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The Lament



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Anton Chekhov

☞ Guess the meaning of these expressions from the context

gingerbread horse	slough
snuffle	as if he were on needles

It is twilight. A thick wet snow is slowly twirling around the newly lighted street lamps and lying in soft thin layers on roofs, on horses' backs, on people's shoulders and hats. The cabdriver, Iona Potapov, is quite white and looks like a phantom: he is bent double as far as a human body can bend double; he is seated on his box; he never makes a move. If a whole snowdrift fell on him, it seems as if he would not find it necessary to shake it off. His little horse is also quite white, and remains motionless; its immobility, its angularity and its straight wooden-looking legs, even close by, give it the appearance of a gingerbread horse worth a *kopek*. It is, no doubt, plunged in deep thought. If you were snatched from the plough, from your usual gray surroundings, and were thrown into this slough full of monstrous lights, unceasing noise and hurrying people, you too would find it difficult not to think.

Iona and his little horse have not moved from their place for a long while. They left their yard before dinner and, up to now, not a fare. The evening mist is descending over the town, the white lights of the lamps are replacing brighter rays, and the hubbub of the street is getting louder. 'Cabby for Viborg Way!' suddenly hears Iona. 'Cabby!'

Iona jumps and, through his snow-covered eyelashes, sees an officer in a greatcoat, with his hood over his head.

'Viborg way!' the officer repeats. 'Are you asleep, eh? Viborg way!'

With a nod of assent Iona picks up the reins, in consequence of which layers of snow slip off the horse's back and neck. The officer seats himself in the sleigh, the cabdriver smacks his lips to encourage his horse, stretches out his neck like a swan, sits up and, more from habit than necessity, brandishes his whip. The little horse also stretches its neck, bends its wooden-looking legs, and makes a move undecidedly.

'What are you doing, werewolf!' is the exclamation Iona hears from the dark mass moving to and fro, as soon as they have started.

'Where the devil are you going? To the r-r-right!'

'You do not know how to drive. Keep to the right!' calls the officer angrily.

A coachman from a private carriage swears at him; a passerby, who has run across the road and rubbed his shoulder against the horse's nose, looks at him furiously as he sweeps the snow from his sleeve. Iona shifts about on his seat as if he were on needles, moves his elbows as if he were trying to keep his equilibrium, and gasps about like someone suffocating, who does not understand why and wherefore he is there.

'What scoundrels they all are!' jokes the officer; 'one would think they had all entered into an agreement to jostle you or fall under your horse.'

Iona looks around at the officer and moves his lips. He evidently wants to say something but the only sound that issues is a snuffle.

'What?' asks the officer.

Iona twists his mouth into a smile and, with an effort, says hoarsely:

'My son, Barin, died this week.'

'Hm! What did he die of?'

Iona turns with his whole body towards his fare and says: 'And who knows! They say high fever. He was three days in the hospital and then died... God's will be done.'

'Turn round! The devil!' sounds from the darkness. 'Have you popped off, old doggie, eh? Use your eyes!'

'Go on, go on,' says the officer, 'otherwise we shall not get there by tomorrow. Hurry up a bit!'

The cabdriver again stretches his neck, sits up and, with a bad grace, brandishes his whip. Several times again he turns to look at his fare, but the latter has closed his eyes and, apparently, is not disposed to listen. Having deposited the officer in the Viborg, he stops by the tavern, doubles himself up on his seat, and again remains motionless, while the snow once more begins to cover him and his horse. An hour, and another... Then, along the footpath, with a squeak of galoshes, and quarrelling, come three young men, two of them tall and lanky, the third one short and humpbacked.

'Cabby, to the Police Bridge!' in a cracked voice calls the humpback. 'The three of us for two *griveniks*.'

Iona picks up his reins and smacks his lips. Two *griveniks* is not a fair price, but he does not mind whether it is a rouble or five *kopeks*—to him it is all the same now, so long as they are fares. The young men, jostling each other and using bad language, approach the sleigh and all three at once try to get onto the seat; then begins a discussion as to which two shall sit and who shall be the one to stand. After wrangling, abusing each other and much petulance, it is at last decided that the humpback shall stand as he is the smallest.

'Now then, hurry up!' says the humpback in a twanging voice, as he takes his place and breathes in Iona's neck. 'Old furry! Here, mate, what a cap you have! There is not a worse one to be found in all Petersburg! ...'

'He-he—he-he', giggles Iona. 'Such a ...'

'Now you, 'such a', hurry up, are you going the whole way at this pace? Are you...Do you want it in the neck?'

'My head feels like bursting,' says one of the lanky ones. 'Last night at the Donkmasoves, Vaska and I drank the whole of four bottles of cognac.'

'I don't understand what you lie for,' says the other lanky one angrily; 'you lie like a brute.'

'God strike me, it's the truth!'

'It's as much the truth as that a louse coughs!'

'He-he,' grins Iona, 'what gay young gentlemen!'

'Pshaw, go to the devil!' says the humpback indignantly.

'Are you going to get on or not, you old pest? Is that the

way to drive? Use the whip a bit! Go on, devil, go on, give it to him well!

Iona feels at his back the little man wriggling, and the tremble in his voice. He listens to the insults hurled at him, sees the people, and little by little the feeling of loneliness leaves him. The humpback goes on swearing until he gets mixed up in some elaborate six-foot oath, or chokes with coughing. The lankies begin to talk about a certain Nadejda Petrovna. Iona looks round at them several times; he waits for a temporary silence, then, turning round again, he murmurs:

'My son... died this week.'

'We must all die,' sighs the humpback, wiping his lips after an attack of coughing. 'Now, hurry up, hurry up! Gentlemen, I really cannot go any farther like this! When will he get us there?'

'Well, just you stimulate him a little in the neck!'

'You old pest, do you hear, I'll bone your neck for you! If one treated the like of you with ceremony, one would have to go on foot! Do you hear, old serpent Gorinytch! Or do you not care a spit!'

Iona hears rather than feels the blow they deal him.

'He-he' he laughs. 'They are gay young gentlemen, God bless'em!'

'Cabby, are you married?' asks a lanky one.

'I? He-he, gay young gentlemen! Now I have only a wife and the moist ground...He, ho, ho, ...that is to say, the grave. My son has died, and I am alive...A wonderful thing, death mistook the door...instead of coming to me, it went to my son...'

Iona turns round to tell them how his son died but, at this moment, the humpback, giving a little sigh, announces, 'Thank God, we have at last reached our destination,' and Iona watches them disappear through the dark entrance. Once more he is alone, and again surrounded by silence... His grief, which has abated for a short while, returns and rends his heart with greater force. With an anxious and hurried look, he searches among the crowds passing on either side of the street to find whether there may be just one person who will listen to him. But the crowds hurry by

without noticing him or his trouble. Yet it is such an immense, illimitable, grief. Should his heart break and the grief pour out, it would flow over the whole earth, so it seems, and yet no one sees it. It has managed to conceal itself in such an insignificant shell that no one can see it even by day and with a light.

Iona sees a hall porter with some sacking and decides to talk to him.

'Friend, what sort of time is it?' he asks.

'Past nine. What are you standing here for? Move on.'

Iona moves on a few steps, doubles himself up, and abandons himself to his grief. He sees it is useless to turn to people for help. In less than five minutes he straightens himself, holds up his head as if he felt some sharp pain, and gives a tug at the reins; he can bear it no longer. 'The stables,' he thinks, and the little horse, as if it understood, starts off at a trot.

About an hour and a half later, Iona is seated by a large dirty stove. Around the stove, on the floor, on the benches, people are snoring; the air is thick and suffocatingly hot. Iona looks at the sleepers, scratches himself, and regrets having returned so early.

'I have not even earned my fodder,' he thinks. 'That's what's my trouble. A man who knows his job, who has had enough to eat and his horse too, can always sleep peacefully.'

A young cabdriver, in one of the corners, half gets up, grunts sleepily, and stretches towards a bucket of water.

'Do you want a drink?' Iona asks him.

'Don't I want a drink!'

'That's so? Your good health. But listen, mate—you know, my son is dead...Did you hear? This week, in the hospital...It's a long story.'

Iona looks to see what effect his words have, but sees none—the young man has hidden his face and is fast asleep again. The old man sighs and scratches his head. Just as much as the young one wants to drink, the old man wants to talk. It will soon be a week since his son died, and he has not been able to speak about it properly to anyone. One must tell it slowly and carefully; how his son fell ill,

how he suffered, what he said before he died, how he died. One must describe every detail of the funeral, and the journey to the hospital to fetch the dead son's clothes. His daughter, Anissia, has remained in the village—one must talk about her too. It is nothing he has to tell? Surely the listener would gasp and sigh, and sympathise with him? It is better, too, to talk to women; two words are enough to make them sob.

'I'll go and look after my horse,' thinks Iona; 'there's always time to sleep. No fear of that!'

He puts on his coat and goes to the stable to his horse; he thinks of the corn, the hay, the weather. When he is alone, he dare not think of his son; he can speak about him to anyone, but to think of him, and picture him to himself, is unbearably painful.

'Are you tucking in?' Iona asks his horse, looking at its bright eyes: 'go on, tuck in, though we've not earned our corn, we can eat hay. Yes I am too old to drive—my son could have, not I. He was a first-rate cabdriver. If only he had lived!'

Iona is silent for a moment, then continues:

'That's how it is, my old horse. There's no more Kuzma Ionitch. He has left us to live, and he went off pop. Now let's say you had a foal, you were the foal's mother and, suddenly, let's say, that foal went and left you to live after him. It would be sad, wouldn't it?'

The little horse munches, listens and breathes over its master's hand...

Iona's feelings are too much for him and he tells the little horse the whole story.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anton Chekhov (1810–1904) was born in a middle-class family in Russia. He studied medicine at Moscow University. His first short story appeared in 1880 and, in the next seven years, he produced more than



six hundred stories. He also wrote plays— *Seagull*, *Uncle Vanya*, *The Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchards* are among the more famous ones. His work greatly influenced the modern short story and drama.

The main theme of Chekov's short stories is life's pathos, caused by the inability of human beings to respond to, or even to communicate with, one another. The present story illustrates this point beautifully.

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

1. Comment on the indifference that meets Iona's attempts to share his grief with his fellow human beings.
2. What impression of the character of Iona do you get from this story?
3. How does the horse serve as a true friend and companion to Iona?

TALKING ABOUT THE TEXT

Discuss the following in pairs

1. Empathy and understanding are going out of modern society. The individual experiences intense alienation from the society around him or her.
2. Behind the public face of the people in various occupations is a whole saga of personal suffering and joy which they wish to share with others.

APPRECIATION

1. The story begins with a description of the setting. How does this serve as a fitting prelude to the events described in the story?
2. Comment on the graphic detail with which the various passengers who took Iona's cab are described.
3. This short story revolves around a single important event. Discuss how the narrative is woven around this central fact.
4. The story begins and ends with Iona and his horse. Comment on the significance of this to the plot of the story.

LANGUAGE WORK

1. Look at the following set of words and mention what is common to them both in form and meaning

snuffle	snort	sniffle	snore
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2. Look at the words given in the box below

snigger	wriggle	sneak	squeak
squawk	titter	pant	chuckle
giggle	jeer	chortle	guffaw
sigh	side	boo	shriek
scramble	croak	straggle	plod
gasp			

Now classify them according to their closeness in meaning to the words given below

A	B	C	D	E
snigger	wriggle	squeak	jeer	sigh

3. Explain the associations that the colour 'white' has in the story.
4. What does the phrase 'as if he were on needles' mean? Can you think of another phrase with a similar meaning substituting the word 'needles'?

SUGGESTED READING

1. 'What Men Live by' by Leo Tolstoy
2. 'The Overcoat' by N. Gogol.