



## *Russian Roulette*

after Pushkin's ghost story

by Christian Lanciai (1994).

### *The Characters :*

Chekalinsky

Surin

Tomsky

Herman

Prince Yeletsky

Lisaveta, called Lisa

The Countess, her and Count Tomsky's grandmother

A servant

Other servants

Other members of society

The action is in Saint Petersburg 1816 in high society.

### *Brief presentation*

Alexander Pushkin's short story "The Queen of Spades" is familiar. However, the Tchaikovsky brothers were not quite satisfied with the story when they embarked on making an opera of it in 1890, so Modest Tchaikovsky altered the plot to some extent. His libretto presents considerably more interesting characters and a more human plot, while Pushkin's original actually is a rather cynical and inhuman story. Even the opera libretto has its weaknesses though, among other things Lisa commits suicide without any reasonable motivation, which is why a new revision of the entire story is presented here to the theatre.

In the first scene it is quite appropriate, though, to have some suitable salon music according to the eminent style of Pushkin and Tchaikovsky.

### *Russian Roulette*

Scene 1. An eminent salon in Saint Petersburg 1816.

*Chekalinsky* Now is the glorious time for peace and us in our old meritorious Russia! All horizons are now cleared after the downfall of Napoleon and his haphazard adventures, and the world is waiting for us to discover and embrace it! And what do we Russians do then? Yes, we sit at home in our comfortable salons wasting our time and money!

*Surin* All are not participating in the gamble. Some who own it just sit gloomily and watching.

*Chekalinsky* You can't mean a Russian. No true Russian would be passive at a gambling table.

*Surin* (*indicates one of the tables, where Herman is sitting sullen and stiff watching the game.*) There is Herman.

*Chekalinsky* But he is a poor man without money. Like a starving wolf he sits locked up in his own cage and follows avidly the delightful games of others which he has no means to join.

*Surin* He has inherited a considerable fortune.

*Chekalinsky* What are you saying?

*Surin* His father passed away last month. He is the heir to more than forty thousand rubles.

*Chekalinsky* And yet he follows hungrily the game as if he could not wage a kopek.

*Surin* Yes, since he is a German and as such as thrifty as a miser. His economical morality forbids him to touch any interest of his father's capital.

*Chekalinsky* It's a virtue suffering hard, which you can see on him.

*Tomsky* Are you talking about money?

*Surin* Yes, of thrift and generosity. Here are some who put themselves in debt for life for just a moment of excitement, while others, who are rich, just sit in gloom and live in misery just to maintain their assets without even granting themselves to live humanly.

*Tomsky* Yes, it is strange, how some are ruined by their fortunes living only poorer and more miserly the wealthier they are.

*Chekalinsky* Are you suggesting someone?

*Tomsky* Yes, my grandmother.

*Chekalinsky* Is she still alive? She must be over seventy.

*Tomsky* Yes, she lives the same intensive life like an Egyptian mummy of ten thousand years of age. Her life is wrapped up like in bandages of cotton, and it is as dusty, dark, locked up and stationary as a well preserved and petrified corpse.

*Surin* But did she ever live? Wasn't she always like buried alive?

*Tomsky* No, forty years ago she raved like Venus around Paris and was celebrated as an eager gambler at all possible disreputable joints. She was renowned and popular for her generosity and beauty, her extrovert and sparkling gaiety and *joie de vivre*. She amused herself to such extremes that she one day had to admit that she was ruined. Not even her husband, my own grandfather, who was afraid of her, would help her any more. She then sought help in higher office and consulted Cagliostro, that notorious charlatan, who offered her a recipe, which proved infallible, but she obtained that secret remedy on one condition only.

*Chekalinsky* Did she sell her soul?

*Surin* No, it used to be the body in those days.

*Tomsky* No one knows the deal they made, but only on three cards she managed to recover everything she had lost and even double it. Since then however she has never gambled any more or ever sought any amusement.

*Surin* Three cards! Just three infallible cards! It sounds like some appropriate challenge for our friend the sullen Herman.

*Herman* (*has overheard them and stolen up to them*) I have already heard it all.

*Chekalinsky* Herman! Are you here?

*Herman* When you began lowering your voices and give me stealthy looks I knew that something interesting was going on.

*Tomsky* We only gossiped meanly about my old grandmother.

*Herman* But is her gambling story true?

*Tomsky* It is not easy to find out, but there must be something to it.

*Surin* Are you curious, Herman?

*Herman* Maybe.

*Chekalinsky* You have money already. Why not wage it, using it to multiply your fortune by the help of Tomsky's grandmother's infallible intriguing formula?

*Surin* Don't provoke him.

*Herman* My money is my father's money. I have only access to the interest of the capital, which is my only firm security, but my ideal is to be independent. To obtain

that independence and be free I do not even touch the interest but live only on my soldier's salary. That's why I never gambled.

*Chekalinsky* But perhaps a recipe of just three infallible small cards could one day even tempt our Herman to a gaming table?

*Herman* Only if I was completely sure of winning, I would deign to play.

*Surin* And that sure no one could ever be, and therefore Herman probably will never play.

*Tomsky* Behold, my cousin! I must introduce her to you.

*(enter Lisaveta with Prince Yeletsky.)*

*Chekalinsky* My dearest Prince Yeletsky! My congratulations on your fortunate engagement!

*Yeletsky* Thank you. I am now the slave of my own fortune.

*Tomsky* Here is my young relation Lisaveta, now engaged to our friend Yeletsky. Lisa, these are some of my friends, Chekalinsky, Surin, and our merry Herman.

*Lisa* He does not look particularly merry.

*Surin* No, he is usually dead serious, like a brooding Hamlet.

*Herman* I lost my father recently, Miss Lisa.

*Lisa* That explains it. You look poor and miserable.

*Herman* And you look more lovely than the first flower of spring.

*Tomsky* I must present her to the others. Allow me. *(leaves with Lisa and Yeletsky.)*

*Surin* Well, Herman, what do those new long looks mean?

*Herman* I have seen her before.

*Chekalinsky* She has hardly been seen outdoors at all. She is always kept locked up by her grandmother.

*Herman* I have seen her in the park and in her window several times.

*Chekalinsky* But she is engaged to that rich Prince Yeletsky.

*Herman* I know. I have no chance.

*Surin* You don't mean to say, that she was your great secret love?

*Chekalinsky (watching Herman)* It doesn't look much better.

*Herman* And she is Tomsky's cousin then?

*Surin* Yes. She lives with Tomsky's grandmother, about whom we just told that story, and who also is Tomsky's grandmother.

*Herman* What a coincidence!

*Chekalinsky* The engagement has been arranged by the family. Prince Yeletsky is a perfect match.

*Herman* Does that mean that she does not love him?

*Surin* Herman, if you play your cards right and honestly, you might stand a chance. It was noticeable that she also recognized you more than well.

*Herman* Bother Surin, you offer me some hope!

*Chekalinsky* He loves her.

*Surin* But Yeletsky will be no easy rival.

*Chekalinsky* The question is how much he is in love with Lisa.

*Surin* Hardly at all, but he is eager at her underwear.

*Chekalinsky* Hold your tongue, my brother! Don't disturb our brother Herman's virtuous thoughts!

*Surin* I am afraid he is lost.

*Herman (to himself)* Lost? Maybe. Ravished and transported would be better words. Maybe I am a lost soul in my rapture, but it is delightful, and such a delight I welcome to become my ruin and destruction. I am a lover, and that love I am prepared to stand for to the world. I can not deny it, and it can but be more true and real by my love seeming to acknowledge and to share my feelings. It is necessary that I may speak privately with her. (*finding his way out to the guests*)

*Chekalinsky* Yes, he is lost.

*Surin* He walks like in his sleep out chasing among people for adventure and fatalities and risks of love.

*Chekalinsky* If Lisa would prefer our mad and solemn Herman to the rich nonentity Yeletsky, they should have each other.

*Surin* Yes, why not?

*Chekalinsky* Even great Napoleon preferred natural unions to arrangements.

*Surin* A marriage based on love could turn out well and happy, while there is no warrant for a planned matrimony for the sake of money to avoid ruin.

*Chekalinsky* So you mean, that love prepared and aimed at ruin would then be preferable to an eventual ruin without love?

*Surin* Herman would not wage himself on any love or lady unless she was definitely certain.

*Chekalinsky* Maybe he took Tomsy's grandmother's infallible cards too seriously.

*Surin* Do you suggest that he would be more interested in speculating in a myth than in Lisaveta?

*Chekalinsky* If I know Herman correctly he would speculate in their combination.

*Herman (comes up to Tomsy. Yeletsky and Lisa)* Tomsy, I think our friends would like to ask you something.

*Tomsy* What is the query?

*Herman* It's about something that would interest Prince Yeletsky as well. I could stay here and entertain Lisa.

*Tomsy* Very well. That suits me. Come, my Prince. It must be something important. (*leaves with Yeletsky.*)

*Herman* Lisa, I would like to talk with you personally.

*Lisa* You must be aware that I am engaged?

*Herman* Are you by your own will or by love?

*Lisa* I am just a young lady. My fate is determined by my family.

*Herman* Why do you look down? Is it to conceal that you are not happy?

*Lisa* I have never been happy. I was always that poor miserable relation who had to be pitied. I am in villenage as a slave to a mummified and tyrannic grandmother.

*Herman* The more important that we meet in private.

*Lisa* Yes.

*Chekalinsky* Count Tomsy, do you dare leave your cousin alone with our unpredictable Herman?

*Tomsy* Didn't you have something important to report?

*Chekalinsky* Why should I?

*Tomsy* That's what Herman told me and sent me to you.

*Surin* Yes, that's correct. Prince Yeletsky, you must be aware that you are marrying into a dubious family?

*Yeletsky* Dubious? In what way?

*Surin* Your fiancée's grandmother, who is count Tomsy's grandmother as well, but in a different way – how was it now?

*Tomsy* My grandmother is the mother of my niece's mother, but my aunt died.

*Surin* Yes, that's it.

*Yeletsky* What nonsense are you talking about family relationships?

*Surin* It's so difficult, you know, about names and all that.

*Chekalinsky* To the point! What was dubious about the family?

*Surin (lowering his voice)* Prince Yeletsky, you must be aware that Lisa's grandmother is in touch with the spiritual world?

*Yeletsky* Who is not a spiritualist?

*Surin* I mean dark powers like perhaps the devil.

*Yeletsky* What do you mean?

*Tomsy* You have got the cards stuck in your brains.

*Yeletsky* What cards?

*Tomsy* Surin is just pulling your legs, my Prince. He is just trying to put us off.

*Yeletsky* Nothing can put me off from gaming tables, Russian roulette and matrimony!

*Tomsy (to Surin)* There you had a clear answer.

*Chekalinsky* Our Prince Yeletsky is not prone to believe in ghosts.

*Yeletsky* Ghosts? Me? Bring on the phantoms, and I will deal with them accordingly to never make them appear again!

*Surin* What deal will you offer them? A regular brush-off?

*Tomsy* Come, my dear Prince. We must not neglect our Lisaveta.

*Yeletsky* Just let me handle all the phantoms! I shall deal with them!

*Surin* Do so, by all means, Prince Yeletsky.

*Lisa* I will wait for you till after midnight till you come.

*Herman* I will come without a sound without raising anyone.

*Lisa* My cousin and Prince Yeletsky are approaching.

*Herman* We shall meet them half way. (*offers his arm to Lisa. She accepts it, sticking her arm under his, and they meet the others.*)

*Lisa* I am well taken care of by your good and gracious colleague, cousin Tomsy.

*Tomsy* So I see.

*Yeletsky* Then at least you haven't been bored in my absence.

*Lisa* No, not at all.

*Herman* I return her to you, Prince Yeletsky. And then perhaps we could reassume our important business, Tomsky?

*Tomsky* What important business?

*Herman* I want to know more about your grandmother's activities around the court of Paris.

*Tomsky* But it is so long ago. I was myself not even born then.

*Herman* Still you know more than you would admit.

*Tomsky* There is only one who knows anything about it.

*Herman* Who?

*Tomsky* My grandmother. And she says nothing. She is a sealed mummy who has kept silent about her secret for forty years.

*Herman* Then it's about time for her to disclose it.

*Tomsky* To whom? To you?

*Herman* I would offer her a fair price for it.

*Tomsky* Would you?

*Herman* I could then afford to offer your dearest cousin my true love.

*Tomsky* You are serious?

*Herman* I was always serious.

*Tomsky* Yes, I believe you were.

*Herman* Listen. That pompous prince has a fortune and could offer Lisa security, but could he give her love? Has he got any feelings of tenderness in his heart? What is he but flesh and money?

*Tomsky* Come to the point.

*Herman* I have been in love with your cousin for weeks without knowing that she was your cousin. I love her, and she loves me. But I have nothing to offer except love. All I have is the inheritance from my father, which is so limited that I can't afford to encroach on it. But with a formula of certainty to gain a fortune on gambling, I could have something more to offer than just the basic simplicity of love. And could I then beat Yeletsky? Are you interested?

*Chekalinsky* Dear Herman, then you are after all a born gambler! To wage everything on just one lady! That's what I call hazard!

*Tomsky* This is nothing to joke about, Chekalinsky. Herman is serious. He wishes to wage his inheritance for the sake of Lisa and his love. And what if the story of the infallible formula is just a myth?

*Herman* And if it isn't? Wouldn't that be worth examining?

*Tomsky* Only grandmother knows the answer, and she keeps quiet.

*Herman* Yes, she keeps quiet to you, but could she keep quiet in the face of love?

*Tomsky* You'll have to persuade her yourself. I will have no part in it.

*Surin* Wasn't it so, that your grandmother was prophesied to die if she divulged the secret of the three fatal cards?

*Tomsky* She shared the secret with her husband, who never used it and died with it, and with a secret lover, who also died in a duel. Then Cagliostro warned her, that if she shared the secret with a third person, that would bring her death.

*Herman* But he would manage?

*Tomsky* Cagliostro said nothing about that.

*Surin* Would you risk the countess' life, Herman, just to force the secret out of her?

*Tomsky* All since then grandmother has lived like a mummy and never mentioned the matter again.

*Chekalinsky* That makes sense. You don't want to talk about what could become your death.

*Surin* It appears like a risky enterprise. Tell me, Herman, wouldn't it be better to give up Lisa and keep your small capital safe?

*Chekalinsky* But Herman is a gambler. He risks all or nothing.

*Herman* If I could be sure to win, I wouldn't be so stupid as not to wage what little I have.

*Chekalinsky* What did I tell you? He is a gambler!

*Herman* You only live once. I only have this insignificant trivial life to wage. If it goes down the drain it means nothing.

*Tomsky* I can neither advise you for it or against it, since I don't know the odds.

*Herman* I advise you to leave it to me. I only ask you to once more trick Yeletsky away from your cousin. I must speak a few words with her.

*Tomsky* Very well. Let's go. (*Tomsky and Herman go to look for Yeletsky and Lisa.*)

*Surin* He certainly seems to know what he wants.

*Chekalinsky* A gambler always knows what he wants until he has waged and lost everything. After that he only knows what he doesn't want.

*Surin* What is it he doesn't want?

*Chekalinsky* He doesn't want to live any more.

*Surin* Will he be sure about that?

*Chekalinsky* That's usually the case.

*Tomsky* My dear Prince Yeletsky, there was some important matter about that queen of spades that Surin wanted to tell you.

*Yeletsky* Queen of spades? I don't follow.

*Tomsky* My grandmother is nicknamed the queen of spades because of the weird bad luck she brings when it comes to gambling.

*Yeletsky* I see! That is indeed of great interest to me! I will be back directly, dear Lisa. Entertain yourself with this cavalier in the meantime. (*hurries off to Surin and Chekalinsky*)

*Tomsky (to Lisa and Herman)* Take your chance now and make a date. (*follows Yeletsky*)

*Herman* All doors are opened to us.

*Lisa* If you are noble enough to be what I believe you are, you will save me from that monstrous Prince. Here is another open door for you. (*shows him a key*)

*Herman* My dearest adorable Lisa! You seem to read my thoughts!

*Lisa* Quiet! We must observe maximal discretion and take no chances. Come tonight to the garden. There is a gate to the staircase that leads up to my grandmother's balcony and bedroom. The key is to the gate.

*Herman* To your grandmother's bedroom?

Lisa            She will not be there. And from there the right door will lead you to my own room.

Herman        My love! I can't believe that I could be so lucky!

Lisa            Quiet! The others are returning. *(Lisa steals the key to him.)*  
*(Yeletsky has laughed cordially to some merriment with the others and is now back in a good humour.)*    What was all that fun about?

Yeletsky      Just some old jokes about your grandmother. In her youth she was the queen of hearts to everyone, but then she married a boring husband and gambled for the last time and became the queen of spades! *(laughs boisterously. Surin and Chekalinsky seem to share the fun.)*

Lisa            Is that so funny? Perhaps you would like to turn me into a queen of spades as well? *(Yeletsky with Chekalinsky and Surin laugh even harder.)*

Surin          The holy quarrelsomeness of marriage starts already!

Chekalinsky   What are married couples in for if not for quarrels? *(laughs)*

Herman        It's not funny.

Lisa            No, it's not.

Yeletsky      Calm down, my love! It's only for kicks!

Lisa            My Prince, you have had far too much to drink!

Chekalinsky   Again! *(laughs)*  
*(Lisa turns her back on them and starts for the exit.)*

Yeletsky      Wait, Lisa, my dear! I'll escort you!

Chekalinsky   That's right, chase her! *(Yeletsky starts fooling out after Lisa.)*

Surin          You can see already what kind of marriage that will be! A wife with a sharpened iron slipper!

Chekalinsky   No one will play second violin in that orchestra!

Tomsky        Maybe it's lucky that Herman exists.

Herman        The gambling table is set. The cards are on the table, and now the game begins. Gentlemen, allow me to retire to find my positions. *(retires)*

Tomsky        Good luck, brother Herman. *(Herman leaves.)*

Chekalinsky   Is he in for a game?

Tomsky        Yes, and probably waging his life.

Surin          Could he win?

Tomsky        It depends on him. He has to bet on a risky card.

Chekalinsky   But Herman was always glad to take risks.

Surin          What card could be risky?

Tomsky        The queen of spades.

Scene 2. The countess' boudoir.

*Herman (comes stealing in from the balcony)* This is where it should be. So this is the boudoir of the legendary countess. There's the door to Lisa's room, my beloved. Shall I go in to her at once or wait until something happens? Quiet! I hear some noise.  
*(hides behind a curtain)*

*Lisa (entering from her room)* I thought I heard something, the firm steps of a stranger.

*Herman (comes out)* Lisa!

*Lisa* There you are! Be careful! The countess has already come home and is in a terrible mood! She might enter any moment.

*Herman* Should I leave?

*Lisa* I must help my grandmother. Could you wait?

*Herman* How long?

*Lisa* Until she is asleep.

*Herman* Old people sleep badly.

*Lisa* But at least you can get them to bed.

*Countess (outside)* Lisa! Who are you speaking with?

*Lisa (lower)* Quick! Vanish!

*Herman* I will stay hidden and wait. *(disappears behind the curtain)*

*Countess (outside)* Lisa! Why don't you answer me?

*Lisa* I am coming, dearest grandmother. *(moves towards the door, which is opened from the other side by the Countess. She enters lavishly dressed up with servants.)*

*Countess* What's the matter with you? Are you walking in your sleep talking to yourself?

*Lisa* I was just humming.

*Countess* I heard you distinctly speak with a double voice. Is none of the servants here?

*Lisa* No, I was alone.

*Countess* Are you sure? *(falls down into a large armchair, dead tired)* My senses may be weakened, but when I hear something it is clear enough! Perhaps it was your cousin Tomsky, my good-for-nothing of a grandson?

*Lisa* He has not been here today.

*Countess* Am I then hearing hallucinations? There, you incapable imbeciles! Smoothen up this pillow! It's full of bumps! Well, Lisa, your impertinence lately demands an explanation! Do I no longer exist in your eyes? The last few weeks you have behaved like a hopeless somnambulist!

*Lisa* I assure you, grandmother, that I am awake.

*Countess* Who could believe it? There, you impossible bunglers! I stifle in this outfit! Undress me!

*Lisa* Didn't you have a nice evening, grandmother?

*Countess* Who can find any joy any more in anything at my age? It was different in the good old days in my youth, when it was allowed in the world to wallow in pleasures! You should have seen the court of Louis XV at Versailles, Lisa darling, and

the exceptional court of Marie Antoinette with her splendid cavaliers! Count Cagliostro knew how to amuse the world, and Anton Mesmer was outstanding in his craft as well. In those days even I was a celebrated beauty on level with Madame de Pompadour and Madame du Barry, but that was now long ago. They all ended up on the scaffold losing their heads just because they dared to laugh and love. You incompetent hangman, are you trying to strangle me?

*A servant (trying to remove the countess' bonnet)* I am sorry, your grace. I just tried to remove your bonnet.

*Countess* Yes, just go on strangling me, you incorrigible lackeys! Just go on executing us, you evil plebeian world, like you executed all France and trampled around in her blood, splashing it all over the world! We don't deserve any better, we who are too fine and noble to live. A human being may not be too fine and noble, for then he is immediately driven to death by all ordinary ignoble people's jealousy. Therefore the world was never allowed to remain fine and noble in peace. Well then, get on with it and undress me!

*Lisa* Shouldn't grandmother go to bed?

*Countess* I am all right here as it is. I will sleep here tonight.

*Lisa* In the armchair?

*Countess* It's no shitting stool anyway, is it? It's a comfortable armchair, and now I am comfortable enough. Who knows, if maybe I die tonight. If I do, I want to be awake when it happens.

*Servant* The way you talk, countess!

*Countess* Away with you, peasants, parasites and rabble! Stop messing with me!

*Lisa (to the servants)* I think the countess wishes to be left alone.

*Countess* That accounts for you too, Lisa! Get out!

*Lisa* But you can't stay here, grandmother? There could be a draft here in the night.

*Countess* Nonsense! Here I sit, and here will I sit, whether I sleep or not. But with you madcaps and gossiping rabble about, you can't even close your eyes in peace! Get out, all of you!

*(The servants disperse. With a worried look towards the curtain even Lisa retires back to her room. It's impossible for Herman to pass from his hiding place to Lisa's room without being noticed by the countess.)*

*Countess (when everyone has left)* No style in the world any more. Only stolid rudeness. Men are only militant clods, and women are only parodic hens and magpies. It was different when Versailles was the centre of the world. Then the whole world was obliged to be fine and elegant and behave and be ruled by predominantly gentlemen of nobility and born countesses. The rest was just pastors and shepherdesses. No one knew of any rabble in those days, and there were no large cities either. Everything was just human.

*(While she talks to herself, Herman has come out approaching the countess, and is now standing in front of her, politely and carefully expectant. Gradually she becomes aware of him.)*

*Countess (low)* What do you want?

*Herman* Three cards.  
*(The following conversation is restrained in low voices.)*

*Countess* I don't gamble.  
*Herman* You have gambled.  
*Countess* You are mistaken.  
*Herman* Count Tomsky has told me.  
*Countess* What?  
*Herman* Your secret.  
*Countess* You are mistaken.  
*Herman* You gambled at Versailles forty years ago and won a fortune on three cards.  
*Countess* I have forgotten it.  
*Herman* I don't think so.  
*Countess* You are talking nonsense.  
*Herman* If you give me the secret I can win enough to be able to marry Lisaveta.  
*Countess* And if I don't?  
*Herman* Then she will be unhappily married to Prince Yeletsky, and I will take my life.  
*Countess* You are a romantic.  
*Herman* But honest and sincere.  
*Countess* And if I don't have any secret?  
*Herman* I know you have it. You divulged it to two others.  
*Countess* They died. Do you also wish to die?  
*Herman* I would rather die than live without a chance.  
*Countess* Lisa will be married rich to Prince Yeletsky.  
*Herman* But she doesn't love him, and he only wants her flesh. Could you live and see your grandchild violated and humiliated by a stupid narrow-minded libertine?  
*Countess* You offend me.  
*Herman* You don't see what's good for your grandchildren. You only think of money, like all the others. Rich people only think of themselves and to enrich themselves while they blindly drive over victims, like your family and Prince Yeletsky intend to crush Lisa.  
*Countess* Young man, you are going too far!  
*Herman* I only ask for the secret of the three cards!  
*Countess* It's a myth. I was only lucky.  
*Herman* It was a magic formula! I know it! You got it from Count Cagliostro!  
*Countess* Count Cagliostro was just a mad charlatan.  
*Herman* No one thought so in those days!  
*Countess* I can't help you.  
*Herman* You must! It will cost you nothing!  
*Countess* Young man, you are hysterical.  
*Herman* Then I must force you to speak! *(produces his gun)*  
*Countess (obviously shocked but contained)* I was told, that the third man I told the secret would be my death. *(dies)*

*Herman* Answer me! Don't fall asleep now! (*shakes her*) She is dead! Woe is me! I have killed her!

*Lisa (enters)* Grandmother, I thought I heard voices. (*sees Herman by the countess, puts her hand to her mouth.*) Ooh! (*faints*)

*Herman (hurries up to her)* Two fainted women is more than I can take. There, Lisa, wake up! (*She wakes up.*)

*Lisa (confused)* Where am I?

*Herman* Here with me. You are at home.

*Lisa* What are you doing here?

*Herman* Don't you remember?

*Lisa (sees the countess)* What's the matter with grandmother?

*Herman* She is dead, and I have killed her.

*Lisa* You?

*Herman* Yes.

*Lisa* How?

*Herman* I knew, that the third man who would have her secret would be her death. I showed her this, (*shows the pistol,*) and she died. But I did not learn the secret.

*Lisa* What secret?

*Herman* The three cards.

*Lisa* What three cards?

*Herman* The infallible formula. If you apply it to a game of cards you will inevitably win.

*Lisa* So that's why you came. You only wanted to play cards and win. You were only interested in my grandmother's youth's gamble. You were never interested in my love. You only pretended. And now you have caused my grandmother's death! (*cries*)

*Herman* Lisa! (*tries to sooth her, but she is inconsolable*)

It was for you I came. I am a poor man and stand no chance against the riches of Prince Yeletsky. But if I in three rounds could be sure of winning, I would then have a fortune and be able to marry you out of love alone! It was only for the sake of your love that I wished to know your grandmother's secret.

*Lisa (fights her tears)* Is it true?

*Herman* It's the perfect sacred truth. My dearest love, I swear. But now this disaster here is a fact. Babushka is dead, and she brought her secret with her to the eternal silence. And the only ones who also knew the secret are long since dead.

*Lisa* What does that mean?

*Herman* That there is no hope for us. I have no chance. Farewell, my beloved, and live in peace and happiness with your rich prince. I apologise for my existence, but it was only temporary. (*wants to leave.*)

*Lisa* Stay on, my friend. Could nothing help us?

*Herman* Your grandmother was the only possibility. She has let us down. There is nothing more to do. Dearest, try to be happy without me. Maybe it will work. That's unfortunately all I can say and my last word. (*leaves hastily by the balcony.*)

*Lisa* Herman! My beloved! (*silence*) What's the use? (*turns to the corpse*) And you, old hag of a tyrant, you just keep silent, more tyrannical, evil and ugly than ever in life! Wasn't it enough that you tortured me and bullied me all my life? Did you have to commit your worst sabotage against me by passing away in the most inappropriate of moments? You old horrible bitch, I wish for you a splendid future in hell for ever! (*leaves in fury.*)

Scene 3. Herman's poor quarter in the soldier's barracks.

*Herman (at a worn table with his gun in front of him in the dim light of a lonely candle.)*

Dark is the night but not as dark as life itself, which now is growing constantly more dark and black, all since one star is silently passing out after another. The sun no longer rises in the morning, life is withering in its buds, and instead of spring there is but winter after winter, which constantly is exacerbated in mocking sardonic morbidity. If life is no more than a torture constantly made worse and doubled, if the destiny of a man is but to slip deeper down into an infernal trap of despair, if all hope and joy only exist to wither, like a beloved but by others ruthlessly raped virgin, then life is not as good as death. All is finished, I give up my game and confess myself a loser, since there is no other way out of my ruin. (*raises the pistol to his brains about to fire off when there is a knock at the door*)

Who disturbs the peace by interrupting my solitude? Who will hinder me in my joining the only beatitude of life – a beatific termination of its hollowness? (*another knock*) Still it must be a message from life. (*goes to open the door. It's Prince Yeletsky.*)

Prince Yeletsky! You!

*Yeletsky (entering, shaking the snow off his clothes)* Yes, it's me, your foiled rival, who comes to beg of you to help Lisaveta.

*Herman* What's the matter with her?

*Yeletsky* She is ill and wasting away, she doesn't want to eat or live, she doesn't want to have anything to do with me, so it's obvious she doesn't love me.

*Herman* And how does that concern me?

*Yeletsky (grabbing his arm)* Brother, you are the one she loves. You can save her.

*Herman* She is nothing to me. I have neither titles nor money.

*Yeletsky* But she loves you. I can't bear to see her miserable.

*Herman* The game is lost. Her grandmother has passed away.

*Yeletsky* What has her grandmother to do with the two of you? She was an outdated old devilish hag and tyrant who had lived too long. No one is missing her. On the contrary, everyone is made happy by her death and the fortune she has left.

*Herman* I have no right to propose to that.

*Yeletsky* But her! I am standing here offering her to you! All I want is her happiness!

*Herman* So do I. But I was born to misery. The best way for her to find happiness would be by you and your easy-going nature.

*Yeletsky* But she does not love me in the least.

*Herman* She will get used to it. She will have to get used like all women to the practice in bed. There is no great difference between the flesh of different men.

*Yeletsky* You are cynical and bitter.

*Herman* I am sorry. That is my fate.

*Yeletsky* Sorrow is an egoist, and you are foolish enough to let it get the better of you! You are fencing yourself in by its folly!

*Herman* No power is greater than the sorrow that always wins.

*Yeletsky* Then be damned and go to hell! (*goes angrily straight out into the winter storm*)

*Herman* Yes, that's the best thing I could do. I hesitated far too long.

(*Just as he is about to return to his gun, there is another knock, but more careful.*)

And who is it now? Are all the world's idiots coming here to disturb me in the night as I am ready to perform the only good deed of my life?

(*Another knock. The door opens. No one enters. The wind howls spookily.*)

What strange hallucinations are haunting me? Someone knocks, the door opens by itself, and no one enters?

*Countess* I had to visit you against my will. (*enter the countess' ghost.*)

*Herman* By all the worst terrors of evil midnight forces! What madness is this?

*Countess* I will leave you presently. But I have been commanded to give you the secret of the three fatal cards. You will have it, but only on one condition: when you have played them you must never play any more game in your life.

*Herman* I promise. That will be an easy promise to keep.

*Countess* And one more thing: you must marry Lisaveta.

*Herman* Why not, if I win?

*Countess* Promise!

*Herman* If I win I will marry her. I always stick to my word.

*Countess* Now listen. The first card is three. Then there is a seven and finally an ace.

*Herman* Three, seven and ace.

*Countess* I will forgive you my death, but only if you marry Lisaveta.

*Herman* If I win I will marry her.

*Countess* That's all. I must leave. But remember: it's your only game! (*leaves.*)

*Herman* Could this be true? Is it a mad and evil dream and fantasy that renders me incapable of seeing what is real and what is delusion? But I have to try the formula of the three cards, since I have nothing to lose. If I am only suffering from madness, the formula must fail, but in that case I would be lost anyway! Wage everything on the ghost, Herman, for you have no other choice! You stand at the bottom of the abyss of your despair and couldn't fall any deeper anyway. So why not wage on the possibility of rising, since now you have been offered a ladder? Now the game begins! And it's no ordinary reckless game of chance, since I have got a tip from the other side!

Scene 4. Like scene 1.

*Chekalinsky* The dice are rolling with the roulette, the gaming parties never end, people make their wages, waste their money and remain seated until everything is lost, while liquor and tobacco is furiously consumed. And to all this people voluntarily and whole-heartedly are committed. Can you understand the logic or divine driving force behind such reckless self-destruction?

*Tomsky* Egoism and greed – nothing else. They all believe they must win, but that delusion makes everyone inevitably a loser. A certain part is also played by the lust and urge for pleasure.

*Chekalinsky* But it's the most irrational possible way to live.

*Tomsky* Yes, but it is Russian.

*Chekalinsky* You always have an explanation.

*Tomsky* Here is our friend Surin.

*Surin* Any news?

*Chekalinsky* There is always something new going on here at the gaming tables.

*Surin* How is the triangle drama proceeding?

*Tomsky* I assume you mean my cousin and her cavaliers Day and Night. Prince Day is completely out of the game, and Prince Night is completely vanished underground.

*Chekalinsky* Day and Night?

*Surin* Prince Day is Prince Yeletsky, with whom the cousin of our count has broken her promising engagement. Prince Night is our brooding Byronic hero Herman, whom our princess loves but who buries himself in his poverty and misery.

*Chekalinsky* The good Herman, who inherited a fortune?

*Tomsky* Only a small one.

*Surin* His idea was to wage it and double it. But in order to succeed he had to be sure to win. They said Tomsky's grandmother had such an infallible recipe, but the countess died.

*Tomsky* And since then Herman has never been seen again neither in Lisa's company nor in any salon.

*Chekalinsky* But if she loves him and he loves her – what could then possibly get between them?

*Surin* The vital queen of spades was lost in the game.

*Chekalinsky* I don't understand.

*Tomsky* Herman suffers from a complex of poverty. He has not money enough to support Lisa and no title. So he considers himself unworthy of her.

*Chekalinsky* And what does Miss Lisa think about that?

*Tomsky* No one is more alert on Herman's case than she. She keeps informed about his health, sends agents to his poor quarters, keeps track of everything he does and worries herself to death about him.

*Chekalinsky* It's obvious that the girl loves him.

*Surin* When you think of the fair child she is already here... (*Lisaveta shows up in the salon, anxiously looking for someone.*)

*Tomsky* (*goes to meet her*) But my dearest cousin, what are you doing here all alone?

*Lisa* Have you seen the fallen angel Herman?

*Tomsky* No one has seen him. He is somewhere underground.

*Lisa* Alas, not any more! He is coming here to gamble!

*Tomsky* Gamble? Herman?

*Surin* Not very likely.

*Chekalinsky* Herman never dared to gamble, only hungered for it.

*Lisa* But I tell you, that he intends to come here only to wage everything he owns on a gamble!

*Surin* In that case Herman has gone crazy.

*Chekalinsky* Yes, it seems very much out of order indeed.

*Lisa* We must stop him!

*Tomsky* Lisa, if your Herman intends to start gambling no one can stop him. He is of age, and it's not against the law to gamble.

*Lisa* But he will lose everything!

*Tomsky* How do you know?

*Lisa* I know it!

*Chekalinsky* Things are gathering. Here is Prince Yeletsky. (*enter Yeletsky*)

*Tomsky* Prince Yeletsky, what's up?

*Yeletsky* I had a strage invitation. Herman, my rival, you know, has invited me to a game of love, that is, he offers both this fair lady and all his inheritance for a wage.

*Surin* So he really intends to play?

*Yeletsky* No doubt about it.

*Lisa* My Prince, don't accept his challenge!

*Yeletsky* My dear, I must. It's now a matter of honour. It's like a duel but without weapons. Instead we take cards.

*Lisa* About your life!

*Yeletsky* No, no one can get hurt.

*Lisa* But he will lose everything!

*Yeletsky* There is no room for skill in gambling. Everything is just luck, chance and bad luck, which means we have exactly the same chances.

*Chekalinsky* Are you really ready to gamble about a woman's heart?

*Yeletsky* Why not? The wages are in fair order, are they not? He has her heart but not much money. I have plenty of money but not her heart. The winner gets both.

*Surin* He is certain of winning. Or else Herman would never gamble.

*Yeletsky* The more reason to accept the bet. The more cowardly it would be to pull out.

*Chekalinsky* (*aside*) But the rule is: bad luck in games brings you luck in love. I never heard of any player that was lucky in both.

*Tomsky* Dearest cousin, allow your cavaliers to duel. None of them will get killed.

*Lisa* How do you know?  
*Tomsky* It's only a game of cards.  
*Surin* Here he is.  
*Chekalinsky* He seems excited but not inebriated.  
*Herman* Are you all here? Good. Then let the game begin.  
*Lisa* Don't gamble, Herman!  
*Herman* I have no choice. It's my only chance.  
*Lisa* The less you own, the more you stand to lose.  
*Herman* I will gladly lose everything if I can't win everything. A mediocre life of only ordinary frugality and grey basics is not for me. Let me have everything or nothing! If I lose there is nothing more to it, and I can depart from life with honest decency.  
*Yeletsky* I am ready, if you are ready.  
*Herman* I am always ready.  
*Lisa* Stop them!  
*Tomsky* Too late.  
*Yeletsky* How much do you wage, my dear friend?  
*Herman* Here is my credit on the bank. It's all I have: forty seven thousand rubles.  
*Yeletsky* A respectable sum. Will you give up, if you lose?  
*Herman* I wish to wage it all in three rounds at most. If I lose any of them I have lost the game.  
*Yeletsky* You are bold and full of confidence. I accept the bet.  
*Chekalinsky* Gentlemen, you have each a deck of cards. Choose the card you wish to bet on, put it covered on the table, and the first card, of those which then are dealt, which is of the denomination of any of your cards, will be the winner.  
*Yeletsky* I have chosen my card. (*chooses a card and covers it.*)  
*Herman* So have I. (*does the same*)  
*Surin* Cut, Chekalinsky! Start dealing!  
*Chekalinsky* So let the game begin.  
*Tomsky* (*tries to placate Lisa*) It's an ingenious game, made specially to make cheating impossible. No one knows, except the gambler himself, what card he is betting on.  
*Lisa* (*implacable*) It's just a macabre game for inhuman men.  
*Chekalinsky* I am dealing. (*dealing*) Three of hearts.  
*Herman* (*calmly*) I happen to have a three. (*shows his card*)  
*Chekalinsky* Prince Yeletsky, what have you got?  
*Yeletsky* (*shows his card*) A knight.  
*Chekalinsky* Then the beginner Herman has won the first game.  
*Surin* That was fast!  
*Herman* And painless. This game is just a trifle.  
*Chekalinsky* Do the gentlemen wish to go on? What do you say, Prince Yeletsky?  
*Yeletsky* Were we not agreed on three rounds? I will go on. I still have better chances than Herman to end up the winner.  
*Lisa* O Herman, don't go on! Be content with what you have won!  
*Herman* (*ignores her*) The wage is now doubled: ninety four thousand rubles.

*Surin* Herman, don't wage it all.  
*Herman* If I don't wage it all I can't win it all.  
*Tomsky* High stakes indeed, on my honour.  
*Chekalinsky* Somewhat nerve-racking, if I may say so.  
*Herman* Are you on, my Prince?  
*Yeletsky* I am on.  
*Herman* My card is ready.  
*Surin* He seems to know what he is betting on.  
*Yeletsky* (after some hesitation) I am settled also.  
*Chekalinsky* Then the game can begin.  
*Lisa* This is unbearable!  
*Chekalinsky* The first card is seven of diamonds.  
*Herman* (calmly) It so happens by chance that my card is a seven.  
*Chekalinsky* Prince Yeletsky?  
*Yeletsky* My card was a queen of hearts. I waged it all on love.  
*Chekalinsky* Unfortunately it's the most commonly played and most losing of all cards. Our inexperienced player is once more our victor.  
*(Many cheer and are obviously impressed.)*  
*Surin* (to Herman) You have now won four times your fortune. Go home now.  
*Tomsky* You have already won Lisa.  
*Herman* Prince Yeletsky, didn't we agree on a third round even in cases like this?  
*Tomsky* Will you utterly ruin the Prince?  
*Lisa* Herman, stop!  
*Yeletsky* I agreed on three rounds but no more. The third one remains.  
*Tomsky* Consider, my Prince! Could you afford another loss? You don't have your favourable odds any more.  
*Lisa* Herman, spare me and spare the Prince!  
*Surin* This appears more and more like madness.  
*Chekalinsky* It's only hysteria, my friend, the inevitable distraction of the gambling craze.  
*Herman* Prince Yeletsky, are you on?  
*Yeletsky* How much do you wage?  
*Herman* One hundred eighty eight thousand rubles.  
*Yeletsky* The chances are equal. It's no worse than that. I am on.  
*Tomsky* I beg you, gentlemen, to refrain! You are not compelled to such a risky game!  
*Yeletsky* Our German Herman compels me. He gives me the glove. I am not a worse man for accepting it, but I would be if I didn't.  
*Surin* Herman, desist, for the sake of God!  
*Herman* God has nothing to do with gambling.  
*Tomsky* He is adamant and wishes to destroy the Prince.  
*Lisa* Herman, for the sake of your love, have you forgotten it? – I am yours, if only you break it up *now*!  
*Herman* Shut up, woman! Let me concentrate in peace!

Yeletsky I hope you realize what you are doing.

Herman I settled for three gambling rounds. I am only consistent and will therefore sustain all three. That's all.

Lisa Avert this evil game, for the sake of God!

Herman The woman is hysterical. *(chooses among his cards.)*

Lisa *(comes up and muddles his cards)* No, I am serious!

Herman Keep her away from here! She is sabotaging our game!

Yeletsky I am ready. Let game begin, Chekalinsky.

Chekalinsky As you wish. *(deals)* It's the ace of spades.

Herman *(triumphant)* The ace is my card! *(uncovers his card)*

Yeletsky *(after a moment's orientation in the situation and recapitulation)* I am sorry, Herman, but your lady is not quite up to the ace. *(shows his own card, which is the ace of clubs)*

Herman *(stunned, getting his glance fixed on his queen of spades)*

Surin *(coming forth, soothingly)* It's no ace, Herman. It's the queen of spades.

Herman *(rising, with the card in his hand, which his attention is fixed upon)* She has tricked me!

Lisa *(rushing forth)* No, Herman, I always loved you! I never deceived you! You are only deceived by yourself and no one else!

Herman Why did you have to come between us and muddle my cards? Now everything is lost!

Lisa Oh! *(swoons)*

Herman *(still with the card held up high)* You accursed demon from the other side of hell! You outrageous infinitely cruel witch and abyssal monster of a wicked and rotten hag! Are you satisfied now, inhuman harridan and harpy?

Tomsky He is mad.

Chekalinsky He is not well, but he may recover.

Yeletsky I'll collect my winnings in the meantime. *(has taken care of Lisa and now sensually carries her away, well aware that she is his.)*

Herman No, gentlemen, I am not mad. I have only been tricked into gambling myself away, – I am not quite sure about how it happened. Have I out of my senses become the victim of my own imagination and thus grossly deceived myself, or was I actually visited from the other side and fooled by an evil demonic outrageously selfish womanish force? We will never know the whole truth about that, for the game is lost. *(quickly brings up a gun and shoots himself in his head.)*  
*(Great consternation everywhere, disorder and panic.)*

Chekalinsky Is he dead?

Tomsky *(examining Herman)* It would be strange if he wasn't. Yes, he is completely dead.

Surin Now your poor cousin will at least have her wealthy husband.

Tomsky Shut up your improper comments! This poor hero was at least absolutely consistent as such.

*Chekalinsky* The game is lost. Yes, that's always the inevitable finishing touch of Russian roulette.

*Tomsky* Keep quiet, and help us carry out this deplorably messed up miserable body.

*(They carry out Herman under continued great consternation and chaos.)*

(march 1994,  
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