

Lights rise on a drab office with sick green walls and a window overlooking a brick wall that sports an enormous banner picture of Stalin. Only a quarter of Stalin's face is visible, an eternally staring eye. Kreplev, a government official, sits at a desk and Natalia leans against the wall opposite.

Kreplev has several files, which he taps on the tabletop. Each time he taps the files, the sound is like a riflshot. Tap -- tap -- tap. Tap -- and last tap, a light flashes outside the window --- as if a gun has been fired, and the report of the rifle report echoing, echoing, echoing, gone. Natalia reacts to this by moving away from the window, but Kreplev does not respond to the sound. It is as if he so accustomed to the sound of gunfire that he can no longer react.

KREPLEV:
Now then.

I have very little time today, comrade doctor. And I imagine you too have pressing business.

Beat

KREPLEV:
I do my best to keep things cordial. Please never let it be said that I have no respect for your profession.

NATALIA
Of all the things on my mind this morning, comrade, that ... that is not something I have been troubled by ...

KREPLEV:
I will consider that a humorous rejoinder comrade doctor and not make a record of it.

NATALIA
Does it matter? Surely someone is taking notes.

KREPLEV:
It is always possible. But if we have nothing to hide—then we have nothing to fear. Perhaps now, you will join me in a cup of tea?

Kreplev turns to an electric kettle on a table nearby. He plugs the kettle in -- a red light surge outside the window---

KREPLEV
Please. Do sit.

He motions to the empty chair.

Natalia regards the chair. It begins to glow red.

KREPLEV

Now. To your patient. We find that you have kept many thorough records. After every meeting---you recorded your findings and observations. You are most meticulous, comrade doctor. And he is a most fascinating case is he not?

Beat. She is silent, trying to avoid his eyes.

KREPLEV

Comrade doctor.

Natalia takes a seat.

KREPLEV

Surely you are not still thinking that you have some obligation to this man? Some misguided sense of what do you call it?

NATALIA

Patient confidentiality.

KREPLEV

That is not the word I was thinking. Loyalty. Is that not more like it? Some ... sense of personal loyalty? Friendship.

NATALIA

He was a patient.

KREPLEV smiles.

KREPLEV

Yes. But doctors often develop some sense of feeling for a patient, do they not?

NATALIA

Some might.

KREPLEV

And you surely must know that we no longer can afford the luxury of personal feelings ... when national security is at stake.

NATALIA

I will tell you what I can, so long as I am not forced to betray- any confidences made during our consultations. It is a professional matter.

KREPLEV

So I understand. Your interest in him was rather clinical, then. More of a curiosity than anything?

NATALIA

I did what I could for him.

KREPLEV

And what was the nature of the disease?

NATALIA

Don't you already have that? You seem to have all my notes.

KREPLEV

They are written in code.

NATALIA

It isn't code. It's shorthand. Any decent secretary could figure it out.

KREPLEV

But you have time on your hands and a great need to prove exactly where your loyalties lie.

NATALIA

I am completely committed to the Revolution.

KREPLEV

And your father's loyalty to the Tsar is an open secret

NATALIA

How my father felt about the last regime is not anything I can control.

KREPLEV

It raises questions about your own commitment, comrade doctor. And to the extent that you refuse to assist us—we can only wonder if you have been influenced by your father's poor judgment...

The kettle whistle goes – and at the same time, the sound of a departing train outside the window. Natalia is drawn to the sound of the train whistle.

KREPLEV

Ah. There's the tea.

NATALIA

For the record, I hated the Tsar. He was a leech upon humanity---a greedy, stupid, little man unfit to lead a parade of garbage collectors through the back streets of Saint Petersburg---

KREPLEV

That's well and good, comrade.

During this he prepares the tea

KREPLEV

But actions are what we need today, not empty words spoken for the microphone. If you wish to demonstrate your loyalty in a way that will be believed---that will keep you off the next train out to the east---I suggest you provide the details we seek about Comrade Sharashlivski.

Kreplev puts the tea pot (sans lid) on the desk --- a black smoke billows out of the pot, Natalia rubs her eyes.

KREPLEV

A man with an excellent memory, is he not? One for the books as they say.

The files are directly in front of her. One of them flips open and the papers within glow a sickly yellow,

KREPLEV

All we need to understand is how this phenomenal memory worked. What tricks did he employ?

NATALIA

No tricks.

KREPLEV

Surely he had some device by which to remember so obscure a detail ... as the composition of a photograph.

NATALIA

It was a natural ability. Not one he worked to cultivate.

At this point, the patient, Alexei, enters the space as if he is coming into Natalia's office at the hospital.

ALEXEI
Doctor, my apologies.

NATALIA
He simply has an ability to recall whatever he saw or experienced in more detail ... than any human should be able to recall.

ALEXEI
I missed the streetcar, fancy that!

KREPLEV
Is it not true that once he committed something to memory he could never forget it?

ALEXI
For mother was chopping beets for soup and it immediately took me to the time we went to the Winter Palace.

NATALIA
There were things I know he wished he could forget.

KREPLEV
Such as?

NATALIA
Childhood experiences.

ALEXEI
Not at the invitation of the Tsar---mind you. But my uncle---I believe I told you about him---he is the one who later took the job in the Post Office. Who kept a copy of Chekhov among his cookbooks, with the dog-eared page to the scene where Lopahin moos at Varya!

He laughs and sits in Kreplev's seat opposite the doctor

NATALIA
I wish I could tell you more---comrade believe me, if I go into these things, then I am worth nothing to myself and my profession.

ALEXEI
There were girls my uncle had mooed to in his lifetime.

NATALIA

You might as well sign my death warrant now as ask me to violate that sacred trust.

KREPLEV

Do not tempt me, Comrade Doctor.

NATALIA

I swear to you these are personal matters only---they had nothing to do with the state.

KREPLEV

Everything is to do with the state.

Natalia looks to Alexei, who is still grinning at her.

ALEXEI

Shall I go on, doctor?

The light shifts and Natalia takes up a pen and begins to write on the paper in the file. Kreplev takes his cup of tea and leans against the table to observe. Outside the window, Stalin's eye fades out to a vision of cherry tree in bloom.

NATALIA

Yes your uncle who went to work in the Post Office? And had a copy of Chekhov among his cookbooks?

ALEXEI

It was the blade that took me there. Mother was chopping beets and the motion had a rose-colored hue---the beets sound like bells sometimes, soft. You asked me to keep in mind the connections -- and this time I am sure it was the beets that took me to my uncle's kitchen and then to the promenade outside the Winter Palace. It was Vasily's name day and his treat to go---we went thinking we would see the Tsar, but of course ... we got nowhere near the Tsar.