

TV Mini Series

"LEVITAN"

Biography, History, Drama

PILOT
"On the Edge"

2023

TITLE: TURCHANINOV ESTATE, GORKI, 1895

EXT. TURCHANINOV ESTATE - GORKI - LEVITAN'S WORKSHOP
 "SYNAGOGUE" - NIGHT

Snow covers the yard. It's dark and windy.

A WOMAN trudges through the fresh snow, wrapped in a posh fur coat. The house lights shine through frosty windows and trees sway in the wind.

A distant dog howls.

INT. TURCHANINOV ESTATE - GORKI - LEVITAN'S WORKSHOP
 "SYNAGOGUE" - NIGHT

ISAAK LEVITAN (30s) paints, employing vibrant colours in a meadow with the setting sun. He squints, scrutinising the tiny details.

ANNA TURCHANINOVA (40s) enters, shakes off the snow. She holds a paper in one hand and looks determined. She watches Levitan painting for a moment.

A POINTER DOG named VESTA is asleep on the woollen rug.

Everything in the workshop is neatly arranged: brushes stand ready, splatters decorate the easel. Paint tubes, glaze pots, and sketchbooks fill the shelves.

ANNA

Turning into a jester, are we?

Despite her comment, Levitan pays her no mind and perseveres with his work.

ANNA

Is it Russia's greatest landscape painter? No, I no longer recognise him.

Vesta approaches Anna with a wagging tail, but Anna ignores her, shooing her away.

ANNA

Indulging in artistic infidelity
 for the sake of vogueish decadence?
 How very 'Levitan' of you -
 infidelity!

Levitan remains silent and carries on his work.

ANNA

What have you done to yourself?
This daubing...

Feeling his patience wane, Levitan's brush strokes become more abrupt. Vesta comes to him seeking reassurance. Levitan squats down and strokes her.

LEVITAN

(quietly to Vesta)
It's fine, sweetheart. It's all good.

ANNA

The newspapers are tearing apart your new artistic direction. Have you even bothered to read them?

LEVITAN

No, I haven't.

ANNA

What a surprise! Of course, you haven't. Exile made you utterly ignorant... And they still discuss Chekhov's "Grasshopper". I don't understand how he could exploit you, a dear friend, for his literary pursuits! You should've pursued with a duel!

LEVITAN

Please, Annushka, let me finish.

ANNA

(tries to stop him taking away his brush)
Never! You must revert back to what you once were. I won't allow this... It's a disgrace!

LEVITAN

Please, stop!

ANNA

Is this the artist you've dreamt of becoming your entire life?

LEVITAN

I don't know who I am anymore!

Vesta starts barking. Levitan tears his canvas, grabs his rifle from the wall, and puts on his jacket to leave.

LEVITAN

Happy now? I'm no longer disgracing myself.

ANNA

You're impossible! You always do things your way! That's why you can't come back to Moscow! -- Where do you think you're going?

Levitan leaves and Anna looks at the ruined painting.

ANNA

(muttering to herself)

Why not paint a winter scene, just for once?

CUT TO:

TITLE: MOSCOW, 1970s

MONTAGE

- Loud horn and the rhythmic clatter of the train wheels.
- A glimpse of the train's inscription reveals it's heading from Kibartay, Lithuania to Moscow. Young Levitan happily peeks out of the window, resting his chin on his hands, enjoying the breeze and the view of nature.
- The Levitan family, consisting of Father Elias, Mother Basia, sons Abel (9) Young Levitan, daughters Taube and Mihle, step onto the platform. The children appear excited about the move.

ELIAS

Ready to chase your dreams?

- Basia and the daughters unpack their belongings in Levitan's tiny apartment. Young Levitan and Abel pretend to sword-fight with paintbrushes. Isaac "injures" Abel but quickly extends a helping hand to help him up.
- The room is cramped, with visual aids lining the walls. Elias sits across from a restless young Levitan. Young

Levitan's attention keeps drifting to his brother, Abel, who is engrossed in painting.

Abel stands in contemplation, struggling to decide what to paint next. Meanwhile, Elias maintains a calm demeanour, indicating he is a kind and patient teacher.

ELIASH

My boy, to master any skill, you have to fully immerse yourself in the process. You need to learn to focus. Comprenez-vous?

LEVITAN

Oui, Papa.

- Young Levitan can't sleep. He quietly gets up and looks at his brother's painting, careful not to wake up Abel. He takes a brush and adds the missing colours, making the painting beautiful. He puts down the brush, smiles happily as he looks at what he's done.

- In the morning Young Levitan enters the room rubbing his eyes, only to be met with an angry and upset Abel.

ABEL

Why did you do this? You ruined my painting!

YOUNG LEVITAN

(starts sobbing)

I didn't want to! I just had a vision of this painting completed last night! I couldn't help it.

ELIAS

What's the problem? We've always known Isaac had talent.

The sisters examine the painting and nod in approval.

YOUNG LEVITAN

(crying)

I just wanted to create something beautiful.

ABEL

Then take your paints and canvas and paint as much as you want!

BASIA

(gasping for breath)

He didn't ruin it. You both did very well... You've done it together... (coughs) like a team.

Basia coughs heavily, her raspy breath visible in the chilly room. Elias gently wraps a shawl around her. Young Levitan and Abel anxiously exchange glances.

- Young Levitan marvels at the classical building of the SCHOOL OF PAINTING, SCULPTURE, AND ARCHITECTURE. He admires the bright, spacious classrooms, the staircase adorned with sculptures, the immense library, and the collection of paintings. He glances out the window and sees the domes of a church.

Abel stands in the school hall surrounded by fellow students and teachers. Elias and Basia stand nearby, looking pensive.

BASIA

I'm not sure if we're making a mistake. How can we afford paying for Abel's education...

ELIASH

Don't worry, my love. We always find a way.

BASIA

How? You can't find another job, my darling. The whole point of moving to Moscow was to live better. In Lithuania, we had enough to eat, and you didn't have to toil like this...

ELIAS

There was no future for our children there. It didn't work out for me, but at least our boys will have a chance to succeed.

Basia struggles to suppress a harsh cough, and almost loses her balance. Young Levitan approaches Elias and Basia, appearing excited.

YOUNG LEVITAN

I want to study here too! I'll become the greatest artist in the entire universe.

Basia and Elias exchange worried glances.

- Young Levitan gazes out the window at night. Snow falls outside. Basia approaches him and joins in watching the snow.

BASIA

You are still awake, my sweetheart.
It's so late... Look how much snow
has fallen!

YOUNG LEVITAN

You'll see. One day, I will become
the most famous artist in the whole
universe. And I will buy you plenty
of food...hire a doctor for you.

Basia smiles and kisses Young Levitan on the forehead.

- A young Levitan sits on a bench up on a hill, busy drawing. Elias shows up, looking tired and sad. Levitan can tell from Elias's expression that something is wrong.

- Young Levitan and Elias return home. Young Levitan sees the gloomy faces of family members. He throws down his bag and easel and runs to his parents' bedroom. Basia is dead. He rushes to her and cries inconsolably.

YOUNG LEVITAN

Mommy, Mommy, why didn't you wait?
Mommy, you were supposed to wait! I
hate winter! I hate it!

END OF THE MONTAGE

CUT TO:

TITLE: GORKI, 1895

EXT. GORKI - FOREST AND LAKE - NIGHT

Levitan, his breath visible in the frigid winter air, makes his way through the dense forest, a sense of urgency in his steps. It snows heavily. Levitan reaches the frozen lake, its glassy surface illuminated by the pale moonlight. Vesta follows by his side.

In the distance, Levitan catches sight of a frightened bird fluttering in the moonlit clearing. Following the bird with his rifle, Levitan refrains from taking the shot.

Powerlessly, he drops his rifle into the snow beside him and collapses to his knees.

Tears stream down his cheeks as his emotions spill over, mingling with the silent wilderness around him.

CUT TO:

TITLE: MOSCOW, 1970s

INT. MOSCOW SCHOOL OF PAINTING, SCULPTURE, AND ARCHITECTURE - DAY

Isaac walks into the school, his eyes filled with curiosity as he takes in his surroundings. As he enters the classroom, his eyes meet the hostile stares of the students GEORGI and MITYA.

GEORGI

(laughing)

Well, well, the Jew has graced us with his presence...Look at him, he's about to burst with importance!

MITYA

What do you think he's doing here? Probably wants to learn how to draw some gold coins for himself.

GEORGI

Yeah, he's gonna learn how to paint his way out of the ghetto.

MITYA

What rags he's wearing! Levitan belongs in the trash heap!

Levitan takes a deep breath, trying to remain cool. Just then, another student, KOSTYA KOROVIN, enters the classroom. The gang's attention swiftly shifts to him.

GEORGI

(turning to Kostya)

Ah, look who it is! The pauper's son.

MITYA

Did your daddy abandon you? Couldn't stand the shame of being flat broke?

GEORGI

Hey, we heard your father blew his
brains out. Must run in the family,
huh?

Kostya Korovin pays them no mind and takes a seat beside
Levitan.

LEVITAN

Let him alone!
(to Kostya Korovin). You
can paint next to me.

GEORGI

What did you just say, loser?

Another student, NIKOLAI CHEKHOV, steps forward.

NIKOLAY CHEKHOV

Enough! Cut it out, you bunch of
cowards!

The gang falls silent as a teacher PEROV (40) walks in,
dressed in an elegant suit, he has aristocratic manners. He
takes out a handkerchief and gently dabs his forehead, opens
the windows.

PEROV

It's unbearable to breathe. When
will it rain and relieve us from
this suffocating heat?

NIKOLAY CHEKHOV

I am Nikolay Chekov. We'll be
spending some time together I
guess.

LEVITAN

I am Levitan. Isaak Levitan.

KOSTYA KOROVIN

What a name! Levitan! I am
Konstantin Korovin. You can call me
Kostya.

Perov presents a painting showing a scene from peasant life.

PEROV

You have chosen a challenging path for yourself because art demands hard work, but the rewards are worth it. Here is a painting worthy of a medal, strive to paint similarly.

The students approach the painting, examining it. Georgi breaks Levitan's paintbrush while he's admiring the artwork. Nikolay Chekhov notices this and nudges Georgi, as if provoking a confrontation.

PEROV

Nikolay, what's going on over there?

NIKOLAY CHEKHOV

Everything's fine, Vasily Grigorievich.

Perov walks around the classroom and continues his discourse. The students paint.

PEROV

Your task is to capture the nerve of Russian life.

A GUARD, an old former soldier IGNAT, known as EVIL SPIRIT peeks into the classroom.

EVIL SPIRIT

Excuse me, Vasily Grigorievich. Seems like I lost my key yesterday somewhere here.

PEROV

Yes, yes, Ignat. Here they are.

Perov hands over the keys and resumes his lecture.

NIKOLAY CHEKHOV

How is he guarding our classrooms then? No wonder they call him Evil Spirit. His vampire relatives play tricks on him and take away the keys!

The boys burst into laughter.

KOSTYA KOROVIN

Is that true? What a weird
nickname!

PEROV

And one of you will be chosen as a
member of Peredvizhniki that
revolutionised the world of art.
Thanks to Peredvizhniki, you have
been granted freedom, and now
you're not painting biblical
scenes. The real Russian life is
about gluttonous priests and the
suffering common people.

Shaggy, gentle giant ALEXEY SAVRASOV, clad in baggy clothing,
with a dishevelled black beard bursts in the classroom. In
his hands, he holds a willow branch, which he fondly rubs
between his fingers and then brings to his nose, greedily
inhaling its fragrance.

PEROV

What...has bloomed already?

Savrasov thrusts the branch under Perov's nose.

SAVRASOV

Breathe it in, Vasily Grigorievich.

The students watch with curiosity.

PEROV

To me, the branch doesn't smell
like anything.

Savrasov appears bewildered.

SAVRASOV

How can you not sense the divine
aroma of a fresh, living tree,
Vasily Grigorievich? I've just
returned from Ostankino, and
there's life everywhere! Earrings
have already appeared on the alder.
Can an artist not feel the
pulsating sap within the tree
trunks?

KOSTYA KOROVIN
(whispering to Levitan)
He's the creator of "The Rooks Have
Returned," which Tretyakov himself
purchased!

LEVITAN
(Also whispering)
Who is Tretyakov?

KOSTYA KOROVIN
You'll find out later.

Savrasov turns toward the students.

SAVRASOV
Do you feel the aroma, gentlemen?

Everyone remains silent. Suddenly, from behind an easel,
Levitan timidly emerges and speaks softly.

LEVITAN
I do.

SAVRASOV
Who's this brave soul here?

He strokes his beard, looks with interest at what Levitan has
painted of nature, before he starts adding people, and nods
approvingly. It's clear that Levitan is nervous. Savrasov
presents him with a willow branch. Levitan admiringly gazes
at Savrasov.

INT. PEROV'S WORKSHOP - DAY

Perov hardly looks towards Levitan who just entered the
workshop and instead sorts through papers on the table.

PEROV
Come in, Isaac.

Levitan cautiously enters. Perov attentively looks at him
over his glasses.

PEROV
Alexei Kondratyevich has been
consuming my thoughts. Give me the
boy, just give him to me.

Perov once again scrutinises Levitan, as if testing his reaction. Levitan stands still, not moving, but it is evident that he can barely contain his joy.

PEROV

Do you want to join Savrasov's classes?

Levitan barely prevents himself from jumping and, in order not to offend Perov, calmly responds.

LEVITAN

Yes.

Perov averts his gaze and examines the papers, shuffling through them.

PEROV

I want you to know that before you now lies a crucial life-changing decision. Do you understand what you're getting yourself into?

Levitan nods his head.

PEROV

Firstly, landscapes, as you surely know, are not in demand by anyone--

LEVITAN

I am ready to face any obstacle that comes my way. I want to paint nature, not people.

PEROV

Nonsense! You won't make a living from painting nature. Genre painting is where the money is. It's what sells.

LEVITAN

I'm not worried about it. I believe that true artistry is not just about financial success. And I don't look for easy ways or short cuts.

PEROV

Hmmm, trust me, soon you'll change your mind! And let me remind you that even talented landscape artists like Savrasov struggle to make ends meet. And are you aware of his battles with alcohol addiction?

Levitan shrugs his shoulders.

LEVITAN

This is the path I want to take. Savrasov's struggles won't hold me back, Sir.

Perov examines Levitan for a moment before sighing softly.

PEROV

Just don't say later that you weren't warned. Your determination that both worries and impresses me.

LEVITAN

Only nature truly moves me.

A pause hangs in the air, after which Perov once again examines Levitan.

PEROV

Is this your final decision, or do you want to t...

LEVITAN

Final!

Levitan can barely contain his joy. Perov gestures for him to leave.

INT. MOSCOW SCHOOL OF PAINTING, SCULPTURE, AND ARCHITECTURE
- HALL - DAY

Savrasov approaches the teacher's room with Levitan.

SAVRASOV

Wait here, Isak.

Levitan stands behind the door, but he can hear the TEACHERS speaking.

TEACHER 1

Landscape painting of Russian nature is the domain of true Russian artists, not Jews.

TEACHER 2

You've caused quite the trouble, Alexei Kondratievich. How do you plan to clean up this mess? Haven't you heard about what happened to our emperor?

SAVRASOV

And what does that have to do with anything? Ridiculous!

TEACHER 3

Everything, Alexei Kondratievich. An order was given to expel Jews from Moscow. The Jews should not be among us.

TEACHER 2

And Levitan just happens to be one of them.

SAVRASOV

Just look at yourselves and what you're saying. Open your eyes! Levitan may be a Jew, but he's worth a hundred Russian painters! His talent knows no bounds! Let me nurture him!

The teachers remain silent, pretending not to change their opinions.

TEACHER 1

We've made ourselves clear, Savrasov. We don't support your decision. If you dare to go against us, the consequences are on you.

Savrasov exits the teacher's room and realises that Levitan has heard everything and fled. Savrasov sighs loudly in frustration.

SAVRASOV

Damn it!

CUT TO:

TITLE: GORKI, 1895

INT. TURCHANINOV ESTATE - GORKI - LEVITAN'S WORKSHOP
"SYNAGOGUE"- NIGHT

Levitan, soaked to the bone with snow, enters his studio and looks at a damaged painting. He takes off his jacket, shakes off the water droplets, and hangs it up. Approaching the ruined artwork, Vesta sits by the entrance, observing her master.

LEVITAN

(to Vesta)

What a lousy owner I am. You must be hungry, yet too proud to ask for food. Let me get change and we'll go to the house.

Vesta happily wags her tail.

Anna Turchaninova's daughter VARYA (19) enters the studio.

VARYA

You didn't appear for dinner. Where have you been?

LEVITAN

Just wanted to have some fresh air.

VARYA

What happened to the painting?

LEVITAN

Sometimes, these things happen when you're an artist.

Varya moves closer and touches Levitan, attempting to seduce him. She removes her shawl, revealing her naked body.

VARYA

I'm worried about you...

Levitan barely restrains himself from looking at her, trying to avert his gaze and turn away. He picks up the shawl from the floor.

LEVITAN

Please, put it back on.

Ignoring his request, Varya tries to kiss him. Levitan seizes her hands forcefully and drapes the shawl over her.

LEVITAN

What on earth are you doing? Have you lost your mind? We could be seen, and who knows what people might think!

VARIA (CRYING)

I don't care anymore! I can't live without you, don't you understand?

LEVITAN

Please, Varen'ka, calm down. I'm begging you.

VARIA

If you don't love me, I'd rather be dead! I'll go and hang myself, just you wait and see!

LEVITAN

Varia, my sweet Varia, why are you saying such terrible things? Take a deep breath, please. Let me walk you to the house.

VARIA

My mother uses you to boost her image! She flaunts our relationship like it's some trophy. She doesn't truly love you! She build this synagogue to worship you!

LEVITAN

Alright, let it be. Come, let's go home.

VARYA

Vesta starts barking.

VARIA

No!

LEVITAN

Let's go home. Please.

VARYA

I don't have a home without you. I am homeless!

LEVITAN

You have a home. But trust me I know how it feels to be homeless...You are lucky...

VARYA

(with sarcasm)

Do you really?

CUT TO:

TITLE: MOSCOW , 1877

INT. LEVITANS' APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

The house is chaotic as the sisters desperately try to help their sick father. Taube turns to Abel, seeking his assistance.

TAUBE

The doctor never showed up. Abel, you're the oldest. Father's fever won't go down, we need to take him to the hospital. Isaac is unwell too, he should go with you.

ABEL

As always, I have to do everything.

INT. HOSPITAL, HALLWAY - NIGHT

Levitan and Abel anxiously wait for their father. Abel paces back and forth, growing impatient.

ABEL

Why is it taking so long? Can't they give him a pill and send us home?

A doctor approaches them and explains something with a serious expression.

EXT. HOSPITAL - HALLWAY - NIGHT (CONTINUOUS)

Tears well up in Levitan's eyes as he looks at the hospital courtyard.

ABEL

This is all your fault. You shouldn't have pursued anything. Papa had to work hard to pay for your education.

LEVITAN

I didn't mean for this to happen. I wanted what was best...I..I can't live without painting...Can't you see I feel just as hurt as you do!

ABEL

I hate this Jewish community. Papa's efforts meant nothing to them!

(with sarcasm)

Elias Levitan hasn't achieved anything! And what have they achieved now?

Abel walks away, and Levitan watches him depart with a longing look. Crows caw in the distance. Beggars and lepers pass by, disgruntled that they were unable to enter the hospital, because it's overcrowded, but curiously observing the heated argument between Abel and Levitan.

INT. LEVITAN'S APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - DAY

Levitan struggles to get out of bed, his hair sticking to his face from the fever. The house is filled with chaos. Sisters pack up belongings, and Levitan notices unfamiliar faces in the apartment. There is an ELDERLY WOMAN and ELDERLY MAN, neatly but modestly dressed, as well as a MAN, wearing a suit.

ELDERLY WOMAN

We're taking Mikhle with us. Traube's getting married and moving with her husband to Saltikovka. We can't take the boys.

MAN IN SUIT

(with an ominous tone)
We'll figure something out with

them, don't worry.

With tears welling up in his eyes, Levitan collapses against the wall.

INT.INT. MOSCOW SCHOOL OF PAINTING, SCULPTURE, AND ARCHITECTURE - PAINTING CLASSROOM - DAY

Rain pours outside, tapping on the windowsill. Levitan stays overnight at school as he has nowhere to go. He hides, huddled against the wall among the painting easels as the Guard, Evil Spirit checks and locks the classrooms, shining his torch around.

He notices a scarf left on a chair.

EVIL SPIRIT

Who do we have here, huh?

He approaches the spot where Levitan is hiding. The Evil Spirit takes the scarf and walks past, not noticing Levitan.

EXT. MOSCOW - OSTANKINO - WOODS

Savrasov strides into nature with giant steps. His students struggle to keep up with him. Levitan catches up with him.

LEVITAN

Alexei Kondratievich, let me carry your box of paints.

Savrasov takes off his hat and places it on Levitan's head.

SAVRASOV

There you go. Now I feel better. Damn hat keeps slipping off my head. It looks great on you!

Savrasov exclaims, addressing the students.

SAVRASOV

Paint it in a way that the larks are not visible in the picture, but their singing can be heard!

Savrasov and his students stop at the edge of the woods, near two large oaks.

SAVRASOV

I can teach you a little, but it's not enough if you don't work in the studio, at home, and even in the open air. There's another artist who works only two hours a day. He complains of swollen hands and aching back, then lazily lounges around. Being an artist, my young friends, requires hard work! It's hard to say who works harder—a labourer or an artist.

Students start sketching the oak tree. Savrasov draws while humming to himself, then goes to see what the others are drawing. He approaches Levitan.

SAVRASOV

What have you concocted there? Why the embellishments? Is that how you see it?

LEVITAN

I thought if I enhance nature a bit, it will be more impressive. Medal will come then, right?

SAVRASOV

Nonsense! That's brainwashing! Medals, success... A true artist shouldn't focus on those things. It's essential to love Russian nature and, like I said, make the birds' songs come alive in our art. Sure, fame can be tempting, but it'll only come to those who are truly devoted to their craft.

Savrasov turns to Levitan.

SAVRASOV

Take a look at my canvas, Isaak. Can you hear the rustling of the oak leaves or not?

Levitan carefully observes the canvas, closes his eyes for a moment, and then opens them.

LEVITAN

Yes, I can totally hear it.

SAVRASOV

I never taught you to lie. So,
never lie in your paintings.

INT. MOSCOW SCHOOL OF PAINTING, SCULPTURE, AND ARCHITECTURE -
PAINTING CLASSROOM - NIGHT

The dimly lit painting class is empty, except for Guard Evil Spirit, who patrols the room with a torch. His footsteps echoing in the silence.

Hiding Levitan accidentally knocks over an easel, disrupting the silence. The Evil Spirit investigates the noise.

EVIL SPIRIT

(sarcastically)

Oh, what do we have here? Trying to
play hide and seek, are we? Did you
think I wouldn't find you?

Levitan, filled with embarrassment, emerges from behind thick curtains as the guard shines a flashlight on his face, exposing him.

LEVITAN

(stammering)

I... I've been staying here... for
a while...trying to find some
inspiration.

EVIL SPIRIT

(mocking)

Inspiration, huh? More like
troublemaking.

The guard grabs Levitan's arm firmly and leads him out of the classroom.

EVIL SPIRIT

This place ain't a cosy hotel, my
friend. I don't make the rules, but
I enforce 'em. You can't turn it
into your personal hideaway. When
you're penniless, you bow to the
Lyapin merchants. That's how it
goes. "Poverty comes with
obedience," they say.

EXT. PARK NEAR THE SCHOOL MOSCOW SCHOOL OF PAINTING,
SCULPTURE, AND ARCHITECTURE - NIGHT (CONTINUOUS)

Levitan sits on a bench, shivering. He watches as a happy family walks by, their laughter resonating in the night. The mother lovingly hugs one of the kids, gently scolding him.

The Guard Evil Spirit approaches, holding a cigarette in his mouth.

EVIL SPIRIT

Tell me the truth. You ran away
from home, didn't you? Hate your
parents drinking?

Levitan rises from the bench, avoiding eye contact. The Evil Spirit persists with his probing questions.

EVIL SPIRIT

So you're saying you have nowhere
to go, and you plan to spend the
night freezing on this bench?

Tears well up in Levitan's eyes as he meets the Evil Spirit's eyes, his silence confirming the suspicions. The Evil Spirit's stern demeanour softens.

EVIL SPIRIT

Follow me. I won't leave you out
here.

LEVITAN

(grateful, but hesitant)
Thank you, but I think I'll stay
here.

EVIL SPIRIT

Come on now, move it. You'll freeze
out here. Don't be too proud to
accept some help.
Reluctantly, Levitan follows the
Evil Spirit.

INT. EVIL SPIRIT'S GUARDHOUSE - NIGHT

Inside the small guardhouse, there's a single iron bed. The only chair is cluttered with various items: newspapers, pants, a screwdriver.

EVIL SPIRIT

Wait, I'll make you a bed.

The Evil Spirit went out and vanished. With a loud thud, he brings two big, black boards held together, mattresses, and two stands under his arm.

EVIL SPIRIT

Had a pal crashing at my place. We served together. I whipped this up for him. Came in handy. Set it up yourself. I'm off to work.

INT. MOSCOW SCHOOL OF PAINTING, SCULPTURE, AND ARCHITECTURE - SAVRASOV'S WORKSHOP - DAY

Savrasov is absent from the classes. Levitan waits for him anxiously, looking out of the window.

The students chat to each other.

STUDENT 1

Hey, did you hear? Savrasov disappeared on a drinking spree.

STUDENT 2

No way! I heard he begged Perov to let him take a vacation to work on something new. Ya-yak-yack!

STUDENT 1

Goodbye, springtime! Alexei Kondratievich is totally missing out on the best season for landscape artists.

LEVITAN

He'll come back soon! I'm sure he's busy with his own art.

STUDENT 2

"The Rooks" won't return! They went on a bingeing drink!

STUDENT 1

Levitan, why don't you join the vodka club too? Seriously, Savrasov would be so impressed.

Students leave. Levitan stands alone at his easel. There's his painting of an autumnal park. Nikolai Chekhov enters the room.

NICKOLAI CHEKHOV

Haven't seen you in ages. You don't attend classes anymore.

LEVITAN

I just want to paint, Nickolai. Classes suffocate my creativity.

NICKOLAI CHEKHOV

I get it. Today they taught us history, but who cares about remembering dates? How am I supposed to remember what happened in which year?

LEVITAN

Would be great to forget many things that happened. Just like that, all at once. Remember nothing at all.

NICKOLAI CHEKHOV

Agree. We'll somehow pass it.

LEVITAN

I borrowed a couple of books from the library. I'd rather read them. They are about suffering and sadness. My soul needs tears...

NICKOLAI CHEKHOV

What is it you are painting?

Nikolai Chekhov approaches the painting and examines it closely.

LEVITAN

It's a piece for the upcoming Peredvizhniki exhibition at our school...But finishing for me is a torture. I'm afraid I'll ruin it with one wrong stroke... .

NIKOLAI CHEKHOV

Watch me, how one stroke can create a masterpiece!

Nikolai Chekhov snatches the brush from Levitan. Levitan tries to take it back.

LEVITAN

What are you doing?

NIKOLAI CHEKHOV

Learn! Levitan doesn't paint people... But a beautiful woman could stroll along this path. Right here, she'll appear in all her glory.

Levitan makes an attempt to stop Nikolai Chekhov, but hesitates and then watches him painting a woman dressed in black.

NIKOLAI CHEKHOV

These Peredvizhniki... Along with Perov and Savrasov. They're all about their revolution in painting. It's social propaganda and commercial interests. That's all.

INT. EVIL SPIRIT'S GUARDHOUSE - NIGHT

LEVITAN peels potatoes. The Evil Spirit is washing a pot.

EVIL SPIRIT

Who put this nonsense in your head, huh? Pursuing art?

LEVITAN pauses in contemplation for a moment, then continues peeling potatoes.

LEVITAN

Nobody did. I decided this for myself. It's who I am. My soul.

EVIL SPIRIT

Soul...Wasn't there anyone to dissuade you?
I certainly wouldn't have encouraged my children this nonsense, but I never had any. Tough. Never had luck with women. What are you going to do?

LEVITAN throws the potatoes into the pot that the Evil Spirit handed to him.

LEVITAN

Paint.

EVIL SPIRIT

And what if you never make any living?

LEVITAN

I don't think about it. I am devoted to my craft.

EVIL SPIRIT

Well, you're making a mistake, Tesak.

LEVITAN

It's Isaak.

EVIL SPIRIT

Isaac, Tesak. Don't be angry with an old man.

The Evil Spirit lights a cigarette, lost in thought. The smoke stings his eyes.

LEVITAN wrinkles his nose at the smoke and tries to turn away from it.

EVIL SPIRIT

I have distant relatives. They have a shop in Taganka. Let's go see them, maybe they'll hire you. You can earn money and gain experience for the future. Who knows, maybe you'll want to start your own business one day?

LEVITAN cleans the last potato and throws it into the pot and pours water into it.

LEVITAN

I'd rather starve then.

Evil Spirit chuckles.

INT. MOSCOW SCHOOL OF PAINTING, SCULPTURE, AND ARCHITECTURE -
STUDENT EXHIBITION - DAY

The student exhibition is in full swing. Levitan, presents his painting "Autumn in Sokolniki". Savrasov storms in, and Levitan who is thrilled to see him quickly realises that Savrasov is either hungover or not sober.

Savrasov examines the paintings displayed by his landscape class students.

SAVRASOV

This is utter rubbish! It belongs in the back alley markets, not gracing the walls of an art exhibition. And this...it's only good for hiding pickled cucumbers.

(roaring)

Where is Levitan?

Savrasov spots a visibly agitated Levitan among the crowd and makes his way toward him.

SAVRASOV

Why the hell did you include a woman in your landscape? What did I tell you, huh?

Levitan guiltily looks at Savrasov. At that moment, soldiers approach Savrasov and escort him out of the premises, with Levitan following closely behind.

LEVITAN

(following them)

Where can I find you, Alexei Kondratyevich? Where can I find you?

Savrasov fails to hear him, already sobbing on the street.

SAVRASOV

Why the hell did you include that woman in there?

Levitan casts a heavy look upon his own painting, fighting with emotions.

An elegantly dressed businessman, PAVEL TRETIAKOV, who outwardly resembles more of a clergyman, enters the room. The students exchange whispers as they recognise him.

KOSTYA KOROVIN
Remember I told you about
Tretyakov? Here he is.

Tretiakov walks through the exhibition, carefully observing
each painting until his gaze falls upon Levitan's artwork.

TRETIAKOV
Impressive. What's your name?

LEVITAN
Levitan, Sir. Isaac Levitan.

TRETIAKOV
I am interested in buying it, Isaak
Levitan. Would one hundred rubles
be an acceptable price?

LEVITAN
Thank you, Sir. Very much so.

Congratulations and well wishes pour in from the other
students.

KOSTYA KOROVIN
It's a lot of money! You are rich!

Levitan receives their praise with a bittersweet twinge of
sadness, his eyes fixated on the front door.

INT. SAVRASOV'S WORKSHOP - DAY

The room hums with the sound of scratching pencils as
students sketch. Levitan paints nature. Elegant and
well-dressed DMITRIY VASILIEVICH POLENOV (45) enters into the
classroom.

POLENOV
My name is Dmitriy Vasilievich
Polenov. I'm your new teacher.

LEVITAN
(shocked)
What... happened to Alexey
Kondratich?

POLENOV
He's been let go. Unfortunately,
his relationship with vodka had an
unpleasant effect.

The room erupts in gasps and murmurs, shock and disbelief etched on every face.

POLENOV

But fear not, my dear students! I'm here to guide you. And as a gesture of goodwill, consider this your personal invitation. Join me at my place. We'll drink tea, paint masterpieces, and create magic together!

Students excitedly and hastily gather their tools. Levitan appears as if struck by a bullet.

INT. POLENOV'S HOUSE - DAY

Polenov's house reveals a place of wealth and artistic inspiration. A gleaming samovar is on the table and a lot of decadent treats. The room, filled with scattered souvenirs.

POLENOV

My jams from distant worlds. This relic, Italy's gift. And this, a token from the sacred lands of Palestine.

Levitan, lost in thought, looks at the artistic wonders. In that moment, Polenov approaches him, a glint of mischief in his eyes.

POLENOV

Isaak, my dear friend. Don't you mind becoming our muse, embodying the great martyr Jesus Christ himself?

Levitan rests on the sofa draped in a dark fabric. As the students' paint him on canvases.

INT. POLENOV'S HOUSE - DAY (Continuous)

Levitan, back in his usual attire, is ready to leave. Polenov approaches him.

POLENOV

I have a friend who needs talented artists for a private fancy opera based on Dargomyzhsky "The Mermaid". And he is very generous with money. Interested?

LEVITAN

Very much so, Sir.

POLENOV

Excellent. Pick a few talented painters of your liking and bring them along.

Levitan nods and then blurts out.

LEVITAN

Where can I find Alexey Kondratich?

POLENOV

I wouldn't know...Apparently nobody knows. And...I don't advise you to look for him.

INT. SAVVA MAMONTOV' S OPERA SET - EVENING

Levitan, Korovin, and Chekhov work on painting the opera decorations.

KOSTYA KOROVIN

This is a brilliant idea. I think I've found my calling. And the ladies here are beautiful. I'm always falling in love, but this place has really made me dizzy.

LEVITAN

Opera is beautiful. Grand. But it's not my thing.

KOSTYA KOROVIN

But look at the costumes, the music, the gold, the pearls, the lights! Opera is the very essence of artistic vision!

LEVITAN

For me, art is my painting. I want to express my feelings and moods on canvas, just the way I see them.

NIKOLAI CHEKHOV

So, you don't want to paint decorations anymore?

LEVITAN

I prefer to create my own art,
without anyone's instructions.

KOSTYA KOROVIN

And preferably only nature. Nature
doesn't give instructions, right?

LEVITAN

They say a lame man who walks the
right path can outrun a horse rider
moving in the wrong direction.

Nikolai Chekhov takes a sip of vodka from his flask.

NIKOLAI CHEKHOV

Our Levitan is full of mysteries.
And what about the ladies?

LEVITAN

Ladies...they hold both inspiration
and distraction, for better or
worse.

Levitan climbs to the top of a massive furnace in the centre
of the stage, looking down at their work. ANTON CHEKHOV
enters the hall.

ANTON CHEKHOV

I have the impression that you're
climbing to the top of the world!
To the stars themselves!

THREE LOVELY LADIES dressed in theatrical costumes step out
from backstage, giggling.

The men watch them passing by and cheer.

ANTON CHEKHOV

Now I understand why you disappear
here for days on end.

Levitan laughs. Anton Chekhov reaches out his hand to Levitan
as he descends. Levitan wipes his hands with a handkerchief
and shakes Anton Chekhov's hand.

LEVITAN
Isaac Levitan.

ANTON CHEKHOV
Anton Chekhov.

Anton Chekhov notices that Nikolai Chekhov is not sober.

ANTON CHEKHOV
In Russia, we have two main
problems - a mean wife and
(glancing at Nikolai) alcoholism.
So don't forget, gentlemen,
marriage is slavery as well as
vodka.

Laughter and nods of agreement fill the air. Levitan looks at
Nikolai Chekhov with concern.

CUT TO:

TITLE: GORKI, 1895

INT. GORKI - TURCHANINOV ESTATE - LEVITAN'S WORKSHOP
"SYNAGOGUE" - NIGHT

Levitan desperately tries to calm Varia down.

VARIA
I wish we had never crossed paths.
You are using our family like you
used Kuvshnikova! She wanted to
kill herself because of you too!
You bring nothing, but misery to
women!

Levitan contemplates Varia's words.

CUT TO:

TITLE: MOSCOW, 1884

INT. KUVSHINNIKOVA'S FLAT - LIVING ROOM - EVENING

Energetic music fills the air.

Levitan, Anton and Nikolai Chekhov stroll down the corridor.
They look into a half-empty room, where TWO MEN are locked in
an intense chess match.

The apartment's interior exudes a bohemian, hippie vibe, infused with a distinctly Russian touch. Fishing nets serve as makeshift curtains, while soap crates adorned with rugs act as quirky sofas. The atmosphere is festive, with an all-male crowd filling the space.

Meet SOFIA KUVSHNIKOVA (39), the charismatic hostess. Though not conventionally beautiful, she radiates boundless energy and joy. Sofia plays the piano while one of the male guests belts out a lively song. And in a truly mesmerising sight, a living crane gracefully joins in the rhythmic dance to the music.

Levitan, Anton, and Nikolai Chekhov step into the living room. Levitan takes in the scene, his eyes momentarily locking with Sofia's. She appears momentarily startled, before swiftly resuming her enchanting performance.

INT. KUVSHNIKOVA'S FLAT - LIVING ROOM - EVENING
(CONTINUOUS)

Levitan stands beside Anton Chekhov when Sofia struts towards them, holding her head high.

SOFIA

(evaluating and looking at
Levitan)

Anton Pavlovich, it's a pleasure to see you here. Will you read to us something new?

ANTON CHEKHOV

Perhaps not today, Sofia Petrovna. You still don't have any women around.

SOFIA

You know, Anton Pavlovich, I find the company of women boring.

ANTON CHEKHOV

Then allow me to introduce you to Isaak Levitan. The finest Russian landscape artist.

Sofia firmly shakes Levitan's hand in a manly fashion, holding his hand in hers longer than etiquette requires, stepping back to scrutinise him from head to toe.

SOFIA

You don't look like a Russian landscape artist, you look like a Spaniard. From the Spanish royal court.

ANTON CHEKHOV

This Spaniard, Sofia Petrovna, is worth five Russians, believe me. What have you been up to lately? Engaging in all sorts of games, painting, and chasing celebrities?

Sofia feels momentarily flustered but swiftly straightens her shoulders, tilts her head slightly upward, and opens her mouth to respond. Anton Chekhov doesn't give her the chance as he notices Nikolai Chekhov having a great time, tipping back another shot.

ANTON CHEKHOV

Give me a moment, please.

Anton exits, leaving Sofia and Levitan alone.

SOFIA

So, you're not a Spaniard, Mr. Levitan?

LEVITAN

I'm not.

SOFIA

Have you been to Spain?

LEVITAN

Not yet, but I would love to go. There's no better country than Russia, and only in Russia can a true landscape artist exist.

Sofia playfully takes a sip of champagne.

SOFIA

Don't you drink?

LEVITAN

Usually not.

SOFIA

I know you don't want to see women in Peredvizhniki society. Isn't it too ignorant?

LEVITAN

And do you want to see women in
your society?

Sofia chuckles. TWO MEN approach them, one of them is a
singer.

SINGER

Levitan himself! We've heard about
your exhibition. Everything's sold
out! Painting is indeed still
wanted by someone! How did you like
Crimea?

SOFIA

So, that's where your beautiful
tanned skin comes from.

LEVITAN

I climbed a really tall cliff in
Crimea, looked out at the vast sea
from the top, and at that moment, I
couldn't help but cry. I felt the
overwhelming presence of eternal
beauty, making the insignificance
of humanity so evident. I tried my
best to capture that feeling in my
paintings... though I sometimes
wonder if I truly succeeded.

SECOND MAN

I strongly believe that landscapes
should eventually return to their
original purpose and remind us of
the value of human existence.

SINGER

I agree. A landscape should stop
being a separate standalone
picture.

SOFIA

What on earth are you talking
about?

Sofia's husband DMITRIY KUVSHINIKOV enters the room and
invites everyone to the table.

KUVSHINIKOV

The food is ready, gentlemen.

INT. KUVSHINNIKOVA'S FLAT - DINING ROOM - EVENING
(CONTINUOUS)

Guests sit around the table, with the room filled with the buzz of conversations and clinking cutlery. Sofia sits next to Levitan. She gestures, offering him more gravy. Levitan gestures with his hand, politely declining.

Levitan notices Anton Chekhov giving him a stern look from a distance. Nikolay Chekhov seems drunk, cheerfully sharing something with his neighbour.

SOFIA

(to Levitan)

So, you visited Crimea. Do you travel a lot?

LEVITAN

It was my first trip. But I plan to go to the Volga soon. I've been dreaming about it for years.

SOFIA

What's so special about the Volga?

LEVITAN

That's what I hope to discover.

SOFIA

What about your family? Do they also live in Moscow?

A pause hangs in the air.

LEVITAN

Have you always been a pianist?

SOFIA

Or no, I have vast skills...

(makes sip of wine smiling
at Levitan)

and interests. Have you always wanted to be an artist?

LEVITAN

As far as I can remember. I don't understand myself outside of painting.

SOFIA

How interesting. Do you take on students?

LEVITAN

It has happened a few times.

SOFIA

Would you take me as your student?

Levitan hesitates with his answer, his eyes once again meeting Anton's stern look.

SOFIA

My husband disappears at work from morning till night. I am left to my own devices. You can see the result for yourself. I often meet fascinating people. I am often praised for my musical talent. But I also want to find my understanding in painting. It's my preference, not music. You must look at my paintings and give your verdict.

Levitan, lost in thought, takes a sip of water.

EXT. MOSCOW - STREET - NIGHT

Anton Chekhov helps drunken Nikolai Chekhov into the carriage then approaches Levitan who waits for him.

ANTON CHEKHOV

It won't end well for Nickolasha.

LEVITAN

I believe in him. He's smart enough to stop it.

Anton Chekhov scoffs. As they walk towards a carriage driver, he abruptly stops.

ANTON CHEKHOV

And you, Levitash... Be careful. You're playing with fire. Kuvshnikova is married. You ain't planning to cross that line, are you? You know it's immoral.

LEVITAN

But you consider marriage as a form of slavery. So why are you concerned about morality?

ANTON CHEKHOV

It's my business to warn you. Everyone in this town knows the Kuvshnikovs.

LEVITAN

Thank you for your concern, Antosha, but I am a grown man and I can handle my own damn affairs.

ANTON CHEKHOV

I'd like to believe that.

LEVITAN

So, what's the problem? Is it hard for you to trust me?

ANTON CHEKHOV

It's better to be shot in the shoulder and leg than to fall for a married woman...

CUT TO:

TITLE: GORKI, 1895

INT. GORKI - TURCHANINOV ESTATE - LEVITAN'S WORKSHOP
"SYNAGOGUE" - NIGHT

VARIA

This fake love of yours... it's hollow, empty... I hate both of you!

LEVITAN

You're right. It hasn't been perfect, but --...

VARIA

You must leave her! I'm begging you, abandon that old hag and run away with me. Run away with me, I can't bear living without you!

Anna Turchaninova storms into the art studio.

ANNA

I saw the light in the workshop.
What does all of this mean?

VARIA

I love him! I love him! And you are
unworthy of his love.

Varia points accusingly at a destroyed painting by Levitan.

VARIA

This is what you've accomplished.
You think you married him for your
own gain, and now you can dictate
the lives of others? Everything you
do is driven by cold calculation. I
hate you!

Varia flees, leaving Anna to confront Levitan directly.

ANNA

Where have you been all day? You're
driving me insane! What more do you
want? How could you ever lust after
a mere child?

Levitan struggles to hold himself together.

LEVITAN

I need some time alone.

He exits the workshop and goes to the main house. Anna and
then Varia follow him. Anna looks determined not to let him
slip away.

ANNA

Wasn't it enough for you to wander
alone for the whole evening?

While Anna lectures him, Levitan squats down and gives Vesta
some food. She refuses to eat.

LEVITAN

(whispering)

Forgive me, sweetheart. I know
everything will be fine with you. I
know it. You'll be taken care of.

Breathing heavily, he leaves the kitchen under Anna's watchful gaze.

ANNA

How could you treat us like this?
You only think about yourself. No
one and nothing else matters to you
in this life! Self-absorbed fool!
(ДАЛЬШЕ)

ANNA (ПРОД.)

All you do is admire your art and
yourself and revel in your
victories!

CUT TO:

TITLE: MOSCOW, 1881

EXT. MOSCOW - STREET - DAY

The newspaper carriers report that Emperor Alexander II was fatally wounded as a result of an attack by several members of the terrorist organisation "Narodnaya Volya".

INT. LEVITAN'S APARTMENT - MORNING

Levitan carefully sews his jacket while Nikolai Chekhov enters, his appearance dishevelled, hair tousled, bearing the marks of a hangover.

He grabs a bottle of vodka, pours himself a shot, and reluctantly sniffs it alongside a sliced pickled cucumber.

NIKOLAI CHEKHOV

Antosha still has no clue I'm
moving in with Natasha.

LEVITAN

When do you plan on breaking the
news to him?

NIKOLAI CHEKHOV

Not a clue, my friend. You know
damn well how he disapproves of
her.

LEVITAN

You can't dictate matters of the
heart. He'll come around
eventually.

NIKOLAI CHEKHOV

Ever since I met Natasha, life has taken a turn for the better. But Anton won't grasp that. He keeps measuring me against you. You rented a flat and sold your art, while I'm squandering my damn talent!

LEVITAN

He's just concerned that she has a penchant for vodka, that's all.

Levitan opens the door in response to a loud knock. TWO POLICE OFFICERS enter the room, one of them unfolds a paper and reads its contents.

POLICE OFFICER 1

In light of the regicide, Jews are to be expelled from the historically Russian capital within 24 hours, failure to comply will result in imprisonment.

Levitan's face twists in shock.

POLICE OFFICER 2

(pointing at Levitan with a gun)
24 hours!

The police officers leave.

NIKOLAI CHEKHOV

They've lost their minds, those scoundrels! First, they ban you from painting Russian nature, and now they're kicking you out.

LEVITAN

I'll go to my sister's. But let me tell you, Nikolasha, I refuse to surrender. No one can deny me the right to paint Russian nature or dictate where I live.

Nikolai Chekhov, now tipsy, downs another shot. His speech begins to slur as he approaches Levitan, placing a hand gently on his shoulder.

NIKOLAI CHEKHOV

You won't be going anywhere, my friend. Trust me, I'll handle everything.

EXT. MOSCOW - RAILWAY STATION - DAY

The station is packed with Jewish people. Some are struggling with their luggage, while others spend the night there. Levitan goes to the ticket counter.

TICKET CLERK

Sorry, the closest available tickets are for next week.

LEVITAN

I need to leave urgently. I can't wait. There's an official order.

TICKET CLERK

Everyone is in an urgency. Jewish keep coming here and causing problems with their demands. There are no tickets left. Next!

With a worried look on his face, Levitan walks around the station and spots a ticket seller who is reselling tickets at significantly higher prices. People passing by scold him.

Levitan approaches the seller and buys a ticket from him.

INT. TRAIN - DAY

The train is filled with exhausted Jewish people and crying children. Levitan looks at it all and feels sick.

EXT. RAILWAY STATION - SALTYSKOVKA VILLAGE - DAY

Levitan steps off the train and takes a look at the station. It's almost empty.

INT. SISTER TAUBE'S HOUSE - SALTYSKOVKA VILLAGE - DAY

Inside the cramped home of Taube, there is hardly any space to move around. She has FIVE LITTLE CHILDREN, and her HUSBAND SERGEI displeased with Levitan's presence.

Levitan prepares to take his easel and go outside.

SERGEI

Where are you off to? You should
chop firewood first. This
(pointing at easel)
...only for idlers. All this
painting nonsense. Live a real
life!

Levitan leaves his easel and paints behind, going outside.

EXT. SALTYSKOVKA VILLAGE - COURTYARD - DAY

The sky is covered with clouds. Laundry is hung on
clotheslines. It's raining. Levitan chops firewood, and it's
clear that he does it with all his might and desperation.

INT. SALTYSKOVKA VILLAGE - RAILWAY STATION - EVENING

Levitan paints his famous later "POLUSTANOK".

EXT. SALTYSKOVKA VILLAGE - COURTYARD - DAY

Levitan is beating a rug, causing dust to fly. Taube brings
him a newspaper.

TAUBE

I've been thinking whether or not
to show you what they write. You
seem completely disinterested in
what others think.

Levitan sets aside the rug beater, dusts off his hands, and
takes the newspaper. He appears annoyed.

EXT. MOSCOW - TRETAKOV GALLERY - DAY

Pavel Tretyakov talks to a SECURITY GUARD. In the background,
someone is putting the final touches on a painting while
standing on a ladder.

TRETAKOV

I specifically told you not to let
Repin in here when he has his
paints with him. Please pay more
attention next time.

Tretyakov approaches the artist ILIYA REPIN, who is working
on his painting called "Unexpected Return."

TRETYAKOV

Ilya Efimovich, what are you doing here?

REPIN

Good afternoon, Pavel Mikhaylovich. You see, the face of a person coming back from exile doesn't match with the rest of the family's faces. And in another painting, I added some dust. A large crowd of a thousand people is approaching, and the dust rises like a cloud. But it seemed like something was missing, so I made the whole background look dusty.

Tretyakov tries to control his emotions and clears his throat.

REPIN

What's that new painting over there? It's by...whatever Levitan. People are already talking about it in the newspapers. You're harming your reputation, Pavel Mikhaylovich, by buying unfinished work.

TRETYAKOV

Ilya Efimovich, I'm forbidding you from making any changes to your paintings after I purchase them. Let's confirm it again.

Tretyakov looks at Levitan's painting "AUTUMN IN SOKOLNIKI" and walks away.

INT. SALTYKOVKA VILLAGE - TAUBE'S HOUSE - SHED - DAY

Levitan destroys a couple of his new paintings, punching the wall in frustration. Taube enters.

TAUBE

That's exactly why I didn't want to give you the newspaper. But if you want to become an artist, you'll have to toughen up. If you react like this after every article, you'll have no nerves left.

Levitan sits on the floor, weeping. His sister sits next to him, trying to comfort him.

LEVITAN

It's unbearable to exhibit unfinished paintings. My eyes see so much, I'm torn apart by emotions from what I see, but my hands won't cooperate, you know? These hands won't listen!

Levitan strikes the wall with his hands.

TAUBE

Stop complaining. Did they give you a medal? Did Tretyakov buy your painting? Maybe you should just stop painting puddles and fields and start painting what's trendy and in demand? Look here --.

Taube approaches the damaged painting, lifts it, and places it on the easel.

TAUBE

Why don't you paint a pedigreed cow? And how about a couple of lovers under the birch tree?

LEVITAN

It's all nonsense. I want to speak my truth through my paintings. With my own voice. The Levitan voice. Like Savrasov taught me. I won't paint people anymore in my life.

TAUBE

That's a shame. How can you do without people?

LEVITAN

Leave me alone.

Sister looks at him sympathetically and takes his trembling, broken hand.

TAUBE

I am your sister. What do you mean, leave you alone?

LEVITAN

I'm just useless...

TAUBE

You know what? If you don't want to paint what's fashionable, prove that your truth is worthy of being accepted.

The sister's disgruntled husband Sergei looks into the barn window.

SERGEI

What are you all doing here? Isaak, hurry up. Put the chickens in the coop.

INT. SALTYKOVKA VILLAGE - TAUBE'S HOUSE - SHED - DAY

Levitan lies in bed with a detached expression. His sister enters.

TAUBE

There are guests for you! Get up!

LEVITAN

I have no strength.

TAUBE

Enough already! He has no strength. Get up when you're told!

Levitan shakes his head negatively and turns his face towards the wall. Taube leaves.

Anton Chekhov enters the shed.

ANTON CHEKHOV

Your sister told me you stopped painting and haven't gotten out of bed for two days apart from chopping the logs.

Levitan doesn't turn to face him and continues lying with his face against the wall.

LEVITAN

Why should I get up? Artists are not loved, they're not needed.

ANTON CHEKHOV
Are you only an artist?

LEVITAN
Only.

ANTON CHEKHOV
(Ironically)
I see.

LEVITAN
Paint about country estates, cows,
lovers, Moscow. All you paint about
is the grey day, autumn, the small
forest, they say... But who cares?

ANTON CHEKHOV
Exactly. Who the hell cares?

LEVITAN
It's boring, it's Russia, not
Switzerland. What landscapes are
there to paint? Oh... I can't talk
to them. I'll die - I hate...

Anton Chekhov remains silent. He looks around and stops his
looks at the destroyed paintings.

LEVITAN
But that's my tone, that blue road,
that melancholy light beyond the
woods... that's me, my spirit!

ANTON CHEKHOV
Come with me to Babkino, Spirit.
We're renting a wonderful house
there at the Kiselevs' for the
whole summer. I'll introduce you to
the family. You'll distract
yourself. Stop lazing around,
Monsieur Artist!

Levitan shakes his head negatively.

ANTON CHEKHOV
I still need your help. I can't
manage without you.

LEVITAN
(interested)
Help?

ANTON CHEKHOV

We urgently need an illustrator for my new stories at Budilnik. I told them I won't consider any candidates except for Levitan's work. Only the best or nothing!

LEVITAN

What about Nikolasha?

ANTON CHEKHOV

Nikolasha is already working on them. But he can't handle it alone. Get dressed, Levitasha.

Levitan attempts to cover his head with a blanket and shakes his head negatively, but he sees the disgruntled husband of his sister peering in through the window and jumps out of the bed.

EXT. BABKINO ESTATE - DAY

A picturesque one-story mansion offers beautiful views of the countryside. A terrace with a mezzanine, overlooking the Istra River.

The house sits high with a balustrade, leading to a steep staircase down to a bathing area. Flowerbeds and paths adorn the surroundings.

There is the CHEKHOV WING and the WING where Levitan stays.

Anton Chekhov leads Levitan to the wing, marked "Merchant Levitan's paintings for sale."

NIKOLAI CHEKHOV

Levitan! Finally, you're here.
Enjoy your stay, my friend.

Chekhov helps Levitan unpack as they are approached by MASHA (20), Anton Chekhov's sister.

Levitan straightens up when he sees her. He immediately appears enchanted.

ANTON CHEKHOV

This is my sister, Masha. Masha, please meet my friend and the great artist, Isaak Levitan.

LEVITAN

Pleasure to meet you, Masha. As for the great artist part, thank you, Antosha...I'm still learning.

ANTON CHEKHOV

(to Masha)

He's being modest.

MASHA

I dabble with painting...a little.

There is an instant spark between Masha and Levitan.

EXT. BABKINO ESTATE - GARDEN - EVENING

A performance unfolds, enacted by the Chekhov family and Levitan.

Levitan is dressed as a Bedouin, wearing a turban, pretending to perform a prayer on the garden lawn. Anton Chekhov lies hidden in the bushes, aiming a rifle at him, then shoots, causing Levitan to fall to the ground.

Masha rushes towards him wearing a doctor's costume and checks his pulse.

MASHA

Are you alright?

Levitan opens his eyes.

LEVITAN

When you're around, I am.

Masha lights up. Nikolai Chekhov hurries over with a stretcher.

NIKOLAI CHEKHOV

Shall we bury him?

Anton Chekhov emerges from behind the bushes. They place Levitan on the stretcher, with Masha walking alongside, looking gently at him.

Levitan jumps off the stretcher, grabs Masha's hand, and they run off into the woods. They sprint with all their might, stumbling, falling, and rolling together, laughing joyfully.

EXT. BABKINO - WOODS - EVENING (CONTINUOUS)

Levitan and Masha lie on the ground breathless, laughing.

MASHA

I hope we haven't ruined the costumes of the imperialistic theatre. The homeowner's father will be upset. He still has plays on stage.

LEVITAN

(still catching his breath and turning to Masha)
We'll have to find a way to make it up to him.

Levitan is above Masha, looking down at her with a loving glance, about to kiss her, but they are interrupted by Anton and Nikolai.

ANTON CHEKHOV

There you are! If you've ruined the costumes, I might shoot you both for real.

NIKOLAI CHEKHOV

Look at them!... It seems even if you shoot them, at least they'll die happy.

Levitan and Masha burst into laughter. Anton Chekhov looks resentful.

MONTAGE

- Masha is painting a picture in the woods. Levitan approaches her with his easel.

LEVITAN

You have a gift... May I?

Masha nods. Levitan joins her. Their brushes and paints scattered on the ground. They paint side by side. Their brushes occasionally collide, creating laughter and stolen glances.

- Masha reads a book in the lounge in the evening. Levitan walks by with her loud brothers. Masha's and Levitan's eyes meet, exchanging a loving glance.

- Levitan and Masha in the woods. He delicately takes her hand with the brush and dips it in paint, then uses her hand to add strokes to the painting.

LEVITAN

(softly, nearly whispering
in her ear)

*In nature's hands, you've been blessed,
She favoured you, she was impressed.
Our endless praises may seem trite,
But for you, they hold their rightful light.
For long you've known, deep in your core,
That love for you is never a chore.*

Masha literally melts in Levitan's hands. She struggles to concentrate on what she's doing and breathes heavily. They kiss.

- Anton Chekhov and Masha observe as Levitan passionately paints a picture in the courtyard. Chekhov admires the picture.

- Anton Chekhov, dressed in his finest suit, sits at a table and begins to write. He looks at Levitan's painting, which he had just finished and now hangs on Chekhov's wall.

VOICEOVER

A summer morning. Silence fills the air, only interrupted by the chirping of crickets by the shore, and the timid purring of a dove somewhere. Feathered clouds hang motionless in the sky, resembling scattered snow... Near a building bathed in construction, beneath the green branches of a willow...

- Levitan paints the woods when Masha watches him work, admiring from a distance.

MASHA

(approaching him)

The green colours are so beautiful.

LEVITAN

(surprised)

Masha... Have you been here long?

MASHA

No, no, I just didn't want to distract you. You seemed so engrossed.

LEVITAN

When I'm painting, I forget about everything else. I probably wouldn't even remember my own name.

MASHA

I have never met anyone as hardworking as you, Isaac.

Masha looks embarrassed. Levitan approaches her, his breath catching. He becomes flustered and gets down on one knee, holding Masha's hand in his.

LEVITAN

My dear Masha, every dot on your face is precious to me... I... You... Will you marry me, Masha?

Masha blushes, covers her eyes with her hands, and runs away.

LEVITAN

Masha!
(she can't hear him anymore). I love you, Masha...

END OF MONTAGE

INT. BABKINO ESTATE - CHEKHOV'S WING - EVENING

Anton Chekhov is surprised to hear Masha sobbing in her bedroom. Worried, he knocks on her door and enters.

ANTON CHEKHOV

What's wrong, Mashenka? Why are you crying?

Masha tries to speak through her tears.

MASHA

(sobbing)
He proposed to me...he was asking me to marry him. But I hurt his feelings. I acted badly and ran away...

Anton Chekhov gently holds her hand. Levitan approaches the bedroom with a bouquet of field flowers, but abruptly stops and overhears their conversation.

ANTON CHEKHOV

Masha, Levitan is not the right person for you. He's not suited to be a husband and father. And if he's interested in women...Well, Women of Balzac's age will suit him.

MASHA

I don't understand what you mean, Antosha. Balzac's...?

ANTON CHEKHOV

Don't worry about those trivial things. Read something more meaningful or take a walk outside.

MASHA

Please, tell me what you mean...

ANTON CHEKHOV

I'll go and try to work. Levitan is an attractive man, but he's weak. He will always be like a boy who needs someone stronger by his side.

MASHA

But I want to marry him!

ANTON CHEKHOV

It's impossible. He needs a woman much older than him. Full stop.

Masha nods, feeling gutted. Levitan storms away devastated.

CUT TO:

TITLE: GORKI - 1895

INT. TURCHANINOV ESTATE, GORKI - MAIN HOUSE - NIGHT

Levitan bursts into his bedroom, nervously pacing the room. He stops in front of the mirror and catches his lost and exhausted reflection. Looks at one of his paintings on the wall and tears it down.

He grabs his head and runs his hands down, pressing them against his face. He breathes heavily, tears stain his cheeks. He takes a sheet of paper and a pen and nervously writes something.

Outside the bedroom door, VESTA, the DOG, scratches and whimpers. Levitan abruptly turns around and walks towards the dresser, trying to ignore the dog. He looks at the door, pounds his fist on the dresser, and finds a revolver among his belongings. He checks for a bullet.

He steps out onto the balcony. Outside, a strong snow storm is raging. Levitan looks at the forest and the river, frozen in awe. A beautiful view lies before him.

He sheds his inspiration, takes a deep trembling breath, closing his eyes. He raises the gun to his temple. In the distance, thunder rumbles, and a gunshot is heard.

COMPLETE DARKNESS