

THE READING

A Play in XII½ Scenes

by

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Translated from the Russian

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Arnold Dorozhny – Theatre director of the chamber drama theatre “Milky Way”. A tall man, 59, with a Byronic vibe – minus the costs of age. High-strung. Long grey hair pulled into a ponytail, with a bald patch right in the middle.

Anastasia Marzenwald – 66, Director of the chamber drama theatre “Milky Way”; also an actress. Her grey hair dyed black gathered into a tight bun.

Marina – Actress of the chamber drama theatre “Milky Way”, wife of the actor Ruslan. A blonde, 35, with a yellowish, mobile face.

Ruslan – Actor of the chamber drama theatre “Milky Way”, husband of Marina. Dark-skinned, Eastern-looking, athletic, 37.

Lina German – A daughter of Anastasia Marzenwald. Young actress of the chamber drama theatre “Milky Way”. A pleasant 20-year-old girl with piercings in her nose and ears.

Captain Zubov – Dmitrii Zubov, Actual Federal Prosecutor-Executor for the Central Regional District. About 50. Wearing a floor-length grey greatcoat.

Roman and Oleg – Federal bailiff-enforcers for the Central Regional District. Dirty white caps, dirty white coats, black rubber batons on their belts.

Voice: Serge – Sound engineer. An unseen low bass coming from the sound system.

Voice: Edik – Lighting designer. An unseen high tenor coming from the sound system.

Nikolas Priborsky – Medium height, indeterminate age; appearance at the director’s discretion. Enters with a black leather notebook and a fountain pen. From time to time, he makes notes.

SCENE I

Slowly and mournfully, a dim, diffuse light rises out of perfect darkness. Center stage in the chamber drama theatre “Milky Way” stands a wooden Viennese chair, set at an angle. A woman’s synthetic white fur coat hangs over the chair’s back. Arnold Dorozhny sits on the chair, absorbed in a game on a tablet. The tablet spits out 8-bit game sounds. Arnold wears an elegant short dark coat. Around his neck, with a touch of foppishness, a dark-purple silk scarf is looped loosely. About a minute—minute and a half later, Marina enters from the left wing. She comes up behind the director quietly, hugs him gently around the shoulders, and silently watches him play. Marina wears jeans, tall suede boots, and a moderately elegant loose sweater that hangs like a sack.

Arnold (*glancing back*)

Marina, tell me this: am I a director, or what am I, in the end? (*still hooked on the tablet*)

Marina

Of course you are, Arno. You’re my favorite, my best director. Kiss me already. (*rests her chin on the director’s shoulder from behind*)

Arnold (*still playing*)

No, you tell me! Why the hell do we need a “little gift” like this for New Year’s? What the hell is she thinking—dragging this shit into the repertoire?! —Ah. There. Got it! (*jabs at the tablet, frantic*)

Marina

She knows best, Arno. My God, what are you even playing? Squares, cubes... Up-down—I don’t get it at all. Arno, we’re so rarely together and you—zero attention. She’ll be here any second—hug me, now. What, already cooled off?

Arnold (*hammering the tablet*)

You’re my muse. One second, Marina—this thing. Tell me: did you read it?

Marina

The new one? Didn’t have time, honey. Gypsy read it.

Arnold

Did you two make up?

Marina

Better not ask.

Arnold

Fine... You could’ve found ninety minutes for the material.

Marina

But we've got a reading today anyway—why?

Arnold

Because it's your job, Marina.

Marina

Mea culpa, my director. Ready to make it up to you—gently. *(strokes Dorozhny's forearm, tender)*

Arnold *(eyes locked on the tablet)*

My muse. "French," my ass. Cliché chasing cliché chasing cliché. Onion soup made of turnip with cranberries. He's as fucking French as I am. Sorry, Mary.

Marina *(kisses Arnold's ear, keeps stroking his forearm)*

Why not? You're perfectly French. I thought he was French too—Marzenwald said: we're staging something French.

Arnold *(smirks)*

French... We didn't smack the frog-eaters hard enough back in 1812. Achoo!

Arnold sneezes loudly. With one hand he pulls a huge handkerchief from the inside pocket of his coat—matching the scarf—blows his nose loudly into it, crumples it, and stuffs it back.

Marina

What did the French ever do to you, sweetheart?

Arnold

They did, Marina—of course they did. I'm just talking. Where's that black one in here? *(pounds the tablet, frantic)*

Marina

Seriously, how much longer?! Kiss me already—everyone's about to show up.

Arnold

I've got no strength left, Marina. Human herpes. *(drops the tablet onto the floor)* Fine—fuck it. Go on, go—before they start filtering in. *(checks his wristwatch)*

Marina

Go where? You done playing? Six-thirty... She'll be here any minute.

Arnold

She promised quarter to. Come here—quick.

Marina sits down on Arnold's knees. They give themselves over to kissing and rather explicit fondling (without taking off any clothes).

SCENE II

The kisses on the chair, threaded with passionate half-whispers, go on for about a minute. Suddenly, a muffled sound of a fairly powerful blast is heard—apparently out on the street, not far from the theatre. Arnold and Marina break off, turning their heads toward the sound. At once the speakers and the stage monitors begin to crackle. They crackle exactly like someone is clumsily trying to jam a jack or an XLR plug into a live mixer that's patched into an active system—which is, in fact, what's happening. Then, from the speakers and monitors, a loud, half-drunk low bass:

Serge

What the hell was that? Boss—hi. Marina—hey.

Still rattled by the blast, Arnold and Marina flinch as if scalded when the sudden voice hits, and they end up standing there onstage.

Arnold *(wildly, toward the sound booth)*

You s-s-son of a bitch! You nearly gave me a heart attack! Listen—if you tell anyone a single word about what you saw here, you won't be working here, fuck—got it? And you won't be living at all, got it? Fuck—understood?

Serge

Boss, why “son of a bitch” right away? I didn't see a damn thing—I was asleep.

Arnold

What are you even doing here? I didn't call you in today. Were you boozing again?

Serge

Petey and I were seeing the old year off. Why “son of a bitch” right away, Boss. We had a few. Like it's the first time.

Marina

You're drunk again, Serge?

Serge

I'm not drunk.

Arnold *(softening)*

All right. Come on, sweetheart. We've got a reading of the new play now—set my mic. And call Petey, tell him to throw a center spot.

Serge

There is no Petey, Boss. He took off earlier today. Went to Peredelkino—his mother-in-law's. For borscht.

Arnold

To hell with him. Sorry, Mari. You go—get my mic set.

Serge

One second, Boss. I'll come down.

Marina

My God—what was that that exploded?

Arnold (*distracted*)

Who knows, Marina... There are tanks across the street. Maybe one of them fired...

Marina

Fired? How—fired?

Arnold (*a bit irritated*)

How the hell would I know, Marina? You can see—I'm here too. With you.

Serge

Boss, I can't get out. Petey probably locked the door.

Arnold

Are you out of your fucking mind? Sorry, Mary. Locked it how?

Serge

The door's shut—and there's no key.

Arnold

Then sit in there. Your own fault. You'll run playback for us.

Serge

Playback of what? Nobody gave me anything.

Arnold

I did! I personally gave you the play the day before yesterday. In the text there are seagulls—and a bell, like on a pirate brigantine. You got seagulls?

Serge

We'll find some, Boss.

Arnold

Fine. Later.

Serge

Whatever you say, Boss.

One more hoarse rasp in the sound system—and Serge goes silent.

Confident footsteps. Anastasia Marzenwald enters. Anastasia wears a heavy fur coat—silver fox — and a large, spherical black fur hat. In her hands she carries two bags: one large white plastic bag with red METRO lettering, and a second—transparent, unmarked—stuffed with tangerines. A long baguette sticks out of the METRO bag; spruce branches with pine cones stick out of the tangerine bag. Anastasia sets the bags down onstage, leaning them against the lone chair.

Anastasia

Happy almost-New-Year, troupe. Well—everyone here already?

Marina

Ruslan and Lina aren't here. And to you, Ms. Marzenwald.

Arnold

Nastja—do you know what just went off out there?

Arnold takes off his coat and carelessly tosses it over the chair. He remains in a thin black V-neck sweater and his scarf.

Anastasia

A tank. You saw the tanks?

Marina

We did, Ms. Marzenwald.

Anastasia

One fired at another. The other one got shredded—turret off to the side, everything's burning. Soldiers, firefighters, cops running around like ants. They've cordoned everything off—I barely managed to slip in here.

Marina

My God. That's horrifying.

Arnold

Accident, or what?

Anastasia

I don't know, Nolli. On my way from home via METRO, every hundred meters—"passport." Three blockposts. Three!

Marina

And you're not afraid, Ms. Marzenwald, walking around on foot in the evening.

Arnold

Seriously, Nastja. Why are you out on foot at this hour?

Anastasia

Listen—what, I can't take two steps through the center? It's not night. It's only seven-thirty. Curfew's still three and a half hours away.

Arnold

I worry about you. Someone might hurt you. Hop on the electró and ride.

Anastasia

In the electró, Nolli, there's no air. Besides—I'll hurt whoever I want.

Arnold (*smirking*)

That's for damn sure.

Offstage, approaching voices. Lina and Ruslan enter together. Lina comes in first. She takes off her backpack and sets it down by Anastasia's bags, next to the director's chair, then unzips her puffer jacket and looks around for somewhere to hang it.

Lina

Hi, everyone.

Arnold (*petulant, annoyed*)

Tell me something—why is it that I show up early for rehearsal, and you're always late?

Ruslan

Sorry, Arnold—I had to drop the kid off at Grandpa's on Third International. Marina was supposed to warn you. Marina—didn't you warn him, or what?

Marina (*irritated*)

I did. I did.

Arnold

Next time everyone's here on time.

Lina

Of course, Uncle Nolly—sorry. Sorry, Uncle Nolly. Also, a tank just blew up on Wrangel.

Anastasia

We know. You got through without trouble?

Ruslan

At the blockpost I said I was going home—the senior let me through, no questions. Just said: don't wander around after curfew.

Marina

Gypsy—why are you showing up with Lina like this? Messing with the kid's head?

Lina

We ran into each other in the electró, Marina. By accident.

Marina

Watch it, my Gypsy.

Ruslan (*irritated, tired*)

Marina—how many times have I asked you... What “Gypsy” am I to you?

Marina

Why are you so dull, Rusi? I’m kidding.

Ruslan

I don’t like it. Can you not joke like that?

Marina

Fine. Then you’ll be my little Greek.

Ruslan

Oh, fuck off, Marina.

Marina

You fuck off. Go on—bring chairs. They’re right behind the left wing.

Ruslan, without arguing, obediently goes behind the left wing, returns carrying four chairs stacked one on top of another, and—together with the director’s chair—sets them in a C-shape, open toward the empty auditorium. Lina, Ruslan, and Anastasia take off their outerwear and hang it over the chair backs. The troupe stands there talking.

Lina

Is Serge here? Tanks just drove over his bicycle. They were swerving around a tank without a turret and climbed onto the sidewalk—our whole parking area got sprayed to hell.

Arnold

He’s in the booth, drunk, Lina. Let him sleep—tell him later. Nastja, why are we reading onstage today? Who the hell put the curtain out in the house? (*points into the auditorium*)

Anastasia

Why are you swearing? Lucy washed it—now it’s drying. Where do you suggest she dries it? You can’t read onstage, Arnold? What do you mean—drunk?

Serge (*a low bass from the crackling speakers*)

I’m not drunk. What happened to my bike, Lina?

Lina

Serge—he's fucked. Oh—Mommy...

Anastasia

What's wrong with you, Lina? Have you lost it?

Lina

Sorry... That's it—your bike's gone, Serge. Five tanks just tore through the parking lot one after another. Every bike that was there—pulp. Scooters too—pulp. Absolute mince.

Serge

Well, damn. How is that even...

Anastasia

Lina—language. You're going to wash your mouth out with soap.

Lina (*smiling*)

Sorry, Mommy. It slipped.

Anastasia

Watch your mouth. Serge—watch it, or I'll fire you.

Serge (*hurt*)

Why “fire” right away?

Arnold

All right. So—did everyone read the material? Ruslan? Lina?

Lina (*sits on the edge of the stage with her legs dangling into the auditorium, rummaging in her backpack*)

Uncle Nolly, I'm really sorry—I kept putting it off, putting it off, figured I'd read it today. And today my thermos spilled in my backpack, Uncle Nolly—right onto the play. Now you can't make out a damn thing.

Anastasia

Lina, you're making excuses like a first-grader. What is this childish babble? And what's this “Uncle Nolly”? At work you will be so kind as to say Mr. Director.

Lina (*holds up her copy of the play, two-thirds soaked in something brown*)

Sorry, Mr. Director. Mom—seriously, the coffee spilled.

Ruslan

Arnold, sorry—I didn't manage to read it either. I sat down to read only yesterday—and then they yanked me into a side gig at the Ministry of Agriculture.

Arnold (*annoyed, petulant*)

What is this, guys—what is this, daycare? Nastja, why am I supposed to work with people who don't even need anything? They're late, they don't know the material. Tell me—what do I need this for? I'd rather be at a festival in St. Petersburg, drinking vodka with Boris.

Anastasia

Nolly—like you don't know what happens when you drink vodka with Boris.

Arnold (*irritated*)

I know that I have absolutely no idea why we need to stage this cheap pseudo-French bullshit now—or ever. Achoo!

Arnold pulls a handkerchief from his coat pocket and blows his nose loudly into it. After he's done, he puts the handkerchief into his trouser pocket.

Anastasia (*cheerful*)

I do know—and that's more than enough. Bless you.

Arnold

Merçi. (*presses a hand to his heart and dips into a sarcastic bow*)

At that moment, someone's phone starts ringing—Tchaikovsky's "Waltz of the Flowers," arranged in an 8-bit style, as the ringtone. Marina pulls her smartphone from her jeans pocket and answers.

Marina

Mom—hi. How's Vanya? Wha-a-at? Fucking hell. What—exactly? Fucking hell. No, we're fine, we're at rehearsal. Yeah—right near the theatre, on Wrangel. No, I didn't see it, they told me. Which channel? Which one? Well I'll be damned... Fucking hell. Listen—can you babysit for a couple more days? Great, Mom. Where's Dad? The squirrel thing? Tell him hi. Listen—then we'll see by the situation. Third International Street—everything okay there? Okay. Mom, sorry, I have to work—I'll call you in a couple hours. Yeah. Bye, sweetheart. Kiss. Sorry. (*hangs up, pockets the phone*) Fucking hell!

Ruslan

Vanya's okay?

Marina

Mom says there's an uprising in the center. They're talking about Wrangel on the teleró—they just showed the theatre from outside, on both channels. The 9th Damansky Regiment has risen up—tanks are driving around and shooting at each other. Twenty of them are already burning all over the center. The general is addressing the nation on the teleró.

Arnold

What the hell is the 9th Damansky Regiment?

Marina

I don't know, Arnold—Mom said it.

Ruslan

I'm asking—Vanya's okay, Marina?

Marina

Vanya's fine. Fine. He and Grandpa are doing the squirrel puzzle. Mom says curfew is in effect right now—and the electró is cancelled today and tomorrow. The general on the teleró is saying: don't go outside. So I'm thinking—maybe Vanya should stay on Third International Street for now?

Ruslan

Yeah. Of course. Let him stay for now.

Arnold (*irritated*)

Perfect. Just wonderful. So who are we staging your French for, Ms. Marzenwald—tankers?

Anastasia (*sharp*)

For wankers, for fuck's sake... I've got an order. You're getting paid, right? You are—so quit whining, for God's sake. Stage what you're told, or go find another job. You, Nolly, are sometimes worse than a woman.

Arnold (*grumbling*)

All right, all right. I'll stage it.

Anastasia (*cheerful*)

Now that's better! Now you're better than a woman! You and Ruslan—go and bring the table onstage. It's in the corridor behind the left wing.

Arnold (*petulant, grumbling*)

My employment contract doesn't say anything about carrying tables onstage, actually.

Anastasia (*sarcastic, with some irritation*)

Marina—bring the table onstage with Lina, since Arnold's contract doesn't cover it.

Arnold (*waves her off*)

All right, all right—I'm joking. Rusi, let's go. We'll bring it in.

SCENE III

Arnold and Ruslan exit into the upstage left wing. Arnold has a tablet in his hands. The lights go out. The turntable rotates, and the audience sees a fairly wide corridor in cross-section, its wall farthest from the house packed with assorted theatrical set-dressing and props. The corridor runs diagonally from the upstage left wing toward the far downstage right corner. Here stands all sorts of furniture and objects that are clearly set pieces and stage property: right by the left wing there is a baroque escritoire, on top of which Arnold's tablet lies and phosphoresces; just behind it—a coat rack hung with costumes studded with multicolored peacock feathers; nearby, a battered old piano; strange retro-futuristic cardboard frame constructions; a small papier-mâché gondola; in short, everything a set designer could possibly dream up. At the far edge of the right wing—where the corridor effectively dead-ends—stands a large round oak table. Arnold stands at the table, leaning on it, facing the house, his eyes covered by his hand. Ruslan stands slightly behind him, a hand resting on the director's shoulder. From their poses alone it should be clear that this scene is heavy for both of them.

Arnold (*tired*)

Ruslan, I can't do this anymore. We have to stop this disgrace immediately.

Ruslan (*first contemptuous, then fervent*)

How low, Arnold. You used me—just used me—and now you want to toss me out like an old sock. But I love you. What am I supposed to do now?

Arnold (*tired*)

This isn't love, Ruslan. You've lost your mind. Let's end it cleanly and never come back to it.

Ruslan (*fervent*)

But what do I do with my feelings, Arnold? I can't just switch them off like a lamp. It hurts. I love you.

Arnold (*tired, with a touch of irritation*)

What are you even talking about, Ruslan? We fooled around a couple of times, did some coke—what feelings? You've got Marina, a beauty, and Vanya is a wonderful kid. A son, for fuck's sake. Those are the feelings you're supposed to have, Ru-ru. You and I—this is just dust, a haze, a whim. Forget it. Go live normally.

Ruslan (*first angry, then burning*)

You're a bastard, Arnold. A piece of shit. A pig. I hate you. No, no—sorry—I don't know what I'm saying. Let's meet again. Like the first time—in the May Baths, remember?

Arnold

Tanks are shooting outside and you're crooning serenades—pick your time and place... The women will notice we're gone and come looking. We'll decide later. Take it, and let's go.

Ruslan

I'll take it—but you promise we'll meet at least one more time.

Arnold

All right, all right. One more time. Let's haul it.

They take the round table from opposite sides and carry it down the corridor toward the upstage left wing. As they approach the wing, the light fades smoothly to black.

SCENE IV

The turntable rotates, and the audience sees Arnold and Ruslan carrying the table onstage from the upstage left wing. They bring it to the five chairs that have been set out and place the table in the center. Then Ruslan walks over to Marina, who is standing near the upstage wall, and starts arguing with her—clearly in raised voices. Lina, sitting on the edge of the stage, has taken the play out of her backpack, put on her glasses, and is trying to make out at least something on the pages. The culprit behind the disaster—Lina's big black thermos—stands next to her.

Anastasia

Honestly, if I sent you two to fetch death, I'd live forever. Why so long?

Arnold (*irritated*)

It's jammed up with crap—like a damn maze, Nastja. We barely cleared a path. When is Lucy going to put some order in there?

Anastasia

Leave Lucy alone. It's all from the current repertoire. Where do you want it put? You want the stagehands hauling it in from storage every single time?

Arnold

Let them haul it. They won't break.

Anastasia

Of course they won't—what are they, idiots? They'll quit. And then you'll haul it yourself. Except that isn't in your contract. All right, enough bickering—let's do some work.

Anastasia sets both bags on the table and, rummaging inside, pulls disposable plastic cups out of the big white METRO bag, along with a large transparent two-liter bottle filled with orange liquid and a «fruity» label.

Arnold (*grumbling*)

So are we reading today, or are we eating today?

Anastasia (*patiently*)

We'll read, then we'll take a break and have a bite. Why do you grumble all the time, Nolly, like some old grandpa?

Arnold (*temperamental, ingratiating*)

Because you feed us. You know, Nastjenka, that I love you with all my strength.

Anastasia (*cheerful*)

I know, I know. Keep it up and I'll take the work away from you. Marina—go bring a vase from the dressing room. We'll stick the fir branches in.

Marina (*exits into the right wing*)

On it, Ms. Marzenwald.

Anastasia pulls five mandarins from the clear bag and places them in the middle of the table. Then she takes a bundle of fir branches out of the METRO bag and lays it on the table. She sets the bags on the floor.

Arnold (*skeptical*)

The broom's from METRO too?

Anastasia (*sighs*)

The broom's from the cemetery, Nolly. We visited Murad this morning, so I snapped off some fir branches by his grave. Look how neat they are—smell like New Year.

Anastasia takes a fir branch from the table and inhales loudly beside it.

Arnold (*taps his forehead*)

December 30th... Today's Murad's anniversary. And I completely forgot.

Anastasia

Today, yes. Three years since he dumped me and Lina, the old bastard.

Lina (*swinging her legs on the edge of the stage, casually shaking her head*)

Mommy, why do you talk about Daddy like that? He didn't exactly fake his second heart attack on purpose.

Anastasia

Not the second—third, Lina. And not a heart attack—a stroke.

Lina (*cheerful*)

Right—third stroke, Mom. Slipped. Sorry, Mommy.

Marina returns from the right wing carrying a large brown ceramic vase with an antique pattern and sets it in the center of the table. Anastasia places the fir branches into the vase.

Marina (*shakes her head, devastated*)

Murad... our dear one... May the earth rest lightly on you.

Arnold (*shakes his head*)

What a props man. A giant. They don't make them like that anymore—now it's all small fry. Yeah... human herpes.

Ruslan (*sits at the table*)

Jesus. I forgot too.

Lina (*swinging her legs, smiling, staring with an unseeing gaze into eternity toward the sound booth*)

Me and Mom could barely get to him this morning. Little mounds in the snow, bullfinches darting around, granite shining in the sun. Our Daddy's lying there under a white blanket, dreaming a summer dream in his beloved Yalta.

Anastasia (*smirks*)

I know what he's dreaming about. All right—let's toast him.

Anastasia unscrews the bottle, separates the stack of disposable cups, and pours the yellow drink.

Anastasia

Eat the mandarins. Murad used to say: no matter how many you take, it's never enough. He loved mandarins—could eat a kilo in one sitting. But he didn't like oranges—said they were too damn big.

The actors gather at the table, take cups and mandarins, peel them, pile the peels on the table, eat the mandarins, drink.

Arnold (*chewing a mandarin, washing it down*)

Could've had something stronger, of course. We used to drink a bit of brandy, I remember..., I remember—right there in the workshop, all of it. (*absently rubs his throat under the scarf, sniffles*) Yeah... that was something... Yeah...

Anastasia (*cheerful*)

That was something... So you could go on a month-long bender? Been there. Remember. You said "work, not eat"—so work, don't eat. We toasted him, that's enough. Now—peels in here and straight into the reading.

Anastasia pulls out another empty METRO bag, shapes it into an oval nest, and sets it on the table. Everyone obediently tosses their mandarin peels into it. Then Anastasia folds the bag into a compact bundle and slips it back into the METRO bag with the baguette sticking out. The transparent two-liter bottle with the yellow liquid remains in the center of the table next to the vase of fir branches.

SCENE V

Arnold (*rubbing his forehead hard, briskly*)

Fair enough. All right—scripts out. We work.

Everyone obediently sits down around the table. Arnold sits in the center, Anastasia to his right, Ruslan to his left. To Anastasia's right sits Marina, and to Ruslan's left sits Lina. Everyone pulls their copies from bags and backpacks. Lina sets her coffee-soaked copy aside and peers into Ruslan's.

Lina

Rusi, can I read off yours? I can't see anything in mine.

Ruslan (*slides his copy closer to Lina*)

Sure, Lini. Move in closer.

Lina drags her chair right up to Ruslan, pressing her chest against him.

Arnold (*hands cupped like a megaphone, shouting toward the sound booth*)

Serge, up you get. Wake up, you enfant terrible.

A rasp crackles through the portals, and then Serge's low voice follows.

Serge (*low, offended*)

You're calling me names again, Boss.

Arnold

That's a French compliment. Now find me a seagull and a bell, Serge.

Serge

Thanks, Boss. Lemme look, Boss.

Arnold

The play's called *The Heritage*. It was written forty years ago by Anastasia's buddy—Vladimiróvich. Right, Ms. Marzenwald?

Anastasia (*gazing dreamily into the past*)

He based Ellen on me, back when we were—hm—close. Then we split up. In '76 he left for France, lived in Marseille for a while, drank himself to death, and died there—penniless. A bum. Such a fool.

Lina

Mommy, really? Somebody wrote a play about you?

Anastasia

Well, it's not about me. I just—let's say—I posed a little.

Marina (*delighted*)

That's so romantic, Ms. Marzenwald! Let's read already.

Arnold (*puts on his glasses, takes the script, turns serious and focused*)

Hold it, Marina. Right. Marina, you're Sophie Dior. Ruslan—you're Jacques. Lina, you're Ellen. And you, Ms. Marzenwald, accordingly—Geneviève Fraasier.

Anastasia (*shakes her head, joking*)

You're a real bastard, Arnold. Vladimiróvich wrote me as a twenty-year-old girl, and I'm stuck playing a seventy-year-old hag.

Arnold (*shrugs*)

What do you want from me? Lina looks just like you. You want her playing a seventy-year-old hag? I mean—sorry, Nastja.

Anastasia (*cheerful*)

Told you: you're a bastard, Arnold!

Lina

Really, Mommy? I look just like you?

Anastasia (*cheerful*)

Not just like me, but there's a resemblance. So—go.

Lina (*jokingly snaps a salute*)

Yes!

Ruslan

There are more roles listed here too, Arnold.

Arnold

Those are voices—we'll run them recorded. For now I'll read them.

Suddenly a loud, pounding bell-peal blasts from the portals. Everyone flinches and turns.

Marina

Jesus, Serge—are you trying to kill us?

Serge (*bass*)

Boss said bells. What's wrong with bells?

Arnold

Serge, I asked for a little bell—like on a romantic brigantine—and you're hanging a whole belfry. In the play it's a tiny bell on the front door. I need a small bell. Go find a small bell.

Serge

How am I supposed to know what kind of bells you need, Boss? I'll check others. I've got plenty more.

Arnold

Check, check, Serge.

Immediately the portals blast surf, distant gulls, and a deep foghorn from an ocean liner.

Serge

There are gulls like this too, Boss.

Arnold

Not those gulls, Serge. I need just one gull—no sea, no Titanics. That gull cries into an open window a few times during the play. Find me a solo gull. Listen in your headphones, Serge, yeah? Make a little folder—small bells and lonely gulls—and later I'll have you cue them for me. And don't put anything else through the speakers until I ask. Otherwise, yeah, you really can die from it.

Serge (*gloomy, offended*)

Whatever you say, Boss. You told me to play it—so I played it.

Arnold (*waves a hand toward the booth*)

Anyway. Play starts like this: mid-last century, a port café in France. An empty room lit by candles. Behind the bar stands Jean—that's you, Ruslan—and he's waiting for some visitors. He mutters curses to himself, waters the plants, drinks cognac straight from the bottle. You're half Algerian, Ruslan.

Ruslan (*narrows his eyes, suspicious*)

Algerian?

Arnold

Yes, Ruslan—Algerian. Half. (*raises a warning finger*) Next: in walks a young beauty, a brunette—Ellen. That's you, Lina. Only you'll have to take the metal out of your nose.

Lina

Okay, Arnold. Ooh—will you get me a black wig? Gorgeous!

Arnold

Stop interrupting—I'm giving you the plot. So: the café owner, Jean-Paul Dior, has been seriously ill with cancer. Three days ago he killed himself and left a will. First, he ordered that he be cremated and that his ashes be used to fertilize the plants growing on the walls of his café. Second, he left the café, his apartment, and his money as an inheritance to four people. The first is Jacques. Jacques is a café worker who does everything there—cook, waiter, bartender, cleaner. The second is Ellen. Ellen is a young, beautiful girl, a shop assistant at the newspaper stand on the ground floor of the building where Jean-Paul's apartment is—he's been buying newspapers and cigarettes from her for the past two years. The third is Jean-Paul's daughter, Sophie—he had a huge falling-out with her and threw her out years ago. That's you, Marina. And the fourth is Madame Fraisier. Geneviève Fraisier is an

elderly neighbor of Jean-Paul's, who's known him since childhood and cared for him in the last year of his life. These four people are now all meeting tonight in the café to decide what to do with the inheritance. That's our main line. Questions?

Lina (*claps her hands*)

It's all so French! Come on—faster, faster—let's read!

Marina

Why did he throw me out, Arnold?

Arnold

Because you were supposed to read the script, Marina. Short version—you got knocked up by a Nazi.

Everyone at the table laughs.

Marina (*smiles*) Sorry, Arnold.

A phone rings. The ringtone is Oginski's Polonaise. Anastasia reaches into the pocket of the fur coat hanging on the chair back, pulls out her phone, and checks the caller.

Anastasia (*covering the receiver with her hand*)

One second—it's Droyf. (*into the phone*) Yes, Mr. Droyf. Yes, yes, we're all here. From where? And why the urgency, Mr. Droyf—why not after the holidays? I get it. What can you say. Calm? How is it calm—you're watching teleró, aren't you? Yes, it's right here near us. No, so far everything seems fine. All right, if it's a directive, what can I do. What time will they come? Already? We're not free people—what can you do. Well then... Yes, Mr. Droyf, I'll call the back entrance. Yes, all the best to you too. Happy almost-New-Year, Mr. Droyf.

Arnold

So are we reading today or what? What did your Droyf want, Nastja?

Anastasia

Why is he "my" Droyf? Listen to this—an inspection commission is coming right now. Droyf said so.

Arnold

Coming where?

Anastasia

Coming here. The Culture Executive got an order from regional management just now: they're making the rounds and inspecting. Because of that—what is it—this Madam-something uprising, hell if I know.

Marina

Damansky, Ms. Marzenwald.

Anastasia

What's the fucking difference...

Arnold

You mean they're coming here tonight? Right now?

Anastasia

Right now. Droyf said they'll come in and then leave right away. Look around, ask a couple questions, wish us a happy New Year, and go.

Arnold (*bleak*)

My God, Nastjenka. I'm so sick of all of this... tankers, commissions... your Droyf. How—tell me—how can anyone stand it? How can you do decent work in this endless madhouse? Your Vladimirovich was right: better to die drunk by the sea with your pants off than this thousand-year fog with tanks, cattle, and inspection commissions.

Anastasia

This is our homeland, Arnold.

Arnold (*mournful, sarcastic*)

Homeland, sure. "The endless sweeping reaches of the meadows, the groves and rot of souls that groan and sigh..."... Yeah. Human herpes...

Anastasia

Stop whining, Arnold.

Anastasia dials.

Anastasia

Zoya? Yes, it's me. Listen—an inspection commission is coming right now. Let them in and send them to the stage. They should be here any minute... And don't you dare be rude to people. What? Like I don't know you. All right. Bye. (*She sets the phone down on the table in front of her.*)

Anastasia

That's it. We can read, Arnold.

Arnold

Fine. Let's do what we can. Serge—have you got anything, sound-wise?

A ship's bell rings from the portals.

Arnold

Serge, fuck! Sorry, ladies. I asked for a seagull. One seagull with no bell—not a bell with no seagull. What are you—do you live in fucking reverse? Sorry, ladies.

Serge (*very low, raspy bass*)

Sorry, Boss. I thought the seagull comes after the bell.

Arnold

Not everywhere, Serge.

A seagull cries anxiously from the portals.

SCENE VI

Heavy footsteps. A strange trio comes onstage from the right wing. In front is a taut, dry, middle-height man of about fifty, in a brand-new greatcoat that reaches his ankles, bareheaded. His mouse-colored hair is cut short, but not too short. He is carrying a large tablet—almost the size of a small painting—set into an ornate gilded frame. Behind the dry man come two stout, slovenly men, below average height or about average, in white medical coats and white caps. They resemble each other like two different drops of water. Thick black rubber batons hang from their belts. The one on the left has something slung over his shoulder—folding stretchers stained with brown blotches.

Captain Zubov (*looks at the tablet, reads*)

Good evening. Chamber Drama Theatre “Milky Way.” Manager Anastasia Marzenwald. Director Arnold Dorozhny?

Anastasia

Yes, yes, good evening. You’re the inspection commission? Droyf warned me you’d be coming. Please—go ahead, look at whatever you need.

Captain Zubov (*dry, emotionless*)

Senior Captain Dmitrii Zubov. Actual Federal Prosecutor-Executor for the Central Regional District.

Anastasia (*astonished, authoritative*)

Actual federal what? Is this some New Year’s prank?

Captain Zubov

Unfortunately, no, Ms. Marzenwald. Everyone remains in their places. Comrades—control.

The two slovenly men pass behind the table, grinning badly, and stand facing the auditorium behind those seated.

Arnold (*stands up, irritated*)

“Control”? What do you mean, “control”? What are you here to control? This is a theatre, in case you missed it. I get it—you’ve got an inspection. But let’s still behave like human beings.

Senior Captain Zubov gives Oleg a short nod toward Arnold. Oleg unhooks his rubber baton and strikes Arnold in the kidneys. With a short groan Arnold drops back onto his chair. The others stare in horror and confusion. Anastasia clamps a hand over her mouth and lets out a small, choked gasp. Ruslan instinctively rises from his chair to defend the director. He doesn't manage to do a single thing: the second bailiff, Roman, hits him on the back of the head with the baton. Ruslan collapses to the floor, unconscious.

Oleg *(with a nasty grin, to Arnold, idly playing with the baton)*

You wanted it “human”? Stay put. You understand Human? Or is it only French you understand? Everybody sits like little bunnies, you pus-flaked dandruff. Hear me, Brother Roman—have you finished with our patient?

Roman *(with the same nasty grin)*

What the fuck's gonna happen to him, brother Oleg. He's moving. I know my job—we won't lose him before schedule. Sit back down, leaky clown. And calm, no jokes—our instructions give us all the powers.

Ruslan, holding the back of his head, slowly gets up from the floor and sits back down.

Marina *(trembling)*

What is this? Who are you people? By what right are you hitting my husband?

Captain Zubov *(soothing, looking at the framed tablet)*

Calmly, Marina Sidorova.

Zubov changes his tone and begins to read from the tablet in a flat, official voice.

Captain Zubov

I am Senior Captain Dmitrii Zubov, Actual Prosecutor-Executor for the Central Regional District, authorized by the Federal Culture Executive Committee for the Central Regional District, and also by the Federal Executive Prosecutor's Office for the Central Regional District. Pursuant to Order No. 6, “On the New Cultural Policy, the Creative State Space, and Moral-Sexual Law,” of the Interagency Executive Committee of State Security, on December 30 of the current year, I and the enforcement bailiffs are required to conduct a mobile operational judicial-enforcement session on moral-sexual law in the matter of the collective of the Chamber Drama Theatre “Milky Way.” Pursuant to the consolidated code of instructions for a mobile operational judicial-enforcement session on moral-sexual law, in the event the accused do not comply with the demands of the Prosecutor-Executor, all means and measures at the disposal of the Prosecutor-Executor's team are to be applied to the accused immediately, up to and including the most extreme.

Anastasia *(trembling)*

Who are you? What kind of devilry is this? Droyf said you'd look around the hall, wish us a Happy New Year, and leave.

Captain Zubov (*calm*)

Happy New Year, Ms. Marzenwald. Pursuant to Order No. 6, “On the New Cultural Policy, the Creative State Space, and Moral-Sexual Law,” of the Central Interagency Executive Committee of State Security, mobile operational judicial-enforcement session on moral-sexual law are conducted in relation to cultural workers and collectives of institutions subordinate to them, in accordance with an approved list in my possession from the Interagency Executive Committee of State Security. In the event of noncompliance, measures shall be applied to the accused pursuant to the code of instructions for a mobile operational judicial-enforcement session on moral-sexual law.

Zubov gives Bailiff Roman a short nod.

Captain Zubov

Comrade Roman. We have a misunderstanding.

Roman saunters up to Anastasia, politely touches her shoulder, and when she turns to face him, swings and slaps her hard across the cheek with the back of his hand. Anastasia folds forward, chest onto the table, turning her head. Blood runs from her nose. Seeing what is happening to her mother, Lina jumps up and tries to claw at Oleg’s face. Oleg dodges, grabs Lina by the hair, twists her arm behind her back, and lightly knocks her forehead against the tabletop. Lina’s nose starts bleeding too. Anastasia’s blood runs from the left nostril; Lina’s from the right.

Oleg (*quiet, nasty*)

The Prosecutor-Executor doesn’t joke. So wipe your blood and sit and listen. Mr. Actual Prosecutor-Executor is going to lay everything out for you point by point. Easy, boys.

Oleg flips back the front of his coat and shows Arnold and Ruslan—who have stirred—a holstered pistol on his belt.

Captain Zubov

Thank you, Comrade Oleg. Let them wipe up—Ms. Marzenwald is bleeding from the nose.

Oleg rummages in his pockets, pulls out an enormous filthy handkerchief, unfolds it, and lays it on the table in front of Anastasia and Lina.

Oleg (*earnest, as if apologizing*)

Here. Wipe, mother. Sit square on your fat ass and tell your slut to sit square too. You girls don’t twitch at me—our job’s nervous, you understand.

He snaps his tone and barks.

WIPED UP, BITCHES!

The women, crying, take the handkerchief and wipe their broken noses, one after the other.

Roman (*with a grin*) Contact established, Mr. Actual Prosecutor-Executor.

Captain Zubov *(in a standardized official voice)*

Thank you, Comrade Roman. Accused persons, I strongly recommend that you show forbearance toward a certain roughness in our manner of handling you. I assure you: without timely and precise reaction to noncompliance here and now, there would be far more unnecessary blood. I must state that we act in this manner not because it affords us any pleasure, but solely for the maintenance of judicial-enforcement order and exclusively within the framework of the consolidated code of instructions for the mobile operational judicial-enforcement session on moral-sexual law. Do not take these opening remarks as a justification—still less as an apology to you. The insignificant physical impact applied to you just now, exclusively for the purpose of ensuring order during the mobile operational judicial-enforcement session on moral-sexual law, was applied in a measured manner and lay wholly and entirely within the scope of the legal powers granted. Do not interrupt me. When the time comes, I will invite the accused to speak. In the event of unauthorized remarks by the accused, measures of physical impact will again be applied to the accused—immediately—pursuant to the code of instructions for the mobile operational judicial-enforcement session on moral-sexual law.

Zubov's intonation shifts to a ceremonious, conference-like solemnity; the stage lighting also shifts (at the discretion of the director and the lighting designer).

Captain Zubov

The mobile operational judicial-enforcement session on moral-sexual law in the matter of the collective of the Chamber Theatre “Milky Way” is hereby declared open.

The slovenly man on the right rummages, produces from the pocket of his white coat a little bell like those on hotel reception desks, and presses it. A melodic ding. The bell is put away again.

SCENE VII

Captain Zubov

So what is it you lot are disgracing, citizens? Carrying on like the devil knows what: jerking off, you know, sticking it into whoever, letting whoever stick it into you, and then you end up with illegitimate kids, and those kids go on to behave like ownerless pigs. How is that how cultural workers are supposed to behave in our beloved Central Regional District, huh?

Roman and Oleg snicker nastily, playing with their batons.

Captain Zubov

You're utterly indiscriminate in your sexual cravings and your hookups. You there, Arnold. In your old age—pardon me, ladies—you want to shove it into anything that wanders into your line of

sight. True or not?! Is that right? Is that our way—our federal-regional way? Is that fair? No! Is it fair that you, Dorozhny, are “polishing” both Marina Sidorova and Ruslan Sidorov here—lawful spouses to each other, even if their relationship is... distant, yeah? And they don’t know a damn thing—neither in sleep nor in spirit, neither ass nor ear? Huh? And did you think about their little Ivanyusha when you were secretly using his mom and his dad one after the other? How he calls for his parents on a nasty stormy night at grandma’s and grandpa’s? And I wouldn’t be surprised if you *did* think about it—because you’re a broadly talented citizen, aren’t you.

Marina and Ruslan stare at each other in shock, then at Arnold. Arnold sits with his face dropped into his hands on the table.

Captain Zubov

And do you know that the courage with which you corruptly play around in the depths of Ruslan Sidorov has, as of December 23rd of this year, become a serious offense, and under the new federal-regional instruction code carries severe punishment—up to the most severe?

Marina (*in extreme shock*)

What?

Ruslan drops his face into his hands and shakes his head.

Captain Zubov

Everyone shut up. And do you know, Arnold, that Angelina German—daughter of the citizen Anastasia Marzenwald present here and the now-deceased citizen Murad German—is not his daughter, but your spawn? Say thank you you didn’t manage to plow her too. You were creeping up on her, weren’t you? Looking, looking... licking your lips, you mangy stud.

Anastasia (*screams*)

That’s a lie! How dare you?!

Captain Zubov (*snaps, switching tone*)

What lie, Anastasia. One moment—right now.

Zubov looks at the gilded tablet, taps a few options, and a moment later starts reading.

Captain Zubov

Here. Kindly accept. “On September 28th, 1999, trainee director Arnold Dorozhny visits actress Anastasia Marzenwald at her residence. Taking advantage of the absence of her spouse, theatrical prop-maker Murad German—who at that time was on a creative assignment in St. Petersburg at the Mariinsky Theatre staging the ballet *The Void*—Arnold Dorozhny enters into sexual relations with actress Anastasia Marzenwald lasting one hour, thirty-three minutes, twelve and a half seconds. Dorozhny uses no contraceptives, as Anastasia informs Arnold that she is infertile and incapable of conceiving children. As a result of this meeting, Anastasia carries and, nine months later, successfully delivers a daughter, Lina, whose father is officially declared to be Murad German.”

Arnold lifts his head from his hands and stares at Anastasia, stunned. Anastasia drops her face into her hands and begins to sob hysterically. Lina looks at Arnold—fixed, serious. Ruslan and Marina stare dully at each other.

Captain Zubov

By the way, Dorozhny—and you too, Anastasia. Your daughter Lina, despite her young age, regularly and with pleasure takes an active part in illegal group pile-ups involving people she knows as well as strangers. Isn't that right, Lina? Furthermore: Lina, experiencing an unlawful sexual interest toward the theatre actor Ruslan Sidorov—the lawful spouse of Marina Sidorova—regularly engages in self-abuse while browsing Ruslan Sidorov's account on the virtual social network *Expanses*.

Lina cries out sharply, dropping her face into her hands.

Captain Zubov

And how, tell me, after such moral-sexual behavior, do you all intend to carry the cultural light of art to the federal-regional public—your dear central fellow-countrymen? What kind of moral-sexual example do you expect to pass on to them?

Anastasia (sobbing)

Scum, scum, scum... Who the hell are you to... Lies. It's all lies.

Captain Zubov

How is it "what's it to us"... And whose business would it be, Anastasia, if not ours? Take a look yourself, Anastasia. Here—this recording is fresh.

Roman and Oleg laugh approvingly even louder, nod their heads, and begin clapping loudly.

Zubov shows Anastasia something on the gilded tablet. She tries not to look, covering her eyes with her hands. Zubov gives Roman a short nod. Roman steps up from behind and roughly grabs Anastasia by her hair, twisted into a tight bun.

Roman

Look, mother, look—don't hide those director eyes. Better look the nice way. Otherwise I'll ask you so hard you'll end up without eyes. There've been precedents.

Zubov starts a video on the tablet. It emits passionate moans—male and female voices. Held by the hair by bailiff Roman, Anastasia looks at the tablet for a few seconds, then loses consciousness and goes limp, hanging by her hair in Roman's hand.

Lina

Mommy, mommy! What did you do to my mommy, you bastards?!

Marina Sidorova lets out a small, terrified squeal, covering her mouth with her hand. Roman lowers Anastasia's head by the hair onto the table, turns to Marina, and delivers a heavy smack to the back of her head. Marina's head jerks and lightly strikes the table with her forehead. Marina grabs her forehead with her left hand and falls silent.

Ruslan (half-rising, staring from under his brows with a mix of hatred and terror, hoarsely whispering)

Animals. What are you doing? She's a woman—you're hitting women...

Roman (*jabs Ruslan in the neck with his baton*)

Quiet here, man, ha-ha-ha. And you, Ruslan, don't even think about twitching—your whole leaky little family will go down together. Better sit still and think about your Vanya, you cheap faggot.

Ruslan covers his face with his hands and moans softly.

Captain Zubov

You see, Ruslan, in our state structure we have absolute equality: in that equality there are neither women nor men—neither Jewess, as they say, nor Greek. And here and now we have a concrete collective of defendants and a team of a mobile operational judicial-enforcement session on moral-sexual law, acting exclusively within the bounds of its instruction code of the mobile operational judicial-enforcement session on moral-sexual law. Comrade Roman—treat her.

Roman (*turning to Lina, pointing with his baton at the unconscious Anastasia*)

See, Lina, you little filth, what you brought your mother to. Don't piss yourself—we'll bring her back. Brother Oleg, get the smelling salts for the old broad.

Oleg pulls a cloudy little bottle from the pouch on his belt, steps up to the table, and thrusts it under Anastasia's nose. She doesn't react. Oleg slaps her cheeks; she still doesn't respond.

Arnold (*half-whispering*)

You bastards... fascists... She needs help. Call an ambulance...

Captain Zubov switches to an official register.

Captain Zubov

Calling an ambulance is not provided for by the instruction code of the mobile operational judicial-enforcement session on moral-sexual law. An ambulance may be called only upon completion of the mobile operational judicial-enforcement session on moral-sexual law. Instructions, Arnold. Comrades, in order to avoid any possible violation of the instruction code of the mobile operational judicial-enforcement session on moral-sexual law, I order that handcuffs be placed on the defendants.

Oleg

On the old woman too, Mr. Prosecutor-Executor?

Captain Zubov

On everyone, Comrade Oleg. Everyone present here. Including, of course, Anastasia Marzenwald.

Roman

Come on, Brother Oleg—tie them up. Watch this: anyone twitches—straight to a control shot. Instructions allow it.

Oleg takes out the handcuffs and, one by one, snaps them shut on the wrists of the defendants lying on the table.

Oleg

Done, Mr. Prosecutor-Executor.

Captain Zubov

Thank you, Comrade Oleg. Comrades, I proceed to the confrontations—we're running out of time. Comrade Roman?

Bailiff Roman takes out a court bell and presses it. The bell rings immediately.

SCENE VIII

Captain Zubov

All of you present here are filthy animals who have trampled on the moral-sexual law of our dear Central Federal-Regional Union. And you—Arnold! How do you have the nerve? Ruslan and Marina Sidorov are your subordinate actors, and you, shameless dog that you are, used the authority and skills granted to you by the cultural administration in a shameless way—to shove your prick into the very cell of our Central Federal-Regional Union: a married acting family with a child, their son Ivan. Well then. To them I now give the floor to speak to each other in their own defense. So—what do you have to say in your defense, actress Marina Sidorova, to your official husband Ruslan Sidorov, in justification? Speak, speak. If you remain silent, the comrades will apply the instruction code of the mobile operational judicial-enforcement session on moral-sexual law in full. Comrade Oleg, keep an eye on it.

Bailiff Oleg approaches Ruslan, lightly tapping him on the head with his baton; Ruslan's head jerks almost imperceptibly. Captain Zubov approaches Marina and begins to stroke her hair paternally.

Captain Zubov *(softly, coaxing)*

Why are you so afraid, you poor fool? Look at you, shaking like a leaf in the wind. Are we beasts, really? We're people—almost the same as you—and we wish you well, all of you. But the instruction code of the mobile operational judicial-enforcement session on moral-sexual law requires that you and your husband be subjected to a face-to-face confrontation, so that you may grasp the extent of it, cleanse your souls before each other, before your colleagues, before the mobile operational judicial-enforcement session on moral-sexual law. You just say the first word, Marina. The first word is always the hardest—once you say it, the rest will follow on its own. I know. Believe me.

He changes his tone and gives Marina a light slap to the back of the head.

Captain Zubov

Come on, come on, Marina—quickly now. Don't bellow and don't dawdle. We've got three more points to process today besides you.

Unexpectedly, Marina jumps up and, with her hands locked together, delivers a fairly strong blow to Captain Zubov's face. He falls to the floor clutching his head, then immediately gets up. The audience sees blood flowing from a fairly deep scratch on Zubov's right cheek—the steel handcuffs on Marina's wrists are to blame. Marina screams hysterically. Trying to throw herself at Zubov, she catches her feet on her chair and falls together with it beside him. Bailiff Roman rushes to her, grabs her by the head, and pins Marina's neck to the floor with his knee. At once Ruslan jumps up from his seat to defend his wife, but after being struck on the head with a baton by bailiff Oleg, he also falls to the floor together with his chair. Already on the floor, Oleg strikes Ruslan hard in the face several times with the baton—until Ruslan goes limp. Marina is hysterical; she screams, writhes, hisses, and spits, trying to hit Roman in the face.

Marina Sidorova (*screaming, breaking into shrieks and hoarse cries*)

A-a-a-a! You filthy beasts, be damned! Aaaa! Executioners! I hate you! A-a-a-a!

Captain Zubov (*wiping blood from his cheek, looking at his hand*)

Easy, comrades, easy. Our own fault—we didn't watch closely enough. One has to be more attentive at work. We're not playing with kids in a planetarium here. These are malicious offenders—one could say hardened repeat offenders of sexual vice.

Marina hisses, wheezes, arches her body, resisting; Roman's knee presses her neck to the floor.

Roman (*grunting, straining to maintain the floor status quo*)

Quiet, bitch! You try being nice with her, and she smashes your face bloody! What a cunt!

Captain Zubov

Careful there, Comrade Roman—don't damage the defendant. Marzenwald is already non-compliant, Sidorov is non-compliant, and I still have video documentation to do. Two non-complaints before the General Artistic Council is too much—they'll mark it in the profile.

Roman

Holding her carefully, sir. Damn bitch—how she slashed your cheek...

Captain Zubov, holding his cheek, approaches Marina, pinned to the floor by Roman. He squats beside her and again begins to stroke her hair as she resists.

Captain Zubov (*earnestly, sincerely*)

Why do you do this to me, daughter? I'm treating you kindly—giving you a chance for relief and leniency—and you tear my face bloody. Understand this: if you answer us and each other sincerely, show repentance, we are authorized to forgive your guilt. To a certain degree, and within the framework of the instruction code of the mobile operational judicial-enforcement session on moral-sexual law, of course. We know, we know—weak in the loins and unreliable in spirit. But the main thing is sincere repentance: to understand properly that you are guilty everywhere and completely. All of you are guilty—before each other, before federal-regional society, and before the mobile operational judicial-enforcement session on moral-sexual law. You have to conceive of yourselves as the lowest shit, Marina—to truly grasp that feeling, to smell your own little soul from the inside and accept the whole ugly truth as it is. Show us submission—and we'll leave you your life and your job; maybe we'll even give you a better life and a better job. The main thing, dear, is to

understand that everything about everyone is known to us, and no one will be able to hide anything anymore—such are the times now. I know there's been no life with Ruslan for a long time; only little Ivan has kept you together. I know a rutting fucker exploited the disorder in your family to satisfy his lust, to amuse his swollen ego. There is no forgiveness for him and cannot be—but for you, perhaps, there still may be. So don't keep it inside. Tell it aloud—how was it? Ask your husband straight in the eyes how he came to that back-door manhood with his director. Well? Will you speak, daughter?

Marina stops resisting, stops arching and hissing, and begins to sob quietly.

Marina *(sobbing)*

Let me go.

Captain Zubov *(standing up, rubbing his cheek)*

That's good. Cry it out—get some relief. Let her go, Comrade Roman. Why are you pinning her with your foot like some piece of livestock? She's a good woman—she volunteered at an animal shelter.

Roman

Are you sure, Mr. Prosecutor-Executor? She's quick—watch it, she might pull something else.

Captain Zubov

Let her go, let her go. I take Marina at her word.

Bailiff Roman slowly lifts his knee, removes his hands from Marina, and stands up beside her. Marina lies there for a moment, sobbing, then she too gets to her feet. Her hair is disheveled; tears run down her face; her mascara is smeared. Captain Zubov steps close to the trembling Marina, takes her by the chin, and stares straight into her eyes.

Captain Zubov

Cried your eyes out, wretch—look, even your mascara's running. Now come on: don't hold up the mobile operational judicial-enforcement session on moral-sexual law. Open the gate for your sins.

Zubov abruptly changes his tone.

Captain Zubov

Or we can pay a visit on Third International Street to Grandma Klara and Grandpa Ernest. And little Vanya—if it comes to that—we'll place him in the boarding school for children of federal-regional arts workers. They'll raise him properly there.

Suddenly Marina lunges at Zubov without a sound, like a snake, and smashes her forehead into his nose. Zubov shoves Marina away; she falls. Blood pours heavily from Zubov's nose. Bailiff Roman rushes to Marina on the floor and again, grabbing her by the hair, pins her neck to the ground with his knee.

Captain Zubov *(wiping the blood flowing from his nose with his coat sleeve, head thrown back, speaking)*

Ah, so that's how it is? Fine. Your choice, daughter. Video documentation for the union committee—and carry it out.

Zubov switches something on in the gilded tablet, raises it to head level, and looks into it like a mirror, turning first one cheek, then the other. Having recorded the documentary evidence of workplace injuries, he places the tablet in the center of the table.

Captain Zubov (*touching his cheeks*)

That's it, comrades. Just do it carefully—less mess. Husband and wife—same depth. Carry out both.

SCENE IX

Bailiff Oleg approaches Ruslan, who lies unconscious on the floor. He places Ruslan's head face-down onto the brown, stained stretcher, draws a pistol from his holster, presses it to the back of Ruslan's head, and pulls the trigger. A shot rings out. Ruslan's body jerks. Lina shrieks. Arnold, pressed into the table, whimpers and shakes. Marina, trying to wrench herself free from bailiff Roman's iron grip, screams and writhes. Bailiff Roman drags the screaming Marina across the floor. He yanks her down by the hair, forces her head beside her husband's burst skull, pins her to the stretcher with his knee, draws his pistol, presses it to the back of Marina's head, and pulls the trigger. Another shot. Marina's body convulses once and stops resisting. A truly piercing scream bursts from Lina. Bailiff Roman steps to Lina and slams her head against the table again—this time much harder than the first. Lina loses consciousness and collapses onto the chair.

Captain Zubov (*alarmed*)

How's the girl?

Roman

All good, Mr. Prosecutor-Executor. I was careful—out for five minutes tops.

Captain Zubov (*heavy-hearted*)

Ah. Ah... All right, comrades—stretcher the carried-out ones backstage for now. After the session, the ambulance will sort it out. And yes—check Marzenwald afterward.

Bailiff Roman and bailiff Oleg lift Ruslan onto the stretcher, then place Marina on top of him and carry them off behind the left wing. From the stretcher hang the executed bodies' arms; a thin stream of blood runs onto the floor. From behind the wings comes the crash of bodies being dumped off the stretcher. The two bailiffs return at once. Roman and Oleg approach Anastasia, lying with her head on the table. Roman takes her hand, trying to find a pulse. Oleg touches her neck for the same reason.

Roman

No pulse, Mr. Prosecutor-Executor. The old hag's finished suffering.

Captain Zubov Mirror. To be sure.

Bailiff Oleg pulls a small round mirror in a gilded frame from inside his coat.

Oleg *(with a smirk, in a declaimer's voice)*

Mirror, mirror, do not lie—is she dead? Don't dodge, reply.

Bailiff Oleg lifts Anastasia's head by the hair and holds the mirror to her mouth and nose. After waiting about forty seconds, he looks at the mirror and shakes his head.

Oleg

Gone. One hundred percent. Not breathing. What—backstage with her too, Mr. Prosecutor-Executor?

Captain Zubov

Drag her, comrades. Of course.

Lina *(coming to, hysterical)*

Mommy, mommy! You killed my mommy!

Captain Zubov *(in the voice of a state prosecutor)*

Not us who killed her, Angelina. You killed her—with your impermissible moral-sexual behavior. From your group matings she breathed her last. And if you're guilty—then you answer for it. Mother didn't raise you—so we will have to. Carry her, comrades. What are you waiting for?

Lina sobs, her face buried in her handcuffed hands. Bailiffs Roman and Oleg hoist Anastasia from both sides under the arms and, dragging her feet across the stage, haul her off behind the right wing to the rest of the corpses. Having thrown her behind the wings, they return at once.

Lina sobs.

SCENE X

An 8-bit “Waltz of the Flowers” by Tchaikovsky is heard—it’s Marina’s phone ringing, having fallen from her pocket during the clash with Zubov. Lina sobs.

Captain Zubov

Who’s that?

Bailiff Roman picks the phone up from the floor and checks the caller. Lina sobs.

Roman

Third International, Mr. Prosecutor-Executor.

Captain Zubov holds out his hand. Bailiff Roman gives him the phone. Captain Zubov answers. Lina sobs. Smiling, Captain Zubov presses his index finger to his lips, looks at Lina imploringly—and Lina suddenly stops sobbing. Zubov speaks into the phone in a kind, smiling voice.

Captain Zubov

Hello? Vanya? Hello, sweet boy. Mommy’s busy—she’s at rehearsal. Yes, Vanya, she’ll call you back soon. I am a kind wizard, Ivan. What? Of course. A present on the first—right after midnight. Happy upcoming New Year to you. And listen—behave yourself properly from now on, all right?

Captain Zubov looks over the phone.

Captain Zubov

Hm-hm... An iPhone. Brand new, comrades. We’ll move it through the quartermaster’s department. And check the others for trophies later, by the way.

Captain Zubov carefully slips the iPhone into the inner pocket of his greatcoat.

Oleg (cheerfully)

Yes, Mr. Prosecutor-Executor.

Lina—sobbing—jumps up from behind the table, flings the chair aside, and runs toward the right wing, her hands cuffed behind her back.

Captain Zubov (nodding toward the fleeing Lina)

Comrade Roman: by the authority granted to me by the instruction code of the mobile operational judicial-enforcement session on moral-sexual law, I order an operational act of sexual punishment to be carried out with respect to the defendant actress Angelina German-Dorozhny. Quickly. Ten minutes—then it’s the General Artistic Council, and straight to the next point. Otherwise we won’t make time.

Roman (salutes)

I serve the General, the Central Regional District, and the Federation, Mr. Prosecutor-Executor! I’m on it!

Roman runs after Lina and disappears behind the right wing. From behind the wings come a crash, Lina's scream, the sharp smack of slaps, the tear of ripping fabric, and Roman's heavy breathing.

Oleg (*offended, sulking*)

Mr. Prosecutor-Executor, this is downright insulting: if it's an operational act of sexual punishment and an interesting young lady—then it's Brother Roman right away. But if it's making a dead old woman breathe on a mirror—then it's me right away.

Captain Zubov (*squinting fatherly*)

What year did Comrade Roman start? And you—what year did you start? Exactly. Don't mope, young man. Serve—and you'll be rewarded. Everything's ahead.

Oleg (*sighs gloomily*)

Yes, Mr. Prosecutor-Executor. Everything's ahead.

Captain Zubov (*generously chuckling*)

All right—go help Comrade Roman. When you finish—carry out the patient, and run back here. Time's up.

Oleg (*running behind the wing, delighted*)

Thank you, Mr. Prosecutor-Executor! I serve the General, the Federation, and the Central Regional District!

Captain Zubov (*calling after him*)

Eagles!

Captain Zubov turns to the table where Arnold sits hunched, clutching his head in his hands. Arnold now sits alone at the table. His lowered head is buried in his hands, elbows braced on the tabletop. His shoulders shake with big tremors. He's feverish, convulsively sobbing. Arnold is completely out of it—fully disoriented.

Captain Zubov (*a muffled rumble held back in his voice*)

Well then, Arnold... Now you and I are going to have the General Artistic Council. And why are you still whimpering like some scrawny woman at a wake? You stuffed yourself full of deeds—have the courage, Arnold. Look at you: hanging there like a consumptive snotrag, shaking with fear.

From behind the wings comes a scream, the sound of struggling, and then two shots in quick succession. Five seconds later Roman and Oleg appear onstage. Roman, holding his eye, is fastening his fly and straightening his robe. Oleg, with an extremely dissatisfied look, holsters his pistol and also straightens his robe.

Captain Zubov

What's that? Why so fast?

Roman

The punishable one showed malicious resistance—we had to carry her out immediately, Mr. Prosecutor-Executor. Good thing Brother Oleg was nearby, or there would've been trouble—she nearly took my eye, the bitch. And just think—she even got the handcuffs off. Imagine that!

Captain Zubov (*rubbing his wounded cheeks with both hands*)

Be more attentive at work, comrades—or they'll carry you with honors to the graveyard. And you, Comrade Roman, don't curse at the defendant: that's not why you're here. You are the executing hand. And you, Comrade Oleg—don't be upset. You'll get your turn at “education”—maybe even today. We still have three more points to set. Everything's ahead. Give me the bell—and take the flanks. I declare the General Artistic Council.

SCENE XI

Oleg (*considerably cheered up*)

Yes, Mr. Prosecutor-Executor. Everything's ahead.

Oleg takes a little bell out of the pocket of his robe and places it in the center of the round table, in front of Arnold Dorozhny, sprawled out. Then Roman and Oleg take their places to the left and right of Captain Zubov. They hoist their black batons onto their shoulders. Oleg, standing to Zubov's right, raises the baton with his right hand onto his right shoulder; Roman, standing to Zubov's left, correspondingly raises the baton with his left hand onto his left shoulder. The mise-en-scène must be perfectly symmetrical visually. Zubov is now standing directly behind the back of Arnold Dorozhny, who is pressed face-first into the table, facing the audience. Then Zubov, with a slow marching step, goes around the table on the right, stops with his back to the audience exactly in the center—opposite the seated Arnold Dorozhny—presses the bell set down by Roman, takes the tablet in a gilt frame from the table, straightens up, and returns to his former position to the left of the table, thus making a full circle around the table and around Dorozhny seated behind it. Then Captain Zubov takes a gold pince-nez without lenses from the inside pocket of his greatcoat, perches it on his nose, and begins, glancing into the tablet, to speak.

Captain Zubov

I, Senior Captain Zubov, Actual Federal Prosecutor-Executor for the Central Regional District, authorized by the Federal Culti-Executive Committee for the Central Regional District, as well as by the Federal Executive Prosecutor's Office for the Central Regional District, pursuant to Order No. 6 “On the New Cultural Policy, the Creative State Space, and Moral-Sexual Law” of the Central Interagency Executive Committee of State Security, declare the General Artistic Council on the election of the method of completing the life path of Arnold Dorozhny open. Pursuant to the General Code of Instructions of the mobile operational judicial-enforcement session on moral-sexual law, the choice of the means of executing the completion of the life path of the condemned must be made by internal debates among the members of the mobile operational judicial-enforcement session on moral-sexual law, conducting the mobile operational judicial-enforcement session on moral-sexual law. The final choice is made by open voting of the members of the mobile operational judicial-enforcement session on moral-sexual law.

Zubov leans to the center of the table and presses the bell.

Captain Zubov

The left artistic word of conscience is granted to Federal Bailiff of the II degree, Comrade Roman. What do you say, Comrade Roman? How should Dorozhny be executed, given the weight of his offenses and the degree of Dorozhny's moral-sexual guilt before society, the region, and the Federation? Which method of execution would you personally choose, Comrade Bailiff?

Roman *(thinking hard, taking his free hand to his chin and rubbing it)*

What can I say, Mr. Prosecutor-Executor... We're simple people, didn't finish no academies. But here's what I'll say: if all his life he was swinging that want of his around in every direction, then you should take his life in the same way—so he understands what for. Right? So here's what I think, Mr. Prosecutor-Executor: we should take the Scepter—*(Roman slightly shifts the black rubber-and-lead baton raised on his shoulder)*—and fuck him with it mercilessly. For all the sludge—tear his asshole wide. And at the end of the execution—a bullet to the back of the head, and that's the end of the fairy tale. Then we'll have Arnold Dorozhny executed by all federal-regional notions. Right here on the table we can execute him, Mr. Prosecutor-Executor. Brother Oleg, you hear—hold him, I execute, and you, Mr. Prosecutor-Executor, on video recording. No, well—why not? So, in general, I've spoken my left word of conscience.

Captain Zubov *(thoughtfully)*

Your thought is, beyond doubt, good—artistically valuable and internally correct. Well then, thank you, Comrade Roman. Severe is your left artistic word of conscience. Severe, but correct—by all moral-sexual rights and federal-regional notions it comes out truly so. We shall decide by open vote—immediately after Comrade Oleg speaks the right artistic word of honor, and then I speak my central artistic word of wisdom—pursuant to the code of instructions of the General Artistic Council, conducted within the framework of the mobile operational judicial-enforcement session on moral-sexual law with state-funded creative workers.

Zubov leans to the center of the table and presses the bell.

Captain Zubov

The right artistic word of honor is granted to Federal Bailiff-Executor of the I degree, Comrade Oleg. What do you say, Comrade Oleg? How should Dorozhny be executed—what are your thoughts?

Oleg *(scratching the back of his head with his free hand)*

I'll say this, Mr. Prosecutor-Executor: Brother Roman's right—execute Dorozhny so he understands what for. But I'm thinking: why the hell would we smear the Scepter in enemy shit? Wash it after, scrub it, you know—when are they going to issue a new one. And I think we should take his dignity from him alive, with a knife. Then one by one all the fingers on hands and feet, then arms to the elbow, legs to the knee, nose, ears, then tear out his tongue with fingers, and at the very end—take the head off together with the filthy mouth. So that everything that stuck out won't stick out ever again, and won't stick into anything ever again. And the Scepters are useful to us—better keep them clean. There'll be blood, sure, we won't manage it all, but this isn't jokes, Mr. Prosecutor-Executor. It's fine—the ambulance will clean up after, those girls are experienced. There—spread a curtain on the stage *(he points into the house, where a curtain is drying)*, on that we execute him, and then

throw it out. And it'll be very good. I can execute myself, if you trust me, Mr. Prosecutor-Executor: my older brother's a butcher, so I helped him at the beef plant a whole year—I know the work well. Brother Roman will help, and you, Mr. Prosecutor-Executor, on video recording. That's my right artistic word of honor, Mr. Prosecutor-Executor.

Captain Zubov

So: the right artistic word of honor is received, Comrade Oleg. There is in your word both a hot thought and a moral-sexual resonance and a debt of honor to the federal-regional motherland. In general I agree with both of you, comrades: both with your, Comrade Roman, lacunar supplementation, and with your, Comrade Oleg, segmental resection. And now listen to me, Comrade Bailiffs: I will speak the central word of wisdom.

Captain Zubov steps out from behind the table and begins to walk slowly around Dorozhny, who is sitting at the table, pretending to have lost consciousness.

Captain Zubov

We could, of course we could, comrades, supplement Dorozhny lacunarily on the left and excise him segmentally on the right—these are all just and effective ways of executing the accused. However I, comrades, would come at this question obliquely, from the most central chthonic depths.

Captain Zubov walks slowly back and forth, one hand on his chin, the other tucked behind his back on the belt-tab of his greatcoat, looking down at the floor.

Captain Zubov

Tell me, Chief Director Dorozhny: how did you thank our federal-regional motherland, our mother-swam, for feeding you, clothing you, and watering you, you bastard, from your earliest childhood? The motherland that raised you, gave you education, work? How did you thank our federal-regional center for the chance to do deed and misdeed, to receive rations and pleasures, to eat tasty and drink yourself blind? I'll tell you now.

Zubov takes a bag with a "METRO" inscription, shows it to the bailiffs and the audience, then pulls out a baguette sticking out appetizingly.

Captain Zubov (holding the baguette in his hand and staring at it carefully)

For ages uncounted the peasant ploughed the hard virgin soil, sparing not his belly; he sowed grain—the last he had; from dawn to night he tore the field, not taking his wife, not soothing his little children. The wife tortured the grain with the flail, forgetting her man for months, howling at the lamp from her heat; the sleepless man hauled grain at night, vanishing on the bread road; from the grain the man ground white meal, crushing hands and feet in millstones; from the white meal the wife kneaded sponge, and then traded bread, burning her body into sores and scabs against the red-hot oven, sometimes unto death. And this bread, raised in diesel and manure, mixed in blood and labor-sweat, fed with piss, tears, and seed—this you ate, Dorozhny, spitting on the earth, tossing crusts aside. Not thinking, Dorozhny, how bread came to you—through what labors, what filth and torments it stands upon your table. You think this is a French baguette? You think the bread forgot in whose earth it was buried? Under whose sun it ripened, on whose rot it grew? You think the grain does not remember whose hands stripped it from the ears, and, crushing kernels into dust, squeezed sponge from white ash and baked it into bread? It's the inventors and the creaverts who made you this Frankish thing out of bread and coined a fancy name: "French baguette." Well, look at that—

French baguette... And yet we beat the French foe mercilessly on this very land in '812, and now the bread grown on this same land you call by his name? How is that, Arnold Dorozhny—what kind of Arnold are you, not remembering kin? Why is it, Arnold Dorozhny, flesh of the blood of our dear federal-regional motherland-swan, that you eat this very bread, call it in French, praise it, while you slander the motherland-swan—mother, sister, wife, and daughter—calling her a gray haze-kikimora? We heard all your words; we have the equipment. And is it not because your bread is a baguette from the Frank that on stage you do, instead of your own Raspopov and Belugin, cheap fru, a scoundrel and national traitor Vladimiróvich, who sold the motherland-swan for berry swill with bird offal, fled cowardly to the Normans-Provençals, and there died on watery sand like a mangy dog?

The intonation of Zubov abruptly switches to ordinary, dialogic, production-floor speech.

Captain Zubov

So, comrades bailiffs, I submit the central artistic proposal of wisdom: take this very French baguette and penetrate Dorozhny with it orally until full awareness of guilt before the federal-regional society and final execution. I'll take this baguette right now, comrades, and Dorozhny will be mastering it orally. Lift his head up and hold both his hands out to the sides properly—hold tight—and I'll be executing the bread center. You'll get your bread center now, Arnold Dorozhny. When he starts taking it, you, comrades bailiffs, take turns striking his throat with the Scepters, and I'll be asking: French baguette or bread of the motherland? Question—strike. Question—strike. Won't take long, and besides—no extra slush: less for the ambulance girls to clean up, why should they get smeared again? Look—the stage is already filthy. So: I've finished the central artistic word of wisdom, comrades bailiffs. Now, by schedule, we have debates and open voting. We'll combine it so it's quicker.

Roman and Oleg silently nod with respect and look at Captain Zubov. Dorozhny pretends to be unconscious, but the audience can see his shoulders trembling finely. Zubov leans to the bell and presses it. The bell rings.

Captain Zubov

I declare the open debasement of the mobile operational judicial-enforcement session on moral-sexual law, in the part concerning the final election of the method of executing the condemned Arnold Dorozhny, open. Everything as always—you know the order. Let's go.

Zubov leans and presses the bell.

Captain Zubov

So: who's for executing Arnold Dorozhny lacunarly—present your I.

All three remain motionless.

Captain Zubov

No one, comrades. So: who's for executing Arnold Dorozhny segmentally—present your I.

This time, the Scepter lying on Oleg's shoulder flinches. At first it stretches upward very timidly, then immediately drops back and freezes on Oleg's shoulder. Captain Zubov looks closely at Oleg, then continues.

Captain Zubov

No one, comrades. So: who's for executing Arnold Dorozhny chthonically—present your I.

This time, both clicking heels, raise their batons upward with a forward incline, while Captain Zubov sharply lifts his right arm with an open palm straight up.

Captain Zubov

Unanimous I, comrades bailiffs. The central word of wisdom has won. I serve the General, the Federation, and the Central Regional District!

Oleg & Roman *(in unison)*

I serve the General, the Federation, and the Central Regional District!

Zubov leans to the bell and presses it. The bell rings.

Captain Zubov *(standing at attention)*

The immediate measure of execution of Arnold Dorozhny, finally approved by the members of the mobile operational judicial-enforcement session on moral-sexual law, is not subject to appeal or postponement. Executors—take your flanks. I turn on video recording and begin the execution.

Zubov leans to the table, sets the gilt tablet upright in the very center of it with the screen facing Dorozhny, and presses some button. A loud mechanical ticking starts; it will not stop until the very end of Scene Eleven.

Captain Zubov *(solemnly)*

Spread the executed one right-and-left!

Oleg approaches the Arnold Dorozhny lying on the table from the left; Roman—from the right. Roman bends, unfastens Dorozhny's handcuffs; Roman and Oleg take Arnold Dorozhny by the hands and stretch them out to either side. Arnold Dorozhny begins to look like a person imitating a bird sitting at a table with wings spread and head lowered into the tabletop. Dorozhny shows no signs of life. Zubov thoughtfully walks up to the table, takes a transparent two-liter plastic bottle filled with orange liquid, and stares at it for a while. Then he approaches Dorozhny, jerks his head up by the ponytail like a nutcracker doll, and pours the liquid from the bottle in a wide stream right into Arnold Dorozhny's face. The liquid goes into Dorozhny's mouth, nose, and ears, so Arnold Dorozhny has no choice but to start coughing, snorting, and spitting instinctively, making it clear he is in full awareness of what's happening to him. Dorozhny opens his eyes. Captain Zubov sets the bottle with orange liquid on the table, takes the baguette, stands behind Arnold Dorozhny, and holds Arnold Dorozhny by the ponytail so that Dorozhny's face is thrown up and his mouth is open.

Captain Zubov *(severely, looking at the spluttering Dorozhny)*

Well then, Arnold Dorozhny—you're back in yourself. Your fate, Dorozhny, has been decided by the General Art Council, and now you will suffer for your deeds and actions to the very bread end. Are you ready to be executed before the video recording of the mobile operational judicial-enforcement session on moral-sexual law? Before the end you will have to say: French baguette or

bread of the motherland. We need it for the report. The faster you say it—the less you'll suffer, the sooner it's all over.

Arnold (*whispering-hoarsely, eyes shut*)

Lord save me. Lord save me. Lord save me...

Captain Zubov, like an ancient priest, takes the baguette as if it were a sword in his right hand, raises it up; with his left he holds Dorozhny by the ponytail with the mouth up, and begins slowly and inexorably pushing the baguette into Dorozhny's open mouth. Dorozhny has no choice but to bite off small pieces, chew convulsively, spit, and swallow. He cannot keep up with Captain Zubov's pressure.

Captain Zubov (*pressing down on the baguette from above*)

French baguette or bread of the motherland? Comrade Roman—Scepter!

Roman, from the left, swings and strikes the throat of Dorozhny as he convulsively swallows; Dorozhny wheezes and coughs.

Captain Zubov (*pressing down on the baguette from above*)

French baguette or bread of the motherland? Comrade Oleg—Scepter!

Oleg, from the right, swings and strikes Dorozhny's throat. Dorozhny chews, swallows, spits, wheezes, coughs even harder, but says nothing.

Captain Zubov (*pressing harder down on the baguette from above*)

French baguette or bread of the motherland? Comrades—mutual Scepter!

Roman from the left and Oleg from the right deliver a synchronized blow to Dorozhny's throat. Dorozhny coughs violently and chokes so badly that Captain Zubov yanks the bitten bread out of him.

Captain Zubov

So which is it—French baguette or bread of the motherland, Dorozhny? Execute yourself with honor and conscience!

Dorozhny is seized by violent coughing and convulsions; he bulges his eyes—the French bread of the motherland has gone into his airways; Dorozhny is choking and moving inexorably toward stage death.

Arnold (*coughing, through the stage pre-death agony*)

BAGUEEEETELAAAAND!!!

Having executed himself, Arnold Dorozhny hangs dead in the hands of Roman and Oleg and the Prosecutor-Executor like a puppet of an actor portraying a bird, with head drooping to the table, dead-hanging in the hands of puppet-masters—this resemblance must be emphasized by stage lighting. Everyone on stage freezes motionless for about half a minute. In the silence the ticking is heard, coming from the gilt tablet standing on the table. Everyone on stage stands immobile for all 30 seconds; the sound design must be effectively underlined by lighting. After half a minute, the

mechanical ticking ends with a strike of the small ship's bell from the play "The Heritage"; a brief chain of seagull cries sounds.

SCENE XII

Immediately after the ship's bell strike, over a seagull's cry, a man of indeterminate age and appearance quickly climbs onto the stage from the center aisle of the front row, stepping into the frozen tableau. The author leaves both his age and looks entirely to the director's discretion. The man carries a black leather notebook and a thick fountain pen.

Priborsky (*running up the steps energetically, loud, temperamental, annoyed*)

Edik—no, no, no! Edik, come on, how many times have I told you: the spotlights on the executioners—hinted, quarter-tones. I don't need these straight-on beams. And smear it around with cold white! I need mystery here, subtext, Edik. Come on—Edik, you used to do it right. What is this, huh? We fly the day after tomorrow and my finale light isn't set. All right, freeze, kids. Everyone's brilliant—everyone to me. Edik, give me the standard wash.

A flat, deliberately non-artistic cold general light comes on.

Edik (*an unseen high lyrical tenor from the portals*)

My console glitched, Mr. Nikolas, that's why I blasted those spots in the end. I'll load the backup for the run-through—will be top-tier.

Priborsky

All right then. Serge did great—sound's good now, balance is clean.

Serge (*a low bass from the portals*)

Oki, Mr. Nikolas. Mr. Nikolas, am I getting killed in the finale or not?

Priborsky

No, Serge, you're not getting killed. You're my mystical character, stitching three worlds together with sound: the primordial world of dramaturgy, the real world of rehearsal, and the afterlife world of the Artistic Council. You saw the bloody lawlessness onstage, went quiet in your booth like a mouse, and you sit there until the next play. Eternally dry, so to speak.

Serge

Got it, Mr. Nikolas. Grave.

Priborsky walks up to the table from the stage side and puts his notebook on it, then places the pen on top. Arnold "unfreezes" in the hands of Roman and Oleg, gets to his feet, wiping his face and chin with a towel pulled from his trouser pocket. Roman and Oleg, letting go of Dorozhny, place

their black rubber batons on the table beside the bitten baguette, remove their caps, set them on the table, and loosen their necks and muscles—rolling heads and arms, squatting, bending forward and back.

Alex (Roman) *(angry)*

Wadi, damn it—take your scepter, don't take mine. How many times do I have to tell you? Mine's marked—see the red A? Don't touch mine. Last warning.

Vadim (Oleg) *(good-natured)*

They're two identical foam sticks—what difference does it make?

Alex (Roman) *(angry)*

What do you mean, "what difference"? I said: take yours, don't take mine. Are you an idiot? My hand's smaller—I sanded the grip down and repainted it after. Want me to punch you in the face if you don't understand like a human being?

Priborsky *(soothing)*

All right, all right—break, guys, break. We've been rehearsing all day, everyone's tired. Easy, kids—hold it together. Two more runs and we're home. And the day after tomorrow, festival—over the sea. Maybe we'll win something... Just don't stuff your faces on the ferry, I know you.

From the wings, laughing at full volume, Lina comes out; behind her, choking with laughter, come Anastasia, Marina, and the also-laughing Ruslan.

Alexandra (Anastasia) *(laughing, clutching her stomach)*

A-a-a-ha-ha... Svetlana, stop it, I'm going to split in half. What a filthy thing you are! A-a-ha-ha-ha!

Svetlana (Lina) *(laughing too)*

Oh, come on, Alexandra.

Spartak (Ruslan) *(laughs loudly)*

Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha.

Mila (Marina) *(laughs)*

Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha.

Priborsky *(coming closer)*

For murdered actors you're awfully cheerful, people.

Mila (Marina) *(brightly)*

Svetlana told a joke—we dropped dead laughing, Mr. Nikolas.

Priborsky

Will you tell it to me, Svetlana?

Svetlana (Lina) *(embarrassed)*

I don't know, Mr. Nikolas. It's got swearing in it.

Priborsky

That's fine, Svetlana. I'm strong, I can take it.

Svetlana (Lina) *(smiling charmingly)*

I'll tell it, Mr. Nikolas.

Stepan (Arnold) *(irritated)*

I got executed in a perverse way, and they're cackling like horses. Leo—how many times have I asked you to be careful with the baguette. I tore my lip. *(Touches his lip, looks at his finger.)*

Leo (Zubov)

I got carried away, sorry. You know—the Stanislavski system.

Stepan (Arnold) *(annoyed)*

Go to hell. You're not yanking strings in your little dump—this is work with living people. You're a puppeteer—what Stanislavski are you talking about?

Leo (Zubov) *(conciliatory)*

Stanislavski is the same for all of us. All right, sorry, sorry. Forgive me, my dear. Nikolas, maybe we replace the baguette with a piece of foam—like the batons? Stepan keeps suffering from your homeland baguette. Tell me, can we not do the blood? My hands get sweaty from it. *Leo shows Priborsky his palms—burst packets of stage blood taped on.*

Priborsky *(breaks off a piece of the baguette from the intact side, puts it in his mouth, chews with appetite)*

What are you talking about, Leo? What is Zubov without blood on his face? Listen—don't mess with my head. We sail the day after tomorrow and you're talking props. How's he supposed to eat foam bread? All the punch goes to hell. It's enough that the batons are fake. Work carefully and everything will be fine. All right—now, quickly, a tight circle around me, then half an hour break.

The actors gather around Priborsky, watching him with searching eyes. The table with the chairs is downstage; the actors with Priborsky are upstage.

Priborsky *(glances into the notebook, makes notes with the pen)*

So. First—about the bread execution. Leo, you're somehow not threatening. Look: your Prosecutor-Executor, Mr. Zubov, has to embody for me the export-grade quintessence of absolute administrative violence over the collective creative personality at the next nosedive of development of Russian socio-humanitarian civilization—and what you're doing comes out funny, not tragic. No scale, no pathos, Leo. Hm-hm... Maybe darken the eyebrows? Hm-hm... Or shave them off entirely?

Leo (Zubov)

For God's sake, Nikolas!

Priborsky *(extremely focused, carried away, speaking fast, three fingers of his left hand pressed to his chin)*

I'm kidding, Leo. But look: where we've got the General Artistic Council scene—that has to be epic absurdity, but not funny—terrifying, Leo. Terrifying! Because the scene ends with the execution and death of a controllable god of the third degree, Leo. A god! Meaning: the controllable governing god of the second degree in this scene is you—Prosecutor-Executor Zubov, Leo. And I'm not afraid of you! With you, this divine-infernal absurdity is... I don't know... toy-like, puppet-like. I get it—you're a puppeteer. That's exactly why I took you into the production. Remember? One of our fundamental plot allusions in this local dramaturgy is: the middle puppeteer does to the lower puppeteer everything the upper puppeteer prescribes. But we need, Leo, to somehow fuse that puppet, mystical-mechanical toy-ness with the grotesque tragicism of the dramaturgical moment. We need to show the absurd epicness of the apotheosis of human longings and relationships. I don't know, I don't know—something's off here for me. Maybe look at the text, tweak it? Bottom line: I don't believe you yet, Leo. The others are fine. The enforcers are excellent—good work, boys. And the creative objects of administrative violence—those are, today, above all praise. I've only got a small wish about Sveta. Work at home with a mirror, Leo. Michael Chekhov. Go through every scene starting with the appearance of your, hm-hm, trio. We've worked on this—you know all the manners: which author where, what intonation for what. Sharpen it. In short—work, Leo.

Leo (Zubov)

Wow, Nikolas, I didn't understand a single thing you just pasted together. Kidding, kidding. I understood everything. On the subconscious level, ha-ha. Fine—Chekhov, so Chekhov. With the mirror. Tomorrow morning at home, I'm on it. The Finns will lose their minds from a premiere like this, Nikolas. The Grand Prix will be ours, Nikolas. Or ours? What gender is “Grand Prix,” anyway, Nikolas?

Priborsky

French, Leo. Wait—don't interrupt me. Sveta! There's not enough sex, Svetlana. Before the executioners come on, Lina has to radiate so much sex around her that the male half of the audience is hit by a collective erection. And the female half too. You're youth, Svetlana—youth and beauty, the embodiment of the best part of the female beginning. And the female end! Yes-yes, Svetlana—end! Life and death in one bottle, Svetlana—that's the complete female image, but I need sex. Lots of sex!

Svetlana (Lina) (*serious*)

I'm trying. Maybe instead of jeans I should wear a shorter skirt? Or should I play topless in some scene?

Priborsky

Where exactly are you going to flap your tits? This isn't about showing the audience naked flesh, Svetlana. I'm talking overall presence—your evaluations, the shine in the eyes. With a single line, Gelya has to give herself to Spartak onstage! And I don't see it, Svetlana. And I don't hear it. So try harder.

Svetlana (Lina) (*serious*)

All right. I've got a couple ideas.

Priborsky

One would have been enough, Svetlana. I'm kidding, my dear. All right—moving on. Spartak! You're not emotional. The secret gay you are in our play—that's a walking psychological trauma and a nonstop neurosis. You, my dear, should be thrown like on a swing from wild joy into black depression, and you're too confident, too calm. I need more emotional looseness. Even in the offstage dialogue with the director: you remember the night in the May Baths—there you need ecstasy, bottomless romance. And the other way around: when the director abandons you, you should be practically dying of despair. Should I put you on your knees there? Let's do it like this: in the run-through, when you beg for the meeting, drop to your knees, okay? In front of the director. And we'll get a local rainbow prayer to the controllable god of the second degree. An inner, ephemeral gay-drama with an outer, illusory little hope at the end of the scene. Understood?

Spartak (Ruslan)

All right, Mr. Nikolas. For art you can get on your knees, ha-ha. I got it. I'll be more hysterical, overall.

Priborsky

Not hysterical—emotionally expanded. That, Spartak, is a big difference. Read some gay literature in the evening. Early Priapov, I don't know.

Spartak (Ruslan)

Understood.

Priborsky

Fine. Remember it and do it. All right, I think I'm done. Kids: thirty minutes break, then we load up for two runs back-to-back. Go smoke. Svetlana—the joke is on you. Can we make it in half an hour? *(Everyone laughs.)* Kidding, kidding, my dear. All right—break.

Everyone present, talking among themselves, disappears into the wings. Priborsky walks down into the auditorium and leaves through the back door, jotting something in his notebook as he goes.

On the dimly lit stage, a round table remains with props on it (two black foam batons, two dirty-white caps, handcuffs, a prop clipboard in a gilded frame, a baguette bitten from both ends, an antique vase with fir branches sticking out, a black thermos, actors' copies of the play "The Heritage," one of them almost completely soaked in coffee, and a two-liter bottle with cloudy orange liquid) and five chairs standing in messy disorder behind it, with actors' clothes hanging off them, a red bag that says "METRO," and a transparent bag full of mandarins. In the silence, the dim diffuse light slowly dies.

Complete darkness.

SCENE XII½

Out of complete darkness, a dim northern light seeps in. July. A white Finnish night. Onstage, the water surface of a small round lake shimmers silver; on it—a rowboat, handled by Stepan (Arnold). Opposite him sits Alexandra (Anastasia), a large wicker basket on her knees. Far upstage, in the

distance, a forest is visible, and a house with lit windows on the shore. Next to the house a campfire burns. It would be good if the scenography in this scene were arranged so that the lake functions as a conditional clock face, with the house upstage placed around the number 12. In that case the campfire should burn slightly to the right of the house—if aligned to the clock scale, it is at 12:05. Stepan (Arnold), unhurried, rows—rather, he doesn't so much row as bathe the oars in the dark lake surface. The splash of water is heard.

Alexandra (Anastasia) *(hugging the basket, resting her head on her shoulder)*

Stepushka, my Stepushka, how good it is here! You know, I'm so fucking done with our theatre: rehearsals, directors, squabbles, intrigues. They fuck with your head and you stand there and politely nod. How long can you do that? I'm sick of it. I want to retire.

Stepan (Arnold)

Oh, Sasha, knock it off. I've been hearing about your retirement every season for ten years. Tell me—what would you do without work? Dig around at the dacha? Sit on a bench in the yard?

Alexandra (Anastasia)

I don't know, Stepushka. I'll grow cactuses. Listen—I'll go teach. I'll work with young people, pass on my professional experience.

Stepan (Arnold)

There's already no room at home because of your cactuses, and young people will wear you out faster than the theatre, my love. It's all bullshit, Sasha, post-festival blues. It's fine. We'll pull in, the kids fired up a barbecue. We'll drink, we'll cuddle up. Look how beautiful it is around us.

A crow caws twice.

Alexandra (Anastasia) *(lowers her hand into the black lake surface, scoops up a palmful of water, and lets it run back down)*

Oh, some lover you are... But it is beautiful, of course. And still—without the theatre, when would we ever have gotten here, right?

Stepan (Arnold)

Never. We went great—Priborsky's a big hero. And the Finns—look what a parting gift! Hjarkönen's a solid guy.

Alexandra (Anastasia)

He'd have been better off paying a proper fee instead of these shitty scraps and two days on a water.

Stepan (Arnold)

Stop whining, Sasha. Three grand is bad for you? We made good money, we don't get that at home.

Alexandra (Anastasia)

We might be fine, but Priborsky's making a lot.

Stepan (Arnold)

Come on, my love. We're slicing prizes at the fifth festival already—next month we fly to the sixth, Avignon. You should thank him, and you're counting his money. What kind of ungrateful creatures are you women?

Alexandra (Anastasia) *(sighs, hugging the basket)*

People. Just people. *(Sighs, bleak.)* And why didn't we have kids, Stepa? We'd be minding a grandson. Or a granddaughter.

Stepan (Arnold)

I told you thirty years ago—let's have one, let's have one. You'd have lost a year or two. No: career, theatre. Fine—so theatre, then theatre. Just don't regret it, my love. What's the point, now, regretting what doesn't exist?

Alexandra (Anastasia)

Yeah, Stepushka... If something isn't there—then it couldn't have been there, right, my good one? Otherwise it would have been. *(Sighs.)* Stepa, I'm really falling apart. Where's the flask? I'm drinking.

Stepan (Arnold)

Go on—take a proper pull to the white Finnish nights. Check the basket for the flask, I left it there. And toss me some bilberries—damn good.

Alexandra (Anastasia) rummages in the basket, takes a handful of berries, and pours them into Stepan (Arnold)'s hand. The oars hang in the oarlocks, blades in the water.

Alexandra (Anastasia)

Here. Take it.

Stepan (Arnold) *(chewing)*

Kiltos, my love.

Alexandra (Anastasia)

What?

Stepan (Arnold)

I said thank you. You've been here a week and a half and you don't know how to say "thank you" in Finnish? Come on, my love...

Alexandra (Anastasia) *(laughs)*

Oh, screw you, Stepa, leave me alone.

Somewhere a big fish smacks its tail on the water. Alexandra (Anastasia) pulls a flat metal flask from the basket, unscrews the cap, takes a decent swig, winces, pinching her nose with the back of her hand, grabs berries from the basket, eats from her palm, then holds the flask out to Stepan (Arnold).

Alexandra (Anastasia) *(with a touch of theatrical strain)*

Here, Stepushka. Drink for me, my love—because I just drank for you. You're the main person in my life, and without you I'm nobody, never, for no reason.

Stepan (Arnold) *(laughing)*

One swig and you can't even tie a sentence together?

Alexandra (Anastasia)

You're such a bastard. I'm opening my soul to you, swearing eternal love—and you're mocking me. Here, you heartless shit...

Alexandra (Anastasia) scoops a good handful of bilberries from the basket and, swinging her arm, throws them at Stepan (Arnold).

Stepan (Arnold) *(laughing, shielding himself with his hands; berries fly everywhere; the lake around the boat boils with small splashes)*

Thank God you came back to yourself. Why waste berries? Better we bring them to shore, treat the kids.

Alexandra (Anastasia) *(laughing too, visibly cheered up)*

We've got plenty there—enough for everyone. Come on, drink faster, my dear.

Stepan (Arnold) unscrews the cap on the flask.

Stepan (Arnold)

To you, best of gatherers. To you, my life's nerve. To you, my eternal one.

Stepan (Arnold) drinks, but suddenly chokes and starts coughing—so hard he has to turn his back to his wife and gesture for her to thump him. Alexandra (Anastasia) thumps his back with a cupped palm. The basket slips off the seat and drops to the floorboards, but Alexandra (Anastasia) doesn't notice.

Alexandra (Anastasia) *(tenderly)*

You're getting old, Stepushka. Drink more carefully, or look—before Avignon I'll have to find you a replacement.

Stepan (Arnold) *(coughing it out, turning back to his wife, laughing)*

Not a chance. Why'd you drop the basket? Now you get to pick it up.

Alexandra (Anastasia) *(looking around)*

Where—? Oh, hell. Jesus... This is all your fault, you old bastard.

She starts, groaning, gathering the spilled contents from the boat floor and putting it back into the basket. Stepan (Arnold), slipping the flask into his pocket, takes the oars and begins to row.

Stepan (Arnold) *(good-natured)*

Me, of course. Always me. I'm the only one to blame for everything, and nobody else. Don't get upset, my love. As soon as you're done, we'll pull in.

Alexandra (Anastasia) straightens up, holding a huge white mushroom she picked up from the boat floor. The cap tears off in her hands: in one hand she's left with the stem, in the other—the cap. She examines it.

Alexandra (Anastasia)

Stepa—why the hell did you pick it? It was just sitting there growing.

Stepan (Arnold)

I spotted it in the moss, and I wanted mushroom soup so bad my soul started itching. Like when we were kids at Grandma's and Grandpa's—potatoes, onion. We'll boil something hot tomorrow for the hangover. Why are you whining again, my love?

Alexandra (Anastasia) *(peering closely at the mushroom)*

It's full of worms. Look—crawling. You should watch what you grab.

Stepan (Arnold)

Then throw it out. Problem solved. What a tragedy.

Alexandra (Anastasia) winds up and throws the stem and then the cap toward the house and the fire. Two quiet splashes sound not far from the boat. Alexandra (Anastasia) hugs the basket again, resting her head on her shoulder. Stepan (Arnold) rows evenly; the splash of water is heard.

Alexandra (Anastasia)

It's so good, Stepushka... Maybe we don't need to go to shore yet. It's noisy there, fuss. Row for half an hour—let's float a bit?

Stepan (Arnold) *(rowing)*

Whatever you say, my love—whatever you want, as long as you feel good. Just don't worry. You know—nerve cells don't grow back.

Alexandra (Anastasia) *(sighs)*

I won't worry.

They float. In the silence, the splash of oars is heard. The light slowly fades.

The End