

A number, Anton Checkov

The other day I called Miss Julia, the children's teacher, to my office. I had to give her her salary.

"Sit down and let's do the accounting," I said to her. "You'll need money, and you're too shy to open your mouth... So...

"We agreed on thirty rubles* a month...

"Forty."

"No, for thirty, I have it written down. I always give thirty rubles to the teachers...

"So, you've been here for two months...

"Two months and five days..."

"Two months exactly... I have it written down... So, we have sixty rubles. We need to take out nine Sundays... You don't work on Sundays. You go for a walk with the children. Then we have three holidays..."

"The holidays are not counted," she said.

"They are counted," I said. "We've agreed on thirty rubles a month, and that's what you'll get. You don't have to like it, but that's the way it is.

Julia's left eye turned red and swelled up. Her jaw began to tremble. She was seized by a nervous cough, she put her handkerchief to her nose, but she didn't let out a sound.

"On New Year's Eve, you broke a teacup with its saucer... We'll take out two rubles... The cup is more expensive because it's a family heirloom, but that doesn't matter... So much the worse! Let's move on! One day you didn't pay attention to Kolya, the little one climbed the tree and tore his jacket... We'll take out another ten rubles... Another day when you weren't paying attention, a maid stole Barbara's boots. You have to have four eyes, that's why we pay you... So, we'll take out another five rubles. On January 10th, I lent you ten rubles...

"No, that didn't happen," Julia murmured.

"I've written it down!"

"Okay..."

"We'll take out twenty-seven rubles, leaving us with fourteen.

Julia's eyes filled with tears. Sweat beads glistened on her nose. Poor girl!

"But I only borrowed money once. Only three rubles, from the lady," Julia murmured, her voice trembling... That's all I borrowed.

"Oh? And I didn't have those written down. So, fourteen minus three, we're left with eleven. Take your money, my dear! Three... three... three... one and one... Take it...

And I gave her eleven rubles. She took them with trembling fingers and put them in her pocket.

"Thank you," she whispered.

I jumped up and started pacing back and forth in the office. I was possessed by demons.

"And why are you thanking me?

"For the money.

"But, damn it, I robbed you, I robbed you! And you say thank you?

"The others didn't give me anything!...

"They didn't give you anything. Of course! I played a prank on you to teach you a hard lesson. Take your eighty rubles! I had them ready in the envelope! But why don't you shout for your rights? Why are you standing there like an idiot? Can you live in this world if you don't put your foot down, if you don't show your teeth? Why are you so will-less?

She muttered a few thank yous and left."