

ANTON CHEKHOV

Easter Week

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The Student

The weather was fair at first and still. The blackbirds were calling and a creature in the nearby swamps plaintively hooting as if blowing into an empty bottle. A woodcock flew past, and a shot boomed out merrily in the spring air. But when the woods grew dark, an inauspiciously cold, piercing wind blew in from the east, and silence fell. Needles of ice stretched over the puddles, and the woods became disagreeable, god-forsaken, hostile. Winter was in the air.

Ivan Velikopolsky, a seminary student and deacon's son, was on his way home from a hunt, following a path through a water meadow. His fingers were numb, and his face burned in the wind. He felt that the sudden blast of cold had violated the order and harmony of things, that nature herself was terrified and so the dark of evening had come on more quickly than necessary. Desolation was everywhere, and it was somehow particularly gloomy. The only light came from the widows' vegetable gardens by the river; otherwise everything far and wide, all the way to the village four versts off, was submerged in the cold evening mist. The student remembered that when leaving the house he had seen his mother sitting barefoot on the floor in the entryway polishing the samovar and his father lying on the stove coughing. It was Good Friday, so cooking was forbidden and he was terribly hungry. And now, stooped with the cold, he thought how the same wind had blown in the days of Rurik and Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great and there had been the same crip-

pling poverty and hunger, the same leaky thatched roofs and benighted, miserable people, the same emptiness everywhere and darkness and oppressive grief, and all these horrors had been and were and would be and even the passing of a thousand years would make life no better. And he had no desire to go home.

The gardens were called the widows' gardens because they were tended by two widows, mother and daughter. The crackling fire gave off great heat and lit up the surrounding plowlands. The widow Vasilisa, a tall, plump old woman wearing a man's sheepskin coat, stood nearby, staring into it pensively; her daughter Lukerya, who was short, pockmarked, and had a slightly stupid face, sat on the ground washing a pot and spoons. They must have just finished supper. Men's voices came up from the river, local farmhands watering their horses.

"Well, winter's back," said the student, going up to the fire. "Hello there."

Vasilisa started but then saw who he was and put on a welcoming smile.

"I didn't recognize you," she said. "God be with you and make you rich."

They talked. Vasilisa had been in the world: she had worked for the gentry first as a wet nurse and later as a nanny, and she had a dainty way of speaking and a gentle, stately smile that never left her lips; her daughter Lukerya, a product of the village and her husband's beatings, merely squinted at the student in silence with the strange look of a deaf-mute.

"Peter the Apostle warmed himself at a fire just like this on one cold night," the student said, holding out his hands to the flames. "It was cold then too. And oh, what a terrible night it was. An exceedingly long and doleful night."

He looked around at the darkness, gave his head a convulsive



shake, and said, "You've been to the Twelve Apostles service, haven't you?"

"I have," Vasilisa responded.

"Remember when Peter says to Jesus during the Last Supper, 'I am ready to go with thee, both into prison, and to death' and the Lord says, 'I tell thee, Peter, the cock shall not crow this day, before that thou shalt thrice deny that thou knowest me'? When the supper was over, Peter, grieving unto death, prayed in the garden, and poor Peter, weary of soul and weak, his eyes heavy, could not fight off sleep. And sleep he did. Later that night Judas kissed Jesus and betrayed him to his torturers. He was bound and taken off to the high priest and beaten while Peter—exhausted (he'd hardly slept, after all), plagued by anguish and trepidation, sensing something dreadful was about to happen on earth—watched from afar... He loved him passionately, to distraction, and could now see them beating him..."

Lukerya laid down the spoons and trained her fixed gaze on the student.

"Having arrived at the high priest's house," he continued, "they began questioning Jesus, and the servants kindled a fire in the midst of the courtyard, for it was cold and they wished to warm themselves. And Peter stood at the fire with them, and he too warmed himself, as I am doing now. And a certain maid saw him and said, 'This man was also with Jesus,' meaning that he too should be taken for questioning. And all the servants standing by the fire must have looked at him with suspicion and severity because he grew flustered and said, 'I know him not.' And when shortly thereafter another recognized him as one of Jesus' disciples, saying, 'Thou art also of them,' he again denied it. Then a third time someone turned to him and said, 'Was it not thou I saw with him in the garden today?' and he denied it a third time, whereupon the cock immediately crew, and Peter, gazing

from afar at Jesus, recalled the words he had said to him at supper... And having recalled them, he pulled himself together, left the courtyard, and shed bitter, bitter tears. The Gospel says: 'And Peter went out, and wept bitterly.' I can picture it now: the garden, all still and dark, and a muffled, all but inaudible sobbing in the stillness..."

The student sighed and grew pensive. Still smiling, Vasilisa suddenly burst into sobs herself, and tears, large and abundant, rolled down her cheeks, and she shielded her face from the fire as if ashamed of them, and Lukerya, her eyes still fixed on the student, flushed, and the look on her face grew heavy and tense like that of a person holding back great pain.

The farmhands were returning from the river, and one of them, on horseback, was close enough so that the firelight flickered over him. The student bade the widows good night and moved on. And again it was dark, and his hands began to freeze. A cruel wind was blowing—winter had indeed returned—and it did not seem possible that the day after next would be Easter.

The student's thoughts turned to Vasilisa: if she wept, it meant the things that happened to Peter on that terrible night had some relevance for her...

He glanced back. The lone fire glimmered peacefully in the dark, and there were no longer any people near it. Again he thought that if Vasilisa wept and her daughter was flustered then clearly what he'd just told them about events taking place nineteen centuries earlier was relevant to the present—to both women and probably to this backwater village, to himself, and to everyone on earth. If the old woman wept, it was not because he was a moving storyteller but because Peter was close to her and her whole being was concerned with what was going on in Peter's soul.

And all at once he felt a stirring of joy in his soul and even

paused for a moment to catch his breath. The past, he thought, is tied to the present in an unbroken chain of events flowing one out of the other. And he felt he had just seen both ends of that chain: he had touched one end and the other had moved.

And when ferrying across the river and later climbing the hill he gazed at his native village and to the west of it, where a narrow strip of cold, crimson twilight still shone, he kept thinking of how the truth and beauty guiding human life back there in the garden and the high priest's courtyard carried on unceasingly to this day and had in all likelihood and at all times been the essence of human life and everything on earth, and a feeling of youth, health, strength—he was only twenty-two—and an ineffably sweet anticipation of happiness, unknown and mysterious, gradually took possession of him, and life appeared wondrous, marvelous, and filled with lofty meaning.

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