

Happiness: A Life According To Chekhov

GEORGE BLECHER

CHLOE SMELLS LIKE SHREDDED CARROTS. Collin, our Konstantin, wears Aramis. Elisabeth—Arkadina-- has a shyer smell: turned-over earth? I take their smells home with me every night.

I want to tell you something. I don't love my father. But you and I—I feel like we have something in common.

Chloe delivers Masha's lines from my lap. She's a small woman, but when she lands on my thighs, it's with the weight of Masha's unhappiness.

But what can I do? What am I supposed to do?

Each night Dr. Dorn's line feels different in my mouth. Sometimes the characters seem to gather around me, begging for something indistinct yet urgent. Sometimes I hold Chloe tight, like the father I haven't been to my daughter Debby. Even tighter—the way Dorn might hold one of his mistresses, cooped up on a provincial estate in Kharkov or Tibilits. Chloe doesn't pull away; on the contrary, she hugs me back.

Sometimes she doesn't land in my lap. The line in which she comes closest to discovering that Dorn is her real father—I *don't love my father. But you and I...*—she'll deliver from the floor by my side, stroking my arm as I sit in a wicker summer chair; or standing downstage, where I lose her in the lights.

"I don't always *feel* like sitting in your lap, Reuben. I'm trying to keep it fresh."

"But when you don't, I feel bereft."

"Then come after me."

Groping my way toward the apron of the stage, I grab her head, waist, whatever I bump into.

How nervous all of you are! And so much love all around! That damned magic lake! But what can I do? What can I do?

The spotlights—twenty full moons—dim and disappear. A cottony darkness fills the theater. I feel Chloe exhale into my chest. I feel almost as if I have the right to be alive.

My name, Reuben Stein, was my mother's brainstorm. Since my classmates at P.S. 122 on 181st St. and Grand Concourse hadn't heard of the flamboyant pianist, they nicknamed me Frank-in-Stein instead. Maybe they knew something that she didn't.

For as long as I can remember, my single goal in life has been to be happy. A particular kind of happiness. "Happiness Light," if you will: the absence of pain, and maybe a little more. In this, as in much else, I took after my father, the world's laziest man. He died on Long Beach in his beach chair with a paperback collection of Chekhov's short stories over his nose.

When I received my Ph.D. (dissertation title: "Friendship, Family and Frivolity in Certain Restoration Playwrights"), I was offered two instructorships: one at Stanford, the other in a new branch of the City University. I chose the latter because I guessed that it would be easier: I wouldn't have to contend with the in-fighting of a rural campus or the competition of an excellent one. I was right on both counts.

My wife Louise had ambition enough for both of us. Her *Harvard Law Review* editorship landed her a job at a white shoe Wall Street firm, where she became their first Jewish woman partner, and paid for our West End Avenue apartment. Ever restless, she left to set up her own litigation firm, where she quickly earned a reputation for rectitude and tenacity. You have no doubt heard of some of her cases.

This is how the dying Professor of Medicine Nikolai Stepanovich—, Chekhov's protagonist in "A Boring Story" (1889), describes his teaching style:

In front of me are a hundred and fifty faces, all different from one another, and three hundred eyes staring straight into my face. My aim is to conquer this many-headed hydra. If I never allow their attention to slacken for a moment during the whole of my lecture, and at the same time never talk above their heads, then they are in my power.

The parallels between Nikolai Stepanovich and me are not immediately obvious. I never have classes of more than 35

students. Instead of lecturing, I coax and cajole. I assume many roles: the Jewish Uncle, dispensing wisdom with a wink and a chuckle; the Country Bumpkin, the willing butt of jokes from my street-smart audience; the Coach, cheering my charges through the hurdles of a five-paragraph essay. I smile till my cheeks ache.

Because many of my students dodge bullets on their way to school, they deserve credit for progressing as far as they have. But they take the admonition to "go to college" with the same literal diligence that brought them this far, and are surprised, even offended, that more than their physical presence is required for a passing grade. Even here, however, my behavior is duplicitous. I tell them—it is no less a lie for being true—that failure doesn't exist in our system. All they have to do is take the course over with a more lenient professor, and their slates will be wiped clean.

The few times I dare to look into their eyes, I see terror.

The evening students are older and better-dressed. The scents of twenty body washes mingle in the air. But after a full day's work, they sit under the cruel fluorescent parallelograms struggling against sleep. To them, I am not frightening as much as annoying, one of a tedious succession of professors standing between them and a higher pay-scale.

Yes, there are correspondences between Nikolai Stepanovich and me. I love the sound of my voice more than those of my students. Under the guise of friendliness, I keep them in my power instead of descending into the grubby trenches of education. If I respected them more, I'd grab them by their baseball caps and baggy pants and shout: *We will not leave this room until I teach and you learn. That is our contract. Even though it seems 'unfair,' it is actually the purest form of respect.*

Where did I get the absurd idea that I am an actor? Was it only because my life was desolate that I accepted the invitation of my ex-student Damon to make a fool of myself on stage?

On performance days of *The Sea Gull*—Thursday through Sunday—my life narrows to a fine point. Morning sunlight stings me into alertness; rain drips down the window panes to calm my nerves.

In the morning hours, I do nothing. That is my job: simply to breathe in and out.

By early afternoon, the play wakes up and demands attention. I don't know if I want to give it. I stand in the middle of our living room and recite my lines.

Alcohol and tobacco rob us of ourselves. When you smoke and drink, you're not Pyotr Nikolayevich anymore—you're Pyotr Nikolayevich plus someone else. You begin to think of yourself not as yourself, but as a third person.

Did Chekhov really mean "a third person" instead of "a second person" or "another person"? It makes a kind of elliptical sense. I am Reuben Stein, I am Dorn, but more than either, I am an intermediary between them, a ghost in a state of magical nervousness.

The sky outside is the turquoise of the wooden beads on my childhood crib.

I read the entire play out loud. Line by line. I don't know why. I tell myself that the play demands it. Or Chekhov demands it. I hum the half-understood words, gradually slipping into a droning trance that brings me no closer to comprehension but to feeling.

Now the play is almost tolerable. But I am not done yet. Before I leave for the theater, I have to sing.

Each time Dorn enters, Chekhov has him sing, whistle, hum songs obscure even to my colleague Jerry Wexler in the Slavic, Germanic and Asian Languages Department: Prigozhy's "The Heavy Cross," Krasov's "Stanzas."

When I asked Damon if I could substitute songs of my own, he smiled with the sly condescension of the young: "If you make them sexy ones, Professor Stein." Did he think I knew no sexy songs?

In Act II, when Nina bursts into Arkadina's garden, I extend my hand to her as Don Giovanni extends his to the maid Zerlina, and sing the irresistible *Là ci darem*:

*Là ci darem la mano
là mi dirai di sì.
Vedi, non è lontano,
partiam, ben mio, di qui.*

The CD that I practice with is a little-known production with a Russian, Nicolai Ghiaurov, in the lead role. After two run throughs, I try it without the singers. Pure caterwauling! But if I ignore the notes and feel Dorn's and Giovanni's longing, the melody becomes almost recognizable.

*Andiam, andiam, mio bene,
a ristorar le pene
d'un innocente amor!*

My chest—no, all my bones—resonate with sounds that make my whole body hum. I'm singing with all my might, but it doesn't exhaust me. On the contrary, I am filled with power. Have I ever let myself want as much as Dorn and Giovanni want?

In addition to his wife and two children, Professor Nikolai Stepanovich in "A Boring Story" has a ward, Katya, the daughter of a colleague who died when she was 7. She is the love of Nikolai Stepanovich's life. He describes "the extraordinary trustfulness which irradiated her sweet face...her eyes invariably expressed the same thing: 'Everything that is going on is wise and wonderful.'" Nevertheless, he sends her away to boarding school, and when she returns, eager to share her new-found enthusiasm for the theater, his wife and children shun her. Even Nikolai only listens for a half hour at a time. Later she joins a touring theatrical troupe, falls in love with a fickle actor, tries to poison herself, recuperates in Yalta. (The story, a "breakthrough" in Chekhov's *oeuvre*, is prophetic of both the arc of Nina's story in *The Sea Gull* and Chekhov's own attempted recuperation in Yalta a decade later.)

At the end of the story, Katya—now an indolent, directionless young woman—confronts her guardian:

*Help me! You're my father, my only friend. Tell me, what am I to do?
What can I tell you? [He replies.] Honestly, I don't know.*

You will recognize the exchange between Nikolai and Katya as virtually the same as that of Masha and Dorn at the end of Act I in *The Sea Gull*: daughters appealing to fathers; fathers denying their appeals. Underneath Nikolai's professions of helplessness is the cruel withholding of love, not only from Katya but also from his wife and children.

I may not be the right person to judge the similarities between Nikolai Stepanovich and me. I loved my wife and daughter, and told them often. But from the moment I read "A Boring Story," I felt that the author had shone a light on my most secret of selves.

Some may have read my essay, "Chekhov's Eyes: An Appreciation," published, thanks again to Jerry Wexler, in *The Journal of Slavic Studies*, though my Russian is far from fluent and my expertise only that of an amateur. It deals with the theme of "seeing" in Chekhov's work. Some characters literally suffer from "eye trouble" (von Diderer, for instance, Anna's cuckolded husband in "Lady with Lapdog," 1899); others are blind to their own cruelty or detachment (the statistician Ivan Ognev in "Verotchka," 1887; an entire village in "The New Villa," 1899, etc.); and many (most familiarly Ranevskaya and Gayev, the brother and sister owners of *The Cherry Orchard*, 1904) foolishly blind to the ravages of Time. Ivanov in the eponymous play (1889) cannot see the virtues of his adoring wife; Arkadina in *The Sea Gull* (1895) cannot see how much her son Konstantin needs her approval.

What is most admirable in Chekhov [I wrote] is that the ability of some of his characters to see things 'as they are' is held to be the highest virtue, no matter how painful or distressing the revelations may be. While the reader might be more impressed by Tolstoi's grand gestures or Dostoyevsky's ecstatic visions, next to Chekhov's clear observation these seem to be tropes of 19th century Romanticism. By bringing narrative down from the heights to a careful, sympathetic, unsentimental examination of the complexity of 'everyday life,' Chekhov proved to be, by temperament if not exactly by intention, in tune with his revolutionary times.

Writing an essay did not exhaust my interest in, indeed obsession with, Chekhov. Over the years I read him voraciously. Some of his characters—the blind ones—appeared regularly in my dreams. But all I could do was stand on the sidelines, an eye watching the action, unable to make them see; while beyond the limits of my vision, I sensed someone watching *me*.

Once a week during rehearsals, Elisabeth—our Arkadina—instructed me: "Flap your arms like a chicken, Reuben! Make sounds!"

Her Lower East Side studio in a tenement scheduled for demolition was so small that if I flapped too hard I'd break something in it, or her.

At 51, she is still a beautiful woman. Beyond beautiful is more accurate: pale and fair, with bones as delicate as the prehistoric birds one sees in the *New York Times* Science Section, her features

would be perfect if her intensity had not elevated them to another level. So her eyes are too prominent, her nostrils too turned-up, her hair too thin, her body too angular. One could say that her face, which started with conventionally beautiful Episcopalian features, has become more and more Russian.

The most accomplished actor among us, she toured for 20 years with a troupe that set out to save the world. When she came home, she found that she was too old to play ingénues and too young to play character roles.

"I should be playing Nina," she told me in a candid moment. "That's my part. But Damon wouldn't let me."

The stage-struck girl returning from years of touring in third-class railway carriages, fending off traveling salesmen with garlic breaths and wandering hands—it is not only Elisabeth's part, it is her life. She plays Arkadina with nervous heat, storming across the stage, waving a silk scarf to clear the way. She is not afraid of being despicable.

"Make a fool of yourself, Reuben!" she said. "You can afford to. You're a charming man, so call on that for Dorn. He's slept with all the women in the neighborhood, have you, well not all but I don't doubt your abilities. And the part of you that worries about aging—that's Dorn in the second act when he's telling Sorin not to worry about getting old. And the part of you that's more than competent—Damon tells me that you are a wonderful teacher—that's Dorn in the first act when he says what a good doctor he is. I don't need to teach you acting. You need to learn how *not* to act. It's about access to your feelings and revealing them to the audience. If nothing comes, just say your lines and breathe. Never *act*. Be honest. Have you ever been honest?"

She smiled sideways, as if she had someone else in mind.

"Of course you have been. I apologize. But that's another thing about acting. Trust your impulses. I guess I had an impulse to say that. Naughty me."

Sometimes she told me to lie on my back. Taking my head in her small hands, she turned it on its axis, manipulated my jaw, held my arms up and told me to go limp so that she could shake them out like boiled spaghetti. The attention embarrassed me. Something wasn't right. She had built her life around risk. I had risked nothing. I should have been the one serving her.

* * *

Three years ago, in Part 52, New York Civil Court, Louise dropped dead of a massive coronary embolism.

Just like that.

Gone.

Gone.

Debby rushed back from her last year at Harvard Law and paced the apartment like a caged tiger. She cried and broke things, left piles of clothes all over the apartment, and returned to school for midterms. At shiva, relatives cried and howled and stuffed their faces with roast beef and petits fours; they were animals too. This is not a criticism. I wished that I could bay to the moon. But I didn't cry or break things. I didn't howl. I did the only thing I knew how to do: follow routines.

I do not place much faith in moments of revelation—I believe the current phrase is “defining moments”—in part because Restoration playwrights overused them. But one evening as I sat staring at the dining room wall, my fork halfway to my mouth, like a Chekhov character I “saw” something that I had not seen, or noticed, before. A glimmer of pity in the eyes of friends and relatives, a softness that marbled their voices whenever they spoke to me. I saw it in the tilt of Louise's head as she peered over her glasses: *I'll take care of it Reuben, you just keep pretending that you're happy.* The food tumbled off my fork. All this time I'd thought that it was my good humor that had kept peace in Happy Valley. There had been no happiness, no peace. They had only been fantasies to put distance between me and everything that frightened me.

An observation in Chekhov's notebooks came to mind:

The only time a man's eyes are truly open is when he is unhappy.

Is that what Louise had been trying to tell me? *Open your eyes!*

I could see my way of turning away from an argument—raising an arm to fend off unpleasantness or pain, looking after her like an apologetic dog. I could see her wincing at the smiley face that mocked all experience except the bland and innocuous. Short of killing or divorcing me, her only alternative had been to spend long hours at the office and grimace as her blood pressure went off the charts.

I will not call the subsequent weeks edifying. Nothing remarkable happened. Maybe nothing at all happened in the sense of *happened*, as our beloved ex-President Clinton might say. But when mourning becomes boring and self-flagellation comical, basic things like hunger and fatigue take over.

One dark, slushy February evening as I was crossing 72nd Street and Broadway, I noticed the other people crossing with me. For the first time, I actually *saw* them. We were all just there: heads lowered against the wind, annoyed, grouchy, preoccupied. Happiness wasn't a barrier between us; we were all equally miserable. Alone, but joined in mutual discomfort. Universal unhappiness. What a concept.

Do you remember when Dorn describes to Konstantin what it was like to wander through crowds in Genoa?

In the evening when you leave your hotel, the streets swarm with people. You can drift among them aimlessly, live their lives. With the soul of the crowd pouring into you, you start to feel there might really be a single world soul after all—like the one Nina Zarechnaya performed in your play. By the way, where is Zarechnaya now? How is she?

"A single world soul"—I believe that is what I actually felt.

On the other side of Broadway, I passed a little Chinese restaurant, the kind with cherry-colored ducks and ribs dangling in the window. My heart pounding, I doubled back. I do not follow Kosher rules faithfully, but but but. I couldn't order, just point. They chopped up the ribs before me, and laid the pieces on a bed of rice. *We are your desire*, the ribs were saying. *Have you ever followed your desire?* I can still feel the strands of meat between my teeth, the rice against my gums, the sweet barbeque sauce dripping from my lips and fingers. I brought the bowl to my mouth and licked it clean.

We perform the play in a defunct Times Square strip club with a brass pole at center stage. At the beginning of Act II Elisabeth spins around it to show off Arkadina's eternal youth.

"What *are* you up to, baby?"

Lee Ann, our Nina, came to the City six months ago from a small town in Texas. Her combat boots, spiky red hair, leather jacket and cigarette voice make her seem tougher than she is; on stage, she is one step away from falling apart.

"Give us a smooch." As she throws her arms around me, I smell the makeup on her cheeks, and her bubblegum breath.

"Are you really an English professor? I can't picture you in a school. Man, I wanted to get out of school the minute I got in."

Cell phones at their ears, copies of *Backstage* under their arms, the cast drifts in one by one. As they unfold their papers and munch on sprouts and Power bars, peace settles in. Damon enters wearing yellow sneakers, which he maintains are the equivalent of the "checked pants" that Chekhov insisted that Trigorin must wear.

Theater is far from democratic; the director is despot and *paterfamilias*. When Damon starts the notes on last night's performance, we hold our breaths. But he offers only mild "adjustments," and these are always tempered with praise. Afterward, he launches into his favorite speech: "Chekhov in a porno theater! He loved whore houses, so he'd love our show! You are all purely wonderful. You really are. The only one not so wonderful is me playing Trigorin. But I make you guys look even better!"

For a moment we believe him. We *are* wonderful. When was the last time I felt wonderful? When I married Louise? When Debby was born?

I share one of the tiny dressing rooms with Collin and Butch, who plays the estate overseer Shamrayev.

Young Collin, tall, handsome, crystal-jawed, is as fragile as a butterfly. "I'm sick, guys. I don't think I can go on tonight."

"What's the ailment of the day, Collykins?" In a previous life Butch was a union organizer.

Limited only by his imagination and lack of medical expertise, Collin launches into a recitation of today's symptoms: fever, fatigue, headache, cough, sore throat.

Butch has another way of dealing with nerves. A bald, chunky man only a few years younger than I, he mutters to himself constantly—sometimes his lines, sometimes complaints about everything from Damon's directorial style to world capitalism. I'm more like Collin. I worry about my health, but privately. Or about dying. Cancer. Stroke. I believe this only started when Louise died; before that, I was immortal.

I stand before the mirror in Dorn's blue and white seersucker suit, and straw fedora. It is not an image I am familiar with. Perhaps it is someone I would like to be.

Later, just before the curtain rises, we wait together in the wings. Elisabeth is in constant motion. She breezes by in her first-act dress, wide bonnet on her head, then doubles back to smooth down my jacket.

"You are doing quite remarkably, Dr. Dorn!"

She is radiant; all her energy is gathered into Arkadina's self-possession. Do I feel admiration or desire?

Before Louise's body was cold, women started calling. Friends of friends, friends of colleagues, second cousins, the majority shareholder of the co-op—all offering chicken soup and companionship.

The strange thing is that Louise and I had finally started to talk. At home. In my head.

Sometimes she told me how much she hated me, how I'd made our life into a lie.

Sometimes she admitted her complicity in the lie, and even thanked me for my loyalty and optimism.

Sometimes we didn't speak at all, just held hands, as much as one could under the circumstances. I remembered her hands better than when I could touch them.

This may have been the best period of our relationship. What this says about our relationship does not escape me.

Twenty years ago, she and I went to a party at the home of a colleague. Conversation was upstairs, dancing in the basement. After a while I noticed that Louise wasn't in the living room. From the basement came the violin strains of a Strauss waltz; I walked halfway down the steps. The man she was dancing with was handsome in a stocky, ruffled way. He wasn't an academic. He manufactured something—hardware, I don't know. She was leaning back in his arms, perfectly secure. It wasn't that she looked lighter but that her body had discovered that it could use its weight to increase her sensuality. He was guiding her, but she was also guiding him; he was just as much in her arms as she in his. I couldn't breathe. I knew that this was the man she belonged with.

Now, in the basement of my brain, we did our own dance. Not as lovers but as old friends. We exchanged words with the reflexes of athletes. Each was alert to the other's moods. Whispering into my inner ear, she admitted that maybe a small part of me had actually loved her.

After six months, I started exploring the Internet. Not exactly with Louise's blessing, but not, as I chose to imagine it, with her disapproval either.

Every morning five or six e-mails were waiting. By afternoon, several more. More than one obviously crazy, or furious that I

hadn't replied immediately. The world outside my apartment *seethed* with loneliness.

Who had hurt these women? Who had promised them everything, and taken it back? Sitting in restaurants with aromatic names like Popover and French Roast, their skin losing its oils, tiny veins ribboning their eyeballs, they tried to feign interest in a lumpy academic at a third-rate college while their exes sunned themselves alongside their secretaries on the beach at St. Bart's. I understood. They wanted George Clooney, but all they had was me.

The worst and the best was Barbara N—. (Name changed to protect her from behavior like mine.)

Along with her photo, she had scanned into her email a photograph of small, gaily-colored ceramic animals, which she sculpted professionally. Hers was the scrubbed face of a prosperous Jewish girl loved by her father. Great Neck, she told me in a sunny voice over the phone. One son at Dartmouth, a daughter in medical school in Puerto Rico.

We met at a restaurant with expensive jams and waitresses who eye men suspiciously. She was as lovely as her photo. Soft brown just-washed hair. Clear, unveined eyes. Her hand was small and cool. From across the table, she smiled as if I met all her expectations.

Then something seized her face. As though someone standing behind her had gathered her hair into a bunch and yanked it up and to my left; for a second, her expression froze in shock and surprise.

"It's called *tic douloureux*," she said when it passed, and she smiled a dazzling, terrifying smile. She'd had it since she was 17.

I know something about *tic douloureux*. Professor Nikolai Stepanovich in "A Boring Story" has it. He says that it is the only thing that distinguishes his physical appearance: "...my tic evokes in everyone the stern, impressive thought: That man will most likely die soon."

"It's not Parkinson's," she said, answering questions before I thought them. "It doesn't limit me. My children are fine. The cause is unknown. My husband knew about it from the start. We were high-school sweethearts."

In her smile was both an appeal for tolerance and a hint of superiority, as if she deserved credit for perseverance and positive thinking.

Her history was as perfect as her smile. Very much in love, she and her lawyer-husband Bernie lived in Westchester and

summered in Orient Point, where she sculpted her animals. In certain circles, her work was well-known. Some had been used as images on wallpaper for children's rooms. An animator had used others in a cartoon.

Every few minutes the tic repeated itself. A frozen scream. And the *douleur* wasn't limited to her tic:

"Two years ago Bernie developed bone cancer. He was in constant agony, but he wouldn't take medication. It would have knocked him out, and he wanted to be awake."

Now her rosy cheeks were slick with tears. "It wasn't fair! We were so happy. Bernie wanted me to kill him. He didn't want us to suffer by watching him die. It took months."

Behind her smile, I could see how much she hated me, and every person dealt an easier hand. Who could deny her her hate, or her wish to conceal it? But I had to go. Right away. Almost knocking over the waitress, I bolted out of my seat, mumbled something about being late, emptied the contents of my wallet on the table, and slithered away. Behind *my* smile, would a pathologist find the same twisted mouth, the same frozen scream?

On opening night, I wasn't aware of being nervous. But even before I walked out on stage, I believe that my body and mind had parted company. Clutching my hat, I made it halfway across the stage without having any idea where I was. When the actress playing Paulina, my mistress, fed me my cue—*It's getting damp. Go back and put on your galoshes*—I didn't hear. With dreamy detachment, I walked over an expanse of black ice, where one could do nothing but slip and fall.

Time had stopped. I thought I must be dead.

I spoke directly to G-d. I begged Him not to let me die alone.

I knew that I didn't deserve such a favor; I hadn't loved other people enough. But I needed them. Desperately. I couldn't promise Him that if He spared me I'd reform and love them with all my heart and soul. I couldn't promise anything. I just begged. Save me from this desert of black ice. This loneliness.

I said Darling, it's so damp out here. Paulina's voice was shrill, impatient. *Go in and put on your galoshes!*

It's too hot, I said, wiping away tears of joy.

My daughter Debby saw through my brand of happiness right from the beginning.

When she was in third or fourth grade, I'd wait at the door with milk and Mallomars, and try to get her to talk about school, friends, her day. But after she consumed my bribe, she'd push past me without wiping off the milk mustache, and lock herself in her room with her slow-moving, ugly pets: turtles, snakes, an iguana.

"Darling, what do I have to do to cheer you up?"

"Why does everyone have to be cheery just because you are?"

"Not because I am. But don't you want to feel good?"

"What's wrong with feeling bad?"

Her hair was wonderfully thick, curly, coal-black. But she was disdainful of her appearance, wearing baggy clothes and moving with the limpness of a rag doll. Her face had a sullen, melancholy torpor about it, as if she hadn't slept well the night before. The closest she came to lightening up was a quick cynicism that gave her obvious pleasure; otherwise, she carried herself with an implacable aloofness more formidable than my optimism.

The one place where she let down her guard was, like Katya in "A Boring Story," in the theater. Not as an actress, but as a spectator.

I don't recall whose idea it was initially; Louise must have come with us in the beginning. But by her junior year in high school, Debby and I went to the theater every couple of weeks. I watched her more than I watched the play. In the darkness—perhaps *because* it was the darkness—her sullenness disappeared. Whether we were at *Hamlet*, a musical, or a performance of dancers sitting on piles of sand or pretending to make love in a tank of plastic balls, she was enthralled. She would reach out and squeeze my arm as if to drain off the excess excitement. If I tried to talk to her, she didn't respond; she was too caught up in the rapture. It wasn't happiness that she was feeling, but something far more alive and unpredictable. By the end of the play, she was incandescent.

Is that why I leapt at the chance to play Dorn? To finally make my daughter love me?

One night—we only have six performances left—Lee Ann approaches me after the show. She teeters on her platform boots, and her hair sticks out either side of her head like carrot greens.

"Reuben, I don't have anywhere to stay tonight. Last night my roommate went crazy and wrecked the place. He's a psycho anyway, so it was just a matter of time. The police came and took him away. I don't know if they let him out. I'm scared to go home."

Her psycho roommate will come and wreck my place. What would Louise say? What will Debby say? I think none of these things. The apartment has been empty too long: it needs to hear someone else's breathing.

When I unlock the door, her mouth literally falls open.

"This is amazing."

"It really isn't."

"It really is."

"There was a time when it wouldn't have seemed so big."

She walks around, taking in not only the apartment but a new image of me, then picks up a leather framed picture of Debby looking her nearsighted, quizzical self.

"My daughter. She's much prettier than that."

"I think she's terrific looking. I wish I looked like that. I wish—"

With unusual delicacy, as if afraid to soil the fabric, she lowers herself into an armchair and puts her chin in her hand. She stays that way even after I rest my hand on her shoulder. The tears make her large eyes even larger.

"It's just too *hard!*"

She is far less than half my age. I do not like the feeling I am feeling.

She looks up. "Do you have anything to smoke?"

"Could I make you some eggs?"

"Oh my God!" She springs out of her chair and hugs me. Her smell is pure anxiety. "That's so sweet!" I squeeze my legs together. Her body is heaving, but when she pulls back to look at me, she tries violently to smile. "You're so nice!"

In between bites, she sighs with pleasure and exhales questions: "How long have you lived here? Are you very rich? Who is that sweet old couple in the picture at the beach?" The things we did to shore up our family's safety seem to cheer her up; at least they put her at ease. To me they seem a lifetime ago.

She tells me about her abusive roommate/boyfriend Mick, crystal meth, after hours clubs, Irish punk bands. The only thing I can sort out in the rat's nest of words is that she was The Victim. What attraction does that world hold for her? From what she has

told me, her childhood was poor, not destitute—not a breeding ground of masochism. But there must be allure in testing oneself, even in idiotic circumstances. I wouldn't know.

I make up Debby's bed for her.

"She's so lucky," Lee Ann says.

"Why?"

"You're such a good Dad."

"How do you know?"

"I don't think you even have a *concept* of what a bad Dad is. Trust me on this one."

She's back to being tough and savvy. It worries me: I prefer the weeping Lee Ann.

I don't sleep but shiver alone in our queen-sized bed. Maybe I doze. I replay Katya's and Nikolai Stepanovich's story—how their relationship hovers near incest and passion. Was Chekhov suggesting that love is to be seized, even by foolish old men and troubled young women?

"Reuben, are you asleep?"

I feel the duvet rise, sucking in a wave of soft, cool air. Her big body in one of Debby's tee-shirts fills the space next to me.

"I'm having nightmares."

Her whole body shivers. This is not sexual. It is more like sleeping with a grown version of Debby, who by the age of five had stopped coming to our bed. My body is confused. Can she hear my heart thumping? I don't know, and I don't know what I want her to know.

As she weeps, my arm goes numb under her head. Then she turns fiercely away, yanks the duvet to her side, and curls into a fetal position.

"I came home, and there was this bitch in bed with him. I even *know* her. I was the one who trashed the place. Then they went out and he came back and trashed all *my* shit. Reuben, how could he *do* such a fucking thing to me?"

I think of Dorn's line at the end of Act I—*So much love! That damned magic lake! But what can I do? What can I do?* I see the lake before me. It's the black ice that I was afraid to slip on.

"I'll make you some tea."

"Couldn't you just hold me?"

My thin pajamas can't hide what I'm feeling. Gradually she relaxes in my arms until I think she's asleep. But then her hand reaches down in what is her most *committed* gesture of the evening.

I open my eyes. In the faint glitter of streetlight, hers are wide open, and very kind.

"This is for being a good Dad."

In the morning, Debby stands above us. When I put on my glasses, I barely recognize the look on her face: it is in a language that women use to communicate with each other.

"—she's a friend from the play..."

"I came to pick up Mom's laptop. The one you never use."

Lee Ann opens her eyes and sits up. She is a good actor. She looks surprised but unruffled.

She reaches out her hand to Debby.

"Hey."

Debby shakes Lee Ann's hand.

I think I understand Debby's expression now. She is impressed.

The last week of the show, Butch and Elisabeth stop talking to each other. Damon walks through his performances; in his head, he's already onto another project. Collin is even fussier; Chloe is engaged. Lee Ann has moved back to her apartment, but calls me on off-days for reassurance, and to thank me for financing the first two months of her cell phone.

I miss them all already.

There are two moments in the play that I shall not forget. In the first act Shamrayev, Paulina and Dorn wait on stage for Konstantin's play to start. When Elisabeth enters, you can feel the audience suck in their breaths. In her lacy dress and shawl, she is a commanding presence; the smile on her face has been used, one senses, for a thousand purposes. As Reuben Stein, I don't know this woman. But as Dr. Dorn, her ex-lover, I yearn for her. I smell the reeds at the edge of the lake, and see the misty, violet-gray Northern evening sky that Chekhov's painter-friend Levitan finally was able to capture on canvas. When Paulina tells me to put on my hat to avoid catching cold, I can feel the chill.

Elisabeth turns in her chair (she is sitting in the front row, I in the back) and says in my direction—*He's charming now, but then he was simply irresistible*. This time the air is filled with nostalgia, but also with pride in having once lived full throttle. Not as Reuben Stein: there I have work to do. But Dorn's past is my past now; I have earned that right. And even a ray of hope persists: Arkadina still finds me charming.

A few minutes later, after the others go inside, I remain on stage. An unusual moment: only in Act IV, before Konstantin kills himself, is there a similar one. I take my time. Pull my jacket around me. Look out over the audience and the lake. Then, as Nikolai Stepanovich and I might do before beginning a lecture, I look directly *into* the audience. They are startled—I have broken the fourth wall, the law of discreteness, and a low current runs through the room. But I put them at ease:

Maybe I'm stupid, maybe I'm crazy. [I say, catching someone's eye.] But I liked Konstantin's play. There was something fresh and direct about it. When Nina spoke of loneliness, or when the Devil's red eyes appeared—my hands trembled. I hear him coming. I want to say nice things to him.

They sigh with relief. They love Konstantin, too. He is the child of us all, and we are all him, the neglected child.

On closing night, dressed for the cast party that I volunteered to give at our apartment, Debby finally comes to the show. Watching her from the wings, I recognize a shadow of the old enraptured look. But now she is a grown woman. She works at the law firm that gave Louise her start. I believe this is the first time I have seen her wear earrings that sparkle.

After the show, she hugs me lightly and steps back, as if to make two images of me congruent. If not the exact expression that she had the other morning, her look recalls it.

I want to hug her back. Hard.

But I'm still too shy. Instead I say, "Thanks for coming, sweetie." It takes time to learn to act like actors.

As they enter the apartment, they touch edges and handles, take in rugs and lamps and book-filled shelves with sweeping looks not so much envious as relieved: for a moment they are safe. This time I don't make excuses. They taught me that: even if you give what you think was an awful performance, accept all compliments graciously. Why ruin someone else's pleasure? If I told them that we bought the place when it was affordable, they wouldn't believe me anyway. For them, History doesn't extend back to a time when space wasn't the exclusive possession of the rich. Most of them have practically nothing, and don't expect to; otherwise, they'd study accounting.

The least I can give them is this moment before the safety fades, and they step out into the night, and the present breaks over them like a wave.

"Shall I open the champagne, Professor Stein?"

As my student, Damon strolled into class whenever he felt like it, handed papers in late, blurted out answers, made bad puns that sailed over the heads of half the sleeping class. I let it all happen with hardly a whisper of protest. Perhaps I loved him the way Nikolai Stepanovich loved Katya but couldn't tell her. If I let him get away with too much, if he was the Teacher's Pet—maybe that was the only way I could find to tell him. And maybe his casting me in this play has been his way of telling me back.

Debby and Collin stand together at the drinks table. In heels, she's as tall as he is. Her hair is brushed back and shiny. Her shoulders aren't caved in, nor her toes pointed inward. Her look is serious but present: Louise's look before a jury.

Collin looks interested; at any rate, he is listening hard. Perhaps this is the moment *before* interest—when one senses that one's life is about to change. The moment before one steps out on stage.

Is it possible that Time makes some of the bad things go away—*This too shall pass*—and that happiness is simply seizing opportunities?

I do not want this to end.

Across the room Elisabeth wanders by herself, studying books on the shelf just as she taught me: the independent activity to avoid overstating lines and feelings.

"This is a very nice place, Reuben."

"Actually I like your place better."

"They gave me a pile of money, but I've got to get out soon."

"How soon?"

"Soon."

"Move here."

That really surprises her. She isn't the only one. But didn't she teach me to trust my impulses?

"Just temporarily. You can use Debby's room. There's a separate entrance."

"You're actually serious."

"Why shouldn't I be?"

"Because I can't just move into the home of a man I don't know."

"You know me. It's I who don't know you."

Her eyes lock onto mine, then drop, almost sadly. "One day, Reuben, you'll be an even better actor than you are now. You know why? Because you don't show it all, you hold something in reserve. When you want to be, you can be quite dangerous."

She pauses. And then says, a little coldly (which reveals more than anything else the warmth in her heart): "But you really have a lot to learn."

"Teach me."