

THE GULL

A Tragicomedy for One, after Chekhov

by Zachary Cohn

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Characters:

Irina **Arkadina** - An actress, mid-40s.

Pete **Sorin** - Her older brother, 50s. A former civil servant, in poor health.

Constantine "**Connie**" Treplyev - Her son, early 20s, a young and unsuccessful writer. Loves Nina.

Boris **Trigorin** - Her lover, 50s, a successful writer

Nina Zarechnaya - An aspiring actress, early 20s.

Masha - A woman not at home in life, early 30s. Loves Connie.

Pauline - Masha's mother and Arkadina's maid, late 50s.

Dorn - A local doctor, late 50s.

Simon - A schoolteacher. early 30s. Loves Masha.

The Player - A narrator.

Time: Now

Place: The stage

Note on Performance:

The performer wears a single costume throughout. Changes in character are indicated solely by changes in physical attitude and voice.

(A bare or mostly bare stage. A prop table visible to the side with items on it: a daisy, a book, a pile of feathers, a medallion, a shawl. An plain wooden bench at center. The PLAYER enters matter-of-factly)

THE PLAYER:

This is play by Anton Chekhov, more or less.

People call it *The Seagull*, but there's no sea. We're inland. There's a lake just over there—in the play, that is—the gulls fly around it, so I suppose you could call it *The Lakegull*, if that's something you wanted. But I just call it *The Gull*.

The curtain opens. Light illuminates Russia. You're thinking, perhaps, of Moscow or St. Petersburg, of snow and onion domes. Those you don't see—it's midsummer and we're in the country, at the estate of one Peter Sorin. Huge trees, heavy with leaves, deepest dark green, almost black, and they're everywhere. As I said, there's a lake over there, but you can't see it at present, because there's a little makeshift stage here and the curtain is blocking the view. Workers are putting the last touches on it—you can hear them hammering and coughing. The sun's going down. And two people enter, just coming back from an aimless walk. One of them is dressed head to toe in black. This is Masha. The other looks ruffled. This is Simon. He says:

SIMON:

Why are you always wearing black?

PLAYER:

And she says:

MASHA:

I'm in mourning for my life. I'm unhappy.

SIMON:

But *why*? You're healthy enough, you're not poor—well, your dad's not poor—he's got a decent position. My life's much harder than yours. I get 23 rubles a month to live on, but I don't go around mourning for my life.

MASHA:

Happiness isn't about money. Poor people are happy.

SIMON:

You say that—they say that—but it isn't true! My mother, my two sisters, my little brother and me all have to live on my salary. Twenty three rubles a month. And we have to eat, we have to keep the lights on somehow, and we can't just starve, can we?

MASHA:

Play's starting soon.

SIMON:

...yeah. Nina Zarechnaya in:...I forget the title. Connie's play. They love each other. Their two souls will merge tonight in the effort to...express the same cosmic essence? He says something like that..

There isn't any cosmic essence where our souls could merge. I love you, you know. I can't stay at home, I feel too restless, I *walk* here every day, six miles, to be with you. And your complete indifference toward me. But—I get it. I'm poor. You can't marry someone who can't feed himself.

MASHA:

It isn't that.

THE PLAYER:

Masha takes out a cigarette and smoothly lights it.

MASHA:

I'm touched, I really am, but I don't feel the same way, that's all. Want a smoke?

SIMON:

No, thanks.

THE PLAYER:

They don't look at each other.

(*Pause*)

MASHA:

Heavy air. There's going to be a storm tonight, I think. You don't do anything but moralize, or talk about how poor you are. To you, poverty is the worst thing in the universe, but it's a hell of a lot easier to be homeless, even, than—oh, you wouldn't understand.

THE PLAYER:

Here comes the aforementioned Peter Sorin, master of the house, hobbling with his cane—and Constantine, his nephew.

SORIN:

I can't get used to country life. Last night I went to bed at ten and woke up at eleven feeling like my brain was nailed to my skull. And I nodded off again after dinner, and I'm *still* tired. Don't ever get old, kiddo.

CONNIE:

You need to move back to town—(*sees SIMON and MASHA*) Guys—hi—sorry but you need to go, we'll call you when the play's starting.

SORIN:

Masha, could you ask your father to quiet down that dog? It was yowling so much last night that my sister couldn't sleep.

MASHA:

You'll have to talk to *him* about that. Let's go.

SIMON:

You'll tell us when it's starting?

THE PLAYER:

Simon and Masha drift out.

SORIN:

That dog is gonna howl all night again. That's always the way. I come down here for some rest, and by the end of the first day here I want to run away from all this nonsense. But when you're retired, where else do you go? I have to live somewhere.

CONNIE:

Okay. We have the curtain, the foreground, the background and all. (*Gesturing to the empty stage*) No artificial scenery is needed. The curtain will go up as the moon rises at 8:30. Of course the whole thing is completely wrecked if Nina's late. She should have been here already. But her parents—it's like trying to break her out of prison.

SORIN:

Would you happen to know why your mother's out of temper? I asked her, as a brother, but she wouldn't say.

CONNIE:

Because she's jealous (*laughs*). Also bored. She's not acting tonight—Nina is. So she's mad because she's mad at her and me and the play—which she hasn't even read, by the way. Nina's gonna have a success, so of course she's furious. God, what time is it? (*He checks an unseen watch*) My mother. She's a psychologist's dream. Brilliant? Talented? Of course! Cries over novels, can recite verses and verses of social protest poetry—down with the establishment! If you're sick she's an angel—but just *watch* what happens if you even speak the word "Bernhardt" to her! Only Mother can be praised, get raves—"Oh, you were soooooo good in *Camille*". And she can't get that out here in the sticks, so she gets pissy. And good lord is she stingy—seventy thousand rubles in the bank, but ask her to lend you *one* and she turns on the waterworks.

SORIN:

Connie, please, don't get worked up with this. She adores you.

(*The PLAYER takes the daisy from the prop table*)

CONNIE:

(Flower petals) She loves me, she loves me, not, she loves me, she loves me not, she loves me, she loves me—NOT. *(He's reduced it to tatters)* She does NOT love me. Why should she? I'm twenty-five, so she can't be that young anymore, can she? When I'm away she can still be 32. When I'm here she's 43! Oh, and she knows I hate her kind of theatre. She thinks she's Building Empathy and Connecting Human Beings, but to me it's just...Nothing. When the curtain comes up on that middle-class living room—it's always a living room—and they recreate for us how we eat, think, love, how we *walk*—when playwrights give us the same, same, SAME old stuff dressed up a thousand different ways...it makes me want to *run*.

(Pause)

SORIN:

Well, we can't just...stop.

CONNIE:

No? We can still do it—but if we can't make it new, then let's not make it at all. I love my mother. I do, but her life is—it's laughable. She's got that writer on the brain, the newspapers are always scaring her, and I'm sick of it. Sometimes pure selfishness makes me wish she wasn't famous.. If she were just a regular person, I'd be happier, I think. What's worse than what this, Uncle Pete? I'm a nobody sitting among all the Artistic Minds. They only tolerate me because I'm her son. I'm...what? I barely scraped my way through college. I don't have brains. I don't have money. Read my passport, and it'll tell you I'm a middle-class guy from Kiev. My father was, too, but he was a famous actor. When the celebrities, the authors my mother has over *deign* to look at me, they're only gauging my insignificance. It's humiliating.

SORIN:

By the way—what's Trigorin like? I can't understand him. He's always so...quiet.

CONNIE:

Trigorin? Typical writer. Clever, simple, well-mannered, a little glum. Swimming in critical praise and he isn't even forty. And his stories are—well—pleasing, talented, but if you've read Tolstoy or Chekhov you don't think much of Trigorin.

SORIN:

I like writers. I once wanted two things, very badly: to get married, and to become a writer. I didn't get either.

CONNIE:

Hang on, I hear footsteps. *(listens for a moment)* It's her!! Even her footsteps are music. I'm so happy. I'm so happy.

THE PLAYER:

Enter Nina. She's *lovely*.

CONNIE:

You're *lovely*.

NINA:

I'm not late, I'm not late!

CONNIE:

Of course not.

NINA:

I've been—I was so scared Dad would stop me—they just went driving—the sky's clear, the moon—I hurried—I'm so happy to see you!

SORIN:

You look like you've been crying, honey—you shouldn't—

NINA:

It's nothing, it's nothing. Let's hurry. I go on in half an hour. No no don't make me stay—dad doesn't know I'm here.

CONNIE:

It *is* time to start. I have to call the audience.

SORIN:

I'll call them—I'll go. Don't worry. (*He winks*)

THE PLAYER:

Exit Sorin.

NINA:

Dad and my stepmom would never let me come here, they say this place is all sin, they worry I'll be an actress. But the lake...the gulls. My heart is full of you.

CONNIE:

We're alone.

NINA:

Isn't that someone over there?

CONNIE:

No.

PLAYER:

Connie kisses her.

(It is rushed and somewhat awkward.)

NINA:

That tree—!

CONNIE:

It's a tree. An elm, I think.

NINA:

Why does it look so dark?

CONNIE:

It's evening, everything looks dark. Don't go right away, please.

NINA:

I have to.

CONNIE:

What if I followed you? I'll stand in your garden all night and stare at your window.

NINA:

Please don't do that. Rexie would bark at you.

CONNIE:

I love you, do you know that?

NINA:

Oh, shhhh, please, shhhh.

CONNIE:

The moon's rising. We have to do the play. Where's the sulfur, where's the sulfur—okay, okay, got it. You can go. Nervous?

NINA:

Yeah. I—not of your mom, she's fine, but Trigorin...everyone knows who he is. Is he young? His stories are so gorgeous.

CONNIE:

Wouldn't know, never read 'em.

NINA:

Your play, Connie—I'm worried. It's hard. There aren't any characters in it.

CONNIE:

Why should there be? Life has to appear onstage as it appears in...life. A welter of impressions, a wave of symbols. Life as it reveals itself in dreams.

NINA:

But nothing really happens. It's almost just a recitation. And love should be in every play at least a little, right?

CONNIE:

(meaning his love for her)

There *is* love in it.

THE PLAYER:

They exit behind the curtain—he ecstatic, she all nerves. Enter a pair of cranky middle-aged folks. Pauline—Masha's mother—and Eugene Dorn—a doctor—both here for the play.

PAULINE:

Go back and put on your boots.

DORN:

My feet are hot already.

PAULINE:

You don't take care of yourself, you're so obstinate, you won't get healthy—and you a doctor, it's a crime. You know what it is? You like to see me suffer. That's why you were out on the terrace all last evening. You were so *engrossed* in MaDAHM ArKAHdina's conversation that you didn't even notice. Oh, you like her, admit it.

DORN:

I'm fifty-five years old, Pauline!

PAULINE:

Not too old to get up to mischief. And women still like you, somehow. Practically running into your arms.

DORN:

My wife would have a field day, hearing that. I don't know. They liked that I was a great doctor. And I've always been an honorable man.

PAULINE:

Now listen—

PLAYER:

But she doesn't finish, because here come the rest of them: Sorin, with Madame Arkadina—an actress, naturally, in a plum-colored silk dress—swanning on his arm, and Simon, and Masha, gloomy as ever.

ARKADINA:

(calling)

Connie? Where are you, darling? *(to SORIN)* Where is he? Is the play starting?

PLAYER:

And here comes Connie from behind the curtain.

ARKADINA:

There he is! Hi, Connie! When does the play start, dear?

CONNIE:

(portentously)

Ladies and gentlemen.

The play is now commencing.

THE PLAYER:

He's gotten a big, gnarled wooden stick from somewhere, and he bangs it on the ground

CONNIE:

Lake

with your mists

with your depths

make us blind

make us dream

of the things

that will be

millions of years

from now

SORIN:

Will there *be* anything in millions of years?

CONNIE:

(annoyed, off-script)

Then make us dream of the things that *won't* be.

THE PLAYER:

And the curtain is whisked aside. You can see clear across the lake. No wind; the water's like glass. A huge cream-colored moon low in the sky and its perfect double undisturbed in the water. A vision. And Nina's there, onstage. She sits on a big fake rock, wearing in a huge white dress. She, too, is a vision.

NINA:

(trying to make the best of it)

Each

manbeastlioneaglequailstaggoosespider

silentwavefish

seastarfish

and all

that are

invisible to

the eye

all LIFE

all life

finally done

with its circling

has died out.

it's been a million years

since there was

LIFE

on earth.

sad moon

lit for nobody.

No storks

no beetles

in the lime groves.

Cold.

Cold.

Void.

Void.

Void.

Terrible.

Terrible.

Life is dropped

to dust,

matter has

transformed them

into stones

and clouds

their spirits

flowed together
in one
and that
is I
the worldsoul
Alexander and Napoleon
Cleopatra and Shakespeare
and the smallest leech
there is.
Man
joined with the instinct
of
animal.
each life
lives again
in me.

ARKADINA:
...what *is* this?

CONNIE:
Mom—just—

NINA:
I am
alone.
Once
every hundred years
my lips open
and my voice
echoes
cross the earth.
Poor lights of the marsh
you do not hear me
engendered at sunset
unconscious
unreasoning
unwarmed by breath
Satan the father
of eternal matter
has ordered your atoms
to move and change forever.
I alone

am eternal.

THE PLAYER:

Two red lights suddenly blink from the opposite shore of the lake.

NINA:

Satan, my mighty foe,
advances; I see his dread and lurid eyes.

THE PLAYER:

There is suddenly a smell of sulfur.

ARKADINA:

Is there a gas leak or something?! I smell—

CONNIE:

There is not a gas leak. Please.

ARKADINA:

Oh, is it part of the—thing? It's part of the thing, I'm sorry, dear.

CONNIE:

Mom!

NINA:

He longs for man—

PAULINE:

You're going to catch cold, put your hat back on.

ARKADINA:

He's tipping his hat to Satan over the lake there, the father of eternal matter. (*she laughs at her own joke*)

CONNIE:

ENOUGH. That's it. Play's over. Curtain! CURTAIN! So sorry, everybody, excuse me, I forgot that only *certain people* are *permitted* to write plays, or act in them, and I've butted into the *cartel*, I—

THE PLAYER:

Connie exits, trying unsuccessfully to conceal his tears.

ARKADINA:

What was *that* about?

SORIN:

Could you be a little less tough on him, Rina? I think you hurt his feelings.

ARKADINA:

He said it wasn't serious, so I didn't take it seriously! Now he wants me to treat it like high art. Apparently he didn't want to amuse us, he just wanted to tear-gas us to show that his theatre is right and mine is wrong. I'm exhausted. No one can put up with this. He's being a brat.

SORIN:

He wanted to please you.

ARKADINA:

So why didn't he choose a normal play? Why did he sit us down and make us watch the Life Force of the Earth and Atoms and whatnot? I could tolerate bullshit if he *knew* it was bullshit, if he were just joking, but this was an insult to me specifically!

TRIGORIN:

The kid's doing his best.

ARKADINA:

Then he can do his best somewhere else.

DORN:

And the voice from the whirlwind spake!

ARKADINA:

I'm not God, I'm a woman. And I'm not angry. Only sorry to see him waste his time. I didn't want to hurt him.

SIMON:

You know, Mr. Trigorin, you should try writing a play someday about a schoolteacher. A poor schoolteacher. Maybe he's in love with someone who doesn't like him much. And he's about yea tall, and—

TRIGORIN:

Let's not talk about plays. Let's not ruin the evening. Listen to the singing across the water.

(Pause. Then the PLAYER sings something lovely, wordless, and a little melancholic, perhaps a bit of Rachmaninoff's "Vocalise". They have a beautiful voice.)

ARKADINA:

Here, sit. Ten or fifteen years ago we had music and singing on the lake almost all night. Noise, laughter, romance. And Eugene—Dr. Dorn—you were the idol of them all, remember? Irresistible, I seem to—but. Hm. I. Oh, why did I—he seemed really hurt, didn't he? I'd better—Constantine? Constantine?

MASHA:

Do you want me to go look for him?

ARKADINA:

If you wouldn't mind.

MASHA:

Constantine? ...Connie? Connie?

THE PLAYER:

Exit Masha. And enter Nina from backstage, still looking radiant, if slightly frazzled.

NINA:

Well, the play's never going to end, so I'm going home.

ARKADINA:

Oh, brava! Brava! We loved you, dear. It is an absolute *crime* for you to be out here and not playing big cities! You *must* act.

NINA:

It's my dream. It'll never come true, though.

ARKADINA:

Who knows? Ah, let me introduce—this is Mr. Trigorin, Boris Trigorin.

NINA:

I'm so—it's so wonderful to meet you. I've read your books. All of them. But you probably don't want to hear about—I'm sorry! I'm sorry! Ignore me.

ARKADINA:

Don't worry. He's famous, but he's a good man. He's as scared of you as you are of him.

NINA:

It was an...interesting play, wasn't it?

TRIGORIN:

Oh, yes. Couldn't understand a word of it, but I was absolutely transfixed. Your acting was so...pure, so radiant. The setting was beautiful. And there must be so many fish in that lake. God, I love fishing. There's nothing better, really, than sitting at a lakeshore at sunset, staring down at the water.

NINA:

And here I thought that being a genius was the greatest pleasure.

ARKADINA:

Oh, shush, he gets all puffed up if you compliment him.

SIMON:

The only time I've ever been to the theater before this, I was sitting in the audience, right, and there was this rosebush in the background? Because it was—like, the place was a garden, in the play. And some guy crawled up on stage at intermission—an audience guy—and he tried to pick one for his date! (*He laughs hysterically at his own anecdote for a bit.*)

(*A pause*)

DORN:

Looks like the quiet angel flew by.

NINA:

I have to go, bye everyone—no, really, my father's waiting for me.

ARKADINA:

Oh, that old crab. (*They do cheek kisses*) I suppose we can't keep you, but we're *loath* to let you go! I'll send someone with you—

NINA:

No! No, no please don't.

SORIN:

Oh, just stay another hour.

NINA:

I can't! I'm sorry!

PLAYER:

And Nina's off like a shot. The moon has risen further, now much higher and whiter, much smaller.

SORIN:

Come on, let's go in—I'm itchy.

SIMON:

I should go home, I guess. If Masha's not around...

THE PLAYER:

Simon exits to his little house, and Arkadina and Sorin to their big one. Dorn remains. Enter Connie,

barging in. He has been avoiding Masha for a long time, and his hair is strewn with twigs and grass from leaping into bushes when he hears her coming.

CONNIE:

Everyone gone? Masha's been screaming for me up and down. Drives me nuts.

DORN:

Hey, Connie? I'm no theatre critic, but I really liked your play. There was something about it—the girl talking about her loneliness, and the eyes across the lake. You have a lot of talent. Keep writing, won't you?

THE PLAYER:

Connie hugs him.

DORN:

You're crying—listen, hey. You were really trying to *say* something. That matters. Art should go after the big ideas...are you feeling all right? You're a little pale.

CONNIE:

So—so I should keep going?

DORN:

Yes, you should. But only if you use it to pursue the great truths. I mean that. I'm content with my life, but to be a real *artist*...I'd, I'd shoot up into the stratosphere if I could create.

CONNIE:

Sorry, but—where's Miss Zarechnaya?

DORN:

Oh, and another thing—you need to have a clear goal in mind, because if you don't you'll just get lost on the road of art, so to speak, and your instincts can lead you astray—

CONNIE:

(*cutting him off*)

But where's Nina??

DORN:

She went home.

CONNIE:

She went *home*?? What am I gonna do? I want to see her, I have to see her, I'll follow her. I'm going—

THE PLAYER:

Enter Masha: she's cornered him at last.

MASHA:

Connie!!--your mom wants you to come inside. She's waiting for you and she's very worried.

CONNIE:

Tell her I've gone away, and--and leave me alone! LEAVE ME ALONE!! Don't FOLLOW me, don't--
don't--(*collects himself a little*) Goodbye, Dr. Dorn, and thanks.

THE PLAYER:

Connie rushes off left, then remembers suddenly that Nina's house is off *right*, whirls around, and rushes off the right way.

DORN:

Ah, kids.

MASHA:

It's always "ah, kids" when someone has nothing to say.

THE PLAYER:

Masha goes to smoke. Dorn snatches the cigarette out of her hand, drops it on the ground, and extinguishes it.

DORN:

Sorry. I'm a doctor. I don't want to have to look at your black lungs on an operating table someday.
(*Pause*) I have to go in, I think.

MASHA:

Wait. Can we talk?

DORN:

Uh, sure.

MASHA:

(*a kind of torrent*) I'm sorry, but I hate my mom and dad and you, you get me somehow. So, help me.
Help me, or I'll do something that ruins my whole life, and I *can't take it anymore*.

DORN:

Help how?

MASHA:

I'm in agony. No one, no one knows how bad it is.
I love Connie. I'm *in love* with Connie. It's awful.

DORN:

Oh, Masha... There's so much love around here.. But...what can I do? What can I do?

THE PLAYER:

They embrace. Her shoulders can be seen shaking with her sobs, and his hand stroking her hair gently. But all this is just barely visible in the dim blue light. The crickets are singing. The light fades until, imperceptibly, it grades into complete darkness. The crickets keep singing and singing and singing in darkness. And, though you can't see it, the curtain closes.

And that was Act One of *The Gull*.

Rest your imaginations for a bit. Besides, they need time to change the set.

(Pause for the PLAYER to get water or whatever)

All right. Act Two. This is where the gull comes in.

The curtain rises. Light illuminates Russia. Still summer, still at the estate of Peter Sorin, but now it's the broad lawn in front of the house. It's perfectly manicured. The lake is there (*pointing up left*). The house is there (*up center*), sitting on a stone terrace. Here (*down right*) is a large linden tree. Time has passed—it's a few weeks later. Noon. A summer day. Broiling heat.

(The PLAYER fetches the book from the table) Here sit Arkadina, Dr. Dorn, and Masha in the shade of the tree, reading a book. Collectively. And Arkadina's about to be really unpleasant.

ARKADINA:

Masha, dear, stand up, stand next to me. You're twenty-two, and I'm—somewhat older. Now, Dr. Dorn, which one of us looks younger?

DORN:

Uh...you, Mrs. A.

ARKADINA:

Now why is that? I work, that's why. My heart and mind are always busy. You never move off the same spot, Masha darling. You just don't live. I always say, never look at the future. I just don't think about old age or death—I live in the moment.

MASHA:

I feel like I've been alive a thousand years, pulling all my life behind me like an infinite...scarf. I don't want to live at all, most of the time. But that's not—I know I need to pull myself together.

ARKADINA:

I've kept my looks by never *slumping*. Look at me, strutting like a teenager.

DORN:

It's great, Mrs. A, but I'd like to get back to the reading. Let's see...rats. We were at the rats.

ARKADINA:

The rats. Go on. No—give me the book, it's my turn to read. Rats, rats, rats. Here. (*Reading*) "It is as dangerous for society to attract and indulge authors as it is for farmers to raise rats in their grain silos. Yet society loves authors. And so, when a woman has found one she wishes to make her own, she lays siege to him by indulging and flattering him." Well, I wouldn't put it past the French, but we don't do that here. A woman is already mooning over an author before she *lays siege* to him. Just look at me and Trigorin.

THE PLAYER:

Here comes Sorin—he's in a wheelchair today, his legs are bothering him—pushed by none other than Nina, with Simon hanging around them both.

SORIN:

(*to NINA*)

We're happy today, yes we are, we're VERY happy, because daddy and stepmommy went bye-bye for three days! And don't we look lovely today.

NINA:

I'm all yours for the weekend, Madame Arkadina.

ARKADINA:

What a pretty dress, Nina darling—you look just wonderful. Oh, but we mustn't spoil you with praise. Have you seen Boris?

NINA:

He's out fishing at the wharf. Again. I know. What're you reading?

ARKADINA

(*checking the cover*)

On the Water by Maupassant. (*Flipping through it*) But the rest of it isn't so good.

I've got a bad feeling about my son. What's wrong with him? Why is he so...heavy, lately? He spends all his time out near the lake. I never see him.

MASHA:

He's in pain.

Nina, could—would you recite something? From his play?

NINA:

Why? Is it that interesting?

MASHA:

It's just—especially when he recites it—it's very beautiful. His eyes get all shiny and his face goes pale. He suddenly looks like a true poet.

ARKADINA:

Pete? Pete, are you sleeping?

THE PLAYER:

Sorin, who's been quite obviously snoring, starts up.

SORIN:

Hm?

ARKADINA:

Are you asleep?

SORIN:

No, of course not.

ARKADINA:

You really should do something about your health.

SORIN:

My *health*. What, at sixty-five?

ARKADINA:

People still want to live at sixty-five. Maybe we can go to one of those spa towns. Get away for a while.

DORN:

Oh, spa towns aren't anything. Does nothing for anyone.

ARKADINA:

I don't think you understand, Doctor.

SIMON:

You probably shouldn't smoke so much.

THE PLAYER:

Everyone stares at Simon.

DORN:

No, he's not wrong. You're not yourself when you're smoking or drunk. After a cigar or a glass of vodka you're not Pete Sorin, you're Pete Sorin *and* someone else. You start thinking of yourself in the third person.

SORIN:

Certainly *you* can talk about the dangers of smoking and drinking.

DORN:

Well, yes. I'm a doctor.

SORIN:

I mean you've *lived*. I haven't lived. I worked for the Department of Transportation for thirty years. I haven't experienced anything. You've gotten what life has to offer, so you can sit there and philosophize, but I want to live. So I drink and I smoke.

DORN:

But you have to take life seriously. Self-medicating at sixty-five because you didn't go running around in your youth is...silly.

MASHA:

Ugh, my foot's asleep. Got to go walk it off.

THE PLAYER:

Masha exits toward the house—limping, but going suspiciously fast.

DORN:

She's going to have a few drinks before lunch, I bet. Poor girl. She's unhappy.

SORIN:

You judge her like someone who's gotten everything he wanted out of life.

ARKADINA:

Oh, screw being in the country. The tedium! The air is hot, nobody does anything but sit and moan. Don't get me wrong, it's nice in its way, but frankly I'd much rather be alone in a hotel room learning lines.

NINA:

I know exactly how you feel.

SORIN:

Of course it's nicer to live in town. You can sit in your library, no one bothers you, the sound of cars going by—

THE PLAYER:

Pauline enters, sweating.

PAULINE:

Ms. Arkadina, you wanted to go to town, isn't that right?

ARKADINA:

That's the plan, yes.

PAULINE:

Oh, that's great! It's just—funny thing about the car. My husband needed to go out and buy some supplies—

ARKADINA:

And he'll be back soon, I imagine?

PAULINE:

Uh. Well, you see, Ms. Arkadina—

ARKADINA:

He's taken the car for the *whole day*?

PAULINE:

He'd give up ten years of his life for you, you know that.

ARKADINA:

What if I have to go to town?

PAULINE:

Such a big house, you run out of supplies very quickly...

ARKADINA:

Oh, lovely. And not even asking me! This is why I never go out here—the inconvenience, the rudeness. I'll go back to Moscow. Absurd!

PAULINE:

Pardon me, ma'am, but it is *your* house he's keeping up.

ARKADINA:

That's no excuse.

PAULINE:

Ma'am—

ARKADINA:

Never mind, I'll call a cab or something, I suppose—I guess my convenience just doesn't matter to some people, even if they work for me! Every summer...

THE PLAYER:

Arkadina storms out in a huff. Pauline just sort of stands there fuming for a moment.

PAULINE:

Go piss in the lake, lady!

SORIN:

Okay, let's go find Rina and implore her not to go—I'm so sorry, Pauline, she can be such a—you know her.

NINA:

Don't get up, don't get up—here, we'll roll you. This is awful.

SORIN:

She won't leave, I'll talk to her.

THE PLAYER:

Nina wheels out Sorin.

SIMON:

Why am I even in this scene? To make one comment and embarrass myself? This is ridiculous. I'm going, too.

THE PLAYER:

Simon, uh...he jumps off the stage, stomps down the aisle through the audience, and leaves the theater. I hope I can get him back in here before the next act.
Anyway, that leaves only Pauline and Dorn.

DORN:

It'll be fine. It'll all end with Arkadina crawling back and begging for your forgiveness. She knows that the house can't run without you and Eli.

PAULINE:

He took the car. This kind of thing happens day in, day out, I'm falling apart! I'm shaking, she makes me crazy, they both do. He makes me crazy. I can't stand him. (*Beat.*)
Eugene? Let's...stop...disguising things. We haven't got much time left. Let's be together. Why not?

(*Pause*)

DORN:

I'm fifty-five years old. I've been married for thirty of those years. It's too late to, uh...

PAULINE:

I know. You can only play the hand you're dealt. I'm just bothering you, excuse me.

DORN:

No, Pauline—

PAULINE:

It's horrible, I'm so jealous of her, and Madam A. You're a doctor, you're handsome, they won't stop buzzing around you, I get it.

PLAYER:

Enter Nina. She's been picking flowers, which she's bound into a nice little bouquet.

DORN:

Oh, lord. How are things in there?

NINA:

Madam Arkadina is crying, and Mr. Sorin's having one of his coughing fits.

DORN:

We better go see to him. Get them both some tea.

NINA:

I picked you some flowers, Dr. Dorn.

DORN:

(touched) Why, thank you, Nina. What a thoughtful gift. Come on, Pauline...

PLAYER:

Dorn and Pauline walk up towards the house. This next part, Nina doesn't see.

PAULINE:

Give me those flowers. Give them to me.

PLAYER:

He does. She violently tears the bouquet apart as they walk, sprinkling the green tatters of it behind her. Now only Nina is left onstage.

NINA:

It's weird to see a famous actress weeping offstage. Really different from when she does it in the theater.

Unnerving. And why would a famous author spend all day *fishing*? Everyone loves him, there are rave reviews for his books in the paper, people recognize him on the street, he's been translated into twenty languages, and yet he's happiest if he catches a—a-guppy, or something. I don't know fish. I always thought artists were sort of...not of this world. But here I see them crying and fishing and screaming at maids like anyone else.

THE PLAYER:

Enter Connie.

(The PLAYER goes to the prop table and picks up the handful of feathers.)

He's carrying...this.

CONNIE:

Are you alone?

NINA:

Yes.

(The PLAYER tosses the feathers on the floor in front of them.)

NINA:

What does this mean?

CONNIE:

I was...vile enough to murder this gull today. I lay it at your feet.

NINA:

What's *happening* to you??

CONNIE:

I'll do the same for myself soon enough.

NINA:

You've changed. I don't know who you are.

CONNIE:

Yes. I've changed. Because I don't know who *you* are. You're cold, you don't want me near you.

NINA:

You've been so hair-trigger and you talk about these things and I just don't understand them, I'm sorry, I don't understand...

CONNIE:

It started with the play. Failure. A woman can't forgive that. I burned the manuscript, every last page.

NINA:

That's awful, Connie, I didn't want that—

CONNIE:

If only you could fully understand how miserable I am. Your...estrangement from me is terrible, unbelievable, as if, as if this whole lake dried up and dove into the earth one night. You say you don't understand me—what's to understand? You hate my play. You have no faith in my talents, you already think I'm common and worthless like everyone else. Oh, I can understand you. It's like a knife in my brain. To hell with it, and to hell with my stupidity. That's killing me too. (*Catches sight of TRIGORIN approaching*) Oh, here comes Trigorin, the actual genius, Hamlet the Second. "Words, words, words." I see you smiling for him. I won't bother you, oh no—

THE PLAYER:

Exit Connie. Going, going, gone. God knows where. And enter Trigorin. He's noting something down in the little dark-green notebook he always carries.

TRIGORIN:

Smokes, drinks vodka, always wears black, has a schoolteacher in love with her...

NINA:

Oh. Hi.

TRIGORIN:

Well, hello there, Miss Nina. Unfortunately, due to circumstances beyond our control, we're leaving today. You and I will probably never meet again—which I'm sorry for. I don't often meet such lovely young women. I can't remember how it feels to be nineteen, God knows, and the girls in my books have no real life. I wish I could switch places with you, just for an hour. Find out what kind of person you are behind the eyes.

NINA:

I'd switch with you, too. To find out how a famous genius feels. What's it like, being famous? What does it *feel* like?

TRIGORIN:

Feel like? It feels like nothing, to me at least. Or if I *am* as famous as you say I am—then I suppose fame isn't something you feel.

NINA:

What about when you read about yourself in the papers? A big review in a magazine?

TRIGORIN:

If they like it, I'm happy; if they don't, I'm a wretched lump for the next week or so.

NINA:

If only you knew how I envy you! People are meant to do different things. Most of them drag a big heavy dull life behind them. They're unhappy. And then one in a million—like you—gets an actual meaningful existence. You're lucky.

TRIGORIN:

Lucky? Me? Listen, Nina, I hear you talking about fame and happiness and this and that, and it's a very...marshmallow-y idea of life. You're very young. And very sweet, don't get me wrong.

NINA:

Your life is beautiful. It *is*.

TRIGORIN:

Not particularly! At least to me. Some people have these obsessions, right? Someone can't think of anything but all the different kinds of orchid, or crossword puzzles, or whatever. Same with me. I only have one thought in my head—WRITE! I've just finished one book and another pounces on me, and a third, and a fourth after that. I never stop. I go from one story to another, and I can't help myself. That's not a beautiful life, it's a madness. The best years of my youth were agony because of my writing. Being a young author is feeling clumsy and awkward and unnecessary. I was terrified of the public. When my first play went up, I thought everyone with dark hair hated it and everyone with light hair was just coldly unmoved. Torture!

NINA:

But doesn't it give you some happiness? Something ecstatic?

TRIGORIN:

Oh, sure. I like writing, I like reading the proofs, but the minute the book comes out I start to hate it. It's not what I meant, it was a mistake to write it, I'm discouraged. Then the public reads it and likes it, but says "Yes, it's clever and well-crafted, but he's no Tolstoy," or "Lovely, but not as good as Chekhov," and so on forever. I'm going to be hearing people say "clever and well-crafted" to me till I croak, and when I'm gone, my acquaintances will pass my grave and say "here lies Trigorin, a clever writer, but no Chekhov."

NINA:

I don't even know what you're talking about. You work too hard to realize how important your work even is. So what if you're uncomfortable with yourself? To everyone else, you're wonderful. If I could be a writer, or an actress, I'd be able to do anything. Disillusionment. My friends could hate me, I could hate myself, but if I had real *fame*...

THE PLAYER:

Arkadina calls from offstage.

ARKADINA:

Boris! Boris!

TRIGORIN:

She's calling me. I have to pack. I don't much want to go.

NINA:

Do you see that house over there, on the other shore? That was my mom's house, when she was alive. I was born there, I've lived my whole life next to this lake. I know every island.

TRIGORIN:

(Not talking about the lake) Gorgeous. *(sees the gull)* What's that?

NINA:

A gull. Connie killed it.

PLAYER:

He begins jotting something down.

NINA:

What are you writing?

TRIGORIN:

Nothing. An idea for a short story. A young girl grows up on the shores of a lake, like you. She loves the lake, like a wild gull, and she's happy and free. But a man sees her, a man who happens by, and—not meaning to, not even thinking about it, he destroys her.

ARKADINA:

Boris, where are you?

TRIGORIN:

I'm coming—just a second!

THE PLAYER:

Trigorin goes to the house. Arkadina appears. The light shifts into sunset colors, flooding the entire stage.

TRIGORIN:

What is it?

ARKADINA:

We're not going quite yet.

THE PLAYER:

Nina gazes at the sunset, at Trigorin, and says:

NINA:

A dream...

THE PLAYER:

The set falls away. Everything in blazing orange light. Now there is nothing onstage but Arkadina, Trigorin, and Nina, gradually turning to silhouettes. Slowly, the curtain closes.

(Pause. The PLAYER gathers up the feathers and returns them to the prop table, with reverence)

PLAYER:

Act III. By way of prelude: time has passed. The moon is visibly waning, though still full-bellied. Arkadina and Trigorin have packed their bags for Moscow.

Now, it's late morning. The curtain opens on the house's large but sparsely decorated dining room. One door on this side, another on the other. Luggage is all over the place. And at center, here, the long dining table isn't set. Trigorin's eating a late breakfast, having spent much of the morning—what else?—fishing. Masha has a big bottle of vodka in front of her and a cigarette in her mouth

MASHA:

I'm telling you because you write books. In case it's useful. I'm completely serious: I wouldn't have lived another day if he'd actually killed himself. I mean that. But I'm brave. I've decided to rip this awful love out of my heart by the roots. I'll marry Simon.

TRIGORIN:

What, the teacher? The dull one? I don't see why that's necessary.

MASHA:

If you knew what it was like to love for years and years...to wait forever for something that you know will never come. Marriage is a change of pace. I'll still hate my life, but at least I'll hate it *differently*.

PLAYER:

She swigs. Trigorin shoots her a significant look.

MASHA:

Oh, bullshit. Don't give me that. You don't think women drink? They do, they all do, in secret. I just do it honestly, out in the open.

Here, have some.

PLAYER:

She produces a glass. I suppose she must keep them ready to hand.

MASHA:

Cheers.

PLAYER:

And they toast.

MASHA:

You're a nice guy. Shame you're leaving. You should ask her to stay.

TRIGORIN:

Now? She wouldn't. Her son's behavior is unbelievable. First he tries to take his life, and now he's apparently going to challenge me to a fight, though what his provocation is I can't imagine. He sulks and sneers and preaches about new forms as if art weren't big enough for both of us.

MASHA:

Oh it's—he's jealous! Obviously. But that's not my business. Simon isn't too clever, but he's good. He's a good man. And he loves me. I'm sorry for him.

TRIGORIN:

Where is he, anyway?

MASHA:

I think I saw him smoking somewhere.

But let me say goodbye and happy trails. Thanks for being decent. Send me a signed copy of one of your books, why don't you? Nothing fancy, just: "To Masha, who doesn't know where she's from or where she's going."

PLAYER:

Masha exits, trailing a mingled fume of vodka and cigarette smoke. Enter Nina, intent on something.
(*while saying this, PLAYER fetches medallion from table*)

NINA:

Mr. Trigorin!—Boris—pick a number between 1 and 10.

TRIGORIN:

Oh, uh, six.

NINA:

Shoot. (*Realizes this is a touchy word choice*) I mean, dang. If you'd picked an odd number, it would mean I should be an actress. I wish I had someone to give me advice.

TRIGORIN:

Not me—you can't give advice in cases like that.

NINA:

You're going away, and maybe we'll never see each other again. But I want you to...I made you this little medallion. See, your initials are on one side, B.T., and *Days and Nights*—my favorite book of yours—is on the other.

PLAYER:

He takes it—making sure to brush her hand as he does so. And he kisses the medallion.

TRIGORIN:

How sweet. It's lovely.

NINA:

Think of me sometimes.

TRIGORIN:

How could I forget you? I'll always remember you on that bright day last week—you in your light dress, and our talk, and the white gull at our feet.

NINA:

The gull... I need to see you alone again—just for two minutes—before you go.

PLAYER:

Exit Nina and, on the dot, enter Arkadina and Sorin in their traveling clothes. Funny how these things work out.

ARKADINA:

Who was that who left just now? Nina? Sorry to interrupt, dear. I think everything's packed. I am absolutely *exhausted*.

TRIGORIN:

(*reading the medallion*)

Days and Nights, Page 121, Line 11. Do we have any of my books in the house?

ARKADINA:

Oh, yes—in Pete's library, in the corner, I think.

TRIGORIN:

Page 121.

PLAYER:

Trigorin leaves.

SORIN:

I'll be lonely without you. Not that I've got anything to do in town, but—you do want to get out of this fishpond every once in a while. I'm tired of lying here like a cigarette butt. We can go away together.

(Pause)

ARKADINA:

I think—no, Pete, darling, I think you need to stay here. Keep an eye on the boy, take care of him. Guide him. I'm going. I won't ever find out why Connie shot himself, but I think it must have been jealousy. The sooner I get Boris out of here, the better.

SORIN:

Well, uh—how do I put this? There were other reasons. He's a clever kid and he's stuck here in the country with no money, no position, no future, and nothing to do. He's embarrassed. I love him, of course, and he likes me, but he thinks he's useless here, that he's just a hanger-on. He's got your pride.

ARKADINA:

What a headache he is. Could he join the army? Would that help?

SORIN:

It seems to me that it might not be a bad idea to give him a little money. He should be able to dress himself, at least. He's worn that same suit for, what, three years? And he doesn't even have a coat! And it wouldn't hurt him to sow a few wild oats—let him go abroad a little, it wouldn't cost that much.

ARKADINA:

But—hm. Well, I might be able to manage about the clothes, but I couldn't let him *travel*. I don't think I even have the money for the clothes, come to think of it. No, I don't have any money at the moment. *I don't*, Pete. Stop it.

SORIN:

I'm sorry, don't be angry. You're a noble woman, a generous woman.

ARKADINA:

I just don't have the money! I'm sorry!

SORIN:

Listen, if I had any money of my own, I'd give it to him—but I haven't got a thing. Everything's tied up in the estate, you know that.

ARKADINA:

I have a *little* money, but I have to pay for somewhere to stay, and food—the per diem isn't what it used to be. I'm practically bankrupt already.

SORIN:

(*irate*)

I do love you, Rina, I do, but I—oh, I'm—I feel dizzy...

PLAYER:

He grabs the table to hold himself up.

ARKADINA:

Pete? Pete!? Help! Someone help!

PLAYER:

Connie rushes in. One side of his head is swathed in bandages.

SORIN:

I'm all right, I'm all right. It's over. (*coughs*) That was the worst of it.

CONNIE:

They aren't as bad as they look, Mom—he has those little spells all the time now. Maybe you should go lie down, Uncle Pete.

SORIN:

Yes, I think I will. For a few minutes.

PLAYER:

Sorin exits, slowly.

ARKADINA:

He *really* scared me.

CONNIE:

It's not good for him, living in the country. If you could maybe give him—lend him a little bit of money, he could live on that in town a whole year.

ARKADINA:

I don't have anything. I'm an actress, not a bank teller.

(Pause)

CONNIE:

Could you change my bandage, mom? The doctor's late; he promised to be here at nine, and it's noon already. And you...I like it when you do it.

ARKADINA:

Well, all right. Sit down.

PLAYER:

She fetches a fresh bandage and some iodine. She's very careful, very gentle unwrapping and rewrapping the bandage.

ARKADINA:

Hm. Looks good. Almost healed. And when I'm gone, you won't—do anything silly, will you?

CONNIE:

No. No, I was...despairing, and I let it overwhelm me. It won't happen again. Thank you. Hey, remember when you were still at the State Theatre, when I was just a kid, and there was a fight on our street and a laundry worker was beaten half to death? She was knocked out, and you brought her in and took care of her, and bathed her children. Do you remember that?

ARKADINA:

No, not at all.

CONNIE:

There were two ballet dancers who lived in the same building, and they used to come and drink coffee with you.

ARKADINA:

Them I remember.

CONNIE:

They were super religious

(Pause)

I love you, mom. I'm sorry. I love you. I don't have anybody left but you. (*Beat. He can't resist broaching the deadly subject*) But why do you let yourself get so wrapped up in that man?

ARKADINA:

You don't understand him, Connie. He's noble.

CONNIE:

And when they told him I wanted to challenge him to a fight, he nobly ran as fast as he could.

ARKADINA:

That is not true—I myself asked him to go.

CONNIE:

Noble! Here we are almost fighting about him, and he's probably giggling at us in the garden at this very moment, if he's not shedding his radiance of genius on Nina.

ARKADINA:

You really love to say these horrible things to me, don't you? I have the greatest respect for him, and I will not hear him spoken ill of in my presence.

CONNIE:

I have no respect for him at all. You want me to say, he's such an incredible *genius*. But I can't lie, mother—his books make me puke.

ARKADINA:

You're jealous. The only thing that big talkers without talent can do is criticize the really gifted people. I hope you enjoy the satisfaction, cheap as it is.

CONNIE:

Gifted? Please. I'm smarter than *any* of you, *any* of you—you, slaves to convention, who have the advantage and lay down everything you do as law, but trample on everything else. I won't accept it.

ARKADINA:

Oh, what a little jackass you are.

CONNIE:

Go back to your stage and act that garbage you love so much!

ARKADINA:

I've never done garbage in my life—not that you could write it.

CONNIE:

Skinflint!

ARKADINA:

Bloodsucker!

PLAYER:

Connie bursts into tears.

ARKADINA:

No, no, no, don't cry—you mustn't cry. Connie, please forgive me. Forgive your wicked mother.

CONNIE:

I wish you knew. I've lost everything. She doesn't love me. I can't write. I have no hope anymore.

ARKADINA:

There's hope, of course there's hope, darling. This will all pass. He's going away today, and she'll love you again. All right?

CONNIE:

All right.

ARKADINA:

And make peace with him, okay? For me? Just...no fighting.

CONNIE:

I won't fight, but don't make me see him. I can't stand it.

(The PLAYER picks up the book from the prop table)

PLAYER

Enter Trigorin, impeccably timed.

CONNIE:

I'm going. Have to see the doctor.

PLAYER:

Connie rushes off.

TRIGORIN:

Page one-twenty-one, lines eleven and twelve...here: "If you need my life, anytime, it's yours. Come and take it." Come and take it...

ARKADINA:

I hope you're all packed.

TRIGORIN:

Oh, sure. *(To himself)*. "If you need my life at any time, come and take it."
Irina—why don't we stay one more day?

(A deadly pause)

ARKADINA:

Stay? Why, whatever for? No, don't answer. If you answer, you'll lie. You have to control yourself, Boris. Sober up.

TRIGORIN:

Only if you do. Be sensible. No—be my friend, I know you can let things go, if that's the way it has to be. So be my friend—let me go.

ARKADINA:

You're in that deep already?

TRIGORIN:

I'm...there's a definite pull. An enormous one. I think she's what I need.

ARKADINA:

What, the love of a corn-fed country girl? Do you know yourself at *all*?

TRIGORIN:

I'm sleepwalking. I'm not even here. Even while I talk to you, I'm dreaming of her. It's glorious. Let me go.

ARKADINA:

What the—no, god, don't say that, Boris, you're scaring me.

TRIGORIN:

You could be an extraordinary woman if you wanted.

ARKADINA:

I don't.

TRIGORIN

Love scrubs the whole world clean. I had no time for it when I was a kid, when I was fighting to get my stories in the journals, but now it's here, it's beckoning. Why should I run from it?

ARKADINA:

Oh, I see, you've lost it.

TRIGORIN:

Let me go.

ARKADINA:

You've all—you've all gotten together, haven't you, and agreed to torture me? Is that it? Did you mark it on the calendar? "Crucify Irina Day is coming up—better arm ourselves."

TRIGORIN:

You don't get it. You refuse to get it.

ARKADINA:

(no artifice—sudden raw anger breaks through, uncontrollable) Am I so old and ugly already that you can casually chat with me like this about another woman? You've gone out of your mind. You've—

(She is so furious that words stop. Then she takes a deep breath, visibly settles into her body like an actor preparing for a monologue in the audition room, and softens. The actor should do this with commitment, but bringing out the humor of the sudden changes of tactic.)

My splendid, glorious friend. My love for you is the final chapter in the book of my life. You are my pride, my joy, my light. I couldn't endure it if you deserted me even for an hour; I'd go mad. Oh, my wonder, my marvel, my king! I confess, here on my knee, *(she suits the action to the word)* before high heaven and you, that next unto high heaven, I love Trigorin.

TRIGORIN:

Rina, for God's sake, someone might come in.

ARKADINA.

Let them come! I'm not ashamed of my love. My jewel! My despair! You want to do a foolish thing. But I don't want you to do it, I won't let you do it! You are mine! This forehead is mine, these eyes are mine, this silky hair is mine. All your being is mine. You are so clever, so wise, you're the dean of all living writers; you are the only hope of this country. So fresh, so simple, so deeply humourous. You can bring out every feature of a man or of a landscape in a single line. Your characters live and breathe. Do you think these words are only flattery? Do you think I'm not speaking the truth? Come, look into my eyes; look deep; do you find lies there? No, you see that I alone know how to treasure you. I alone tell you the truth. Oh, my dear, you will go with me? You will? You will not forsake me?

(Pause. The performance hits TRIGORIN)

TRIGORIN:

...I'm weak, God help me. I never had a will of my own. I'm too lazy, too submissive to have any. Do women *like* that? Take me. Take me away with you, but don't let me stir from your side.

ARKADINA:

(Casually) Of course, it's up to you—you can stay, if you like. I'll go, and you follow in a week. Why should you hurry?

TRIGORIN:

Let's go together.

ARKADINA:

If that's what you want. Let's go together then. What is it you're writing, there?

TRIGORIN

Hm? Oh, an expression I heard this morning—"a stand of pines." Might be useful. So, we're off again—train carriages, stations, restaurants, arguments. How exciting.

PLAYER:

Suddenly, people pile into the room. Pauline is getting Arkadina her hat, coat, and gloves, and the servants are loading out the luggage.

PAULINE:

Oh, ma'am, here—some plums for the journey. They're very sweet—just to nosh on as you go.

ARKADINA:

Pauline, you shouldn't have. They're beautiful.

PAULINE:

Goodbye, ma'am. I hope things were all right—I hope they weren't too awful—

ARKADINA:

Please, no, I had a delightful time, don't cry!

PLAYER:

Enter Sorin, looking natty in his suit and a cape.

SORIN:

It's time to go, unless you want to miss the train.

PLAYER:

Exit Sorin. I suppose he needed something to do in this act.

ARKADINA:

Goodbye, everyone! We'll meet again next summer, if we're all still alive. Don't forget me. Oh, where's Connie? Tell him I'm starting out—I have to say goodbye. Goodbye, everyone!

PLAYER:

Everyone exits. There is a moment of silence. Enter Trigorin.

TRIGORIN:

(Yelling to Arkadina) I think I left my cane on the terrace. I just have to...

PLAYER:

Enter Nina.

TRIGORIN:

Is that you? We're off.

NINA:

I've decided. The die is cast. I'm going to be an actress. I'm running away from my father, everything. Starting fresh. I'm going to Moscow—I'll meet you there.

(Tense beat)

TRIGORIN:

Go to the Hotel Stanislavsky. Let me know when you get there. I'll be at the Gorky House. You are...so beautiful. I'll see you again soon. My Nina. Darling.

PLAYER:

Spotlight on Nina and Trigorin. They kiss. Ecstatically. For a long time. A car horn honks outside. They do not stop kissing. Then—sudden blackout. Curtain. So much for Act III.

(Pause for the actor to get water or whatever)

So far, the acts have been separated by a few days, a week. This time, two years pass. A slight sound of creaking as scenery shifts about and drops are hauled up and down. Someone starts up the sounds of moaning wind and rattling rain.

The curtain opens. Light illuminates a room that would be medium-sized if half of it hadn't been repurposed as a bedroom/home office. The upstage wall is a row of windows, with a French door there *(pointing upstage left)*. They all look out on total blackness. Connie's desk is here; on it a lamp with a fringed red shade. Books and papers are piled everywhere. Little daybed here *(downstage left)*. The wind moans. Doors on either side. Enter, at right, Masha and—is he here? Simon?

SIMON:

(grumpy)

I'm here, I'm here.

PLAYER:

Ah, good. Masha and Simon in the room.

MASHA:

Mr. Constantine? Mr. Constantine?

Not here. His uncle wants him, as usual.

SIMON:

He doesn't want to be alone. Wild night. This is, what, the second day of this storm?

MASHA:

Yes. The lake looks like it's boiling.

SIMON:

Dark out there. Did you know the old theater near the lake is still up? They should take it down, really. Looks like a skeleton, with its curtain flapping in the wind. Sort of a funeral shroud. I thought I heard—but it was probably just in my head.

MASHA:

What?

SIMON:

It's silly, but I thought I heard someone crying in it when I walked by last night.

MASHA:

You're right. That's silly.

SIMON:

Why don't you come home with me?

MASHA:

I'll spend the night here, thanks.

SIMON:

The baby's going to be hungry.

MASHA:

Matriona will feed it.

SIMON:

Third night in a row without its mother.

MASHA:

You're getting to be a real pill, you know that? You used to talk about other things. Now all I hear is home and the baby, home and the baby. *You* can go home, if you want.

SIMON:

Are you coming home tomorrow?

MASHA:

Sure. Tomorrow.

PLAYER:

Connie and Pauline enter, carrying pillows, blankets, pillowcases, sheets. They start making up the little bed.

MASHA:

What's that for?

PAULINE:

Mr. Sorin wants to sleep here tonight.

MASHA:

I'll do it. Let me—

SIMON:

Well. I'm going. Bye, honey. Bye mother.

PAULINE:

Again, I never said you could call me that. If you're going, be going.

PLAYER:

Exit Simon, presumably to walk six miles on foot in the rain to his tiny home. Poor man.

PAULINE:

Look at all this paper, all these journals—I'm so proud. No one ever *dreamed* you'd be a real author someday! Oh—uh, no, that was a bad choice of words. I meant—of course we dreamed it, but you've made good, honey, you've made good. Dear, dear Constantine, be a little nicer to my Masha, won't you?

MASHA:

Leave him alone, mother.

PAULINE:

She's a sweet girl. A woman only wants a kind glance in her direction once in a while. I learned that early on.

MASHA:

That's not even true.

PLAYER:

Connie gets up and leaves without a word.

MASHA:

(hissing) You annoyed him!! I told you not to bother him!!!

PAULINE:

I'm sorry for you, Masha. My heart, it aches for you. I know love.

MASHA:

You don't know anything—and whatever you think you're seeing, think again. Hopeless love is in novels, it's nothing, all you have to do is keep a clear head. Love has to be cut out the moment it starts growing in the heart. Simon's getting a job at a school a few towns over. Once we're gone, I'll forget everything. I will.

PLAYER:

The strains of a sad waltz on a piano. Masha hears it, waltzes by herself to the music a little.

PAULINE:

He plays when he's sad.

MASHA:

It's all right if he's not in my line of sight. Really. If Simon gets his new position, I'd forget this in a month. It's nothing.

PLAYER:

Enter Simon—he didn't go home after all—wheeling Sorin in his wheelchair, and Dr. Dorn.

SIMON:

So now I have six mouths to feed, and flour is up to seventy kopecks. How am I supposed to live under these conditions?

DORN:

Try living over them!

SIMON:

All very well for you to joke—you could throw your money to the hens like corn, you have so much.

DORN:

What money? It all went to my trip abroad a few months back. I haven't got anything.

MASHA:

You didn't go home.

SIMON:

I can't; weather's too bad, and your mother's not going to let me use the car.

MASHA:

I wish your face were less...there.

SORIN:

(*weakly*)

Where's Rina?

DORN:

She's at the station to meet Trigorin—she'll be back in a bit.

SORIN:

It must be *really* bad if you had to send for her.

(*Pause*)

I have a story idea for Connie—well, a story title. "The Man Who Wanted." When I was younger, I wanted to be an author. I failed. Wanted to be a great orator, a speechmaker—and I'm horrible, with my stuttering, dragging each sentence on and on until I'm *sweating* from the effort. I wanted to get married, and I didn't. I wanted to live in the city. Here I am dying in the country.

DORN:

Try to be peaceful, Pete.

SORIN:

Can't you see I want to live?

DORN:

It's nature. Every human life has to end.

PLAYER:

Connie comes back in and sits near Sorin.

DORN:

Are we keeping you from working?

CONNIE:

No, no, it's fine.

(*Pause*)

SIMON:

When you were abroad, Doctor—which city did you like the best?

DORN:

Oh, Genoa. Such a wonderful crowd there. You leave your hotel in the evening, you throw yourself in, move aimlessly, without a destination, swept along—their life is your life, their soul is your soul. You can almost believe in a great, all-encompassing world spirit, like the one in your play, Connie, that Nina did. Speaking of that—where is Nina now? Is she well?

CONNIE:

I hope so.

DORN:

I heard she's had a bit of a time.

CONNIE:

It's a long story.

DORN:

Tell the short version, then.

(Pause)

CONNIE:

You remember that she ran away from home, and she was with Trigorin. *With* him, an item. Then she had a child, and it died. Trigorin got tired of her after that, of course, and returned to his last woman. (*By this he means Arkadina*) He'd somehow managed to string them *both* along the whole time, so it's not like he even split up with Mom in the first place. Nina's acting career went...badly. When she toured, I went and saw her. She tried to surmount these huge, difficult parts, but she yelled every line. Every gesture was too much. She was best at shrieking and dying.

DORN:

Does she have any talent at all?

CONNIE:

I couldn't tell you. I think so. She didn't see me. The guy at the stage door wouldn't let me into her dressing room. I understood how she felt. She does write me though, sometimes. The letters are sweet, but I can tell she's unhappy. Something that aches in the words...and there's this weird thing she does. She always signs her letters "The Gull." "Sincerely, The Gull." "My love to your family, The Gull." She's here, by the way. In the village inn. She's been there five days. Masha went and tried to see her, but she won't see anybody. Someone said they saw her just...wandering in the fields not far from here last evening.

SIMON:

Yeah, I saw her—she was walking to the village, away from here. I asked her, you know, why haven't you come and visited? She said she would soon.

CONNIE:

She won't. Her dad and stepmom disowned her, did you know that? They've got guards posted all around their house to keep her out.

SORIN:

She was a lovely girl. Lovely.

PLAYER:

Laughter from outside—all eyes turn to the door. Enter Arkadina with Trigorin on her arm. Both are perfectly at ease.

TRIGORIN:

How're you feeling, Pete? You all right? Oh, Miss Masha! How are you?

MASHA:

You recognized me!

TRIGORIN:

Did you marry him?

MASHA:

Oh, ages ago.

TRIGORIN:

You're happy now, I hope. And, uh. Connie. Hi. Your mom says that you've agreed to let bygones be bygones?

PLAYER:

Constantine is silent, but he gets up and shakes Trigorin's hand.

ARKADINA:

Here's a magazine—your latest story's in it.

CONNIE:

Nice of you to bring that, thanks.

TRIGORIN:

Your admirers all send you their regards. Everyone is interested in you, wherever we go—Moscow, St.

Petersburg. For some reason they think you're an older man. And of course, with the pen name, no one knows exactly who you are.

CONNIE:

Are you staying long?

TRIGORIN:

Oh, uh, no, I go back to Moscow tomorrow. I'm finishing another novel, and I have something due to a magazine. Same as ever.

PLAYER:

While they speak, Pauline gets down a box of old bingo cards from a cupboard shelf and sets up a rickety card table.

TRIGORIN

The weather gave me a bit of a rough welcome. If the wind goes down, I'll go out on the lake and fish a little. And I want to look at the spot—remember?—where you did your play. I remember the piece, but I'd like to see where the scene was.

SIMON:

You know, I really should get home. The baby.

MASHA:

Mom, can he borrow the car?

PAULINE:

And what if Madame Arkadina needs it? No, I'm terribly sorry, I can't.

MASHA:

Mom.

SIMON:

It's all right, Masha—I'll go on foot. It's only six miles. Goodbye, everybody. I shouldn't have troubled you all, but the baby—goodbye.

PLAYER:

Exit Simon, every step an apology.

PAULINE:

Come on, let's start. Don't waste time, we're gonna be called to supper soon.

PLAYER:

Masha, Dorn, and Arkadina sit down at the card table and pick out bingo sheets.

ARKADINA:

Look at this old set—we used it when our mother played with us as children. Come, sit with us, Boris. It's boring, but it's all right when you get used to it. Won't you play, Constantine?

CONNIE:

No, excuse me, I'm fine, thanks. I'll just walk a bit.

PLAYER:

He kisses his mother on the cheek, then leaves.

MASHA:

Are you all ready? Okay. I-22.

ARKADINA:

Here it is.

MASHA:

B-3.

DORN:

Got it.

MASHA:

Did you put down B-3? G-8. O-81. B-10.

PAULINE:

Slow down, Masha.

ARKADINA:

I'm still a bit dazed by the reception I got in Kharkov. The students gave me a standing o, they sent whole *baskets* of flowers, and they gave me this little brooch thing.

MASHA:

N-50.

DORN:

N-fifteen, did you say?

ARKADINA:

I wore a *magnificent* dress. I've always been proud of my dress sense.

PAULINE:

D'you hear that? Constantine's at the piano again. He must be sad.

PLAYER:

Indeed, we hear the notes of that sad waltz.

TRIGORIN:

They've been rough with him in the papers.

ARKADINA:

They want to give him attention.

TRIGORIN:

He can't pull anything off, it seems, he can't get it quite right. There's a vagueness there. His characters don't really breathe.

MASHA:

B-11.

ARKADINA:

Are you bored, Pete? Pete? Oh, he's asleep.

TRIGORIN:

Would I be able to write if I lived here, on the shore of this lake? Never. I'd devote my life to fishing.

MASHA:

I-28.

DORN:

I have faith in him—Connie, I mean. There's something there. He thinks in pictures, his stories are vivid—they move me. It's just he hasn't learned to focus. He creates impressions, but no one can go anywhere on just impressions. Is it fun having an author for a son, Madam A.?

ARKADINA:

You know, I've never actually gotten around to reading Connie's stuff. Never have the time, you know.

MASHA:

G-26.

PLAYER:

Constantine enters quietly and sits at his desk. Then, he gets up again and opens the window. He gets rained on.

CONNIE:

Dark out there. Maybe that's what's making me restless.

ARKADINA:

Heaven's sake, Connie, shut the window—it's pouring.

PLAYER:

He does.

MASHA:

O-98.

TRIGORIN:

Bingo!

ARKADINA:

Bravo! Bravo! Wherever he goes, whatever he does, he always has good luck, my Boris. I think it's time for dinner. Our celebrity guest didn't have lunch today. We'll pick up again later. Constantine, it's dinnertime.

CONSTANTINE:

I'm not hungry, mom.

ARKADINA:

If you insist. Come to supper, Pete. Oh, let me tell you about my reception in Kharkhov.

PLAYER:

Pauline turns out most of the lights and wheels Sorin out of the room, followed by everyone else, except Connie. He slides a paper under the red lamp and reads through something he's just written.

CONNIE:

No. No, this is—ugh. "A stand of pines"—stupid, cliché. I have to throw all this out and start from the rain. Trigorin's got everything down to a system, he nods to certain things to and the image is complete. And I overwrite, overthink it. Hideous. Maybe good literature has nothing to do with forms...maybe it's just being honest.

PLAYER:

A knock is heard at the French window.

CONNIE:

What was—I can't see anything. Hello? Who's there?

PLAYER:

He opens the French window and leaves for a moment. You can hear his footsteps on the wet stones, and then murmuring.

(The PLAYER takes the shawl from the table and ceremoniously unfurls it.)

Enter Nina.

(The PLAYER dons the shawl. They are now NINA.)

NINA:

There's someone here. No, there's someone here, Connie, lock the door, please, someone might come in. Your mother—thank you. Let me look at you. It's so warm in here, it's so cozy—this used to be a parlor, didn't it? It's different. Am I much different? Thinner, maybe. Spikier. I saw you looking up at my window. You came. I'm sorry I didn't. I was scared you hated me. Every night I have the same dream that you look at me and you look at me and don't recognize me. I've been out at the lake shore a lot since I came back. Around here. But I never had the courage to come in. God, it's so wonderfully warm in here. Do you hear the wind whistling outside? Shakespeare said, he said—"poor naked jaybirds, wheresoe'er you are that bide the pelting of this pitiless storm..." Poor naked jaybirds—and me a poor naked gull—no, what was I saying? Oh, Shakespeare—"how shall your houseless heads and unfed sides, your plucked and windowed feather coats defend you?" *(Abruptly, she begins to cry.)* No, it's all right, Connie, I'll feel better after this. I can let it all out now. I haven't cried for two years. I cried when I saw our old theater still standing there. And I felt better, and my heart was lighter. See, I'm not crying anymore. You're an author now, I'm an actress. We're both in the mud of the world. My life used to be happy. I woke up in the morning singing. I loved you and dreamed about fame, and meanwhile in the real world I have to go to Eltz on the train—third class—and get hit on by stale old businessmen. I'm playing there in the winter, at Eltz. I don't know if you should come—it's a long trip...

It's—actually, it's time for me to go. What? No, Connie, no, don't say those things, don't say you *can't stop loving me*, please, don't. I can't stay. I'm going back to the village. Why did you say you kiss the ground I walk on? You should kill me. If only I could sleep. I'm a gull. No, I'm an actress. Who's laughing? Who's in the house tonight? Is that—*He's* here too, isn't he? Well. Doesn't matter. He used to laugh at my dreams. I started laughing at them too. And then all the troubles with the baby—I lost the knack, I couldn't play my parts. Had no idea what to do with my hands, couldn't walk or talk properly. I knew how bad I was. I know. I'm a gull—no, I mean—do you remember when you shot that gull once? A man passed by and not even meaning it, not even thinking about it, destroyed it. Subject for a short story. No, that's not—I'm a real actress now. Yes, that's what I wanted to say. It's true. I'm drunk on it. I'm superb. I've been walking and thinking and my spirit is getting stronger. It's not the fame, it's not the glory, it's the strength to endure that matters. I believe, so I don't suffer as much. Shhhh. Shhhhh. Connie. I have to go. You should come and see me when I'm big and famous. God, I'm starving. No, don't—I don't really need food, don't bother. It's just my body. And don't tell Trigorin anything when you see him. *(Pause)* I love him. I love him even more than before. To despair. It was so nice, it used to be so wonderful. Remember—

Each
manbeastlioneaglequailstaggoosespider
silentwavefish
seastarfish
and all
that are
invisible to
the eye
all LIFE
all life
finally done
with its circling
has died out.
it's been a million years
since there was
LIFE
on earth.
sad moon
lit for nobody.
No storks
no beetles
in the lime groves.

(Pause. NINA is now speaking to us directly.)

I ran into the rain. Connie was still there at the window. Handfuls of crumpled paper. Said something I couldn't hear. I turned. Skeletal stage. Dark flowerheads hanging shriveled up.

(Gunshot. Papers.)

I flew over the fields. My wings are strong and they cut the wind. I was miles away in a second. Even from miles away, even through the rain, the sound carried to me. Like a bottle bursting. Like a rifle. No. Smaller. What's it called? You shoot gulls with a rifle, but you shoot people with a—? Pistol. Connie. I knew right away. He's gone into the eternal spirit, then. He's gone, like the storks. Like beetles in the lime groves. The moon is lit for him. No Connie anymore. Then everyone else goes, too. No Trigorin. No Arkadina. No Simon. No Masha. No Dorn. No Sorin. No Pauline.

No Nina. I'm a gull. No gull.

No house. No estate. No Russia. It wasn't made of anything but wood and paint. The stars blaze and they're houselights, and the sky is full of people. They've been been sitting in the darkness watching us...all of them...all of you...out there with your eyes on us. But you don't help us. Maybe you can't.

Well, in a moment I'll stop being real. Then it'll be your turn.

(The PLAYER removes the shawl and places it on the table, walks to center, turns to the audience.)

The curtain has closed. The play is over.

Goodnight.

End of play.