

The Russian National Postal Service

A Room of Laughter for a Lonely Pensioner

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CHARACTERS

IVÁN (Ványa, Vánka) SÍDOROVICH ZHÚKOV

ELIZABETH II, the Queen of England

VLADÍMIR ILYÍCH LENIN

LYUBÓV ORLÓVA, a famous Russian film star

Other figures from Russian history and world literature

Ivan Sidorovich Zhukov is an old man of 70. He sits sadly watching television or listening to the radio.

Two years ago his wife died of pulmonary disease.

It may seem improbable, but somehow Ivan Sidorovich failed to "notice" this disease.

Nonetheless, a nebulous trace of the funeral remained in his memory. He remembers how his wife was lowered into the earth; how they put a low wide fence around the grave; and how afterwards everybody complained about the bad weather while waiting glumly for the bus at the bus stop. He still remembered the ritual fortieth day after her death, when nobody came to visit him and he was all alone when he dipped the ladle into a pot of stewed fruits he had made. He acknowledged the fact of his wife's death, but this "fact" was something similar to a crack in the ceiling that existed according to its own laws. Meanwhile, Ivan Sidorovich existed according to his own laws. Perhaps his thinking showed signs of senility or perhaps he feared bringing down another heart attack on himself. Perhaps Ivan Sidorovich was a philosopher at heart and he subscribed to Plato's phrase: "Life is constant movement from birth unto death." Perhaps, anything is possible. I don't know.

As he did every morning when his wife was still alive, Ivan Sidorovich would lug his milk can to the milk store to buy milk. During the day he would sit on a bench with his friends. Evenings he would watch television, listen to the radio and become upset that things had so gone to hell.

Two years passed in this manner. Life continued on in ways and directions he did not understand. Basically, he did not want to think about it - it was as though rivers never overflowed their banks and sewage pipes never backed up. During the winter he used a hand broom to scrape the snow off the railing of his balcony. In the spring he got out his galoshes. In the fall he got out his stiff, warm boots made of compressed fiber. Suddenly, however, in early fall, the milk store was moved to a newly-built district. His friends, as if they had all conspired to do so, all went off to the "big bench in the sky" to join his wife. His television and his radio broke down irrevocably. He got bored.

For days on end our Ivan Sidorovich did not show his face in public. He sat on his stool, rocking away his loneliness and listening to the floorboards squeak beneath him. He felt sorry for himself. He had no one to talk to; no one was there to visit him.

He would think of his old neighbor friends and his wife, a woman of few words. He would squint at the blank television

screen and sigh as he recalled the pictures of "live people" he used to see there.

However, in school, trade school, at the front and at work, Ivan Sidorovich always stood out for his wit and his talent for inventiveness.

Right now, in fact, as he sits on his stool, his old head is as filled with the serious work of thought as any young head ever was. And, apparently, he has an idea!

Ivan Sidorovich's one-room apartment.

The room is furnished simply: a table covered with a plastic tablecloth; a chest of drawers that has been spiffed up with brown floor paint; a television standing on a small table; a heap of musty sheets on his bed; and a small rug on the floor.

An identical rug hangs on the wall over his bed.

Way back when, his wife had worked at the post office and she used to bring home huge quantities of envelopes and slips for telegrams. She never did find a use for the low-grade paper, although that didn't stop her from bringing home whole packs, boxes and bundles of things until she finally earned eternal rest.

The envelopes seemed to migrate from the chest of drawers to the overhead storage compartment, then from there to the balcony.

After his wife died, Ivan Sidorovich remembered the envelopes for some reason and brought them back in out of the cold.

For the longest time, the bundles stood next to the heat radiators, giving the whole apartment an odor of dampness mixed with the smell of rancid glue and bedbugs.

Now Ivan Sidorovich had found a use for the envelopes.

The gray corners of letters protrude everywhere throughout the apartment, from the chest of drawers, from tears in the wallpaper and from the closet. Every envelope bears the exact same handwriting.

Ivan Sidorovich gets up from bed and goes to the closet. He opens it, removes from it a "fresh" notebook and a packet of envelopes. Ceremoniously, he removes a bare ink cartridge from his small table, blows in the little hole at the top and sits down at his table. With a single stroke of his hand, he wipes away the bread crumbs.

For a long moment, Ivan Sidorovich is preoccupied scratching the inside of his ear with the cap of his ballpoint pen. He wheezes and slowly begins writing something on a clean sheet of paper.

IVAN SIDOROVICH

Hello, dear Ivan. (Thinks. Writes.) This is the o-l-d g-a-

n-g writing: Mish-ka, Grish-ka and Fyo-dor. (*Thinks. Writes.*) Finally, we have found you! (*Aside.*) Yeah, and I wonder how long the bums looked? (*Thinks. Writes.*) After we finished the seventh grade you disappeared somewhere but good. Somebody said you went off to build a factory somewhere, but nobody knew where or which one. (*Thinks. Writes.*) Others said you sailed off to the Arctic on a ship. We wrote you up there but they wrote back and said you weren't there. Then the war started and we quit looking. (*Thinks. Walks around his room. Begins writing again.*) After the war, we started looking for you again everywhere. (*Aside.*) Sure they did. Mikhail said the last time he saw you was on the television set dancing *Swan Lake*. That must have been the 1970s. And now the information bureau gave us your address and said that you're the real Vanka Zhukov, the same one who used to be our friend and companion. (*Thinks. Writes.*) So, is that really you? Do answer us, won't you? Because this gives us no peace. (*Thinks. Writes.*) Because this gives us no peace. Signed, your old school chums, Mishka, Grishka and Fyo-dor! (*Rereads the letter. Thinks. Writes.*) P.S. And if, and if you are not you, then at least write us if you know where to find Ivan Sidorovich Zhukov who was born in 1921. You'd know him by his... (*Looks at himself in the mirror. Writes.*) He's of average height and has gray hair. (*Looks in the mirror. Writes.*) He had a snub-nosed nose and he answers to the nickname "Old Stump."

Ivan Sidorovich looks over what he has scribbled and then carefully folds the letter and puts it in an envelope. He seals the envelope, smoothes it down with his hand and writes an address on it. He hides the letter between his shirt and his chest. Feeling good about himself, he walks about the room and stops before the mirror. He slips the letter behind the mirror. He paces back and forth, whistling. He sits on his stool and dreamily looks out the window.

I feel something coming on today. (*Looks out the window.*) Aha! A bullfinch! There'll be news today.

Something unexpected! (*Squints at the mirror.*)

He walks about the room, looking in alarm at the wall on which the mirror hangs. He thinks about how he might trick himself. He walks up to the mirror, sticks his hand behind it and pulls out the letter. Looks around. He puts the letter on the table.

(He calls himself by his name and patronymic, as if shouting over a distance.) Ivan Sidorovich! Hey, Ivan Sidorovich! You have a letter, an urgent one! It finally came! You hear that, you old goat? Where are you? H-e-y! (*Snaps to attention. Blinks repeatedly with alarm.*) Here I am! I'm here. Ivan Zhukov. That's me in the flesh. (*Loudly, in a commanding tone.*) Here's your letter! (*Looks around. Approaches the table, picks up the letter and reads what is written on the envelope.*) Is this for me? (*Looks around. Loudly, aside.*) For you! Take it and get out of here! (*Quietly, almost inaudibly.*) Where's this from? Who could have written to me? (*Rips open the envelope, reads what he had scribbled.*) Mishka, Grishka and Fyodor?! (*Reads.*) You've got to be kidding! Well, I'll be! Look at this! Holy Moses! What do you know about that? Who woulda thought? Now isn't that something? What won't happen next? (*Sits down, makes himself comfortable. He rereads the letter carefully, acting it out in his expressions, oohing and aahing, smiling happily. When he finishes it, he hides it behind the mirror again. Sadness comes over him. He paces back and forth, his slippers making shuffling noises on the floor.*) Guys... You didn't forget. Can you imagine that? After all these years! They found me through information. They don't give up easy, those guys. (*Grows more lively.*) They don't give up. No sir. Well, guys, we'll still mix it up yet! (*Decisively walks about the room. Looks at the window, the table, the chest of drawers. Tears a clean sheet of paper out of his notebook. Sits at the table and writes.*) Howdy, guys! It's me! The real Vanya Zhukov! (*Thinks. Writes.*) I'm very gratified that you finally found me. (*Thinks. Writes.*) I got your happy letter and I'm answering right away. (*Thinks. Becomes sad. Writes.*) So, how's life been all this time? Mishka. Grishka. Fyodor. I see they didn't kill you in the war. I thought you were dead. (*Thinks. Writes.*) So, how's life been? I don't know a damn thing about you. I'll bet Mishka has grandkids and great-grandkids. And Fyodor

probably married that schoolgirl Anfisa. Did Grisha ever become a millionaire like he dreamed of? *(Thinks. Writes.)* Write me everything. What cities do you live in, what streets, what are prices like there? *(Thinks. Writes.)* So, do you play dominoes? And, if you do, which kind do you play: "crosses" or "regular"? *(Thinks. Writes.)* I like "crosses" because it's quick and that way you can keep your opponent on his toes. *(Thinks. Writes.)* During the Great Patriotic War my daughter disappeared and somehow we never had another. Basically, my wife and I lived a modest life. *(Falls into thought. Sits that way a long time. Finally begins writing.)* Grishka still owes me twelve bills hard cash! I'll bet you forgot. *(Thinks. Writes.)* So, now I live my life. For the fun of it. Write me again. I guess that's all for now. Signed, the real Vanka Zhukov. *(Thinks a minute then adds a postscript.)* And whoever that was in Swan Lake, it wasn't me. That was somebody else.

Ivan Sidorovich folds the letter and puts it in an envelope. He seals it, addresses it and takes it to the chest of drawers. He opens it and a whole pile of envelopes scribbled with the same writing falls out. He carefully puts the envelopes back. He becomes sad. Sits on his bed and dozes off.

Outside leaves begin to rustle. The room fills with rays of green, blue and red light. It is as though the bed, the small table, the television and the closet have been covered with an expensive, semi-transparent cloth. Sparkles begin flashing in the air. Voices are heard.

Ivan Sidorovich turns his face to the wall and all of that disappears as if it had never been.

Ivan Sidorovich awakes. He sits up and hunts for a

slipper with his bare foot. He gets up. He stands in the middle of the room and seems to remember something. He goes to the chest of drawers and opens it. He shuffles through the letters all written in the same handwriting and finds one in particular. He opens it and reads: "Write me again. The real Vanka Zhukov." Puts the letter back, closes the chest of drawers. He goes to the table, takes up a clean sheet of paper and an envelope and thinks.

Mishka. Grishka. And Fyodor. (*Writes.*) Hello, Vanka! (*Thinks. Writes.*) We don't play dominoes. Nothing but chess. We hasten to write you about our lives. (*Thinks long. Writes.*) Our life is like a fairy tale. (*Thinks. Writes quickly.*) We all had kids grow up in large quantities. All of them are good and smart. They never say a cross word to us. They take care of us as if we were crystal vases, and that's a fact. Every Saturday they take us to resorts. (*Falls into thought. Writes again.*) The war didn't leave a trace on us! Even our neighbors didn't get so much as a splinter the whole war through. Just a few scratches. Basically, it was like there wasn't even a war at all. All our aunts and uncles and cousins are all healthy and in their right minds. Our grandsons all graduated from college with straight A's and our granddaughters all married very impressive young men. As for us, we live in a huge, quiet city where there is never any snow or mud. (*Thinks. Writes.*) Our city is as beautiful as a dream. All the buildings have transparent roofs and there are all kinds of different flowers on every balcony. They scrub the streets with soap and water and there are berries and mushrooms growing right there in every courtyard. (*Thinks. Writes.*) Everything here is cheap, well-made, of good quality and is pleasing to the eye. People on the street behave with dignity. They don't shove and they smile at visitors to our city. Nobody steals and we only know about poverty if we read an old newspaper. The city fathers are upstanding and they don't do any politicking at all. (*Looks at the piece of paper. A bead of sweat has appeared on his brow. He is satisfied. Writes again.*) And on that note, that's the end of that. (*Writes*

carefully.) Signed, Mish-ka, Grish-ka and Fyo-dor!

Ivan Sidorovich seals the letter and hides it beneath his mattress. He removes an accordion from his storage space and sings something like "She'll be coming around the mountain when she comes...." Sits on his stool, tapping his foot in time and stretching the accordion to its limits. He sings the last verse and sets the accordion aside. He falls into thought and sits motionlessly for a long time. He closes his eyes - and falls asleep.

Outside leaves begin to rustle. The room fills with rays of green, blue and red light. The bed, the small table, the television and the closet seem to be inundated in snowy sparkles flashing in the air. Upstage, at the back of the room, Elizabeth II, the Queen of England sits facing Vladimir Ilyich Lenin.

ELIZABETH II

(Glancing at the sleeping Ivan Sidorovich.) No, Vladimir Ilyich. I think loneliness is that state of a man's spirit when the soul despises its own body.

LENIN

(Glancing at the sleeping Ivan Sidorovich.) If you think Ivan Sidorovich is lonely, you've got it all wrong.

ELIZABETH II.

Well, you can't deny that...

LENIN

But I can! And I will. You see, uh, your honor..., loneliness is one of the psychological factors influencing the emotional state of a person who is trapped in the usual

conditions of social isolation.

ELIZABETH II

No, Vladimir Ilyich. You don't know what loneliness is. This guy is writing letters to himself. Poor Ivan Sidorovich.

LENIN

In certain cases a state of shock arises which characterizes anxiety, depression and...

ELIZABETH II

You're the one who drove him to it.

LENIN

I did?!

ELIZABETH II

(Sighs and shakes her head.) Ivan Sidorovich... *(Wipes away tears.)*

LENIN

(Pointing at the sleeping Ivan Sidorovich.) There's the first victim of your economic reforms! A sack of potatoes in a suit! And he used to be a hale and hearty man! What have you done?! No! It's you that did it! Supply and demand! Buy-sell!

ELIZABETH II

Oh, don't be so tedious.

Lenin clenches his hands into fists and, with a threatening expression on his face, goes at the Queen of England. Ivan Sidorovich stirs.

Shh! I think he woke up.

The two disappear. Ivan Sidorovich opens his eyes and sticks his hand under the mattress. He pulls out a letter, reads it, smiles, gets up, goes to the chest of drawers and hides the letter there. He paces back and forth. Remembers

something. Goes to the table. Picks up a new envelope, a sheet of paper and writes.

IVAN SIDOROVICH

Hello, Ivan Sidorovich. *(Thinks. Writes.)* This is the director of television writing to you. The national television network. Your neighbors in your apartment building informed us that you play on the accordion very loudly and very beautifully. We highly respect your particular talent and ability to perform Russian folk songs. We especially like the way you play "Kalinka." *(Thinks. Writes.)* Therefore we are inviting you to perform in a broadcast that we will devote only to you and your accordion. *(Thinks. Writes.)* You will be seen by millions of our television viewers! *(Catches his breath. Writes.)* We often receive requests asking us to allow you, our dear Ivan Sidorovich, to play a little bit longer... and to be on television. So that everybody could see you. *(Thinks. Writes.)* Sincerely and with deepest best wishes, your fan, the Director of Television. The national network.

Ivan Sidorovich carefully folds the letter and scrupulously writes on the envelope: "To Ivan Sidorovich Zhukov." He walks around for a long time, not knowing where to put the letter. It then occurs to him to put it under the television set. He is pleased with himself. He goes into the kitchen to fix himself a cup of Georgian tea. He leans back and sticks out his chest, coughs and frowns. He drinks, looking out the window with a bored expression on his face. The tea in the cup long ago cooled down and he continues staring out the window thinking about something. An hour passes and finally he gets up and walks around the room. He approaches the television.

An envelope falls out from
under it.

Sincerely surprised, he
reads what is written on it.
He glances around in
confusion and picks up the
envelope.

From the director of television. (Amazed, he can't read his
own writing. He turns on a lamp and puts on his glasses.)
The national network. (Frightened, he looks cautiously at
the envelope and finally decides to open it. His hands
shake. He reads the letter hungrily, occasionally raising
his brows and blushing from embarrassment.) Sincerely and
with deepest best wishes, your fan, the Director of
Television. The national network.

Ivan Sidorovich cannot
believe his own eyes. He
carefully studies the
envelope, his own
handwriting and finally
concludes that the letter
must be authentic.

He walks around the room
proudly, staring at himself
in the mirror and tugging at
the dirty collar of his
shirt. His gaze falls on his
accordion which is lying
upturned on its side. The
accordion is old and beat-
up, its sides are all
scratched as if it had been
attacked by some wild
animal. The bellows have
been eaten by moths, the
strap is frayed and ready to
snap. Ivan Sidorovich
carefully lays the accordion
under his blanket and goes
back to his table. He does
not know what to write or
how to answer his "fan."
Mustering courage, Ivan
Sidorovich exhales sharply
and begins writing.

Hello, respected director of national network te-le-vi-sion. It's me... (*Thinks. Writes.*) Ivan Zhukov. Son of Sidor. In your letter you wrote (*thinks, writes*) that you like how I play the accordion. Thank you very much. It is very nice to hear something like that. (*Thinks. Writes.*) In fact, I do know how to play "Kalinka." I also know how to play "The Weaver Women's Song," "The Waves of the Amur" and many others. (*Thinks. Writes.*) But I mix up the words. Sometimes I forget them completely and then I add a few verses of my own. (*Thinks. Writes.*) As for television and your invitation to perform on it, well (*thinks, writes*), I can say a lot about that. First, I'm already old and young girls aren't going to like looking at my ugly mug. Second, I don't go out of my apartment too much any more. Only when I need bread. Or a bit of hamburger. (*Aside.*) That is, if I have enough left over for hamburger. (*Thinks. Writes.*) And I haven't been downtown for ages. Being so old, I could easily get run over by a car or get lost in the metro. (*Thinks. Writes.*) Third, even if you took the risk of sending a driver and a van out to pick me up, I still wouldn't come. (*Thinks. Writes.*) The reason why is because all those young girls wouldn't like me and because all the old folks would say, "The old stump's gone off his rocker. He's got the star bug." But I don't have the star bug. (*Thinks. Writes.*) I do it because I love the music. I'd ruin your whole TV show and I'd be scared to death myself. By nature, I'm shy. I get embarrassed easy and I'd hit all the wrong notes. (*Thinks. Writes.*) I'd mess up the whole song and then they'd all say, "What are you doing? Where did you get that old coot?" (*Thinks. Writes.*) So for that reason, goodbye. Your trusty Ivan Zhukov.

Ivan Sidorovich wipes the sweat from his brow and rereads what he wrote. He finishes reading. He's satisfied. He sets the letter aside and goes to the kitchen. He puts the teapot on the stove and waits for the water to boil. He drinks. He goes back into his room. He sits at his table and begins writing a new letter.

(*Decisively.*) To the Social Welfare Department. (*Thinks. Writes.*) I have a demand! I, Ivan Sidorovich Zhukov, demand

that you increase my retirement pension. I can't live on what you send me anymore. My back is against the wall. Everything in the store is expensive and I am already an elderly man. My pension lasts me a week. For the rest of the month I boil Chinese noodles and eat rye bread. (Thinks. Writes.) How did you guys get to the point that your whole government can't even feed one single former worker and veteran of the war? (Thinks. Writes.) Look for yourself: The last week of the month I eat like a cat. And then for the next seven days after I get my pension I am so starved I eat like a hog until there's nothing left. Someday my stomach will burst and it will be your fault. (Thinks. Writes.) I don't have a wife or a television set... and I love meatballs. But I can only afford four pounds of hamburger plus what they charge for packaging it. Therefore, I officially demand that you raise my pension to the living standard and cancel my rent fees!

Ivan Sidorovich bangs his fist on the table and aggressively prints the final period. Suddenly, his gaze falls on the letter from the "director of television," his answer to the "director of television" and the third letter that he has just written. He compares the handwriting in horror, tears the three letters up and throws them on the floor.

In confusion, Ivan Sidorovich paces the floor. He doesn't know what to do. He picks up the tea cozy and looks inside. He twirls the dial of the television set. He goes out on his balcony and looks down at the snowflakes hitting the brick wall of the apartment building and then returns into his room.

His neighbors are listening to a record. The languorous voice of a black singer undulates and seems to float on a sea of melancholy. Ivan Sidorovich's eyes reflect depression. He lies down on his bed and turns to the wall. He swallows some pills.

Outside leaves begin to rustle. The room fills with rays of green, blue and red light. Everything seems to be inundated in snowy sparkles flashing in the air.

The Queen of England and Vladimir Lenin become visible upstage. They are playing dominoes.

ELIZABETH II

What do you think, Vladimir Ilyich? Has he gone crazy or is he not quite there yet?

LENIN

Listen, if you're in a hurry...

ELIZABETH II

Not at all!

LENIN

Your move.

ELIZABETH II

You think he'll die soon?

LENIN

What do you care?

ELIZABETH II

How can you say that?

LENIN

(With irritation.) I repeat: Ivan Sidorovich is a member of the proletariat. And if you go trying to weasel him over to your side...

ELIZABETH II

Then what?

*Lenin sings "The International."
The two disappear. Ivan Sidorovich wakes up. He opens his eyes. On the*

accordion he plays an old-fashioned love song. He is gayer now. He paces the floor. By the time he makes his tenth round, Ivan Sidorovich is really in a good mood. He begins muttering to himself under his breath and waving his arms about. He sits at the table and lightly rips a clean sheet of paper out of his notebook. He sets a new envelope on the table and writes.

IVAN SIDOROVICH

Hello, Ivan Sidorovich Zhukov! Zhukov! Zhukov! (He deliberately writes in oversize letters and laughs.) I, the President of our country, am writing to you to wish you happy birthday and to bestow upon you the Order for Noted Service to the Motherland and the Fatherland! I would also like to award you the title of Honored Pensioner. (Thinks. Writes.) And also the rank of general in the Strategic Weapons Attack Team. SWAT! (Thinks. Writes.) Furthermore, I want to wish you a happy 70th birthday and, once again, to wish you health, happiness and lots of pranks. And I hope all your dreams come true! December 31 according to the Gregorian calendar. Signed, the President! Pre-si-dent.

Ivan Sidorovich turns the envelope over and writes in big letters: "The Kremlin. To Ivan Sidorovich from the head of state."

He laughs, makes faces, waves the letter around and tosses it in the air. Finally, it gets stuck in the prongs of the chandelier hanging from the ceiling. Ivan Sidorovich jumps up and down trying to retrieve it. Suddenly, he hunches over and clutches at his chest. He goes to his bed, takes some pills. He turns his face to the wall and appears

to fall asleep.

Leaves begin to rustle. The room fills with colored light. Everything seems inundated in flashing sparkles.

The Queen of England and Vladimir Lenin become visible upstage. They are drinking tea from Ivan Sidorovich's teapot.

ELIZABETH II

Sometimes I wonder, why do people live on this earth? And quite often it seems to me that a human's life is pointless.

LENIN

Dialectics. Dialectics. Tell me this, how long has it been since you read anything? Huh? Well, you must read newspapers and women's magazines. Hm? You don't even know how to read, your Majesty, but you're all full of ideas, aren't you? Now there's an example of a bourgeois monarchy – an idiot sits there and calls herself a queen! "Life is pointless!" Now how do you like that?

ELIZABETH II

You pitiful Marxist!

LENIN

(Howls with laughter. Looks at Ivan Sidorovich. Abruptly stops laughing.) All right. You've had your fun, now. Just what are you after, comrade?

ELIZABETH II

I am the Queen of England!

LENIN

And I am the great Lenin!

ELIZABETH II

And I... and I... and I... Ivan Sidorovich willed his apartment to me!

LENIN

No he didn't! He willed it to me! *(Pulls an envelope out of his pocket.)*

ELIZABETH II

Oh no, he didn't. He willed it to me. (*Pulls an envelope out of her dress.*)

Elizabeth II and Lenin wave their envelopes in each other's face. They twirl around the room as each tries to grab the other's envelope.

You scoundrel!

LENIN

You slut!

ELIZABETH II

You scum!

LENIN

You sleaze!

ELIZABETH II

Give it to me!

LENIN

Gimme it!

They spin around the room. Ivan Sidorovich awakens and the two disappear. He caresses his chest with his palm. He wheezes. He stands in the middle of the room. Tired, he sadly stares out the window. Suddenly, the envelope falls from the chandelier.

Ivan Sidorovich is curious. He picks up the envelope and reads it. Slowly, his hairs stand on end.

IVAN SIDOROVICH

(*Reads.*) The K...K...Kremlin. To Ivan Sidorovich. From the President, the head of state.

Ivan Sidorovich is stunned.

He looks around in confusion. With quivering hands he pulls the letter from the envelope but can't bring himself to read it. He pours some water into his cup from the teapot and drinks it in a gulp. He shouts, jumps around, spits the water out, opens his mouth wide and waves at it with his hand.

He reads carefully. He reads every line twice. His face expresses fear transforming into quiet ecstasy. Having read the letter from "the President," Ivan Sidorovich swallows hard and puts his fingers to his forehead.

(He dances euphorically. He cannot fight back a huge, naive, childish grin.) Comrade President... Thank you... Why, we... Thank you. What can I... You have made... I am very...!

Ivan Sidorovich sits at the table. He ceremoniously tears a sheet of paper from his notebook, gingerly peels the perforated paper off the edge, blows dust from the piece of paper. He selects the newest and crispest envelope. He writes with great care, as if tracing each letter. Whenever he makes a clumsy letter, he becomes upset.

Comrade President! Your letter was delivered safe and sound by the postal service employees. They handed it to me personally. *(Looks at his chandelier. Writes.)* I read your dispatch very attentively to the very end of your signature. *(Thinks. Writes.)* I extend to you my great and vast thanks for your birthday wishes, for the state honor and for the especial trust that you have entrusted to me.

(*Thinks. Writes.*) Despite my elderly age, I can still be of use to your... (*crosses out last word*) to our homeland. And I am prepared to labor endlessly, giving no thought to my own well-being if it be for the good and flourishing of your... (*crosses out last word*) of our fatherland. In your dispatch, comrade President, you expressed an enthusiastic interest in how I am doing. Let me tell you: I-am-do-ing-gr-eat. I have all the comforts I need for that – gas, cold water on Mondays, hot water all the time, 220 volts of electricity and heat in the radiator pipes. My mood is good and I am healthy. I still want to live... (*Thinks. Writes.*) I have beaten back whooping cough and the mumps. I have high blood pressure, but only in a mild form. I have excellent sight. I could serve in the armed forces. (*Thinks. Writes.*) I have some knowledge of the Chinese language. (*Thinks. Writes.*) Sincerely, your new general and a friend of your attack team, Ivan Sidorovich Zhukov.
December 31, 7:22 p.m. Moscow time.

*Ivan Sidorovich diligently and seriously corrects all his mistakes. He plays the harmonica and sings a patriotic war song. As he plays, he doesn't so much sing as shout. Emotions have gone to Ivan Sidorovich's head. He enthusiastically begins writing a clean copy of the letter. He affectionately looks at the letter from "the President" and freezes: He recognizes his own handwriting. He can't believe his eyes. He compares the handwriting on the letters again. He tears up both the letter "from the President" and the letter "to the President." He throws them on the floor and stomps them underfoot. He slaps himself on the cheeks and lies down in bed. He lets out a sob and turns his face to the wall. He takes a pill.
The black singer's voice is heard singing from the*

neighbor's apartment. It sounds as if she is somewhere on a sunny beach and is lying in the shade of a huge, golden palm tree. Generously, although in English, she shares her melancholy with all the inhabitants of damp apartments with cold heat radiators.

Outside the window leaves begin to rustle. It is as if the room shudders and rays of light dance on the floor. Upstage the Queen of England and Vladimir Lenin become visible.

The Queen picks her crown up off the floor, Lenin smooths down the hairs on his temples and straightens his tie. They stare at each other maliciously.

LENIN

You tore off my button!

ELIZABETH II

Class struggle!

LENIN

You thug! That's right! Just you wait! You think he willed you his apartment!

ELIZABETH II

He will! Ivan Sidorovich loves me!

LENIN

Who? You? Ivan Sidorovich doesn't love you! He told me he loves me... If you want me to, I'll read it to you. (*Opens the chest of drawers and pulls out a packet of letters. Removes one of them and reads it.*) "My dear, precious leader, comrade Lenin!" Need I read any further?

ELIZABETH II

No.

LENIN

He won't will his apartment to you!

ELIZABETH II

Yes he will!

LENIN

It's my apartment!

ELIZABETH II

Mine!

The sound of a drill howls through the wall. The neighbors' bookshelf keeps falling down and today they bought a drill to fix the problem.

The two disappear. Ivan Sidorovich opens his eyes. He sighs as if he were a holy martyr. He doesn't know what to do to hide from the noise of the drill. He goes into the kitchen to boil some water for a package of noodles. He boils it. He comes back into the room with the teapot. His gaze falls on a poster of a heroine from a TV soap opera. He turns away. The masking tape holding the poster on the wallpaper falls away. The poster falls and with it a new letter.

IVAN SIDOROVICH

(Gazes in surprise. Picks up the letter, tears open the envelope and reads.) "Hello, Ivan Sidorovich! This is the Queen of England, Elizabeth Two writing to you. Here is the poem of my life. I was sailing along on the fourth-floor deck of my ship and I was tired of eating meatballs. I was staring blankly at the water when suddenly the television set fixed itself and I saw you on the screen, Ivan Sidorovich. There you were, holding your Russian accordion in your hands. You played a lively tune and you pushed all

those buttons beautifully. For some reason it made me very cheerful and anxious at the same time. It was as though I had awakened from a deep sleep and had suddenly taken off for somewhere. As God is my witness, you are such a subtle, romantic man that I instantly shouted out for everybody to hear on the steamship: 'It's him! Look! My prince!' Naturally, my crooked-legged husband, the king, came running up right away. He threw a tantrum and yelled but I told him all about you anyway. Ivan Sidorovich! I can't live without you. You are the only real man in this capitalistic world. Shelter me with the power of your passion! Tomorrow my steamship is leaving for Paris and I am going to the justice of the peace with my husband. To get a divorce! I do nothing but pine for you and stare out at the sea in the direction of Russia where my long-awaited love waits for me. Signed, Queen Elizabeth Two." (*Twirls the letter in his hands. Does not understand.*) What does she want from me? (*Looks at the letter. Looks at himself in the mirror. Takes a sheet of paper and writes a reply.*) Good evening or good morning, revered Queen of England Elizabeth Two. (*Compares what he wrote with what is on the envelope.*) Elizabeth Two. (*Thinks. Writes.*) I received your letter and, frankly, I just don't know what to do with it. How do people live in your country and how is the weather at sea? (*Thinks. Writes.*) Why did you fall in love with me? I am a sad person, I am old, and I cannot make your happiness. But if you truly do love me, then send me your photograph and I'll think it over good. I am a Russian, you know - my toilet always leaks. If worse comes to worse, you can sleep on the sofa. (*Thinks. Writes.*) If need be, it can be folded out double. (*Thinks. Writes.*) Revered Queen! Do you like jam in half-liter jugs like the ones I fixed last summer? (*Thinks. Writes.*) I won't lie to you. I had never thought about you before. But if life has served up this surprise, then why not with a queen? (*Thinks. Writes.*) Best wishes, Ivan Sidorovich Zhukov, general of the Strategic Weapons Attack Team. (*Sticks the letter in his side table.*)

Ivan Sidorovich sits on his bed and plays his accordion: "My Bonnie Lies over the Ocean." Angrily squeezes the bellows one last time and sets aside the accordion. He turns his face to the wall.

Leaves rustle. The room fills with light. Colored

*light sparkles. Upstage
appear Vladimir Lenin,
Elizabeth II, Robinson
Crusoe, Chapayev, Lyubov
Orlova¹ and Stalin. They
argue and wave envelopes in
each other's face.*

ELIZABETH II

(Rings a bell.) Ladies and gentlemen! Attention, please!

Silence.

I will try to describe the state of affairs as briefly as possible. I suspect you all know the pensioner Ivan Sidorovich from apartment twenty-nine.

ALL

Cutting each other off.) Yes! Yes! Yes!

*The Queen rings her bell.
All fall silent.*

ELIZABETH II

In spring of this year, Ivan Sidorovich began battling boredom by engaging in secret correspondence – with each and every one of us!

ALL

(Together.) Yes! Yes! Yes!

ELIZABETH II

In his letters, Ivan Sidorovich promised to will his apartment to me.

Noise and arguing.

ALL

(Cutting each other off.) And to me! And to me!
ELIZABETH II. In his letters to me, Ivan Sidorovich declared his undying love for me.

Noise and cursing.

¹ Lyubov Orlova (1902-1975) was a beloved matinee idol from the golden age of Soviet cinema in the 1930s and 1940s, who starred in a number of popular comedies and musicals. Vasily Chapayev (1887-1919) was a hero of the Russian revolution who became a genuine folk hero thanks, in large part, to a wildly popular film, *Chapayev* (1934), which continues to enjoy cult status today.

ALL

(Cutting each other off.) Me too! Me too! He loves me! It's me he loves!

ELIZABETH II

Then it follows that he loves each of us. Consequently, we each have claims on his living quarters.

ALL

Yes!

Noise and cursing. The Queen angrily throws her bell on the floor. All fall silent.

ELIZABETH II

I suggest taking the following steps.

Ivan Sidorovich coughs and stirs. Everyone disappears. Ivan Sidorovich gets up and walks about the room.

The black singer is heard beyond the wall. Ivan Sidorovich thinks it is a hungry cat who has caught a cold and, to top things off, has been caught in a trap.

Ivan Sidorovich paces the floor. He approaches the table, tosses back the edge of the checkered tablecloth and picks up an envelope. This, however, is a usual envelope, with a stamp and someone else's handwriting. He opens the envelope and reads.

IVAN SIDOROVICH

"Hello, Ivan! Happy birthday! I hope you kick the bucket soon. Because all you do is dirty the air, take up space somebody else could use and give bed bugs a place to multiply. You old stump. You're just tormenting yourself and others. What did you accomplish with your life? You

fucked up in old age. You're nothing but skin and bones, you old coot, and your head is all twisted inside out. You ought to drop dead out there in the entry way. Paralyzing's too good for you. Let the bedbugs eat you. Or a bunch of young kids mug you at the milk store and throw your body in the river. They ought to withhold your pension for six months, you worthless geezer. You never got over private in the national guard 6th tank division. Shove your medal up your ass, hero. You lived like a castrated rabbit and you wallowed in shit like a pig. You ate up that Soviet crap by the spoonful and sucked on watermelon seeds for vitamins. Now you pee in your pants because you can't make it to the toilet in time. What the hell did you live for? Cash in your chips, loser! Signed, Adolph Hitler's bastard son."

Ivan Sidorovich thoughtfully folds the letter back up and places it back under the tablecloth. He sits on his stool and pointlessly gazes around the room. Finally, he gets up and continues pacing aimlessly. He mutters under his breath: "It's Ivan's birthday. It's Ivan's birthday. It's Ivan's birthday." He jumps up and runs to the bathroom, taking little steps. The toilet backs up and overflows when he flushes it, the pipes wheeze and bang and rattle. The neighbors begin banging on the heat pipes.

Ivan Sidorovich returns. His pants are wet but he wears a happy smile on his face. He holds a congratulatory greeting card and a ballpoint pen.

(Cracking up with laughter.) Dear Ivan Sidorovich! We wish you happiness, health, a long life ahead and a house full of happy guests.

Today is Vanya's birthday.
He got up with the sun.
He cleaned his shirt and made a pie -

Isn't he the happy one!

(Laughs. Takes his pen and adds a few words.) Your friends, the Martians! *(Chuckles. Goes to his table. Feverishly looks for a new envelope and a clean piece of paper. Writes.)* Hello, Martians! This is Ivan Sidorovich Zhukov writing you. I am an Earthling! Thank you so much for your birthday wishes. Especially for the poem. It's very clever and it's all about me: "Today is Vanya's birthday. He got up with the sun. He cleaned his shirt and made a pie – Isn't he the happy one!" *(Thinks. Writes.)* I am very curious why they say here that there is no life on Mars. That's downright seditious! I'll bet they do that on purpose so you can't wish anybody happy birthday. Mars is not visible from Earth and I don't know anything about how you live. But your greeting card is very beautiful. We don't have cards like that. *(Thinks. Writes.)* I would like to learn a lot about flora and your fauna. And I'll tell you about ours. No matter which way you look at it, it's better here in the country than in the city. Let's be penpals. I have lousy handwriting, but I can make it out. So, write me. Oh, I forgot! Happy New Year, Martians! I zealously await your reply. *(Thinks. Writes.)* Like a nightingale on the fly! December 31 of the Earth year. *(Seals the envelope, puts it in the chest of drawers.)*

*Ivan Sidorovich plays the
accordion and sings
something gay and uptempo.*

*It sounds as if the
accordion has gone crazy –
it gives out nothing but
sour notes, squeaks, loud
blats and unexpected chords,
perhaps what a pagan fanfare
might sound like.
He plays and sings. An
envelope falls out of a heap
of laundry .*

(Picks up the envelope and opens it. Reads.) "Our dear Ivan Sidorovich! We wish you a happy 70th birthday and a very Happy New Year! We wish you happiness, hot young blood and lots of optimism in bed. May your life be long! We love you. Your bedbugs. December 31." *(Lies down in bed, tucks a pile of sheets under his head. Looks dreamily at the ceiling and sighs.)* Yes-sir-ee... *(Jerks his hand, squashes a bedbug.)* My God! What am I doing? What a traitor!

His neighbors knock on the wall. The drill squeals. The walls hum, paint peels and an envelope falls out of the overhead storage compartment.

(Approaches the envelope, opens it and reads.) "Dear comrade Zhukov! We hope you have a super jubilee birthday and we wish you paramount happiness. And paramount happiness can only be found up here with us in the overhead storage compartment. Really, Ivan Sidorovich, move in up here with us. You'll play your accordion and we'll listen to you. And we'll all sleep together at night. It's warm up here and your bed catches a nasty breeze. For the last time we wish you paramount happiness. Signed, your bedbugs in the overhead storage compartment." (He directs a frightened gaze at the overhead storage compartment and at the pile of laundry. Shakes his fist threateningly. Sits at his table. Writes.) Hello, Ivan Sidorovich! (Thinks for a long time. Writes.) This is cosmonaut Sevastyanov writing to you. (Thinks. Writes.) In the name of the entire space program, I want to wish you happy birthday and congratulate you on the eve of your seventy-five-year health. (Thinks. Writes.) I particularly hasten to inform you that the day before yesterday I saw you from up here in space. (Thinks. Writes.) There are a lot of specialized instruments on a spaceship and I noticed you right away. You were walking on Earth in the direction of the housing office. My dear Ivan Sidorovich, your overcoat is threadbare. The wind was whipping at you from all sides. After all, it is winter out there, Ivan Sidorovich. It's pretty chilly to be wearing a coat like that. Buy yourself some furry gloves and a hat or you will catch cold and suddenly fall ill. At your healthy age you've at least got to take care of yourself and respect your organism. (Thinks. Writes.) Here is a special bulletin: In my optical lenses I could see that the stitches on your left boot have pulled out and are ripping. (Thinks. Writes.) Everybody up here in orbit is concerned about your health. (Thinks. Writes.) Signed, the conquerors of the cosmic seas – the cosmonauts of the space station "Friendship."

Ivan Sidorovich carefully seals the envelope, writes an address on it and hides the letter in a saucepan. He goes to the window and

*stares proudly into the sky.
He sits on his stool. Stares
abstractly into space.
Leaves rustle. The room
fills with red, green and
orange rays of light. Golden
clouds embrace all the
objects on stage.*

*Upstage appear Vladimir
Lenin, Elizabeth II,
Robinson Crusoe, Chapayev,
Lyubov Orlova, Stalin,
Martians, the cosmonaut
Sevastyanov and Bedbugs. A
stool stands on the table as
if it were a throne. The
Queen of England takes her
place on it.*

There is a deathly silence.

ELIZABETH II

(Reads.) "To Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, the genius leader of the proletariat; comrade Stalin, the first builder of communism; and Vasily Ivanovich Chapayev, the courageous Red commander, Ivan Sidorovich wills in whole and for complete unconditional use his battle medals from the Finnish campaign and the Great Patriotic War as well as his half-size refrigerator, his teacup holder decorated with a scene of Berlin, the three issues of 'Soviet Police Force' magazine and his ax and tools. Add also the living space in the bathroom – four square meters of floorspace."

Tense silence.

"The really fine actress Lyubov Orlova is willed three kilograms of salt, the teapot, the milk can, the salad bowl, the four sieves and the mirror. Also the kitchen."

Silence.

"The Martian inhabitants of the solar system receive total and unconditional use of the television set, the long underwear, the round table, the autumn shoes, the sweater with the diamonds on it and the iron bed."

All are quiet.

"The cosmonaut Sevastyanov receives full and unlimited use of the bicycle chain, the gloves, the mid-season raincoat, the umbrella, the set of bent scissors, the washing machine and the closet with the mark of quality."

A heavy silence.

"The bedbugs receive full and unconditional use of the Saratov accordion!"

Silence.

Well, I think that does it. (*Ceremoniously tears up the sheet of paper.*)

LYUBOV ORLOVA

What do you get?

ELIZABETH II

I get, uh... I get the domino set and the main room.

All stare in amazement at the Queen of England.

LENIN

Kill! Kill the capitalists!

All attack Elizabeth II. They struggle.

Ivan Sidorovich coughs.

Everyone disappears.

Beyond the wall the voice of the black singer continues to undulate as she sings languorously and rolls back her dark eyes.

Ivan Sidorovich feels a pain in his chest. He attempts to squeeze a tear out of his eye. The last doctor he saw, a very intelligent man, told him to cry more often so as not to feel so much pain.

But Ivan Sidorovich can't

seem to cry even though they say that's much more advantageous for the health than those pills they make in America.

The pain subsides.

IVAN SIDOROVICH

(Rocking back and forth on his stool, talking to himself.)
Hello, Ivan Sidorovich! This is an engineer with no name writing to you. My train was bombed and I was left crippled. I have no arms, legs, heart or head. Otherwise, I'm a perfectly normal person and I am very happy that I returned home from the war alive. I have nothing to add to that. No matter how I wish I did, I do not believe in God or the devil. I do not count for much, ladies, gentlemen and comrades. I have wood stumps in place of arms and wheels in place of legs. I have a cabbage stalk in place of a head and a sewing machine in place of a heart. Farewell!

Ivan Sidorovich goes into the kitchen. The door of his oven bangs. He returns into the room and puts on his best suit. He pulls on his old sport coat with his faded war medal on it. He puts on his long underwear, his wrinkled slacks and he tightens up his tie.

He stands at attention before the mirror and sings a bold, patriotic war song. He sings with difficulty for he is out of breath.

He goes into the kitchen. Returns with a huge, black, ugly, overbaked cake. It is horribly unsightly, but he looks at it and even slurps a bit at the sight.

The black singer on the other side of the wall has become more lively. She sings a blues number. Ivan

Sidorovich marches about the room holding the cake. Back and forth. Back and forth.

He puts the cake on the table. He takes a swipe at all the letters and envelopes and they fall on the floor.

He sticks three candles in the cake and counts them.

(Satisfied with himself, he wipes his hands.) Dear comrades and friends! Today Ivan Sidorovich turned seventy-five years old! (Looks over all his letters.) Please, be seated! All of you. Queen. Robinson. Mishka. Grishka. Fyodor. Comrade Lenin. Comrade Stalin. Where's the actress? And where are the conquerors of the cosmic seas? Be seated! Please, be seated! (Gathers up the letters, places them about the table.) Does everyone have a place? Is anyone without? Last one's a rotten egg. (Shakes letters out of the chest of drawers. Places them around the table.) Insects sit by themselves. (On each envelope he places a cup of hot tea or a saucer.) Where's our birthday boy? Come on, take center stage! Let everybody take a gander at your handsome face. (Stands in the center of the room. Looks over the cake, the multitude of letters and mugs and the hot tea.) I am the birthday boy today! (Ceremoniously, with exaggeration.) Dear Ivan! We Martians have a gift for you! (Makes a silly, naive, childish face.) The Martians do? Well, what do you know? Where is it? (Loudly.) Just one minute! (Goes out and a minute later brings back in a small box.) What Martians? Well, what do we have here? May I take a peek? (Looks over the envelopes and letters.) May I? (Opens the box and oohs and aahs. He pulls out a small, artificial Christmas tree the size of a pencil.) Well, I'll be!! Those Martians... It's a... (Sets the Christmas tree in the center of the table.) Thank you. (Cuts the cake. It is as hard as a rock.)

Ivan Sidorovich breaks the cake into little pieces. He affectionately places the pieces around the table on the envelopes, struggling to read his handwriting and reading off the names and addressees. The candles burn. Mugs are set out

around the table. Ivan Sidorovich sits down. He is amazed himself: Where did he ever get so many mugs and so much hot tea?

Ivan Sidorovich sits at the far edge and grows weak with the warm feeling that it is his birthday and the New Year is beginning.

Suddenly he notices that a letter is protruding from inside the cake. Ivan Sidorovich gazes at the dried fruits and rips at the burned crust of the cake to get at the letter. The letter is smeared with ash and sticky resin.

(Tears open the envelope. Reads.) "Hello, Vanya! This is your death writing to you. I wish you a very happy seventy-fifth birthday and a very Happy New Year. So, how is life without me? Still wasting your time on nonsense? You forgot about me and you never think about me as if I wasn't a member of the family. Eh, Vanya, Vanya. You avoid me like the plague. Where do you get the strength to keep it up? Your wife is dead. Your television set and your radio conked out. And you're having a feast. You invited all your friends and you're having a big bash. Eh, Vanya, Vanya. You're a fool, that's what you are. All right, I'll sit here at your table for a few minutes. I'll take a rest and raise a toast to you and then I'll go on to the neighboring apartments to collect all those stubborn old goats like you. Eh, Vanya, Vanya. What times we live in, huh? Life is tough these days, but you know what? Nobody wants to die. I have to drag 'em away kicking and screaming. I get a grip on their ears and I just drag 'em away into the fire. So, you know what, Vanya? Here's my birthday gift to you – Go on, Vanya, live eternally. Farewell. Signed, your death."

Ivan Sidorovich is taken aback. He doesn't know whether to believe this letter or not. He paces the floor in confusion, stomping on piles of letters.

*"Eternally. Eternally.
Eternally." He listens
carefully to the sounds his
voice is making, to the
intonation of this new word
– "Eternally. Eternally.
Eternally."*

*He caresses his chest with
his palm. Stares out the
window.*

*The muddy moon rolls out
from behind some dark clouds
and the entire room is
flooded with light. We see a
sea of stars against a
backdrop of city roofs and
chimneys.*

*"Eternally. Eternally.
Eternally," sighs Ivan
Sidorovich. He lies on his
bed and coughs.*

*A huge pack of letters falls
out of his chest of drawers.
Ivan Sidorovich turns his
head and looks out the
window.*

*Outside are heard the city
sounds of cars and voices.
The water pipes in the
toilet howl like a trumpet.
His neighbors beat on the
radiator pipes.*

*A drill howls and someone on
the third floor plays a
piano.*

*Up on the upper floors,
there are people celebrating
the New Year ahead of time.
Drunken voices sing a happy
song.*

*Right on the other side of
the wall, some neighbor pops
the cork of a champagne
bottle. The clock strikes
twelve.*

The New Year has come.

*Shouts: "Hurrah! Hurrah!
Hurrah!"*

*The door flies open. A stiff
breeze blows the packs of
letters around the room.*

CURTAIN