

TRAGEDY: WAKING UP TO WISDOM

VIDEO ONE

News reaches his colleagues quickly. Ivan Ilyich is dead.

Talk of possible promotions are muttered around the room. At his funeral, rather than weeping, his wife strategizes how to maximise her dead husband's pension.

Yet as one friend peers at Ivan's lifeless face – he notices a strange expression. One of disapproval, even warning, towards the wealthy and glamorous who circulate the room.

Disturbed, he rushes out the door.

Thirty years earlier, Ivan Ilyich had been climbing the ranks as a lawyer. He had two ambitions: living a comfortable life, and gaining respect from others.

And so his pursuit began.

Ivan meets a woman and marries her. Not particularly out of love or attraction, but because his superiors say it would be a good match.

When she falls pregnant, Ivan realises that his wife is struggling and making demands on his time and energy. Marriage isn't giving Ivan the comfortable life he'd hoped for, so he throws himself into his work instead. He's rarely at home, preferring to mingle with colleagues in beautiful houses and fashionable clubs.

Soon Ivan moves to St Petersburg for a higher paying job. He buys a larger house and sets about decorating it with the opulence that he considers fitting for a man of his status.

But as he stands atop a ladder, reaching to fit some beautiful drapes above the window, his foot slips. And he falls, hitting his side against the window frame.

He thinks nothing of it.

But then it begins. A pain in his side. An unpleasant taste in his mouth. Which worsens. And worsens. Doctors give different diagnoses and prescribe ineffective medication. But nothing works.

He tries to distract himself with his pleasant life, keeping up appearances – card games, parties. But they lose their appeal. During one party he withdraws into an adjacent room, and as guests laugh and chatter, he's crushed by the realisation. He's going to die.

The illness tightens its grip. He's soon bound to his bed, unable to control even his bodily functions.

But as Ivan declines – his wife and those around him refuse to acknowledge it. They're jarringly cheery, pretending to themselves and others that he's got a passing illness.

And it's here that Ivan sees things clearly. That he sees himself clearly.

The very thing he hates in these people – a refusal to acknowledge suffering, a concern to merely maintain appearances – is what's characterised his entire life.

It's left him with nothing. He's never loved or been loved. He's never stopped to consider the biggest questions of life, and death. He'd only ever asked the question 'what's next', what house, job, party? Never stopping to ask 'what's first?' What matters most?

And then there erupts, from deep in his being, a desperate scream. He howls for three days for his wasted life, eventually subsiding into silence.

Lying on his deathbed, Ivan caresses his son's head. It moves his son to tears. And, for the first time, Ivan's heart is filled with compassion. Joined by his wife, her face wet with tears, Ivan musters the words "forgive me", before stretching out and, with a sigh, breathing his last.