

# THE ENGLISH LESSON

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### Scene 3

- Martha: New Year's arriving in one hour.
- He: So let's kiss the old one good-bye. Let's do it together.
- Martha: Let's light candles for the Old One and the New One. I want to see a sea of candles; I want lots of light.
- He: Yes, let's do it. (*Takes some candles out of a drawer, gives Martha roughly a half, six or seven, and they light them in silence.*)
- Martha: We met at Halloween.
- He: Yes, I took you home from the cemetery. Nobody close is buried there but I went to pay homage to our war heroes. You know, Warsaw is not my home town...
- Martha: I know you better than you can possibly imagine.
- He: Sorry, that's just my obsession with the Warsaw Uprising and although I am too young to have lived through it, it almost seems that I have experienced it.
- Martha: It really seems that the past is much stronger in you than what's going to happen with us in a minute.
- He: The past is like a plait of blond hair... paraphrasing a poet.
- Martha: Oh... such tenderness...
- He: Have I ever told you a story about the boy who wanted to become a step in a stairway?
- Martha: No, no, I don't recall this one.
- He: He imagined that one day God would go that way and put His foot on the step that the boy had turned into.
- Martha: What did his parents have to say about it?
- He: Exactly, the parents wanted him to become an engineer. My dear, please forgive me!
- Martha: Don't say it, please. I thought, when you had invited your parents for the holidays and when we were together, that this meant something for you. Let's not talk about it. I will always come when you need me. That's the way I am. Pour the champagne.
- He: (*pouring champagne*) Virgin Mary, forgive me. Help me be a man. (*gives her champagne*) Shouldn't we wait until midnight strikes?

Martha: No, not necessarily. At midnight one shouts with joy and counts down the seconds. Strange, isn't it? Have you ever given it any thought?

He: No, not to that. I was thinking how great Chekhov's talent was, who could divide himself into so many characters in a play. I can't do it. Well, perhaps just into two characters but ... So maybe there is some analogy between the countdown on New Year's Eve and Chekhov. I lived once... (*Martha smooths her hair*) no, it won't be a story, my dear, just a short recollection. So I lived once in a flat whose windows faced a concrete wall. This wall didn't have any windows, just a door. This wall was part of the house in which a few musicians resided. The iron door was always slammed so loudly that it made me jump, even in my sleep. There was also a howling dog there, who had his concerts at one at night, and a baby who knew only one one-syllable sound and always uttered it with a horrible noise. When I was in a good mood, in my thoughts I patted the dog which stopped his howling then, or I pacified the baby, which helped a lot. Later it appeared that the real help came owing to the iron doors. It was its infernal sound that frightened me so and then I started sensing this flash of light inside me. That flash for a long time was everything I had. It constituted all my knowledge and hope. Martha, so it was a story after all. And you had known about it before I ever realised it. You are just like that flash of light of mine. You are everywhere...And I don't know how to live because I am a man. Tell me, is that it?

Martha: I wouldn't know. Maybe... But I don't anything you wouldn't know yourself. And you might know so much more.

He: You just want to make me feel better. That's your brilliant way of flattering me.

Martha: Don't be too sure. Maybe you don't know yourself so well, perhaps you don't understand yourself well enough. But this means that you also don't realise what kind of price

you would have to pay for something you believe in. Give yourself a chance. Or give God a chance.

He: What's my English like?

Martha: Decent.

He: Would you care to teach me?

Martha: Your vocabulary is richer than mine.

He: But I don't know the grammar.

Martha: How come?

He: You're not going to believe me.

Martha: Try me.

He: I don't want to know the grammar of the English language because I think that the Anglo-Saxon world always takes the position of a witness and never the participant. They think that the nightmares that the rest of the world went through never really affected them. And I, my dear, want to be alive, I want to go through every single experience, understand? I mean, my soul seems to want it, maybe not myself as I tend to be afraid of everything. But my soul desires it and takes me everywhere it chooses to be. My dear, do you remember the colour red in Caravaggio's painting *Rest during the Flight into Egypt*? The rich red of Virgin Mary's dress. My soul seems to say to me: "When your blood is of this hue, I shall let you rest." I keep hearing its voice.

Martha: (*says to herself, crying softly*) I also hear it.

He: Tell me...

Martha: No, you're not a bad man. I don't think you are. But you always judge yourself. Why don't you leave it to God. It is written "don't make a judgement" which must include judging oneself as well. (*A cuckoo starts singing*)

He: Quickly now, the last seconds of the Old Year. (*Standing close to each other, holding champagne glasses, they start the countdown: 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1...*)

Martha: All the best to you. Lots of happiness in the year 2025.

He: My dear, lots of sunshine in your life, may you shine brightly as well and be healthy in this new 2025 year.

Martha: The champagne was good but I feel like having together with you the first tea this year. And I will make it myself. Please wait here.

*(He sits down and turns on the music from a tape player. When Martha enters carrying cups, he switches the music off.)*

Martha: I'm drinking tea. I shall remember its taste for a long time.

He: And I shall remember the imprint of your lips on the cup, their colour of dark cherries. The purple hue, like the colour of mourning. And their shape of a heart imprinted on the porcelain. I'll wash the cups in the morning.

Martha: We could wash them up before going to bed.

He: And what if we didn't go to bed?

Martha: And what if we prayed? Let's kneel down.  
Father, who art in heaven...

He: Father, who art in heaven...

Martha: I thank you for the simplicity of spirit which you gave me. I thank you for anointing me with knowledge due to which I know what I want. I thank you for not having to go back to the past in order to find suffering in it and that I can accept what you offer with gratitude.

*(Silence)*

He: Amen. *(He hangs his head down.)*

If I could only cry, my dear girl, I would cry so long that it would move you. I would cry for such a long time that you would finally forgive me. But I have cried all my tears out. I have cried my eyes out to God and He forgave me. That's how I know that you would forgive me as well. I had cried for seven years. And I must tell you that I long for tears more than for love. Because they give me the right, if you follow what I'm saying, the right which protects me, the heavenly right which rules that a crying man is untouchable. One will see what happens afterwards but that, in a way, is none of my concern. I just need these few minutes to cool down. Because I... I only know dying and things are just the other way round. Life is the truth, what we actually do is life, isn't that true... People meet, play

and cry together, they share things, they go together to auntie's birthday party. That's true life. Occasionally it so happens that they fall in love and that is wonderful. But I know only dying. Everyday dying, slow, accompanied by the majesty of early dawn torture and the perversion of interrupting that monotony by the coming dusk. So who I am, having received the last blow? Tell me, please, who am I, as I cannot recognise my face in any human physiognomy and simultaneously I can identify with everybody, even these who will come after we are gone. Tell me who I am as through this human adventure I learnt the pain characterised by absence. This inhuman pain that is painless which *makes you neither coward nor hero. This torture in which the one who executes the torturing does not want to know the names of army colleagues and does not care about your secrets at all. As far as he is concerned, you can't have your secrets and that proves his superiority over you. My dearest, the world hasn't always been like that. That is why I keep returning to the past because everything seems to have perished in it, as if it only had existed in the mind before He created anything. And this mind is the one of the Creator's and everything is in it and everything is loved. I can only hope that Lord created this world out of a simple need of sharing himself with others and...*

Martha: He never suffers what you do... the pain that is painless. But your hope has no right of existence. And you know it, darling. You know only too well and that's why you are afraid to write. Not because of honesty but because you don't know what you may encounter once you cross this border. You know this border, every artist does, because every artist eventually withdraws and leaves his creation to its own fate. Let it live its own life, he states nonchalantly, and washes his hands off it. He turns on his heel and goes away. But his heart howls with torment, or like in your case, it doesn't because it finds emptiness and the only thing it can do is to refuse to describe it. But the artist must

describe emptiness which is a contradiction in itself because it cannot be done. How right you are – tears are much better. Tears are like lovers, sweet and so much expected. But I do not know what’s going to happen next because I have reached this place together with you. If you don’t take me further with you, I know neither where I’m going to end up nor you for that matter. I know, though, that this handshake which is not satisfactory for you (*she shows her own hand*), will be a compensation from Virgin Mary. So wait, darling. Find the patience and the strength. I wish you would find them. I don’t know, though, if you will find enough strength and above all I don’t know if it is your predestination.

He: My dearest, before I go crazy, allow me to light up an incense. We’re still alive so we have... well, we have various things. Presently, I have the need to light the incense. (*lights it up*)

Martha: (*using some slang*) ‘cause folks have a buddy they deserve, ain’t that right, bro’?

He: Hey to the New Year!

Martha: Hip, hip, hurrah! It’s warm.

He: I’d say cold.

Martha: Or cold, what’s the difference. Don’t light the incense with a match but with a candle.

He: Why?

Martha: So it doesn’t come in contact with sulphur. Prejudice, isn’t it?

He: Never heard this one.

Martha: Because it’s one of my own.

He: Nice.

Martha: You have a way with words... Nice smell. Let’s have something to eat. Barley and beans, good idea?

He: Very good. Perhaps a bit on the cowboy side.

(*They bring plates from the kitchen, sit down and eat. He starts humming something and after a while Martha joins him.*)

He: Let us eat and eat and eat

Plain good barley with no meat  
Martha: Barley's splendid, barley's neat  
He: Plain good barley with no meat  
Martha: I don't know about you, mate  
But I'm cleaning up my plate.  
*(They finish eating)*  
Why didn't you cross yourself before starting eating? Why  
don't you do it when I am around?  
He: I don't want you to think that I'm pretending something. I  
do it when I'm all by myself.  
Martha: Don't I know it!  
He: I simply don't want to... you know, it seems that the sign of  
a cross is something so intimate, something you shouldn't  
show off. How was your barley? Some salad would have  
been good to go with it, something green.  
Martha: But there are things which are fantastic and wonderful  
when you are among people...  
He: Well, certainly, and this is the most beautiful thing. When  
something good happens to you, you would like to run to  
people, to your friends and share it with them. Without  
doing it, the joy seems to be incomplete, isn't that so?  
Martha: Exactly.  
He: The sign of a cross... I can't, I still can't do it in other  
people's presence.  
Martha: Do you go to church?  
He: Yeah, when it's empty. I wanted to take that wafer, you  
know, the symbol of Christ's body, into my mouth because  
I desperately desired it, because I found such an impulse in  
my heart. A lady friend of mine standing next to me, who  
knew me as a non-church goer, asked whether I had  
confessed my sins. I said no, and she claimed I couldn't  
take the body of Christ without a prior confession. So I  
went to a confession and told the priest at a confessional  
that it was my first time ever. He asked me then if I went to  
teachings. I said no and that was the end of it.  
Martha: Those are the rules and everybody must obey them.

He: And what about the spontaneous impulse of the heart?  
Love is spontaneous. But I know so little about it. I have no  
grudge. I simply won't have this wafer, or perhaps, some  
day, if I find the courage, I will walk up there, open my  
mouth, not say anything, and take it. I doubt it though as  
my consciousness is already poisoned with doubt. Perhaps  
so is my fate – not to belong anywhere. I know now, I just  
realised that I never belonged to anything. People are  
members of all kinds of clubs, or whatever, but I never  
found such a place or a group of people that would suit me.

Martha: That's why it's so difficult for you.

He: Look into your teacup and tell me what you see on the  
bottom?

Martha: Some lees, dregs, and scum.  
*(She touches his forehead with her own and leaves after a  
while.)*

He: No one is proof against a woman's wiles.

Martha: Two can play that game.

He: In the original, two referred to females.

Martha: No, males.

He: It was about a lassie.

Martha: A lad.

He: An arse.

Martha: A dick.

He: Oh, no, what a shame! How can you say such a vile thing! I  
clasp my hands in amazement and in a great arc I circle  
through the air. I join my hands in amazement over you.  
What a female, what character, what cheek!

Martha: I don't even bat an eyelid over your strenuous and  
miserable efforts, monsieur. And the more you strain  
yourself, the more I turn my back to it. And I when I shake  
my hip, the whole army's at my beck and call, and when I  
bat my eyelid the whole country's at... at... *(she searches  
for a word)* the mall... or somewhere.

He: They sowed the grass, this they did,  
And it grew high so they cut it.

Martha: Wow! I didn't know it that you were a poet! Should I write it down? (*She grasps a notebook.*) Ready now. I even have a pen. You may shoot when you're ready.

He: (*lies on the floor*) Nothing comes to mind, only the prayer which I know wrongly because I learnt it from a translation from English. What a fix you put me in! I cannot dictate when called upon.

Martha: Nonsense, I know you love it, you lazy-bones, you.

He: All right then, well... Let something come to mind. Are you ready? 'Cause if you're not, why should I strain myself for nothing? My hands itch, everything itches. No, nothing doing today. Nothing to report, your excellency. No report is a good report.

Martha: Don't hurry it, we've got the time. Relax, my prince.

He: But dear princess, my finger aches.

Martha: Due to what?

He: Due to the morning sketching.

Martha: What did you write?

He: I didn't actually write but in points I noted that I would like to write something, a few pages about aromas and rain. The fragrances of my childhood, from the countryside where I used to go on holidays and where my grandpa and grandma on my father's side lived. It rained at the village where my mom's relatives lived. Both matters are so difficult to describe and they evoke so much emotion in me. I really would like to manage somehow but don't know how to start. The experiences, or rather recollections are so intensive that everything turns pale in comparison, especially words.

Martha: I'd like to tell you about the rain and then you could tell me about fragrances, all right?

He: Great.

Martha: Beyond the great hills and dark forests there was a village...

He: What a grand beginning. And it's the countryside, too. I am all ears. Tell me about the rain, the rain please, pretty please.

Martha: The rain is falling...

He: Great Scott, what a genius you are. I would have never thought to start a story about the rain with the words “the rain is falling”. You, my dearest, are as wise as nature itself, no matter whether we like it or not. And if nature were like me, the rain would never fall. Wow, wonder of wonders! But, pray, continue.

Martha: So when the rain was falling, I was standing in the door of a barn, slightly stooping as the door was as tall as myself, and thinking what I will do, or rather what we will be doing when Violet, my aunt’s daughter returns. I was then maybe ten years old. The drops were falling on my nose and feet. So I stood motionless breathing in the humid, cool air that oozed the fragrance of a garden.

He: Leave the fragrance to me. Sorry, I’ll be quiet, I promise.

Martha: So the air, the more it rained, the more fabulous it grew. And then, some two hundred yards from the barn I stood in, it called a fog over the pond to life. And there, the reeds, and birds, and fish, and rushes spoke in such a language as if they didn’t need the grammar at all, my dear, as if they were one family. The rain washed the dog’s kennel clean, and his food bowl and the dog himself. Scratching my head, totally bored, I was imagining a beautiful palace but what was offered with such generosity, that is the rain, I simply could not accept. And I can’t accept it even today because such a gift signifies might. This might is indescribable, incomprehensible, unthinkable, be it for a child or a grown-up man. Still, it is offered with a smile, humility, sincerity and lucidity, kindness and simplicity, and, finally, it was of such unmistakable nature. That might poured down on me with every raindrop which I couldn’t accept. Look, it’s raining now. Again. How can there be rain in January? To this day I cannot accept this gift of might. This might is not a demagogy of love. It is the goodness, that is a flirt with which I don’t know what to do.

He: I must light up more candles. On the other hand, perhaps not, as it’s getting late. Thank you. Tomorrow I’ll tell you

about fragrances. As early as today I have realised that wherever there is rain, it is accompanied with fragrances, and where fragrances are, there must be is raining. Good night.

*(They go in opposite directions and switch the light off.)*

Martha: Please come to me. *(followed by silence)*

He: *(returns to his room, turns the night lamp on. He doesn't go to Martha's.)* What can I do? Amongst the important, there also exists the unspoken. These are a few terms that define a phenomenon which I am not able to name. But I am able to give you some facts regarding this phenomenon, oh yes, that's simple and I can do it. I shake my arms in order to shake off the birds which can't find a branch of a tree and stubbornly and to the point of weariness pick human arms instead. Away, go away wretched birds! There is no rest whatsoever. Bits of conversations, nonsense subjects don't let one in peace even during the sleep. Everything pulls you down to earth, infesting you with earthiness and burden, and gravitation in order to take your eyes away from the point they concentrated on. Also in order to prescribe your feet proper imprints in the sand which you desire the least. Don't occupy yourself with it, the wise men say. And I am only able to do so few things with emotion, any touch of emotion. If I give this up as well, what will happen with me? What will follow is hunger, loneliness, deprivation of strength and will to fight, and finally the feeling of uselessness. And nowhere to go. From that place there is nowhere to go. *(He kneels and hangs his head down)* Virgin Mary, show me the way. *(He leaves the room looking back at a burning night lamp.)*

END OF ACT I