

THE WHISPER

Written by

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Based on 'The Little Joke'  
A short story  
By  
Anton Chekhov

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From 'The Little Joke', a short story by Anton Chekhov.

Translated by Patrick Miles.

Adapted by Willie Christie

**1947.** INT: TRAIN.

Frosted windows. Cold weak light of winter. Setting sun plays across the features of a MAN. 70 Years or more. He wears a demob pinstripe. Grey. He is deep in thought. A melancholic air. He glances over at a YOUNG GIRL who sits opposite with her MOTHER.

V.O

Look at that face...almost Russian...like her face...different century of course...it's cold...God I'm cold. Such thin blood, in veins that will turn to ice before we reach London, unless we hurry up. 'Ancient Russian émigré found frozen to death on London bound train. Does anyone know him? Does anyone claim him? Someone might have...once. She would have claimed me. Once. Damn what station is this?

*The Old Man wipes the window as the train pulls into a small station. It has begun to snow. The Mother and Daughter pick up their things and leave the carriage. The Old Man watches them as they make their way past the window and continue down the platform.*

*Suddenly he freezes. As the mother and daughter turn and momentarily catch his eye. Now they are from another century. Another life. Russian. Turn of the century. The Old Man is briefly distracted as the Guard blows his whistle.*

*When he turns back, he sees only his original travelling companions, as they make their way down the platform and out of view.*

*He leans back in his seat...bewildered...transported back in time.*

V.O (CONT'D)

Nadya...little Nadezenka...what did I do? Youth. Stupid arrogant youth. Totally invincible, unable to tell the difference between life and love. And where did it get me? Here...alone..and cold....And her? What happened after I left I wonder...did she spend these years like me regretting her life...regretting a happiness that eluded her...?

(MORE)

## V.O (CONT'D)

(No) That was my fate...her's must have been kinder; such beauty, such vulnerability...innocence...and as if to spite my ribald insensitivity, her life must have been everything that she hope it would be. I made sure of that.

SFX: As the sound of the train and his voice fade, he is lost to the world of his youth.

RUSSIA 1897.

A LUNCH PARTY sits around a table in the snow. The guests are clothed against the cold. Yet still elegant. Servants stand-by, making forays from the table, pouring wine, clearing plates, taking hot water from a samovar.

Children play throwing snowballs. Nurses in attendance.

As we join the table we become aware of a pretty young woman, NADYA PETROVNA. Aged 16, she is in the first blossom of womanhood. Her hair is still worn long. She casts an occasional discreet glance at someone else at the table. It is a man. Aged 19. Handsome. More assured, his reciprocating glances hold a little longer, a little steadier. He is NIKOLAY UVAROV. He addresses her across the table.

## NICKOLAY

Just once Nadezhda. Just one time.

## NADYA

I am afraid Nickolay.

## NICKOLAY

No harm will come of us. It is safe. Please Nadya. Please! Don't be afraid.

*But she is afraid. She will die!*

He looks deeply into her eyes. Enticing her. Willing her. Yet as she is almost at the point of conciliation, he is distracted by the merry laughter of two other young Hussars who vie for his attention. He turns his attention to them. Ignoring Nadya.

But Nadya has an ally. Her mother, the Countess. A beautiful, aristocratic woman. A twinkle in her eye.

She speaks softly to Nadya, then she interrupts Nickolay.

## COUNTESS

Nikolay!

(he turns, sharply)

It is unseemly to keep Nadezhda waiting. Especially when she is so keen to accept your offer and join you on your venture.

The other Hussars smirk between themselves as the table goes quiet.

NICKOLAY

Countess! I must apologize. Nadezhda, I thought--

COUNTESS

It is to Nadya that you should apologize, Nikolay!

NICKOLAY

Yes..of course...forgive me Nadezhda. Forgive my rudeness. My friends here will be my undoing. Will you come with me?

NADYA

I--

She is about to surrender, when there is a noise in the background. The assembled party turn to look. Through the trees, a strange sight. An AUTOMOBILE jerking through the snow. It comes to an enforced halt in front of the party. The young Hussars rush from the table.

NADYA (CONT'D)

Mother, how could you say such a thing? You have embarrassed me in front of Nikolay and his friends.

COUNTESS

Nadya, he is a young man. He needs discipline.

DISSOLVE TO:

AT THE TOP OF THE HILL.

TWO FIGURES in the distance. NICKOLAY pulls a large toboggan with two red leather seats.

NIKOLAY

Come. Sit here. Don't be afraid.

NADYA reluctantly takes her place on the front seat of the huge machine. She is so afraid.

Nikolay sits behind. And with a heave he pushes them off as they hurtle into the abyss. To certain death.

SFX: The wind cutting like a knife. Tiny gasps from Nadya as she tries to catch her breath. The runners slicing their way through the snow and ice. It is terrifyingly all-embracing.

And then above the sound yet as one with it, *another* instrument in the ensemble...

*"I LOVE YOU NADYA"*

A whisper! Nadya starts. Did she hear it? Has the wind deceived her, did she invent the words? Gradually the sled comes to a halt at the bottom of the hill. Nadya is pale and terrified. She is confused. She searches his face for a clue. There is nothing.

NADYA

I shall never do that again.

Nikolay helps her to her feet.

NADYA (CONT'D)

Not for anything in the world. I nearly died.

EXT. LUNCH PARTY.

Conversation still plentiful. Two young Subalterns fence together. Resting from her snowball fight, a young child has joined the table. As she is hugged by her mother.

Someone plays a balalaika. Elsewhere a woman is being photographed.

COUNTESS

Felix, if your carriage will start, I think perhaps that it is time to leave and as Nadya has not returned I should grateful Petya, if you would retrieve her for me. The child must be exhausted by now.

PETYA.

I have left Countess!

NADYA (O.S.)

Do you know what?

EXT. UP THE MOUNTAIN.

NIKOLAY

What Nadezhda?

NADYA

I...let's go again. I want to go again.

NIKOLAY

Can you be serious? Just now, you said you nearly died and now you want to throw caution to the winds and go down again. Nothing would please me more, but are you certain?

NADYA

Yes. Take me again.

They climb the hill. Again she is pale and trembling and yet she has to know. She is intrigued. Her fear mixed with the excitement of romantic awakening and it is making her quite giddy.

CUT TO:

They hurtle down the hill as before. Again the *sound*. The terrible fear. Again the *whisper*:

*“I LOVE YOU, NADYA”*

Nadya half turns but Nikolay gives away nothing. When they reach the bottom, she searches his face. She listens to his voice. Nothing. Who said those words?

She hears nothing until :

NIKOLAY

I think perhaps we should return to the others.

NADYA

Yes. I quite like tobogganing. May we go one more time? There is still light.

They turn back to the hill.

CUT TO:

Long Shot as they race down the hill.

SFX: The cacophany and:

*“I LOVE YOU NADYA”*

CUT TO:

They come to a rest at the bottom of the hill.

PETYA (O.S.)

Nikolay! Nikolay!

Petya races towards them shouting that they must return to the others.

The two men, young peacocks in the snow, excitedly strut back to the party. Leaving Nadya to make her own way.

FADE OUT.

INT. STABLES - MORNING

Shafts of morning light stream through the window. A horse stands at his stable door.

Nikolay enters, furtively. He opens an envelope and takes out a letter.

EC/U The letter written in Russian.

NADYA (V.O.)

If you go to the slope today, please will you call for me? N.

## MIX TO MONTAGE:

Of their days together on the slopes. Tobogganing. The runners...the snow...the trees...Nadya's hair in the wind. Their whispering, laughing. Happy days!

And still, the *Whisper*.

Although Nadya is still scared she is now obsessed with the mystery, of finding out the secret. Does he truly love her or does she *imagine* his declarations through her fear.

She is determined to find out...

## INT. HALL - DAY

Nadya tip-toes across the gloomy hall toward the front door.

COUNTESS (O.S.)

Are you going out Nadya?

NADYA

No, Mamma.

## EXT. THE HILL - DAY

Nadya struggles to pull the sled up the hill. Her tiny frame strains with every step.

She is terrified.

From below Nikolay watches unobserved.

At the top of the hill, Nadya surveys the slope below. She climbs aboard the vast sled and pushes off into the unknown.

As she swiftly descends she strains to hear, listening for the words...

*Perhaps* he hears them. Perhaps it was her imagination.

She is disconcerted and she slumps with her head in her hands.

## EXT. GARDEN - DAY

The snows have almost gone. Nadya and the Countess walk down the avenue of their magnificent garden.

Two small children play with their hoop.

NADYA

How was the party?

COUNTESS

What party?

NADYA

At Nikolay's parents.

COUNTESS

It was fun. Nikolay was there as handsome as ever.

NADYA

Did you speak to him?

COUNTESS

Only briefly. He asked how you were.

NADYA

Oh?

COUNTESS

He starts at Military Academy soon I think.

NADYA

Yes. I know.

INT. CONSERVATORY - DAY

Nadya and her mother sit by amongst the tropical ferns and plants. Nadya reads a book.

The Countess stands.

COUNTESS

I think I shall return to the house. Don't be long

NADYA

I won't.

Nadya is left sitting on her own. Suddenly there is a breeze. She looks up. A pages from her book is blown. The palms begin to sway and her garment flaps and flutters.

Then she hears it. Or does she?

*"LOVE YOU NADYA"*.

Suddenly she is transformed as she stands, convinced love has come to her again.

*"I LOVE YOU NADYA"*.

Not believing what she hears, she begins to turn to pirouette, tears in her eyes as she smile and spins laughing with utter joy...

**Camera** pulls back into the ferns to reveal Nikolay standing there. Watching. Dressed in his Subaltern's uniform.

He turns and with a wry smile on his face he walks silently away, leaving Nadya still dancing with joy...

INT. TRAIN - NIGHT

**1947**

OLD NIKOLAY sits, lost in his reminiscences. The sliding door of his compartment opens.

CONDUCTOR

Ticket, if you please, Sir.

Nikolay appears not to have heard but slowly turns to the conductor.

CONDUCTOR (CONT'D)

Your ticket please, Sir.

NIKOLAY

What time do we reach London?

CONDUCTOR

Ten minutes past six Sir.

Handing back the ticket.

CONDUCTOR (CONT'D)

Thank you Sir.

He leaves as Nikolay retreats once again into his reverie.

NIKOLAY (V.O.)

“What shall I do with this absurdity - O heart, O troubled heart - this caricature, Decrepit age that has been tied to me like a dog's tail...” My stupidity, perhaps I lost the only thing I should have made mine, that my life would have been different...a full life. Not this sad wasted life. A secret I never shared, never faced, and her, what about her, does she share it with her grandchildren, her story to be passed down the generations. A love story, a fable, a fairy-tale I wonder...and me...you old fool...it was all so long ago. I'm older and maybe a little wiser and yet I can't...I can't ever understand why I said those words...why I ever played that *joke* on Nadezhda...

He leans back as the train hurtles into a tunnel and BLACK.

END.