

A WIFE LIKE THE MOON

I am 38 and unmarried having not found a suitable husband, although other people's husbands have been quite successful at finding me. Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Sailor – the game I played with my girlfriends when I was eight or nine years old counting cherry stones to find out who we were going to marry. But when it came to it, the married men of my early romantic encounters were Architect, Banker, Businessman, Politician. Far less rhythmical and I didn't want to marry any of them – even if they had been free to marry.

As a drama student in the promiscuous '60s, I was so focused on my acting career that I gave scant consideration to much else. Resentful of day-to-day distractions, I was seen as impatient and unapproachable by my fellow students though positioned as a star by the teachers who repeatedly told me that I would go far in achieving my theatrical ambitions. Much to my embarrassment, I was positioned as a role model to the others in my year. What a stupid thing to do – teachers should know better.

I have always really enjoyed living alone and feeling self-reliant. In those intense and heady student days, Chekhov and Brecht were my main companions. I gave myself whole-heartedly to studying every detail of their character's lives and contexts: the sound of a breaking harp string signifying the end of the old world order; the silent scream from a mother losing the son she can't acknowledge; the drunken judge who, unlike Solomon, chooses the caring mother figure over the birth mother in the fight over a young child.¹

Working hard at the wide range of subjects offered: acting, movement, voice, stage design, poetry, play analysis, even phonetics (in which I was quite unexpectedly top of the class – whoever could have imagined that I could be a 'scientist of sound'?) and more. Eventually it came to the end-of-course final production – which was to be Chekhov's masterpiece: *Three Sisters*. I vividly remember my anxiety and eagerness whilst waiting to hear which of the sisters I would be allocated. Would it be resigned Olga, passionate Masha or idealistic Irina?

In the end, and to my immediate disappointment, I was cast as Natasha rather than one of the three sisters. Natasha with her bad taste in clothes (the ghastly green belt she wore to dinner with her future sisters-in-law), her vulgar affair with a small-minded county council official and her exuberance when she finally gets the opportunity to cut down the gloomy-but-life-giving trees on the family estate to make space for flower gardens of unimaginable gaudiness.

¹ The Cherry Orchard (Chekhov), Mother Courage (Brecht) and The Caucasian Chalk Circle (Brecht) respectively.

But in researching the part I changed my mind.

Early on I discovered that Chekhov had chosen the name as a barely veiled send-up of Natasha, the heroine of Tolstoy's epic, *War & Peace*, who carries the emotional thread of the book and who, unlike Chekhov's Natasha, is loved and admired by all. I had read *War & Peace* from cover to cover in three days at the age of thirteen, and had seen myself as Natasha in countless imagined scenarios. But even Tolstoy's Natasha changes from breathless beauty to ungainly frump shortly after her marriage to Pierre. A dire warning to women everywhere, I told myself at the time.

Working myself into the role, I enjoyed building a sense of empathy for a character too often played simply for purposes of ridicule. By the time it came to opening night, my Natasha had become a layered and complex woman who made the three sisters seem tediously self-absorbed with their endless whining and their naïve belief that a move to Moscow would solve everything.

Playing the role of a young wife, strongly reinforced my attitude to marriage. It confirmed that a marriage, whatever its idealistic starting point, invariably transforms into patterns of endlessly repeated trivialities and almost unendurable boredom.

After leaving drama school, I spent a couple of years trying to get into the acting business – but with limited success. Tedious walk-on parts in small-minded dramas that left me feeling worthless. There was a flutter of excitement when I was invited to audition for the part of Natasha again, but this time in a new theatrical adaptation of *War and Peace*. It seemed as if this was a kind of inevitable destiny after my early identification with Tolstoy's heroine. But I was discarded quite early on in the selection process. And so my frustration with the realities of a life in the theatre continued. My love of drama, however, remained strong and between my many jobs-to-cover-the-rent I still avidly read and researched my favourite dramatists – especially Anton Chekhov whom I felt as if I had come to know well.

Alongside this, my sequence of short-term romantic relationships gave momentary-but-intense insights into other worlds each of which helped to develop my sense of self.

From the architect, I understood the social impact of the built environment and the excitement of consultation processes where architects and communities work together to find practical and imaginative solutions to desolate urban spaces...

From the banker, I began to understand money not as a necessary evil but as an investment in innovation and an enabler of change...

During my time with the businessman, I became keenly interested in the possibilities of micro-business as a far more satisfying and sustainable route out of poverty than waiting for hard-to-find employment opportunities...

And from the deftly managed, away from the limelight relationship with the politician, I discovered my hidden activist and began to explore ways of fighting against injustice...

All these relationships, however brief, changed me. They gave me curiosity, confidence and expanded horizons. They were each in their different ways very important in shaping who I became during my twenties. And, as far as I know, no-one was hurt by them. But at a certain point I began to feel that I was dabbling and not settling. But did 'settling' have to mean marriage? I fervently hoped it did not.

During this time, I went to the theatre as often as I could afford to. One production of *Three Sisters* (which, of course, I knew word-for-word from my drama school days) captivated me. It became clear to me that the whole play is really about marriage. Starting with the oldest sister (Olga) who didn't marry and resented her life as an aging spinster when it was quite clear that she should have married the schoolteacher. The second sister (Masha) who did marry the schoolteacher, and was so desperately unhappy she started an intoxicating love affair with a married man who led her on and then abandoned her 'for his wife and two little girls'. The youngest sister (Irina) who couldn't decide what was more important – marriage or Moscow.

In this production, I became intrigued by the fate of Irina...

Like the many girls who count cherry stones – Irina spends much of her time dreaming. In scene 1, she is young, exuberant, strikingly pretty and full of optimism about a golden future.

In scene 2, things have become more complicated as two young men have fallen in love with her and are in competition for her hand. One, the Baron, an earnest idealist, the other, an elusive and slightly menacing eccentric. Irina doesn't really want either of them and plans to hold out until she has a wider choice of potential husbands when they get to Moscow – which she is still convinced they eventually will.

Scene 3 takes place in the cramped attic bedroom Irina now shares with her oldest sister because her sister-in-law (Natasha) has taken Irina's bedroom for her infant son. There is a fire in the town and the house is in turmoil as everyone is rushing around trying to assist those who have been displaced or injured. The room is hot and claustrophobic and Irina is disillusioned and exhausted.

Under Olga's guidance she agrees to marry the Baron because, after all, he is a decent man. But she only agrees on the express condition that they can still all go to Moscow.

In Scene 4, the sisters get news that the Baron has been killed by his rival in a duel. Irina decides that this is her fate – she won't ever get to Moscow and she will stay and become a teacher to make something useful and good out of her ruined hopes.

Why did this play fascinate me so much? And why did I find Irina so fascinatingly maddening?

At the age of 33, I decided to enrol for a degree in *Drama & Theatre Studies*. Achieving a 'first' (much to my surprise), I made the momentous decision to apply for a PhD programme which gave me a clear direction of travel, a strong focus and a deep sense of purpose.

On a sudden impulse, I wrote letter to someone I had met during my time at drama school.

Dear Professor

You may not remember me, but we met some 15 years ago at my end of year production of Three Sisters where I was cast as Natasha. You were kind enough to seek me out to say how much you enjoyed my performance and to comment on the way I had understood and interpreted the role. You also asked me why I had chosen to go to drama school and study acting rather than do a drama degree at university. I remember bristling at the question and pushing it away rather ungraciously. If I was ungracious, I apologise!

After all these years, and having struggled (and largely failed) to make a career out of acting, I thought I would let you know that I have just completed a degree course in Drama & Theatre Studies at the Open University and am planning to embark on a PhD on the subject of 'Chekhov's Women – real and fictional'. So my hard work in preparation for playing Natasha sowed a seed.

I feel slightly self-conscious writing to you out of the blue but I remembered our conversation and thought you might be amused to know that, after so long, I finally took your question to heart and decided to take this step into the world of academia.

With all good wishes,

Olivia

Dear Olivia,

I do remember you well – your remarkable and fine performance stayed with me for a long time and was quite an influence on my understanding and subsequent teaching of Chekhov.

It would be a pleasure to hear more of your plans for the PhD. An excellent choice of subject – perhaps I can provide you with some references from my own research work on Chekhov (though it may by now be a little out of date)? I do come to London regularly, perhaps we could meet for dinner?

By the way, I hope you have not been destroyed by flood, fire, tempest, marriage or any other natural catastrophe for I liked you fine as you were.

Yours,

Professor

And so started a new relationship (this time with a man who was not married) conducted largely by correspondence as we lived in separate cities. Chekhov had provided the thread that drew us together and our letters quickly fell into a pattern that was reminiscent of the correspondence between Anton Chekhov and Olga Knipper. Olga started her letters: *Dear Writer* and he wrote back to her as *Dear Actress*. Led by me, the Professor and I adopted this style as an unspoken part of our emerging relationship. The Chekhov connection forged quite a bond between us and, eventually, just as Chekhov had finally proposed to Olga, the Professor proposed to me.

Dearest Professor,

I have thought very much about your proposal. Almost all of me feels elated at the idea of sharing my life with you. And I am excited about what we could do together with the rest of our lives. I love the way your mind works, the deep knowledge that you wear so lightly, the faith you have in my abilities. And I think we could be happy in taking this step.

Having said that, I also need you to know that a small part of me is very afraid of no longer being free or, even worse, that over time our love will simply evaporate into something routine and predictable and I, perhaps we, will regret marrying.

But if you are really sure this is what you want and that we can make it work, then I will marry you – so long as I can be a wife like the moon, one that does not appear in your sky every night.²

Your,

Student

² This is an adaptation of a letter Chekov wrote to a friend who had urged him to marry the actress Olga Knipper who gave the first performance of Masha in *Three Sisters* at the Moscow Arts Theatre. The original was: “Yes, I will marry, but give me a wife like the moon, one that does not appear in my sky every day” (translated from the Russian by Ronald Hingley)

My dearest student,

Being a good deal older than you and having lived alone for all my adult life, I understand and even share your fears. But surely if we acknowledge them, we can overcome them. We will do marriage differently and always be honest with each other if either of us feel that things are closing in.

Let me know when it would suit you to do the deed and I will get a licence from the local registry office. We agree that just the simplest ceremony will suit us best. No-one need know, no-one need come, this will be our secret and our lives will go on as before but with renewed purpose.

With all my love,

Ever yours

Professor

PS With regards to a honeymoon – should we go to Moscow?

Once back from our honeymoon (which did not take place in Moscow), I started on my PhD and read everything I could find about the women in Chekhov's life: the very close relationship to his sister; his frustrations with his mother; his many female admirers some of whom became lovers and, eventually, Olga who became his wife. I then moved on to the female characters who feature in his five well-known plays and his more than five hundred less well-known short stories.

The research soon became an all-absorbing passion that, at last, made sense of my life. Gradually I found that my husband, to whom I had been drawn because of the strong Chekhov connection, was not the font of all knowledge I had assumed and that, despite our pre-agreement to continue to live separately, he was not at all happy with this arrangement.

It became clear that he really didn't want, and probably had never truly wanted, a wife like the moon. This clarity allowed me to admit to myself that I didn't really want to be a wife, whether like the moon or like anything else.

He announced one evening that he had fallen in love with one of his students. This was completely out of the blue. 'Another one? This could become a habit. Isn't it time you grew up?' I retorted trying to keep the shock out of my voice (acting training had its uses). I think I sounded cool, even sardonic, having picked up some of his characteristics during our time together. But underneath I was furious and felt that this was a calculated punishment for my infidelity. Not that I had been unfaithful in the usual sense of that word, rather that I loved my independence and sense of purpose somewhat

more than I loved him. But my anger was simply hurt pride and was quickly replaced by a flooding sense of relief and release.

Two weeks after this beginning-of-the-end conversation, at a time when I knew my soon-to-be-ex-husband would be at work, I went to collect the few things I kept at his house. I left my key on the kitchen table with a farewell note ending with my genuine good wishes for his future happiness.

Then I got on the train back to London and thought about the rest of my life.

It seemed that I had been right all along. Marriage was definitely not for me.

In due course, I decided to postpone completing my PhD as I came to realise that to do justice to my chosen topic, it was vital to read Chekhov's journals, plays, short stories and letters in their original versions. It was, therefore, imperative to learn Russian. Having been awarded a generous study grant, here I am nearing the end of three exhausting but exhilarating years learning this searingly beautiful and impossibly difficult language.

In Moscow.