is good for us here.

CHEKHOV: Neither am I, but...

OLGA: But what?

CHEKHOV: It may improve with time.

OLGA: Then again, it may not.

(Silence.)

OLGA: They are so... unhealthy... in spirit. I know it is unkind of me to say so. Perhaps I am all wrong.

CHEKHOV: No, no... we seem to agree.

OLGA: And it doesn't look to me as if you are enjoying your work on the book.

CHEKHOV: Why do you say that?

OLGA: Your eyes have a different glow when you are working on something dear to your heart. You chuckle differently, you seem different.

CHEKHOV: That sounds a bit farfetched.

OLGA: Anton, I can see that you feel out of place.

(Silence.)

OLGA: Be honest.

CHEKHOV: All right, since I've failed in masking my feelings I may as well be frank. I don't like the book I'm working on with Tolstoy in the slightest.

OLGA: Tell me everything.

CHEKHOV: The job revolts me.

(Silence.)

OLGA: Come on. Get it all out. All of it.

CHEKHOV: I've always admired Tolstoy the writer ♦ and I regret having gotten to know Tolstoy the man. It's astonishing how different the two of them are.

(Silence.)

OLGA: I feel it would be best for us to leave. I'd rather not have the summer ruined altogether. We've waited so eagerly all year. We were certain we'd have such a marvellous time.

CHEKHOV: I do agree ♦ but how can I drop the book now that I've committed myself to it?

OLGA: You must.

CHEKHOV: How? How can I find the words. What should I tell them?

(Silence.)

CHEKHOV: They are celebrating their wedding anniversary tonight. We've been invited. They thought it would be such an honor for us. They like us. And we're supposed to celebrate this farce of a marriage with them.

OLGA: I thought it best if we left at once. Fabricate some excuse.

CHEKHOV: I fear we will have to stay.



OLGA: You will be so unhappy doing the job.

CHEKHOV: I know.

OLGA: Why stay, then?

(Silence.)

CHEKHOV: Let's be patient until the anniversary party is over.

OLGA: All right.

### **9. a.**

(Tolstoy, Sofya, Olga, Chekhov)

(The four of them are seated at a table covered with bottles of alcoholic beverages.)

TOLSTOY: I am so glad, my dear friends, that you could join us, my wife and I, on this festive occasion. Without you this little celebration would never mean as much as it does tonight. I've sent the servants to bed because I don't want anyone near, anyone except the two of you at such a cosy, special moment.

(Tolstoy raises his glass and the others follow suit.)

TOLSTOY: Let us drink this wine in honor of the day that Sofya's and my paths crossed. Cheers!

CHEKHOV: Cheers!

OLGA: Cheers!

(Tolstoy and Sofya drain their glasses to the last drop, while Chekhov and Olga barely sip theirs.)

CHEKHOV: It is a fine thing when a man spends many years with his wife. So many shared moments, so many memories ♦ yes, a fine thing.

TOLSTOY: Yes, many a century has passed since the day the two of us, my dear Sofya...

SOFYA: Don't mention the passage of time. I shudder at the thought of how much has passed.

(Tolstoy pours himself and Sofya more to drink.)

TOLSTOY: I am so glad these young people are with us today. Aren't you glad, dear Sofya?

SOFYA: Oh yes. Without them, this would not be such a delightful moment. They are so utterly charming.

(Tolstoy pours wine first into his, and then into Sofya's, glass.)

TOLSTOY: *(to Chekhov)*: Remind me to mention a few of my thoughts on wine tomorrow. We haven't discussed wine yet. Wine is one of my favorite topics.

SOFYA: Wine is a drink. It is not a topic.

TOLSTOY: What do you mean by that?

SOFYA: You used to drink quite a bit of wine, but now you can do nothing but discuss it.

TOLSTOY: I can drink a lot of wine now, too, if I want to.

SOFYA: No you can't. You haven't been able to for years.

TOLSTOY: Oh yes I can.

SOFYA: No, you can't.

TOLSTOY: I can, too.

SOFYA: Even I can outdrink you. Your time has passed.

TOLSTOY: You always vomit whenever you drink too much.

TOLSTOY: Yes, that's it. You vomit each time you get drunk.

SOFYA: Perhaps, but I can hold more than you.

TOLSTOY: You? Hold more than me!?

SOFYA: Are you joking? Of course I can.

TOLSTOY: Don't make me laugh. You're insulting me. Take it back.

SOFYA: And why should I?

TOLSTOY: Because it is a lowdown dirty lie that you can drink more than me.

SOFYA: But I really can.

TOLSTOY: You cannot.

SOFYA: I can, too.

(Silence.)

TOLSTOY: We'll see about that. To your health.

(Tolstoy downs his wine.)

SOFYA: To your health.

(Sofya downs hers.)

TOLSTOY: Shall we proceed?

(Tolstoy pours wine for Sofya, then for himself. They clink glasses and then drink it down. Tolstoy pours again.)

TOLSTOY: And again...

CHEKHOV: Forgive me, but...

TOLSTOY: Whatever for?

CHEKHOV: Perhaps it would be best if you stopped right now.

TOLSTOY: Why?

CHEKHOV: So your celebration doesn't turn into a drinking contest.

OLGA: This evening started out so nicely, it would a shame if...

TOLSTOY: Sofya insulted me and I must prove her wrong.

CHEKHOV: Perhaps another time.

OLGA: What does it matter who can drink more?

(From this point on Sofya and Tolstoy are apparently very drunk.)

SOFYA: Why are you interfering in our life? Darling, why are these whippersnappers butting in?

TOLSTOY: Poor manners. Terrible upbringing.

SOFYA: May you live long.

(Tolstoy and Sofya drink their wine to the last drop.)

CHEKHOV: It could hardly be considered butting in. We merely want to keep you from succumbing to the drink.

TOLSTOY: Succumbing to the drink! That's rich! Ha, ha, ha. Succumbing to the drink? Did you hear what I heard, Sofya my dear? Have you heard anything so preposterous in the last ten years? I have never succumbed to drink. Never! (to Chekhov): You undoubtedly couldn't handle more than three glasses of wine.

CHEKHOV: Well... to tell you the truth you are right. I rarely have more than two.

TOLSTOY: Disgraceful.

CHEKHOV: Why?

TOLSTOY: Disgraceful, I say. Never admit to anyone what you've told me. A writer who doesn't drink! Preposterous!

(Silence.)

TOLSTOY: You disappoint me, my dear Chekhov. You have disappointed me in every respect.

CHEKHOV: So sorry.

TOLSTOY: And most of all you have disappointed me by what went on between you and my wife.

(Tolstoy's words have the force of explosion. Sudden tension. Olga and Chekhov gape openmouthed at Tolstoy).

TOLSTOY: What went on between you and my wife is disgusting.

OLGA: Anton, what is this I am hearing?!

CHEKHOV: My dear... I haven't the faintest notion...

OLGA: What has happened, Anton, what is he referring to?

CHEKHOV: Nothing has happened.

TOLSTOY: Oh yes it has.

CHEKHOV: Believe me, it hasn't.

TOLSTOY: Chekhov, Sofya has confessed everything to me. I know all about it. Everything.

(Silence.)

CHEKHOV: You're lying!

TOLSTOY: No, my wife never lies. And what you did to her is disgusting!

OLGA: Something must have happened.

TOLSTOY: Yes, and it was horrible.

(Silence reigns for a moment, interrupted by Sofya's moan.)

TOLSTOY: What's wrong?

SOFYA: I am going to be sick.

(Sofya rushes to the door, Tolstoy follows.)

TOLSTOY: I told you you'd throw up.

(Sofya and Tolstoy leave.)

## **9. b.**

(Chekhov, Olga)

(Chekhov and Olga remain sitting in an uncomfortable silence. Olga stares at him with anger and hurt, while Chekhov glares at the floor, embarrassed and troubled.)

OLGA: I see.

CHEKHOV: Olga, please...

OLGA: Not another word!

(Silence.)

OLGA: I would never have thought it would come to this. That you'd betray me.

CHEKHOV: Believe me when I tell you...

OLGA: How can I believe you?

CHEKHOV: Listen...

OLGA: Please be quiet.

(Silence.)

OLGA: Ever since you came into my life you've spoken of fidelity, sincerity, and now...

CHEKHOV: Olga, allow me to...

OLGA: I will not! You disgust me!

CHEKHOV: Olga, I beg you.

OLGA: Don't touch me. Please, don't touch me.

(Silence.)

CHEKHOV: How can you think something like that of me?

OLGA: What? Now you are attacking me? After everything? Aren't you ashamed? Ah yes, I know: attack is the best defense. I trusted you from the day we met without a second thought, without restraint. And you!? Oh lord, how everything comes tumbling down in a single day. It is over.

CHEKHOV: Olga, nothing is over.

OLGA: Nothing. It may be nothing to you. You heard what Tolstoy said, he knows all there is to know of what went on between you and that... sickening... Sofya.

CHEKHOV: Olga, sweetheart, how can you speak that way of a woman who has...

OLGA: How can I?! You're defending her! Isn't it enough that you've humiliated me in front of her? Now you're defending her on top of everything. She is horrid, revolting!

CHEKHOV: Darling, please...

OLGA: And so are you. It's beyond belief. But I deserve it. If I allowed you to make a fool of me then you really should take the full advantage.

CHEKHOV: Olga, nothing has happened.

OLGA: Nothing? I saw how she was looking at you yesterday at dinner, how she was devouring you with her eyes.

CHEKHOV: Yes, she does look at me that way, but I don't look that way at her.

OLGA: For years now I have watched women devouring you with their eyes, adoring you. But I never paid it any mind because I trusted you. I can't imagine why I did. All those empty words.

CHEKHOV: Please don't say that. I've had nothing to do with the woman.

OLGA: ♦Nothing♦. Don't you feel ashamed? It sickens me to think that I have spent all these years with you, at your side. Only now do I perceive you in your true colors. Now my eyes are opened.

CHEKHOV: Olga, I will not allow you...

OLGA: Please, I'd rather not talk to you. You are so pitiful that even now when everything has come to the surface you still don't have the courage to confess. Be a man. Own up. There is nothing left to lose.

CHEKHOV: But I have nothing to confess.

OLGA: You coward.

(The door opens, Tolstoy and Sofya come in.)

### **9. c.**

(Chekhov, Olga, Tolstoy, Sofya)

TOLSTOY: I told you shouldn't drink.

SOFYA: Sermonizing again.

TOLSTOY: You retched up your heart and soul. What an appalling scene.

SOFYA: *(to Chekhov and Olga)*: Forgive me for abandoning you briefly. I had to... you know... my weakness.

TOLSTOY: The celebration goes on. What were we talking about a moment ago?

(Silence.)

OLGA: You were saying something about my husband and your wife...

TOLSTOY: Ah yes.. Your husband behaved most dishonorably.

OLGA: So it is true.

TOLSTOY: Your husband bore himself ignominiously. He rejected my wife. Your husband had the indecency to push away my wife, the wife of Leo Nikolayevich Tolstoy. Wet behind the ears and yet he had the insolence to say, ♦No!♦ to my wife.

OLGA: My God. And I thought he had betrayed me.

TOLSTOY: Your husband is not a man. Madame, your husband is not a man.

OLGA: I was so frightened. Lord, I was so frightened. Anton, please forgive me. I was a touch too harsh.

CHEKHOV: A touch?

OLGA: Forgive me, my head is pounding.

CHEKHOV: So is mine.

(Sofya pours herself another glass of wine.)

TOLSTOY: In our book of conversations, dear Chekhov, we will discuss my wife's drinking binges as well, and the behavior of an intoxicated woman. The scene of a woman retching. It has not been described yet in literature and it is quite an ugly sight.

SOFYA: Perhaps I could give you an excellent idea, my dear Chekhov, for a story.

CHEKHOV: For a story?

SOFYA: The hero of the story is an aging writer.

TOLSTOY: Your story doesn't interest me.

SOFYA: Tell me, Anton, do you want to hear my idea for a titillating little story?

CHEKHOV: I'm listening.

SOFYA: As I said, the hero of the story is a writer who has reached the age when he's lost the magic touch. The writer used to write great novels, but he is suddenly at a loss for ideas.

TOLSTOY: Stop this!

SOFYA: I've only just begun.

TOLSTOY: I said, ❖Stop!❖

SOFYA: The writer lives on his own estate, far from the rest of society, and yet he still craves the respect and admiration of those he has run away to escape. As I said, he no longer has any fresh ideas but he would like people to keep reading and admiring him. One day he decides... to write a book of conversations.

TOLSTOY: Shut up!! !

SOFYA: You don't find my little story amusing?

TOLSTOY: If you don't stop telling your little story I will tell our cherished guests about the woman with an invisible mother.



SOFYA: You wouldn't dare.

TOLSTOY: Oh yes I would.

SOFYA: You wouldn't.

TOLSTOY: I will. Now: will you stop telling yours?

SOFYA: Not in your lifetime.

TOLSTOY: Then I will start my own.

SOFYA: I haven't finished mine yet.

TOLSTOY: You can finish after I'm done. Once upon a time there was a woman who had been a young girl many years before. And that girl had an invisible mother. The girl, you see, got to know a young writer. Everyone knew the young writer would one day become the greatest of Russian writers.

SOFYA: Stop.

TOLSTOY: The girl never spoke of her mother, and the writer was so polite that he never asked. A mother could be felt to exist in their conversations, but somehow she wasn't important. And then, one day, the young writer decided to propose to the young girl. He came to her parents to ask for the girl's hand in marriage. The young writer expected he would finally meet her mother, but regrettably he was greeted only by the young girl's father whom he had met on some previous occasion. Her father apologized to the young writer for his wife's absence. She had recently come down with a mild cold, it seems, and taken to her bed and was, just then, asleep. The father blessed them and the wedding date was set. Acquaintance with the invisible mother was postponed until some later date. The writer hoped to meet her mother at the wedding, but on the day of the wedding her mother came down with a bad cold and took to her bed. The wedding went on without her. And now, you are certainly eager to hear how the writer finally met his invisible mother-in-law...

(The abrupt shattering of glass interrupts Tolstoy. Sofya has smashed an empty bottle on the table edge. She holds the rest of the bottle by its neck.)

SOFYA: I don't think I'll permit you to tell any more of your story. I'll cut your throat with this broken glass.

TOLSTOY: You wouldn't dare.

SOFYA: Oh, yes I would.

TOLSTOY: I intend to tell the whole story.

SOFYA: Perhaps you will. But only after I tell mine. I was first.

(Silence.)

SOFYA: Where was I? I stopped where the writer who had run out of ideas for a novel decided to write a book of conversations. He invited a young writer and his wife to the estate. While putting together the foolish book full of his shallow thoughts he happened to fall in love with the young writer's young wife, or perhaps I should say he desired her sexually. The words ♦to fall in love♦ seem a bit excessive. He desired her, so one day while her husband was out riding to a nearby mill the two of them found themselves alone: the old writer and the young actress.

OLGA: Stop!

SOFYA: You don't think my story amusing?

CHEKHOV: What is this I hear?

SOFYA: The story, you know, is based on real life.

OLGA: She is making it all up. A diseased imagination.

SOFYA: Oh no. Tolstoy has told me everything. He always does. He cannot help confiding in me. Men are like children.

(Silence.)

CHEKHOV: I see.

OLGA: Dear, allow me...

CHEKHOV: I will not.

OLGA: But, please...

CHEKHOV: Silence! You should be ashamed.

OLGA: I can explain.

CHEKHOV: You will explain nothing. I will allow no such explanations. There can be no forgiveness once it has happened.

OLGA: You must trust me.

CHEKHOV: You!? Never again. I've trusted you my whole life. Now I can see that I was the fool to put my trust in the wrong person.

OLGA: Nothing has happened. You must...

CHEKHOV: You are disgusting. Your every word, gesture, all of it was a lie. It is over.

OLGA: But this is not my fault.

CHEKHOV: Of course, it is my fault for believing in you. And the saddest part of all is that I loved you sincerely. The only thing you've earned ♦ is my hatred.

OLGA: Anton, can you hear your own words?

CHEKHOV: Do not come near me. You disgust me.

OLGA: Oh, lord. How can you...?

CHEKHOV: You slut, don't profane the name of the Lord!

OLGA: Anton!

(Sofya downs her glass of wine.)

SOFYA: Why do you keep interrupting my story? Why do people keep stopping me?

CHEKHOV: Tell us every perverse little detail.

SOFYA: Oh, I will... the old writer and the young actress were alone, and the old writer desired the young actress sexually. But she told him: ♦No♦.

CHEKHOV: Oh, Lord!

SOFYA: The main who claimed that there wasn't a woman alive who could resist him lived to hear ♦No♦.

CHEKHOV: Olga, please forgive me!

OLGA: Leave me alone.

CHEKHOV: *(to Sofya)*: Do you mean that my Olga is...

SOFYA: Your Olga is a conceited goose! She turned down Tolstoy. What impudence! What a prig!

CHEKHOV: But...

SOFYA: Your wife is a coward. She doesn't deserve you.

(Tolstoy drinks his wine and coughs.)

TOLSTOY: And now, my dear friends, it is time for me to finish my story.

SOFYA: I will not allow it.

TOLSTOY: You must. Otherwise I'll include it in my book of conversations.

SOFYA: You louse!

TOLSTOY: As I remember I stopped at the place where the young writer's wife had an invisible mother. One day, a year after they married, this writer, young at the time, happened to visit a city where there was a large brothel.

SOFYA: You animal!

TOLSTOY: He stopped in at the brothel, hoping to pass the time in good company. The Madame suggested that he try one of the older whores, one whom everyone claimed to be the best. And she was. The writer spent a passionate, thrilling night with this experienced woman. As dawn broke he asked her, by chance, for her last name... and almost fainted dead away when he learned that she was his mother-in-law.

SOFYA: You bastard, that is not true.

TOLSTOY: Oh, but it is true.

SOFYA: My mother is not a prostitute. She ran away with her lover but she never became a whore.

TOLSTOY: Yes, she did escape your father with her lover, but her lover jilted her and she ended up in a brothel. No-one from your circle knew what had happened to her. Your father kept it a secret that she had gone off with her lover and become a whore. Everyone was sure that your mother was at home but bedridden with a debilitating illness.

SOFYA: You are an unscrupulous bastard.

TOLSTOY: A whore's daughter. Ha, ha, ha. A whore's daughter. Ha, ha, ha.

SOFYA: Some day I am going to kill you. Believe me.

TOLSTOY: You woldn't dare.

SOFYA: Oh, yes I would.

(Silence.)

SOFYA: Why don't we tell our guests how you proposed to me.

TOLSTOY: Silence!

SOFYA: We should tell them how I said that I would marry you if you crawled thirty feet on your knees saying: ♠I will be your servant, I will be your servant♠.

TOLSTOY: She's lying!

SOFYA: You crawled. Ha, ha, ha. ♠Servant!♠

TOLSTOY: You daughter of a whore!

SOFYA: If you call me ♦daughter of a whore♦ once more I will bite your throat through.

TOLSTOY: Calm down.

SOFYA: You calm down.

TOLSTOY: You want me to calm down?

SOFYA: Yes, you.

TOLSTOY: Watch your mouth.

SOFYA: You watch yours.

TOLSTOY: Stop, Sofya.

SOFYA: You stop.

TOLSTOY: If you don't shut your mouth I'll rip out your tongue.

SOFYA: If you come near me I'll smash this bottle over your head.

TOLSTOY: Are you threatening me?

SOFYA: I am.

TOLSTOY: Beware, this may be your last time.

SOFYA: You scum.

TOLSTOY: Take that back or I'll strangle you with my bare hands.

SOFYA: If you come another step toward me I'll splatter your seed-grain all over the rug.

TOLSTOY: You animal!

SOFYA: You vulture!

(Silence.)

CHEKHOV: Eh, eh...

(Sofya and Tolstoy swivel toward Chekhov.)

CHEKHOV: Pardon me, Olga and I... will be off to bed.

TOLSTOY: Why?

CHEKHOV: We are a little tired.

TOLSTOY: Won't you join us while we celebrate... what were we celebrating?

SOFYA: Our wedding anniversary.

TOLSTOY: ... while we celebrate our wedding anniversary.

CHEKHOV: If you will allow us...

TOLSTOY: I will do no such thing. Do you realize how important a wedding anniversary is? A whole life spent together in love, relying on one another when in trouble! We do you the honor of inviting you to take part in our joy, our celebration, and you treat us like this. Unspeakable.

SOFYA: These upstarts are part of a new generation. Nothing is sacred to them. Nothing.

(Silence.)

OLGA: Let's go, Anton.

CHEKHOV: Let's.

SOFYA: Wait.

(Chekhov and Olga leave the room. Sofya and Tolstoy remain behind.)

TOLSTOY: What the devil got into them?

## **10.**

(Tolstoy, Sofya)

(The next morning.)

TOLSTOY: I'm so sorry they're leaving.

SOFYA: Me, too.

(Silence.)

TOLSTOY: We must have gone overboard last night.

SOFYA: I suppose so.

(Silence.)

SOFYA: The coach is waiting. They'll be down from their room in a moment to say good-bye and leave. Forever.

TOLSTOY: What a dreadful shame. It will be so boring without them.

SOFYA: We'll be alone all summer.

(Silence.)

SOFYA: I've had enough of Yasnaya Polyana. It's like a grave. Peace, quiet and boredom!

TOLSTOY: Don't shout at me! I'm sorry they're leaving, too.

SOFYA: Do something.

TOLSTOY: What?

SOFYA: Keep them here.

TOLSTOY: I tried, but to no avail. They took it all much too personally. They take everything to heart.

SOFYA: When they leave, it will all be so dull.

TOLSTOY: Oh, no. I'll pick up the latest **◆Almanac of Young Russian Writers◆**. The addresses are listed with their biographies. We'll invite one to write a book of conversations with me.

SOFYA: And when he leaves?

TOLSTOY: Then we'll invite another.

SOFYA: And then?

TOLSTOY: After the third will come a fourth, then a fifth. Don't worry, it will never get tedious.

SOFYA: What if one of them actually completes this book of conversations with you?

TOLSTOY: That, I promise, will never happen.

(They look each other in the eyes and burst into peals of irrepressible laughter and hug each other tenderly. The lights dim gradually.)