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# From An Idealist's Memoir, by Chekhov

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Dear wanderer,

Below you'll find my translation of a short story published by Anton Pavlovich Chekhov in *the Wake-Up Caller* magazine in 1885 under the title *A Dacha Misfortune*, signed "The brother of my brother." Later, in 1899, the story, corrected and edited, was submitted for publishing in Chekhov's short story collection under the new title, *From An Idealist's Memoir*, but eventually, he himself excluded it from the list. Then, only in 1929, 25 years after Chekhov's death, the story's final version (you're about to read) was published in the new big Chekhov's short story collection. Compared to the first version, it had fewer jargon words but acquired the comical 'Reader, I am delighted, let me hug you!'

Now, enjoy the story and the footnotes.

On the tenth of May, I took a 28-day holiday, begged our bursar for a hundred roubles in advance, and decided to "live" by all means, to pull out all the stops, so that in the next ten years I could live with nothing but memories.

And do you know what "living" means in the best sense of the word? It doesn't mean to go to a summer theatre for an operetta, eat dinner and return home in the morning being tipsy. It doesn't mean to go to an

exhibition and from there to the horse racing and twiddle your wallet at a totalisator<sup>1</sup>. If you want to live, take a train and go to a place where the air is saturated with the scent of lilac and bird cherry, where, caressing your eyes with their soft whiteness and the sparkle of diamond dewdrops, lilies of the valley and four o'clock flowers compete in a blooming race. There, in the vastness of space, under the blue vault, in sight of green forests and cooing streams, accompanied by birds and green bugs, you will understand what is life! Add to that two or three encounters with a wide-brimmed hat, flashy eyes, and a white apron... I confess I had dreamt of all this when, with a holiday in my pocket and the bounty from the bursar, I moved to a dacha<sup>2</sup>.

I rented the dacha, on the advice of a friend, from Sofia Pavlovna Knigina, who offered me an extra room at her dacha, with a table, furniture and other comforts. It happened sooner than I could have imagined. Upon my arrival to Pererva and finding Knigina's dacha, I went up to the terrace and... got confused. The terrace was cosy, lovely and delightful, but even lovelier and (let me put it this way) cosier was a young plump lady, sitting at the table on the terrace and drinking tea. She squinted her eyes at me.

'How can I help you?'

'Excuse me, please...' I began. 'I... I'm possibly at the wrong place... I'm looking for Knigina's dacha...'

'Well, I am Knigina... How can I help you?'

I felt lost. I was used to imagining apartment and dacha hostesses as old, rheumatic, coffee-ground-smelling ladies, but there... – “save us, oh heaven’s cherubs!” – as Hamlet said, there sat a lovely, gorgeous, marvellous, charming lady. I, stammering, explained what I needed.

‘Ah, my pleasure! Sit down, please! Your friend has already written to me. Would you like some tea? With cream or lemon?’

There is a type of woman (most often blondes) with whom it only takes two or three minutes to make you feel at home as if you’ve known each other for a good while. That was exactly what Sofia Pavlovna was like. When I had my first drink I already knew that she was single, living on her capital’s interest and waiting for her aunt to visit her; I knew the reasons that prompted Sofia Pavlovna to lend out one room. Firstly, paying one hundred and twenty roubles for a dacha alone is hard, and secondly, it’s kind of creepy: what if a thief breaks in at night or a scary man walks in during the day! And there’s nothing inappropriate about having a single lady or man living in a corner room.

‘But a man is better!’ sighed the hostess, licking the jam off her spoon. ‘With a man, it’s less hassle and not so scary...’

In a word, after about an hour, Sofia Pavlovna and I were already friends.

‘Ah, yes!’ I remembered as I said goodbye to her. ‘We’ve talked about everything, yet not a word about the main thing. How much will you charge me? I’ll only be staying here for 28 days... Lunch, of course... tea

and other things...’

‘Oh, don’t mention that! Give as much as you can... I’m not letting a room for a lucre but just... to make it a bit more crowded here... 25 roubles, would that be fine?’

I agreed, of course, and my dacha life began... What makes that life interesting is that every day and every night are always the same, and how much beauty in this monotony, what days, what nights! Reader, I am delighted, let me hug you! I woke up in the morning and, with no single thought of my work, drank tea with cream. At eleven o’clock I went to the hostess to wish her a good morning and had coffee with fat clotted cream. From coffee until lunchtime there was chitchat. At two o’clock there was lunch, but what a lunch! Imagine that you, hungry as a stray dog, sit down at the table, grab a large shot of listovka<sup>3</sup> and nibble on hot corned beef with horseradish. Then imagine okroshka<sup>4</sup> or green shchi<sup>5</sup> with sour cream, etc. etc. After dinner – a serene lounging, reading a novel and constant jumping up as the hostess flashes by the door every now and then, saying ‘lie down! lie down!’... Then a bath. In the evening – a walk with Sofia Pavlovna until late night... Imagine that at the evening hour, when everything is asleep except for the nightingale and the heron croaking occasionally when the faintly breathing breeze can barely bring the sound of a distant train, you are walking in a grove or along a railway embankment with a plump blonde, who coquettishly squirms off the evening chill and now and then turns her moonlight-pale face to you... It’s terrific!

Less than a week later, something that you've been waiting for from me, reader, and which no worthwhile story can be without, had happened... I couldn't resist... Sophia Pavlovna listened to my explanations indifferently, almost coldly, as if she had long been expecting them, and only made a cute grimace on her lips as if she wished to say, 'I don't understand why should we waste time talking about it!'

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Twenty-eight days flashed like a second. When my holiday was over, I, longing, unsatisfied, bid farewell to the dacha and Sonia. My hostess sat on the sofa and wiped her eyes as I packed my luggage. I almost cried myself to comfort her, promising to pay a visit to her dacha on holidays and meet her in Moscow during the winter.

'Ah... when are we going to settle accounts with you, my sweetheart?' I remembered. 'How much do I owe you?'

'Some time afterwards...' mumbled my "matter", sobbing.

'Why afterwards? Friendship is friendship, and money is apart, says the proverb, and besides, I don't want to live off you at all. Come on, Sonia... How much?'

'Just... just a trifle', said the hostess, sobbing and pulling a drawer out of the table. 'You could have paid afterwards.'

Sonia fumbled in her drawer, pulled out a piece of paper, and handed it to me.

‘Is it a bill?’ I asked. ‘Oh, that’s good... and well... (I put on my glasses) let’s settle up and all in good time... (I skimmed through the bill). Total is... Wait, what’s that? Total... That’s not it, Sonia! It says “212 roubles 44 kopecks”. That’s not my bill!’

‘Yours, Doodle! Look at that!’

‘But... how come there’s this much? For the dacha and food, 25 roubles – I agree... The maid’s fee of 3 roubles – I’ll take that, too...’

‘I don’t understand, Doodle,’ the hostess said longingly, looking at me with surprised, weeping eyes. ‘Don’t you trust me? Count it yourself then! You drank the listovka... I couldn’t serve you vodka for lunch for the same price! Cream for tea and coffee... then strawberries, cucumbers, cherries... About the coffee too... You said you didn’t want it yet you drank it every day! Howbeit, it’s all such a trifle, so I, if you will, can drop you 12 roubles. Let it be only 200.’

‘But... it states 75 roubles and it doesn’t say what it’s for... What’s that for?’

‘What for? How sweet!’

I looked into her face. It was so sincere, clear and surprised, that my tongue could not utter a single word. I gave Sonia a hundred roubles and a promissory note of the same amount, hefted the luggage on my shoulders, and went to the railway station.

By the way, do you, gentlemen, have a hundred roubles to spare?

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## Notes

1. Sports betting/gambling facilities.
2. In the context of the story, a cottage / a summer house.
3. A type of alcoholic drink made by infusing spirits with various leaves, e.g. blackcurrant leaves.
4. The classic soup is a mix of mostly raw vegetables (like cucumbers, radishes and spring onions), boiled potatoes, eggs, and a cooked meat such as beef, veal, sausages, or ham with [kvass](#), which is a non-alcoholic (1.5% or less) beverage made from fermented black or rye bread.
5. A Russian soup made with cabbage.

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