

For residents of [Your Community]

COFFEE AND A STORY · HOST GUIDE · WEEK OF SEPTEMBER 28, 2026

"The Bet"

by Anton Chekhov · Russia, 1889

Before you start. Hand out resident guides a day or two ahead so everyone reads or listens to "The Bet" in Sunday's edition first. Read it yourself, too. On the day, put a guide on each seat and set out coffee before people arrive.

AT A GLANCE: 45 MINUTES

0–5 min	Welcome	Introduce yourself and the story. Say: <i>"Chekhov was a country doctor who became Russia's greatest short-story writer. There are no right answers today. We just want to hear what you think."</i>	Guide p. 2
5–15 min	Warm-up	Ask prompts 1 and 2. Let several people answer each one.	Guide p. 2
15–32 min	The story	Choose two or three of prompts 3 to 6. Follow the group where it wants to go.	Guide p. 2
32–40 min	Your own life	Ask prompts 7 and 8, as time allows.	Guide p. 3
40–45 min	Close	Go around the room: <i>"One word for the lawyer at the end of the story."</i> Thank everyone and announce next week's story.	Guide p. 3

SET THE TABLE

Ordinary black tea in everyday cups is fine; set out lemon slices and a small dish of jam for those who want to try it the Russian way. Have coffee, decaf and water too, and follow your community's usual food and allergy arrangements.

For residents of [Your Community]

0-5 MIN Welcome

SAY

Chekhov was a country doctor who became Russia's greatest short-story writer. There are no right answers today. We just want to hear what you think.

5-15 MIN Warm-up

1. The lawyer agrees to fifteen years alone. What do you think years of solitude would do to a person: to the mind, the temper, the spirit?
Follow-up: Would you expect someone to come out wiser, or simply lonelier?
2. The lawyer makes this bet at 25. What were you completely sure of at 25 that you see differently now?

15-32 MIN The story · choose two or three

3. Look at what the lawyer reads over the fifteen years. What does his reading tell us about how he changed?
4. Why do you think he gives up the two million rubles?
Follow-up: In the end, did he win the bet or lose it?
5. The banker changes too. Why does he feel such shame when he reads the letter?
6. Why does the banker lock the letter in his safe instead of destroying it?

For residents of **[Your Community]**

32-40 MIN Your own life

7. Many of us have lived through long stretches of isolation, such as illness, a move or the pandemic. What did time alone teach you, or cost you?
8. If you had fifteen quiet years to read, what would be on your list?

40-45 MIN Close

ASK

Go around the room: "One word for the lawyer at the end of the story."

Thank everyone, including those who listened, and announce next week's story.

IF THE ROOM GOES QUIET

Ask: "*If you had fifteen quiet years with nothing but books, what would you read?*" It gets everyone talking.

LISTENERS WELCOME

Some residents come only to listen. Don't call on anyone by name unless they have signaled they want to speak.

For residents of [Your Community]

FOR THE HOST · NOT A LECTURE

The introduction from Sunday's edition

As published with the story on September 27. You can read it aloud during the welcome.

Anton Chekhov was born in 1860 in Taganrog, a port town in southern Russia, and died in 1904, only 44 years old. He trained as a doctor and kept practicing medicine for much of his life, while writing hundreds of short stories and plays such as *The Seagull* and *The Cherry Orchard*. Today he is counted among the greatest short-story writers who ever lived.

He wrote "The Bet" at the end of 1888, and it first appeared in a St. Petersburg newspaper in January 1889. The English version you are about to read was translated by S. S. Kotliansky and John Middleton Murry. It was published in Boston in 1915.

The story still speaks to us because its questions never went away. What is a person's freedom worth in money? Can books give us the whole world? And what do we truly want, once we finally have time to think?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A hard start. Chekhov was born in 1860 in Taganrog, a port on the Sea of Azov in southern Russia. His father, a struggling grocer who had been born a serf, made the boy work in the shop and sing in the church choir he led.

Doctor and writer. In Moscow he studied medicine and paid the family's bills by writing hundreds of short comic sketches for humor magazines. He qualified as a doctor in 1884 and kept treating patients for much of his life.

He saw prison up close. In 1890, just over a year after writing "The Bet," he traveled nearly 6,000 miles across Siberia to Sakhalin island, Russia's notorious prison colony, and spent months interviewing the convicts and settlers there.

He changed this story's ending. The 1889 newspaper version had a third part. When he revised it for his collected works ten years later, he cut that part, explaining in 1903 that the old ending seemed "too cold and cruel."

Why readers still love him. His stories rarely tell you what to think. They end with a question and leave the answer to you, which is why they work so well in a group.

HANDLE WITH CARE

Prompt 1 can get heated. Steer back with "What would Chekhov's lawyer say?" Prompt 7 can touch painful memories. Invite answers, but don't push.

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BACKGROUND FOR THE HOST

For you, not a lecture. Use a fact only if the conversation calls for it.

The money. Two million rubles was an enormous fortune in 1880s Russia, enough to make someone rich for life.

If someone didn't finish. This gives away the ending. The banker bets the lawyer he can't stand five years alone, and the lawyer raises it to fifteen. On the last night the banker, nearly ruined, plans to kill him rather than pay. He finds him asleep beside a letter saying he now despises the money and will leave just before the deadline, losing on purpose. The banker weeps with shame and locks the letter in his safe.

The translation. This edition uses the 1915 English translation by S. S. Kotliansky and J. M. Murry.

NEXT WEEK · OCTOBER 4

"The Necklace" by Guy de Maupassant (France, 1884). A young woman borrows a diamond necklace for one glittering evening, and the loss changes her life.

IF YOU WANT TO DIG DEEPER

Optional reading for the host. None of it is needed to lead the session.

Chekhov's life and work. Encyclopaedia Britannica. [britannica.com/biography/Anton-Chekhov](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Anton-Chekhov)

The story's main themes. LitCharts. litcharts.com/lit/the-bet

TELL US HOW IT WENT

After the session, email one line to briefing@theworlddesk.news: how many came, and which prompt worked best.

Sources: The Bet and Other Stories, trans. S. Kotliansky and J. M. Murry (Boston: John W. Luce, 1915), Project Gutenberg; Sunday short story introduction, The World Desk, Sept. 27, 2026; Encyclopaedia Britannica
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