

WISER THAN THE NIGHT

a play in two acts

by Wim Coleman

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Characters:

TATIANA, a retired Russian dancer and actress in her 70s (also CATHERINE THE GREAT).

JULIA, a playwright in her early 40s.

BRUNO, artistic director of the Perdita Theatre Company, in his late 50s (also PETER III and GRIGORY POTEMKIN).

DIERDRE, Bruno's wife and managing director of the Perdita Theatre Company, early 50s (also VOLTAIRE).

Settings:

Manhattan in 1981; Russia in the late 18th century.

Nontraditional casting is encouraged, as is nonrealistic staging with minimal scenery and informal costuming with few if any realistic changes.

Act 1

Scene 1

(TATIANA SVOBODA's apartment in the East 70s of Manhattan, mid-November, 1980. JULIA, BRUNO, and DIERDRE are seated. TATIANA is standing and speaking directly to JULIA; she speaks good English with a distinct Russian accent.)

TATIANA. Before we begin, there is something I must say.

Please listen carefully.

This is a terrible time we live in.

Just two weeks ago—or was it three?—democracy failed us all, and Americans elected as their president a senile sneering demagogue, a man who cares nothing for the people, especially not for the people who love him most and voted for him most, a man who means wickedly toward everyone but the rich and greedy.

Please tell me you didn't vote for him.

(JULIA shakes her head.)

TATIANA *(to the others)*. And you Bruno? And Deirdre?

(BRUNO and DEIRDRE murmur no and shake their heads.)

TATIANA. Good. Because otherwise, I would have nothing to do with you. *(to JULIA again)* You are young, my dear. But I am very old, and I have seen terrible things in my life. And I keep my eyes open always.

And that bastard never fooled me for a moment. I've always known him for the evil imbecile for he truly is, since even before he was governor of California, back when he was President of the Screen Actors Guild, when he was such a lousy actor. Because I knew all the way back then he was no real pro-union New Dealer, just a hypocritical money-grubbing good-for-nothing opportunist with the brains of a hamster and the morals of a weasel.

Mark my words—November 4, 1980, will be remembered as the day when everything went bad. From now on, wealth will rise up to the top, worse than the Gilded Age; the rich will become much, much richer and very, very few, and the poor will become much, much poorer and, oh, so very many, and the spirit of service and mutual aid will die, and Americans will turn against one another in spite and hatred, and so things will continue all the way into the next century, and there will never be any turning back.

It is a blessing that I won't live to see the worst.

But as for the three of *you*—well, my heart is full of pity for you.

(Silence; TATIANA offers JULIA her hand.)

TATIANA. By the way, Julia—I'm very pleased to meet you at last.

JULIA. And I'm very honored to meet you, Ms. Svoboda.

TATIANA. Oh, don't call me that, please. My friends call me Tat. You may call me Tatiana. Anyway, I think we've gotten away from the play you wrote just a little. But not really, eh?

(TATIANA *picks up a manuscript and opens it.*)

TATIANA. You have written a good play.

JULIA. Thank you.

TATIANA. I like it very much.

JULIA. Thank you.

TATIANA. *Lady Leviathan*. A play about the life and reign of Catherine the Great. I hope you will grant me the privilege of creating Catherine. Of being the first actress to play her, I mean.

JULIA. I'd be honored.

TATIANA. Bruno, you do have a staged reading scheduled, yes?

BRUNO. Indeed I do. Saturday the eleventh in the Thymele Theatre. It's a charming little church basement venue in the Village.

DIERDRE. That's just a week and a half away! We'd better get cracking!

TATIANA. I do have trepidations. Catherine was German, after all, and I don't believe I can do a German accent. But luckily, my Russian accent is long gone completely, and I speak English like a native. Bruno will direct, of course.

JULIA. Of course.

TATIANA. It will be an international hit.

JULIA. I'm glad you think so.

DIERDRE. We all think so.

BRUNO. Indeed.

TATIANA (*thumbing through the pages*). It's not perfect, though.

JULIA. Okay.

TATIANA. It needs work.

JULIA. Okay.

TATIANA. Are you ready to do the necessary work?

JULIA. I ... hope so.

TATIANA. I hope so too. You have come all the way from Idaho for that purpose.

JULIA. Iowa.

TATIANA. Eh?

JULIA. I'm from Iowa.

TATIANA. Oh. I always mix them up, those letter "I" states. I hope you had a good flight.

JULIA. It was fine.

TATIANA. Smooth and pleasant?

JULIA. Just fine.

DIERDRE. Are you planning to see any shows while you're here? Because *42nd Street* is well worth catching, and *Children of a Lesser God* is every bit as good as you've heard, and I hear *Crimes of the Heart* isn't bad either, and—

BRUNO (*interrupting*). We'll keep her too busy for that sort of thing.

DIERDRE. Of course.

TATIANA (*to JULIA*). Now of course you know that we, the three of us, Bruno and Dierdre and myself, we can't write your play for you.

JULIA. No.

TATIANA. But we can nurture it. We can be midwives to the birth and realization of this wonderful thing you have begun to do.

JULIA. I hope so.

DIERDRE. An international hit.

BRUNO. Indeed.

TATIANA. And now, let's get right down to it, shall we? Let's start at the beginning.

(They all open their copies of the script; TATIANA tucks a pencil behind her ear and begins to read aloud.)

TATIANA. Scene 1. The Annenhof Winter Palace, December, 1752; the apartments of the Grand Duke Peter, outside his bedroom. The Grand Duchess Catherine, aged 23, approaches the valet standing guard at the door. Catherine: "Get out of my way. I am here to see the Grand Duke." Guard: "What is your business with His Majesty?" Catherine: "Do you know who I am?" Guard: "You are Her Majesty the Grand Duchess." Catherine: "And who does that make me?" Guard: "You are the wife of the Grand Duke." Catherine: "I am Yekaterina Velikaya, you drunkard, the Grand Duchess of all Russia. And I demand to see my husband." Guard: "First you must tell me the password ..."

(TATIANA turns the page impatiently.)

TATIANA. Catherine ... Guard ... Catherine ... Guard ... It goes on this way for a page and a half. Why?

JULIA. Excuse me?

TATIANA. Why do we need it?

JULIA. Need what?

TATIANA. All of it.

JULIA. Well ... it establishes ...

TATIANA. Well?

JULIA. Lots of things, I think. The, uh, political and personal tensions that exist between, uh ... Catherine and her ... uh ...

TATIANA. Does it move the story forward?

JULIA. Well, if you'll just keep reading ...

TATIANA. Does it move the story?

JULIA. Uh, I think ... that it ...

TATIANA. Well?

JULIA. It ... prepares the audience for the coming scene.

TATIANA. Prepares them?

JULIA. It doesn't plunge them into the action too hastily.

TATIANA. Why not?

JULIA. It doesn't rush things. It gives the audience ...

TATIANA. Well?

JULIA. ... a moment to breathe before ...

TATIANA. The audience does not need to breathe. We will cut it completely. Do you agree, Bruno?

BRUNO. Absolutely.

TATIANA. And you, Dierdre?

DIERDRE. Of course.

TATIANA (*slashing her pencil across the page*). Excellent. (*turning the page*) Now let's move on. Dierdre, kindly read the stage directions. Bruno, you will read Peter. And I, of course, will read Catherine. And Julia, you will listen and take notes.

(BRUNO *steps out of the scene and begins playing the Grand Duke* PETER.)

PETER. Ah, my little elf ...

DIERDRE (*reading*). The bedchamber of the Grand Duke Peter, aged 24.

PETER. ... my pearl, my dove ...

DIERDRE (*reading*). The room is cluttered with wine and vodka bottles.

PETER. ... moon of my life ...

DIERDRE (*reading*). On a large table is an enormous cardboard model of a castle, with opposing armies of tiny paper mâché soldiers inside its walls and out.

PETER. ... my sun and my stars ...

DIERDRE (*reading*). Nearby is a toy wooden gallows; an enormous dead rat, quite real, hangs from its noose.

PETER. ... my kitten, my little bear, my beloved wife ...

DIERDRE (*reading*). Catherine enters, and Peter greets her with elaborate bows and flourishes.

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Scene 2

(*Continuing the second scene of JULIA's play, with BRUNO playing PETER and TATIANA playing CATHERINE.*)

PETER. ... to what do I owe the pleasure of this rare connubial visit?

CATHERINE. You don't know what "connubial" means.

PETER. And how did you gain entrance here? Didn't Private Karnovich detain you? Didn't he demand to hear the password?

CATHERINE. Your sentry is drunk, as are you. He forgot the password. I made one up.

PETER. I must discipline the villain with a sound thrashing.

CATHERINE. I have told you many times, thrashings are to no avail. If you'd only leave their discipline to me, I'd turn your besotted cohorts into sober and obedient servants in no time at all.

PETER. Ah, but that's hardly your responsibility, my kitten.

CATHERINE. So you keep telling me.

DIERDRE (*again reading stage directions*). Catherine's attention is drawn to the hanged rat; she walks toward it and touches it cautiously.

CATHERINE. What have you done?

PETER. What does it appear that I've done?

CATHERINE. You have hanged a rat.

PETER. Ah, but not just any rat. A brazen trespasser sent by a foreign power. The nefarious beast dared to breach the walls of my castle and ate two of my soldiers. My dauntless and vigilant dog Lisette did what my men could not do. She sniffed out and captured the malefactor and brought him into my presence for interrogation.

CATHERINE. Did you ... get him to talk?

PETER. No, the insolent devil kept his silence and disclosed no secrets, not even so much as his name or rank. He remained as stubborn as he was devilish, even under pain of torture. I will spare you those details, which would only upset your delicate feminine constitution.

CATHERINE. Did he ... have any recourse to legal counsel? Did anyone so much as ask him to speak in his own defense?

PETER. I assure you, the entire trial was conducted with utmost attention to and respect for international military law and procedure.

CATHERINE. He's starting to smell ... rather bad.

PETER. I should imagine so. He's been hanging like that for two days. He has one more day to go.

CATHERINE. What on earth for?

PETER. Why, to serve as a public example to his compatriots, who lurk in hiding within these walls. Be assured, they'll think twice before they dare to follow in his footsteps.

(Pause; CATHERINE vainly tries to stifle a laugh.)

PETER. Do you find it funny?

CATHERINE. No ... no ... of course not. It's really quite sad. The poor innocent creature.

PETER. And this endearing naiveté of yours, my bunny, my little fox, my twinkling glowworm, is why the defense of Russia must never fall upon your gentle shoulders, and why I am heir not only to the title of Emperor, but to the terrible responsibilities of life and death which that title entails. You should be grateful never to be forced to hold such power in your lovely porcelain fingers.

But tell me—why am I graced by your loveliness this fine day? I thought you were in Petersburg. Did you have a pleasant trip?

CATHERINE. I was sick the whole way here. I am sick right now. But I have come to Moscow to tell you something of vital importance.

I'm pregnant.

PETER. Well. That is fine news indeed. Auntie Elizabeth will be well pleased. As you know, she was getting quite impatient with you on that score. She complains often of your ... well, your delinquency, so to speak.

CATHERINE. Don't you want to know how it happened?

PETER (*laughing*). Ah, my little songbird, what sort of guileless fellow do you take me for? I am a man of the world, fully initiated and seasoned in the ways of Eros. I know many things of which you must always remain sweetly and girlishly ignorant. Of course I remember the time and place. It happened that night when I flirted with Princess Kurland over dinner.

CATHERINE. Ah, that homely hunchbacked girl.

PETER. You made a scene right there at the table, declared loudly before Auntie and all the court that you had a terrible headache, and then you stormed back to your boudoir. Well, little may you have realized, my flirtation was by cunning and design, to provoke your jealousy and desire, and I soon came to your bed flushed with lust, my loins swelling with manly passion, and then ... well, need I remind you?

CATHERINE. That was a year and a half ago.

PETER. So?

CATHERINE. You were drunk and I pretended to be asleep, but you wouldn't stop chattering and groping and fumbling about like some fool traveler lost without a map, or a compass to tell you north from south. At long last you fell asleep and kept me wide awake by snoring the night away.

PETER. You shouldn't say such things, my precious little rabbit.

CATHERINE. I believe I have been pregnant for three months.

PETER. That long?

CATHERINE. I've been absent from Moscow for many more months than that.

PETER. And I have missed you achingly, my sweet. What else would you like to discuss?

CATHERINE (*getting ready to leave*). Not a thing.

(*JULIA appears, sitting separately.*)

JULIA. I can't believe it.

CATHERINE. I leave you the pleasure of telling your auntie the glorious news.

JULIA. She hasn't read the play.

CATHERINE. Meanwhile, do cut down that unfortunate creature before he rots to pieces.

JULIA. She never even looked at it.

CATHERINE. At least he deserves the honor of a military burial.

(CATHERINE steps out of the scene.)

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Scene 3

(Resuming in a café in Manhattan; JULIA, BRUNO, and DIERDRE sit at a table. BRUNO is himself again, not PETER.)

DIERDRE. I believe I'll have a latté and a blueberry muffin.

JULIA. Did you hear what I said?

BRUNO. I'll have a double espresso and a cinnamon scone.

JULIA. Tatiana hasn't read my play.

DIERDRE *(to JULIA)*. What will *you* have, dear?

JULIA. A cup of black coffee.

DIERDRE. Anything to eat?

JULIA. No. She doesn't even know what the play is about.

DIERDRE. Of course she does, Julie.

JULIA. Julia.

DIERDRE. And of course she's read it. Couldn't you tell? My goodness, she and Bruno just read through the first scene together quite beautifully.

BRUNO. Indeed.

JULIA. She's reading it cold. And she *doesn't* know what it's about. "A play about the life and reign of Catherine the Great," she called it. But it's not about Catherine's reign, it's about her apprenticeship, how she *became* Catherine the Great.

(TATIANA appears in a flashback continuing the action of Scene 1; she reads from the script and comments.)

TATIANA *(reading)*. "... my little elf ..."

JULIA. She's got no idea.

TATIANA *(reading)*. "... my pearl, my dove ..."

JULIA. Even so, she's tearing it to pieces.

TATIANA *(reading)*. "... moon of my life, my sun and stars ..."

JULIA. She's cutting and changing everything.

TATIANA. All these dreadful pet names!

JULIA. She hasn't even read it, but she's changing everything.

TATIANA. How many of them are there going to be, anyway?

JULIA. This isn't what I expected when I came here.

TATIANA. There must already be two dozen or more.

JULIA. Could you talk to her, Bruno?

TATIANA. A bit of overkill, I think.

JULIA. Or you, Dierdre?

TATIANA. To be perfectly honest, they make me gag.

JULIA. I mean, if she'd only read it from beginning to end ...

TATIANA. And they're very demeaning to poor Peter, no? I know, I know, you don't want to make him into a hero, and neither do I. But he *is* the Grand Duke. The least we can do is let him have some regal dignity.

JULIA. ... then maybe we could start all over again and talk about it, the four of us, all together.

TATIANA (*crossing things out with her pencil*). We will cut all pet names except "my precious little rabbit."

JULIA. And then we could, well, address any, uh, weaknesses in the script.

TATIANA. And we'll only use it once.

(TATIANA *steps out of the scene*.)

JULIA. But this ... doing things this way ... I never expected ...

DIERDRE. You're being overly sensitive, dear. It's understandable. You just flew in this morning, and you're tired.

JULIA. I just ... don't ... get it.

BRUNO. May I be frank, Julie?

JULIA. Julia.

BRUNO. You're not in Idaho anymore.

JULIA. Iowa.

BRUNO. And this is not some provincial backwoods community theater, like the kind you're used to. You're in New York now. This is professional. You're playing in the big leagues. The question is, are you ready for it?

DIERDRE. Oh, darling, don't be hard on her.

BRUNO (*to DIERDRE*). I'm sorry, but it's got to be said. (*to JULIA*) I can't tell you how many times my wife and I have had to deal with—with *this*, with what's happening right now. It isn't just regional playwrights like you. Even New York playwrights get all worked up like this, at least when they're starting out. They get this idea they've got to protect their masterpiece.

DIERDRE. Bruno—

BRUNO (*interrupting, to JULIA*). It doesn't work that way, and the sooner you learn that, the better. And another thing. To be perfectly honest, I don't know whether Tatiana read your play or not. But I pitched it to her, and she knows all about it, and she understands it at least as well as if she did read it. And let's not kid around. Tatiana is a genius.

JULIA. I know.

BRUNO. More than that, she's a legend. John Houseman wrote a whole chapter about her in his latest book. (*to DIERDRE*). Darling, what did Houseman say about that play she directed for him—Sartre's *The Flies*, wasn't it?

DIERDRE. He said her methods were "painful but productive."

BRUNO. Right. Painful but productive. And pain is always part of the process. You've got to toughen up a little. You've got to trust the process. You've got to trust *Tatiana's* process. So do I. So do we all. Now of course we can't write your play for you. But trust me, by the time we open, we'll all have a play that we can be truly proud of. That *you'll* be proud of.

DIERDRE. An international hit.

BRUNO. Indeed.

DIERDRE. So stop worrying, okay? Everything's going to be fine. (*looking at her watch*) We'd better eat and drink fast. This is only supposed to be a very short break. Tatiana's expecting us back at her apartment in 10 minutes. The next scene is between Catherine and her lover, isn't it?

BRUNO. One of her lovers.

DIERDRE. That's right.

(*TATIANA appears separately, reading aloud from the script.*)

TATIANA. "... the pulse you feel with your touch upon my wrist is merely my heart's inertia in my veins ..."

DIERDRE (*chuckling*). Just one of many, I should say.

TATIANA. "... a ghostly echo of its lost and bygone throb and cadence ..."

DIERDRE. Still, it's a very romantic scene as I remember.

TATIANA. "... because the heart we made together was never meant to live ..."

DIERDRE. Also very sad—she says goodbye to him, doesn't she?

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Scene 4

(TATIANA's apartment. As JULIA, BRUNO, and DIERDRE reposition themselves for the new scene, TATIANA lowers the script with a sigh.)

TATIANA (*repeating the words aloud*). "... heart's inertia ... ghostly echo ... the heart we made together ..." (*her voice fades with a sigh*) Such a lovely lovers' farewell. The language is inspired. It is poetry.

JULIA. Thank you.

TATIANA. I am not paying you a compliment. Poetry is a thing that *happens*. It comes unbidden. Mistakes, mistakes are things that you *make*. (*turning a few pages*) And I see there are many mistakes to come.

(TATIANA sets the script aside and sits; she sighs again.)

TATIANA. I am ... very tired.

JULIA. Maybe we should all just—

TATIANA. Do you know what day it is?

(JULIA shakes her head.)

TATIANA. What about you, Bruno? Dierdre?

(BRUNO and DIERDRE shake their heads.)

TATIANA. No, I don't suppose any of you would know—or care. It is Ilya Shirkov's birthday—my sweet Ilyusha Mikhailovich.

BRUNO. Of course. We should have known.

TATIANA. Oh, don't talk like a fool, Bruno. You didn't know him. He was my dearest friend. And no, it's not true we were lovers. He was as gay as the day is long—but of course nobody knew that, Russia was and still is the most airtight closet in the world, worse even than America. But he called me his, eh, "Muse Terpsichore." I *happened* to him, he said. I was his happy chance, he said—his serendipity, his *inspiration*. He

heard music when he thought of me. All he had to do was write it down. *(pause)* I killed him.

(Long pause; TATIANA seems to withdraw into herself.)

BRUNO. Of course you know that's not true, Tatiana.

TATIANA. You don't know.

(Long pause)

DIERDRE. Well. We've already worked very hard for one day. Perhaps we should—

TATIANA *(interrupting)*. He composed "Little Tatiana" for me. Do you know the piece? Of course you do, every schoolchild knows it. And he composed it for me, and me alone. *(pause)* And I killed him.

DIERDRE *(looking at her watch)*. Goodness, look at the time. I think maybe—

JULIA *(interrupting)*. You should tell us, Tatiana.

(BRUNO growls under his breath.)

TATIANA *(almost as if to herself)*. Ilyusha played it for me on the piano. I was the first to ever hear it. I followed along reading the score. I read music excellently well. And of course I fell in love with it. "What is it called?" I asked. "I don't know," he said. "But it's all yours—a song of dance and pantomime, and of words that are yet to be written. And of course it tells a story. I have no idea what that story is, or what those words shall be. Only you can say, dear Tat Petrovna. You must tell me the story, and then I will give it a name." *(smiles)* Well, I knew from the first measures what the story was.

It was my own story ...
... the story of a childhood lost ...
... of all I lost in those terrible years ...
But now I'm boring you.

JULIA. No.

TATIANA. I never did her justice, the Tatiana of his music, for she was much more than merely ... me. It is a part for a young girl, but also an old woman, a wise old crone, for the story is a *memory* of someone old and wise. One must be both young and old to perform it. I was too young to play it back when he wrote it, and soon I was too old, and now I am much too old, and I never became wise.

When we premiered it, Zhdanov himself denounced it in *Pravda*. He called the story—eh, let's see if I remember—oh, yes—decadent, formalist, counter-revolutionary, nihilist, ideologically incoherent, unintelligible to the proletariat, with no positive hero and no positive message. I fled Russia soon afterwards, but Ilyusha stayed, and he died before too very long—of a cerebral hemorrhage, *Pravda* said, but I knew it was murder.

And I was complicit.

More than complicit.
It was I who chose that story for his music.
It was I who killed him.

JULIA. It wasn't your fault.

TATIANA. You don't know.

JULIA. Yes, I do, Tatiana. It was Zhdanov and Stalin and—and—the whole terrible Soviet socialist realist *thing* that killed him. You didn't do anything wrong.

DIERDRE. Well, now. This has all been very interesting but—

TATIANA (*interrupting, to JULIA*). You weren't even there.

JULIA. Okay, but—

TATIANA. Who are you to judge?

JULIA. I'm not judging.

TATIANA. You are.

(*Pause*)

JULIA. I'm ... sorry ... if I said anything to ...

TATIANA. Well, then.

BRUNO (*to TATIANA*). I don't think Julia was speaking out of any—

TATIANA (*interrupting*). She's holding forth about matters she knows nothing of. Honestly, Julia, I don't know how this is going to work out. Between the two of us, I mean. We don't see the world the same way. We have entirely different, eh, perspectives. But never mind all that. Now that you've dragged us all here and together in one place, I suppose we must soldier on somehow, even if it's a waste of everybody's time.

(*TATIANA picks up the script again and leafs through it.*)

TATIANA. While the rest of you were gone just now, doing whatever it was you were doing, I have been looking ahead at what's to come, and I must say, I'm not altogether pleased. It needs work, much, much work, and I don't even know where to begin. But let us, eh, take a crack at Scene 9.

JULIA. But you're skipping over—

TATIANA. Yes, yes, I know. It looks like more lovemaking, then the birth of a bastard son, who of course will be heir to the throne, then her break with another lover followed by two more lovers and two more bastards, one a girl and one a boy, and so on and so forth, a veritable, eh, parade of adultery and babies. It all looks very cheap,

very rushed, and very ... tedious. But Scene 9 catches my attention. Fill me in on the context.

JULIA. If you've read it, you already—

TATIANA (*interrupting*). Just tell me.

JULIA. It is the day of Catherine's coup.

TATIANA. When she overthrew her husband and became Catherine the Second.

JULIA. That's right.

TATIANA. We will read it now. You all know what to do. Dierdre, take the stage directions, and Bruno, read the part of Peter while I read Catherine. And Julia, think hard about revisions, for there will be many.

(DIERDRE *finds her place in the script* while BRUNO *steps out of the scene to play the Grand Duke* PETER.)

DIERDRE (*reading stage directions*). June 28, 1762—Peter's apartment in the Oranienbaum Palace, just outside of Petersburg.

PETER. Will you stop that infernal racket?

DIERDRE. As usual, the room is cluttered with wine and vodka bottles.

PETER. Go away!

DIERDRE. Looking disheveled and distressed, Peter, aged 34, is disturbed by a loud knocking ...

PETER. Leave me alone, I'm trying to think

DIERDRE. ... which persists despite his protestations.

PETER. All right, all right, I'm coming.

DIERDRE. Peter opens the door, and Catherine enters, aged 33 and dressed in a green military uniform with a saber sheathed at her side.

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Scene 5

(*Continuing JULIA's play, with BRUNO playing PETER to TATIANA's CATHERINE.*)

PETER. Ah, my dear little wife. I wish I could welcome you with the warmth and affection that is your due, but I'm afraid you caught me in a desperate pickle. I'm quite beside myself with dread and perplexity, and I've got a dreadful headache, and—

CATHERINE. You're drunk.

PETER. Quite right. However else can I be expected to cope with the madness churning everywhere around me? I need vodka to clear my head. But I can't seem to swallow down enough to make any sense of things. I've been shunted about from place to place since yesterday like a piece of luggage—for my own safety, I keep being told—and now here I am again where I started. Something about a coup, they say. Have you heard anything about it?

CATHERINE. A little. In fact, that's what I'm here to discuss. I'd rather wait till you're sober, but there's no time for that. But first—

DIERDRE (*reading stage directions*). She goes to the window and draws the curtain.

CATHERINE. —no one must know I'm here, or that we're speaking together. I have already sworn your sentry to secrecy under pain of death.

PETER. But why? And what are you doing in that uniform? And why are you carrying that saber? It's most unladylike.

CATHERINE. I am uniformed according to my military rank.

PETER. Rubbish. You have no military rank at all. That's *my* sphere of command.

CATHERINE. No, you don't exist—politically speaking, anyway. And you were never any good as a soldier. You've seen no more military action than I have—actually less, as of today. You can't even ride a horse properly. I myself have been on horseback all day, conducting myself as befits my deportment as commander-in-chief. I'll pay for it tomorrow with aches and pains, I'm sure. And I haven't caught a wink of sleep for forty hours. Nevertheless, duty is duty.

PETER. But I—I don't *exist*?

CATHERINE. You might call it your comeuppance.

PETER. Whatever for?

CATHERINE. Three weeks ago at dinner, you publicly humiliated me before the court by calling me a fool in a hideous shrieking voice.

PETER. I don't remember that.

CATHERINE. Of course you don't.

PETER. And for that alone I've been rendered—nonexistent?

CATHERINE. Oh, that and a few other things—such as offering aid and comfort to Russia's enemies, attempting to corrupt the purity of Russian Orthodoxy with your devilish Lutheranism, sullyng the glory of the Empire with your martial incompetence, and for taking as a mistress a fat little toad of a woman named Elizaveta. Oh, and for ordering me to be poisoned.

PETER. I never ordered you to be poisoned.
Did I?

CATHERINE. It must be so. It is written in an official manifesto that is being printed as we speak, and which will soon be read aloud in public squares far and wide. It also says you have renounced the throne and declared me to be the sole and sovereign ruler of all Russia.

PETER. It's the first I've heard of it. Who would write such thing?

CATHERINE. I did. Of course there are a few trivial formalities yet to take care of. You must sign a writ of abdication, for example.

PETER. I'll do nothing of the kind.

CATHERINE. Oh, but you will. A fine, strapping, official sort of chap will bring it to you presently, together with quill and ink. Don't worry, he will convince you it's for the best. He's a very persuasive fellow.

PETER. Treacherous woman. Conniving cat. I always knew you were capable of anything. Such a disgrace, that you were ever chosen to be my consort.

CATHERINE. I am not your consort.

PETER. No, certainly not anymore, if I am to have any say in the matter. Be warned, you have underestimated your adversary. My power is not to be trifled with, nor is my wrath, which you have dreadfully provoked. I will not take this lying down. Your little insurrection is doomed. I shall call upon the full military might of the Russian Empire to crush you and your miserable accomplices.

CATHERINE. And which of your loyal forces will you summon to your aid?

PETER. The Izmailovsky Guards, to begin with. And the Semyonovsky Guards. And of course the Preobrazhensky Guards—

CATHERINE. I rode here at the head of all those regiments. They are no longer under your command.

PETER. This cannot be.

CATHERINE. With one great voice, they renounced your authority and proclaimed me their dear "Little Mother." And just now I was greeted by the entire populace of Petersburg with cries of "Long Live Catherine the Second!"

PETER. You dare to rise up against me!

CATHERINE. I merely obey the people's will. It is through no choice of my own that I am proclaimed Empress Regnant, Sovereign Mistress of Russia, Tsarina of the Realm, Defender of the Empire, Protector of the Orthodox Faith, Autocratrix of the Enlightened East, Despot of Liberty, and ... oh, it's a rather long list, I haven't quite

got it memorized. There's also talk of calling me "the Great," but I'll have none of that. My height is neither great nor small.

PETER. But how in God's name—?

CATHERINE. It appears that God has lost all interest in you. It is a fine vindication of Russian Orthodoxy over your wretched European Protestantism. In the end, your cardboard castle and your toy soldiers couldn't keep my rats at bay.

PETER. I don't believe it.

CATHERINE. As you just said, I am capable of anything.

DIERDRE (*reading stage directions*). She pours him a glass of vodka and hands it to him.

CATHERINE. Perhaps a little medicinal help will clear things up for you.

DIERDRE (*reading stage directions*). Peter gulps down the glass and shudders deeply.

PETER. I'm ruined.

CATHERINE. Come, come. Do cheer up and don't be glum about it. In a couple of days, I'm sure you'll see it's all for the best.

PETER. In a couple of days I'll be dead.

CATHERINE. Where did you get such an idea?

PETER. What kind of fool do you take me for? Now that I'm deposed, what choice do you have except to ... ?

DIERDRE (*reading stage directions*) Peter falls on his knees before her in a spasm of panic.)

PETER. Oh, my little bee, my elf, my pearl, my sun and stars, moon of my life, I beg of you! Seize the throne if you must. But for the love of God, and for memory of the affection we once shared, please, please, please don't ...

CATHERINE. Do what?

PETER. ... take my life!

CATHERINE (*chuckling sweetly*). Why, my sweet little Petya Fyodorovich, you've got yourself all worked up over nothing! You're about to be taken to the Ropsha Palace, where you will be kept as safe as safe can be and treated ever so nicely.

(She touches his cheek and smiles an ambiguous smile.)

CATHERINE. Surely you don't think I'd murder the father of my children!

PETER (*more terrified than before*). My dearest Sophie—

CATHERINE. Now, now! After all these years, surely you're not calling me by my German name. Remember who I am.

(CATHERINE *steps out of the scene and picks up the script and opens it, resuming the role of TATIANA.*)

PETER. Then please, please, my—my Empress, my—

TATIANA (*reading from the script*). "... my little bee ..."

PETER. —my Sovereign Mistress, my—our—

TATIANA. "... my elf ..."

PETER. —Defender and Protector, our—

TATIANA. "... my pearl ..."

PETER. —your—your *Highness*—

TATIANA. "... my sun and stars ..."

PETER. —your most exalted *Majesty*—

TATIANA. "... my moon of my life ..."

PETER. —have mercy upon your poor devoted husband!

*

Scene 6

(TATIANA's apartment. BRUNO is himself again. He, JULIA, and DIERDRE are seated. TATIANA stands poring over the script.)

TATIANA. I must say, I rather like all these pet names. They add a certain badly needed charm. I think we could do with more of them. But as for the rest of it ... (*leafing through pages*) ... well, I don't know. I don't know what to say. It leaves me quite dumbfounded. It's hardly what I expected.

BRUNO. We haven't read through to the end, Tatiana.

TATIANA (*leafing ahead*). No, but the play appears to end right after Catherine's coronation.

JULIA. It ends after her husband's murder.

TATIANA. She's still a novice tyrant. Where is Catherine the *Great*? Where is the Lady Leviathan of your title? And the scenes themselves—what am I supposed to make of them? What are we supposed to *do* with them? How are they supposed to play? As soap opera? Sitcom? Sex farce? They certainly aren't, eh, substantial, nothing worthy of the stage. TV, maybe, but not the stage. And look at me. Am I to spend a whole evening of theater convincing an audience I'm not old? Where is the rightful heiress

to the throne of Peter the Great? Where is the woman who enlarged the empire, chopped Poland to bits, warred with Turkey and Persia, brought culture and ideas and enlightenment to backward feudal Russia, and—my Lord, did so *many* things? And where in God's name is *Voltaire*?

JULIA. She never met Voltaire.

TATIANA. You young people are so literal. They were friends, more than friends, *they wrote letters*, they were lovers in the world of ideas. Voltaire was her compass, her—her lodestar, politically, philosophically, morally. He was the very spirit of her times, and it is to him we must turn to for answers about our own. So why don't I see him in your play? (*thumbing through pages again*) Well, there's nothing here that can't be fixed, but we've got much work cut out for us, we'd better get right to it. I see you brought your typewriter, Julia. Get it out and put it on the table and I'll get some paper and I'll sit right next to you and we'll get started typing all the way through it, right from the beginning, the very first page.

(*Pause*)

JULIA. Uh ... no.

TATIANA. I beg your pardon?

JULIA. I don't think so.

TATIANA. You don't think what?

JULIA. Tatiana, I ... just don't want to do this.

TATIANA. We've got to do *something*. What do you want to do instead?

JULIA. I'd really appreciate ... if you'd just read it.

TATIANA. Read what?

JULIA. My play.

TATIANA. What are you implying?

JULIA. I'm not implying ... I just want ... Just read it, okay? Just take some time to read it. Then we can talk.

TATIANA. You're saying I haven't read it. (*pause*) I don't believe I've ever been so insulted in my life. Bruno, Dierdre, surely you don't think ... ?

BRUNO. She was very wrong to speak to you that way.

TATIANA. That's not what I'm asking.

DIERDRE. She certainly owes you an apology.

TATIANA. That's *not* what I'm asking. I'm asking if you agree with her that—

BRUNO. Of course you read it, Tatiana.

DIERDRE. We all know that.

TATIANA. You don't mean that. You're just saying that. All of you think ...

(Pause)

TATIANA. I believe our work here is done.

BRUNO. Now Tatiana, don't be like that.

TATIANA. I didn't ask to be spoken to so rudely in my own home, by all of you. I treasure my solitude, and all was well until just now. I was perfectly happy here all alone with my cat Trotsky, who has made himself scarce since you got here, and with good reason, I now realize. My life was just fine until the three of you, eh, perfect strangers descended upon me *en masse* with this—this—cockamamy inane excuse for a ...

(Pause)

TATIANA. Please leave. All of you.

BRUNO. Now Tatiana—

TATIANA. I want to forget any of this ever happened.

DIERDRE. None of us meant to—

TATIANA. I mean it. I'm only asking once. Get out of here. All of you.

(Pause; BRUNO rises from his chair.)

BRUNO. I'm terribly sorry for what seems to have been a dreadful misunderstanding, Tatiana. We'll respect your wishes and go.

DIERDRE. Maybe after tempers have cooled a little we can all—

TATIANA. Go.

(BRUNO and DIERDRE go out; JULIA begins to gather up her luggage.)

TATIANA. Julia. You stay.

JULIA. But—

TATIANA. Don't go. We should talk. Have a seat.

(TATIANA and JULIA sit facing one another.)

TATIANA *(quite pleasantly)*. It seems we got off on the wrong, eh, foot together, wouldn't you say?

JULIA. Well, I—

TATIANA. Let's start from scratch, shall we? Let's go back where we started, with a clean, eh, slate, before all this unpleasantness happened. It was all Dierdre and Bruno's fault, of course. They don't understand anything, they're so—obtuse, so—*provincial* in their peculiar New York way. You know, I'd never even heard of their—their Perdita Theatre Company until they stuck their noses in my life. They can't have done anything of, eh, consequence. You and I can manage much better one-on-one. Would you like a bit of brandy?

(JULIA *nods*; TATIANA *continues speaking as she pours snifters of brandy and gives one to JULIA and sits again.*)

TATIANA. It occurs to me we've barely been introduced. You know a bit about me, I suppose, but I know next to nothing about you, and that's most unfortunate and, eh, ill-advised. Tell me all about yourself.

JULIA. I—I don't know where to—

TATIANA. You're going through a hard time, aren't you? I'm not talking about what happened just now, I'm talking about your life. You're in a state of crisis, you're at a painful, eh, crossroads. You're looking for purpose and meaning. You don't know where to turn. You're recently divorced, aren't you?

JULIA. Yes, but how—?

TATIANA. I know these things. I have highly developed psychic powers.

(JULIA *chuckles slightly.*)

TATIANA. I'm not joking. Now tell me the rest.

JULIA. Well, if you've got highly developed psychic powers—

TATIANA. You shall not put my psychic powers to the test. Just tell me.

(*Pause*)

JULIA. Tatiana, do you know what it's like to ... *believe*? Stupidly, maybe, but really *believe*? To just know in your heart the world can be saved, and people are good? To think you can really make a difference, to change things for the better? To be full of ... hopes and dreams of ... just ... endless possibilities for the future, for humanity, for peace and goodwill and justice and ... for *everything*?

TATIANA. You are describing my own youth, my dear.

JULIA. Well, that was my youth, too, and also Jonah's, the man I married, and so we ... *fought* the good fight, or what we thought was the good fight, against the war, against poverty and injustice, for civil rights, for free love and free speech. We protested, we carried signs, we waved banners, we raised fists, we marched and shouted and chanted and sang, we wore flowers, we rioted, we broke and burned things, we got arrested, we got beaten, we got back up again, over and over, and we had so much spirit, so much life until ...

TATIANA. It slipped away.

(JULIA *nods*.)

TATIANA. He became a lawyer, I suppose.

JULIA. A plastic surgeon.

TATIANA. Ah, well, I was close. And he specializes in—what?—boobs, maybe?

JULIA (*chuckling*). He does lots of boob jobs.

TATIANA. And you worked to put him through school, didn't you? You sacrificed. You gave up your own dreams. And you took care of the house, and you did the laundry, and you cooked the meals, and you raised the children—no, just one child, I think, a ... son?

JULIA. A daughter.

TATIANA. Who's all grown up now.

JULIA. In college. A junior.

TATIANA. And you went back to school yourself, didn't you?

JULIA. For a couple of semesters, yeah.

TATIANA. And you learned things.

JULIA. And I read things.

TATIANA. And it ruined your mind.

JULIA. Oh, yeah.

TATIANA. What sorts of books?

JULIA. Oh, George Eliot, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Herbert Spencer ...

TATIANA. And Feuerbach, I suppose.

JULIA. Yes, and H. G. Wells.

TATIANA. And Shaw.

JULIA. And Kropotkin.

TATIANA. And Marx, of course.

JULIA. Absolutely.

TATIANA. I suppose it was Marx who wrecked your marriage.

JULIA. Very nearly.

TATIANA. So was he the proverbial, eh, "other man"?

JULIA. You could say that.

TATIANA. Adultery of the mind.

JULIA. You could say that too.

TATIANA. Jonah must not have known what hit him.

JULIA. He didn't *understand* what hit him.

TATIANA. And so you got divorced.

JULIA. To make a long story short.

TATIANA. But the crisis, ah, the crisis—it was yet to come.

JULIA. It came, all right.

TATIANA. Tell me.

JULIA. With Jonah gone, and our daughter too, I felt free, but also so ... so ...

TATIANA. Empty.

JULIA. Useless.

TATIANA. Rudderless.

JULIA. At sea.

TATIANA. "Fighting vainly the old ennui."

JULIA. Is that from a song?

TATIANA. You're too young to know it.

JULIA. Therapy didn't help. Librium and Valium didn't help. Neither did yoga or Tai Chi. Or even chocolate. Booze only helped a little, and cocaine only for a short while, and religion was out of the question, and weed just made me foggy. I was a mess. I was a walking and talking, living and breathing, sleeping and waking, eating and shitting tangle of ... of ...

TATIANA. Historical contradictions.

JULIA. Right. A dialectical-materialist nightmare. An all-out class war raging inside one woman's body. A spoiled guilty overeducated housewife who lived in a really big house South of Grand and drove to soup kitchens and fundraisers and food pantries and bridge games in a BMW she'd gotten in an ugly divorce settlement from an ex-husband who paid for it by fixing women's boobs.

TATIANA. Oh, dear.

JULIA. And then one day I remembered ...

TATIANA. Catherine the Great.

JULIA. The hero and idol of my childhood. I'd almost forgotten! Oh, how I adored her as a little girl! I read everything I could about her, dressed up and paraded around my bedroom pretending to be her, acting out scenes of glamor and power and romance. She had—so much power, more than any other woman in the world! And she always, always knew exactly what to do with it! She never doubted herself, she—she always—just ... *knew*.

TATIANA. And so you wrote a play about her.

JULIA (*wiping away a tear*). Why did I bother? What was I thinking? I just ... wasn't ...

TATIANA. Worthy?

(JULIA *nods, choking back a sob; pause.*)

TATIANA. Did you arrange for a place to stay while you're in New York?

JULIA. A friend in Brooklyn is going to put me up.

TATIANA. You could stay with me.

JULIA. Oh, Tatiana—

TATIANA. Well?

JULIA. I don't think so.

(*Pause*)

TATIANA. Are you old enough to remember when Kennedy said, eh, "Don't ask what your country can do for you, ask—"?

JULIA. "—what you can do for your country."

TATIANA. Yes, and do you remember why he said we must go to the moon, not because it is easy, but because it is hard? When I fled from Russia, I had hope in my heart, because America was a beautiful place of striving, of sacrifice, of—of great-hearted kindness and welcome and—and *aspiration*. But now we have a President whose motto might as well be "Every man for himself"—or what is it you young people say?—"Look out for number one." You are not your brother's keeper anymore, your brother is just another poor dumb sucker to cheat out of everything he has.

It is the commodification of *everything*, including one another, you and me and everyone else. We have all become, each and every one of us, groveling minions to that moronic sock puppet, puppets to the puppet, and the sock is dirty and smelly, and the hand inside the sock reeks of greed and hatred and bigotry.

JULIA. I think my ex-husband voted for him.

TATIANA. You are well rid of him. We are about to become a nation of fascists. No, too lazy to be fascists. What was it Churchill called the Germans? Oh, yes, I remember.

“Carnivorous sheep.” We are now to be a nation of carnivorous sheep. Who was it who said all power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely?

JULIA. Lord somebody.

TATIANA. Do you think it’s true?

JULIA. I don’t know.

TATIANA. Well, think about it. All power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. But who says? Who even can know? You are here to write a play about Catherine—not Catherine the apprentice, but Catherine the Great, Catherine the, eh, brilliant and beautiful and necessary monster. She sought absolute power, but for the good of all—was *she* absolutely corrupt? Somebody else said, “One can be virtuous through a whim.” Was it Sartre? Never mind, it doesn’t matter. Catherine thought the greatest good depended upon the whims of an absolute despot, one with the soul of a saint.

JULIA. Oh, Tatiana.

TATIANA. Well?

JULIA. Catherine the Great—the soul of a saint?

TATIANA. A very worldly saint maybe.

JULIA. A very horny saint. And saints don’t lust for power.

TATIANA. Who says? If they’re weak, why do we worship them? Julia, don’t you see? As we sit here twiddling our brains, American democracy is ending all around us, it is the final breaking of the promise of Europe’s Enlightenment, and it’s happening at the hands of a willfully ignorant public and their idiot sock-puppet of a leader. If we can’t stop it, we must do our best as artists to make sense of it. We’ve got to try to see the world through Catherine’s eyes, tell a story that no one yet has told, and that hasn’t ended yet. We must ... *find out*. We truly must. For the sake of everybody.

(Pause)

JULIA. I’ll unpack.

TATIANA. Good. And remember ... *Voltaire*.

JULIA. Voltaire.

*

Scene 7

(TATIANA steps into an undefined space to become CATHERINE, who appears older than before, but of no particular age, and momentarily alone.)

CATHERINE. Our Voltaire, which art upon this earth, hallowed be thy name; thy wisdom come, thy wit be done, on earth ... But no, thou art upon this earth no longer. I just received word today that you died. How can you be gone from us? And how am I going to survive without you? Now that you are gone, I realize—how *fallible* I am. Oh, I always knew it, I suppose. But now the truth of it consumes me. Why am I who I am, and not some serf or peasant or some crawling insect? You could tell me. You are the one man I could count on not to say I rule by the will of God. But now ... how could you leave me alone like this?

(The actor who played DIERDRE now appears as the elderly VOLTAIRE.)

VOLTAIRE. Oh, Semiramis of the North, do I hear thy trumpet? I hope it's not a call to battle. I never was much of a warrior, and now that I'm dead, I'm sure I'll be no good to you at all.

CATHERINE. Voltaire! I didn't expect—

VOLTAIRE. Nor did I, my dear. But I suppose the death of my body does not mean I am gone from your thoughts.

CATHERINE. Then you're in my mind.

VOLTAIRE. So it seems.

CATHERINE. Why do I feel that I am in someone else's mind?

VOLTAIRE. Perhaps you and I are, both of us. Perhaps it's all we ever were. We ought to have known that all along. There is no *self* alone, my dear. Such a thing is impossible. A self can only exist in relation to other selves, and all minds inhabit one another in an endless set of Chinese boxes.

CATHERINE. Perhaps you could ... slow down a little.

VOLTAIRE. Oh, I think you understand. My thoughts are your own thoughts, after all.

CATHERINE. I don't know where we are. Can you tell me?

VOLTAIRE. I know very little of it just yet. But you hear such peculiar talk echoing through these parts—echoing from the past, and also from the future. "All power corrupts," I just heard someone say, "and absolute power corrupts absolutely." Or maybe someone is going to say so someday. Somebody's idea of received wisdom, I suppose. But received wisdom is often best left unopened and unread.

CATHERINE. Such a strange sentiment—about power, I mean.

VOLTAIRE. If I ever meet the Almighty, I must ask him about it. For if ever a kingdom was absolutely corrupt, how could it not be the Kingdom of Heaven, ruled by the most absolute despot of all?

CATHERINE. And the most arbitrary. To be chosen by God to rule is to be chosen by chance.

VOLTAIRE. Yes, but must it be so? In Egypt, the kings and queens weren't chosen by gods—they *were* gods. It's enough to make you nostalgic, isn't it? Those gods must be around here somewhere. I expect I'll run into one any moment now. Not being a reader of hieroglyphs, I've got plenty of questions to ask them.

CATHERINE. But where are we, *cher ami*? What are we doing here?

(CATHERINE *peers toward the audience.*)

CATHERINE. And do you get the feeling we're being watched?

END OF ACT I.

Act 2

Scene 1

(TATIANA SVOBODA's apartment; the morning after Scene 7 of Act I. JULIA, dressed for bed, is at the kitchen counter trying to figure out how to use a French press coffee brewer; TATIANA enters in a housecoat; she sees JULIA and rubs her eyes with surprise.)

JULIA *(seeing her)*. Good morning.

TATIANA. Who are you?

JULIA. I'm ... Julia. Don't you remember?

TATIANA. What are you doing here?

JULIA. I'm trying to make some coffee.

TATIANA. No, I mean ... what are you *doing* here?

JULIA. You invited me to stay here while I'm in New York.

TATIANA. No, I didn't.

JULIA. I sure thought you did.

TATIANA. I'm sure I did not. I don't know who you are.

JULIA. Well, I know who *you* are—Tatiana Svoboda, a living legend of theater and dance. And if you think real hard, I'm pretty sure you'll remember who I am.

(Pause)

TATIANA. Julia. The playwright.

JULIA. That's right. And I'm honored to be your invited houseguest, Tatiana Svoboda. I hope you had a good night's sleep. I slept fine, thank you for asking. *(indicating the coffee brewer)* What is this thing, exactly?

TATIANA. It's a French coffee press.

JULIA. How does it work?

TATIANA. First you have to grind the beans and boil some water and ... It's very complicated, I'll show you after I've had some ...

JULIA. Coffee?

(Pause)

TATIANA. Let's get on with things. We've got work to do.

(TATIANA gets up and heads toward the kitchen area.)

TATIANA. We need caffeine. And sustenance. Are scrambled eggs all right with you?

JULIA. Sure.

TATIANA. I'll get them ready. Fetch your typewriter and we'll talk and write together while I do the cooking.

(JULIA gets her typewriter ready.)

TATIANA. Now where did we leave off last night?

JULIA. We'd just started a scene between Catherine and Prince Potemkin.

TATIANA. Oh, yes. The annexation of Crimea. You are familiar with the history, no?

JULIA. Well, yes, but ...

TATIANA. But?

JULIA. The annexation of Crimea? How can we make a scene out of that? It's just so—so dry.

TATIANA. Nonsense. It will be marvelously entertaining.

JULIA. Entertaining?

TATIANA. And funny.

JULIA. Oh, Tatiana—

TATIANA. It *will* be funny. Trust me. Now read me the stage directions we wrote yesterday.

(JULIA reads from the sheet of paper that's already in the typewriter; the actor playing BRUNO now appears in the role of GRIGORY POTEKIN.)

JULIA *(reading)*. A state room in the Winter Palace, February, 1784.

POTEKIN. And now, my dear Little Mother, prepare to be rendered quite breathless with pleasure ...

JULIA *(reading)*. Catherine, now 54 years old, stands at a broad table next to Prince Grigory Potemkin, 44.

POTEKIN. ... for you are about to survey the burgeoning expanse of your glorious realm.

JULIA *(reading)*. Prince Potemkin unrolls an enormous map across the table.

POTEKIN *(pantomiming the action described)*. Behold, the newly enlarged—or should I say engorged?—Russian Empire ...

JULIA *(reading)*. He gazes at the map with triumphant delight ...

POTEMKIN (*pointing*). ... and this charming peninsula, now in our possession!

JULIA (*reading*). ... but Catherine's thoughts appear to be elsewhere.

*

Scene 2

(*The actor playing TATIANA resumes playing CATHERINE, now standing next to POTEMKIN.*)

POTEMKIN. Doesn't Crimea look formidable, like a pendulous member hanging from our beloved fatherland's majestic scrotum?

CATHERINE (*absently*). The fatherland does indeed appear to be abundantly ... well-hung.

(*Pause*)

POTEMKIN. You seem oddly unmoved.

CATHERINE. Why do you think that?

POTEMKIN. Your breast does not heave, your torso does not tense or tighten, the small of your back does not arch, your limbs don't thrash and your thighs don't quake and your lips don't emit unbridled cries of *Jesu Maria* as is your wont in such moments of worldly conquest.

CATHERINE. Oh, that.

POTEMKIN. Yes, that.

CATHERINE. It's nothing.

POTEMKIN. It is far from nothing. Your mind is far away, and I know exactly where it has gone. You are still grieving for Voltaire.

CATHERINE. No.

POTEMKIN. Of course you are, and understandably so. His loss is all the world's. If Voltaire didn't exist, God would have had to invent him. And I, my sweet, am almost maddened with jealousy.

CATHERINE. Such foolishness. Why be jealous of Voltaire, of all people? I never even met him. We only wrote letters. You weren't jealous of all the *real* lovers I had before you.

POTEMKIN. Why should I have been? You're done with them.

CATHERINE. I'm done with you, too.

POTEMKIN. No, you're not, and you know it. Look at what we've just done together—ravished the maiden Crimea out of her sovereign chastity, a deed of carnal defilement by a pair of mutually devilish libertines if ever there was one. And no, I'm not jealous of the lovers you've had *after* me, either. How could I be? I picked them out for you. You'd have made terrible choices on your own. You lacked the proper discrimination. I had to ensure they had the necessary—discretion, of course, and the requisite physical endowments, and the mettle, nimbleness, and know-how to put those gifts to proper use.

CATHERINE. And so they did. But how did you come to know of their—endowments?

POTEMKIN. I had the Countess Praskovya take them to her bed and test them out beforehand—she was your *éprouveuse* of lovers.

CATHERINE. You're not really that wicked.

POTEMKIN. I am *exactly* that wicked. You'd have nothing to do with me if I weren't. And I had always to choose paramours who were young—younger than each other in succession, one right after another—and pretty, and with enough brains not to bore you, but no more than that.

CATHERINE. No one to rival you, you mean. But you're the only lover I've had who was jealous of Voltaire.

POTEMKIN. The others didn't know enough to be jealous of Voltaire and his—organ of intellect. They didn't grasp what was going on between the two of you. And right under their noses, too. The pleasures of the flesh pale beside the sensuality of thought, and there is nothing more—*lubricious* than written and recurrent correspondence between two genius lovers who have never met, a pair of minds frolicking in abstract horizontal bliss, dancing the Paphian Jig in the philosophical realm. The beast of multifarious configurations of such a coupling simply beggars the imagination. I can only guess the lascivious potentialities you and he touched and caressed and quickened—the squaring of the circle, the laws of motion and the calculus, *cogito ergo sum* and the duality of mind and matter, the perfect and ideal republic, the poet-monarchs of ancient China, the Wealth of Nations and the Social Contract, the *tabula rasa* and the association of ideas, the sweep of history and the rights of man, the—

CATHERINE (*interrupting*). Voltaire is dead.

POTEMKIN. He is not dead, and your affair with him will never end, for it realizes itself in the realm of ideas—and ideas may be created but never destroyed, only transformed by the vicissitudes of life ... and death.

CATHERINE (*with a sigh*). There is some truth in what you say. He is still here with me, and I with him. But our trysts are not the same as before. I crave another letter from him like I crave an all-consuming spasm of Eros followed by the exquisite breathless tranquility of *une petite mort*. But thank you for your understanding. There is nothing in the world more precious to me.

(CATHERINE *folds herself into* POTEMKIN *'s arms.*)

CATHERINE. How could I survive a day without you?

POTEMKIN. Consider it not too deeply, Little Mother.

(*Pause*)

CATHERINE. Tell me, my dear Grisha Alexandrovich—is it possible ... that we are ... married?

POTEMKIN. Married?

CATHERINE. Yes, I seem to remember a wedding of some sort—something small and secret, but truly sanctified in the eyes of the Church.

POTEMKIN. Odd. I seem to remember such a wedding too.

CATHERINE. Do you suppose we dreamed it?

POTEMKIN. If we dreamed it at the same time, sharing the same dream together, isn't it as holy and binding as it could ever be?

CATHERINE. I suppose so, but—it seems a shame the memory has faded so.

POTEMKIN. Perhaps the time has come for us to renew our vows.

CATHERINE. Oh, yes—let us do that please!

(DIERDRE *and* JULIA *appear, sitting at a table.*)

DIERDRE. Julie, dear—

JULIA. Julia.

POTEMKIN. My sweetest Katyusha, you know that I am utterly and solely your own—

CATHERINE. Yes, I know.

DIERDRE. Bruno and I were so surprised to find you still in New York.

POTEMKIN. —and I shall be faithfully your own until death parts us forever.

CATHERINE. I know that too.

DIERDRE. When I tried to call Tatiana, I hoped to make amends after that awful scene yesterday.

POTEMKIN. I shall strive ever to protect you, and to bring you joy and never sadness.

CATHERINE. Just as you always have.

DIERDRE. But when *you* answered the phone—well!

POTEMKIN. My body and soul and mind are at your dedicated service—

CATHERINE. As you've proven endlessly.

DIERDRE. We thought you'd be back in Idaho by now.

JULIA. Iowa.

POTEMKIN. —always and forever.

CATHERINE. It does my heart good to hear it, *mon amour*.

(POTEMKIN and CATHERINE kiss.)

*

Scene 3

(Resuming in the same café as in Act 1, Scene 3; the actor playing POTEMKIN becomes BRUNO again; he and JULIA and DIERDRE sit at a table.)

DIERDRE. Well, I hope you'll tell us just what on earth is going on. Meanwhile we'd better order. I'll have soda water and a turkey sandwich. What will you have, dear?

JULIA. A cup of black coffee.

DIERDRE. Anything to eat?

JULIA. No.

BRUNO. I'll have iced tea and a Reuben.

JULIA. I shouldn't be here.

DIERDRE. Why not? Has it got something to do with Tatiana? Bruno and I still want to fix things with her. I'm sure we can work this out.

JULIA. It's not Tatiana, it's ...

It was all a mistake, my coming here in the first place. To New York. I was naïve and I didn't know what I was getting myself into. It was very unprofessional of me.

BRUNO. Unprofessional?

JULIA. I've still got no idea what I'm supposed to expect from this whole thing.

DIERDRE. What whole thing?

JULIA. *This* whole thing. My play. You. New York. The Perdita Theatre Company.

BRUNO. It's no big mystery. We're all developing your play together. And what a play it's going to be.

DIERDRE. An international hit.

BRUNO. Indeed.

JULIA. When I got your letter a week ago, I ...

Well, I'd been submitting it all over the place for a year and a half, sending it out to contests and any theaters that said they were looking for submissions, and I paid tons of money for script copies and postage, and I was getting nowhere, and I'd just about given up hope, but then I finally got your letter, and I got awfully excited about it, maybe too excited, and I felt thrilled and honored but also—kind of daunted, you know?

BRUNO. No, I don't think I *do* know.

(TATIANA *appears separately.*)

TATIANA. My Lord, what are you telling me, girl?

JULIA. I guess I was intimidated. I never thought to ask the right questions.

TATIANA. This is outrageous.

BRUNO. And what questions might those be?

JULIA. Well, for one thing ... I flew out here on my own dime.

TATIANA. They didn't even pay your *way*?

JULIA. You've never said a word about reimbursing me.

BRUNO. I thought we had an understanding.

JULIA. We didn't.

TATIANA. You don't even have a *contract*?

JULIA. Or *I* didn't. There's a whole lot about this arrangement I don't understand.

TATIANA. Such a babe in the woods.

BRUNO. Well. What do you want us to tell you?

(*Pause*)

JULIA. What's in this for me?

DIERDRE. What's in this for—?

BRUNO. We should have seen this coming.

TATIANA. But I'm no better, I suppose.

DIERDRE. What a question.

TATIANA. How did I let myself get mixed up in this?

DIERDRE. It's all about exposure, dear.

TATIANA. I should have tried to find out more about this—this Perdita Theatre of theirs, that I'd never even heard of.

BRUNO. Getting noticed.

TATIANA. I should have been more wary—for both of our sakes.

DIERDRE. And remember, we *do* have a staged reading scheduled in just a week and a half.

TATIANA. There's an organization for playwrights, the Dramatists—something.

DIERDRE. We'll do all sorts of publicity.

TATIANA. That's right, the Dramatists *Guild*.

DIERDRE. And we'll invite critics and—agents, Bruno?

TATIANA. They help out with this sort of thing.

BRUNO. No need for agents.

TATIANA. Are you a member?

DIERDRE. Anyway, your whole world is about to change.

TATIANA. Never mind, I'm sure they'll help you anyway.

DIERDRE. You should be grateful for the opportunity.

TATIANA. Their office is right here in Manhattan, I think.

BRUNO. This is a real stroke of luck for you.

TATIANA. Look them up, go there right this minute.

DIERDRE. As far as money is concerned, well—for Pete's sake, be reasonable.

TATIANA. Ask for their advice.

DIERDRE. Now is not the time.

TATIANA. They'll tell you what to do.

(TATIANA *disappears*.)

DIERDRE. We're a fledgling company, just getting by so far on grants and donations and passing the hat and so forth. But we've got a glorious future, and we expect you and your play to be part of it. Just try to understand—right now we're still struggling, and we've got to hold together with spit and bailing wire.

BRUNO. And that means sacrifice. Dierdre and I are making our share of sacrifices, and so is everybody who works with us, and so must you. It's the price of being an artist in this world of ours. The sooner you learn that, the better.

(Pause; JULIA *plops some papers on their table*.)

BRUNO. What's this?

JULIA. I just paid a visit to the Dramatists Guild. They gave me copies of their standard contracts. (*pushing the papers toward BRUNO*). This is a commission agreement, for us to develop the play together—it's all boilerplate, but I've written in our names and the other pertinent stuff where it's needed, and all we have to do is initial those places before we sign our names to it.

(*Neither DIERDRE nor BRUNO pick up the document.*)

DIERDRE. This is very unusual.

BRUNO. We'll have to have our lawyer look it over.

DIERDRE. And that could take weeks.

BRUNO. Or months.

DIERDRE. Surely you don't want that.

JULIA. Just read it and sign it, is all I'm asking.

(*BRUNO picks up the contract, but instead of reading it, passes it to DIERDRE who begins to look it over.*)

BRUNO. You're making a terrible mistake, Julia.

JULIA. No, I'm done making mistakes.

DIERDRE (*reading the contract*). One hundred and nineteen dollars! Heavens, that's—that's just impossible! Where did you come up with such a figure?

JULIA. It's the price of my plane ticket. It's all I'm asking for right now. But we'll have to negotiate a premiere production contract if it comes to that.

DIERDRE (*as before*). But what's this? Where it identifies the author, it has both your name and ...

JULIA. Tatiana Svoboda. We're writing the play together now. I've got a separate collaboration agreement for her and me to sign. She says she's fine with that.

BRUNO. Young lady, you can't be serious.

JULIA. Don't call me that.

BRUNO. You've got no idea what you're getting yourself into. Tatiana Svoboda is an addled prima donna with delusions of grandeur.

JULIA. Then why did you bring her aboard in the first place?

BRUNO. She's a known quantity. Her name counts for something, at least to get started.

JULIA. So what are you telling me? You're planning to dump her as soon as you get some money?

DIERDRE. Nobody said that.

BRUNO. I guess our way of doing things sounds cynical to you. But right now, you're acting pretty cynical yourself. You picked a fine time to let us know how little you trust us.

DIERDRE. I'm hurt, Julia.

BRUNO. So am I.

(JULIA gets up.)

JULIA. Have it your way. *(putting some money on the table)* This'll pay for my coffee. I'll leave the contract with you. I've got a copy for Tatiana and me. Give us a call if you want to talk business.

(TATIANA appears, sitting at the table in her apartment; she is holding a crystal by a chain, using it as a pendulum for divination.)

TATIANA *(to the crystal)*. Show me yes.

BRUNO. Oh, no, my dear, I'm quite sure you'll be calling *us* before long.

TATIANA *(as before)*. Show me yes.

BRUNO. You'll see the error of your ways.

TATIANA *(as before)*. Show me yes.

BRUNO. And don't worry, we won't hold it against you.

TATIANA *(as before)*. Good. That's good. Thank you.

BRUNO. We'll just go on like before, as if nothing had happened.

TATIANA *(as before)*. Now show me no.

BRUNO. Meanwhile, give Tatiana our best regards.

TATIANA *(as before)*. Show me no.

BRUNO. And good luck trying to work with her on your own.

TATIANA *(as before)*. Show me no.

BRUNO. It won't be easy.

*

Scene 4

(TATIANA's apartment; TATIANA continues to sit, watching the pendulum. JULIA sits beside her, looking on.)

TATIANA *(to the pendulum)*. Good. That's very good. Thank you.

JULIA. Who are you talking to?

TATIANA. You know.

JULIA. Uh, no I don't think I do.

TATIANA. I'm reaching out to our shared creative unconscious, yours and mine together, as a unity.

JULIA. Oka-a-ay.

TATIANA. There's nothing supernatural about it. It's perfectly scientific.

JULIA. Oka-a-a-ay.

TATIANA. Our minds have just told us that crosswise is yes, and forward and back is no.

JULIA. So now what do we do?

TATIANA. We ask questions.

JULIA. Um, I should tell you, I don't exactly believe in this sort of thing.

TATIANA. No, and that doesn't make this any easier. But in a minute you'll see. You'll believe. Go ahead, ask a question—a yes or no question.

JULIA. About what?

TATIANA. About the play. About the next scene. What are we supposed to write? Go on.

JULIA (*to the pendulum*). Uh, what are we supposed to write?

TATIANA. It has to be yes or no.

JULIA. I don't know where to start.

TATIANA. All right then, I'll do it. (*to the pendulum*) Should the next scene be about Catherine's personal life?

(*Pause while JULIA and TATIANA watch the pendulum.*)

TATIANA. There you have it. An emphatic no.

JULIA. It looked to me like yes.

TATIANA. Trust me, girl—that was a no if ever I saw one. (*to the pendulum*) Should the next scene deal with history and politics? (*to JULIA*) Aha! Definitely a yes!

JULIA. Okay, that gives us something to work with. Can I ask it something?

TATIANA. Be my guest.

JULIA (*to the pendulum*). Should we write about the partition of Poland?

TATIANA. Oh, that's a good one.

(Pause while JULIA and TATIANA watch the pendulum.)

JULIA. It's saying yes.

TATIANA. It's saying no.

JULIA. You're not doing it right. Let me try.

TATIANA. Don't interrupt.

(Pause)

JULIA. It's saying yes *and* no.

TATIANA. No, it's ... saying something different altogether. Just look.

JULIA. It's moving at some kind of angle.

TATIANA. It's shaping a letter.

(Pause)

JULIA. It's a W.

TATIANA. No, it's a V. Can't you see it?

JULIA. You're right. It's definitely a V.

TATIANA. It's an initial. For someone's name. And it can only be one name.

JULIA *and* TATIANA *(in unison)*. Voltaire!

TATIANA. I've been telling you he needs to be in the play.

JULIA. Yeah, but Catherine never met him. How do you write a scene between two characters who never met? Besides, what are we supposed to do with him? What can we have him say that he didn't say already? It's impossible to write a genius.

(Pause.)

JULIA. I'm not sure this is really Voltaire.

TATIANA. Of course it's not. It's still our unified unconscious. We need to find out how to reach Voltaire. He's out there somewhere. Now focus. Really, really concentrate. And let's say his name.

JULIA *and* TATIANA *(in unison)*. Voltaire ... Voltaire ... Voltaire ...

*

Scene 5

(The same undefined space as in Scene 8 of Act I; the actor playing TATIANA becomes CATHERINE again, and the actor playing DIERDRE becomes VOLTAIRE.)

CATHERINE. Listen. *(pause)* Do you hear it?

VOLTAIRE. What?

CATHERINE. Just listen.

(Pause)

VOLTAIRE. Yes, I hear it. *(pause)* It's a voice in the distance.

CATHERINE. Yes.

VOLTAIRE. But what is it saying?

CATHERINE. I believe it's someone calling out your name. Voltaire, Voltaire, Voltaire.

VOLTAIRE. I believe you're right.

CATHERINE. Someone wants to communicate with you.

VOLTAIRE. What a ridiculous idea.

CATHERINE. Why?

VOLTAIRE. We're not even really here. We're not really anywhere. Or at least nowhere identifiable.

CATHERINE. True.

(Pause)

VOLTAIRE. Dear lady—do you get the feeling Enlightenment rationalism isn't quite catching on? But to resume our chat. What have I missed since I've been dead? How are those upstart American colonies doing, now that they've declared their independence? How fares their war against Britain?

CATHERINE. They might just win.

VOLTAIRE. Have they chosen a king yet?

CATHERINE. It doesn't appear that they want one.

VOLTAIRE. Ha. Dr. Franklin said so when we met. I thought he was joking.

CATHERINE. It seems they aim to become a republic of sorts. Don't you approve?

VOLTAIRE. The question is, are they ready? I doubt it very much. An enlightened monarch is what they need.

CATHERINE. Where would they look to find one?

VOLTAIRE. To the noble houses of Europe, naturally. There are plenty of dynastic pretenders to choose from. What about your son? Might he be looking for something to keep him busy? A sort of—hobby, maybe?

CATHERINE. Aside from trying to murder his dear mother? I'm not that lucky. Anyway, I don't think America would have him.

VOLTAIRE. Surely they don't fancy choosing somebody from their own population—a common bourgeois merchant or planter or blacksmith or some backwoods trapper. What would they even call him? A chairman, a foreman, an overseer, a boss, a—president?

CATHERINE. Maybe they can do without one altogether.

VOLTAIRE. Oh, really—

CATHERINE. How can anybody know till it's been tried? I'm heartily sick of monarchy. Look at me, what have I accomplished? I must be a dreadful disappointment to you. I haven't even succeeded in freeing the serfs.

VOLTAIRE. Patience, dear lady. Such aspirations may take generations to achieve.

CATHERINE. No, you and I both know I'm not up to the job. Who could expect otherwise? Divine right is a fraud. No more of this—this *breeding* of monarchs as livestock and pretending God picks and chooses. Surely the world has had enough of that. Perhaps the people of America can learn to govern themselves.

VOLTAIRE. Now you're scaring me. A government must certainly be *for* the people—that's what "consent of the governed" means. But a government *by* the people, and purely *of* the people? You're talking about anarchy, my friend—no, something worse, democracy.

CATHERINE. Why not? It worked in ancient Athens.

VOLTAIRE. Yes, in a cozy little city state where everybody knew everybody else, but not in a bustling frontier teetering on the brink of savagery. Oh, this "all men are created equal" business is well and good, and I myself have sung its praises, but just between you and me, there's plenty of evidence against it. And anyway, it would take a powerful king to make this equality thing really work. A philosopher king isn't out of the question—they do turn up now and again. Look at you, you've got an excellent head on your shoulders. But a whole nation of philosopher *citizens*? Don't put money on it. Here's a thought. What about pure democracy tempered by absolute despotism? No, don't sneer at the idea. That sniveling sentimentalist Rousseau got one thing right. People must sometimes be forced to be free.

CATHERINE. But forced by whom? That seems to be the problem of America itself.

VOLTAIRE. Indeed, and it's likely to continue so. They'll have to get rid of slavery somehow, but what happens then? After a couple of centuries of strife and striving, lurching between the giddiness of progress and stomach-churning failure, I fear

Americans will tire of the fight and surrender to their own basest instincts and become a nation of puppets. And the puppeteer they choose for their leader will be nothing but a puppet himself, a hollow automaton with neither mind nor will nor purpose, a demagogic fool ranting through his teeth and flailing his limbs and yanking his subjects' strings in random idiotic fury. *(yawning)* I'm reminded of Don Quixote's battle against the puppets. Do you remember it?

CATHERINE. Vaguely.

VOLTAIRE *(drowsing)*. Oh, but you *must* remember ... part two, chapter 26, if memory serves ... the best thing in the book ... so much better ... than that windmill business ...

(VOLTAIRE falls fast asleep.)

CATHERINE *(whispering to him)*. Voltaire ... Voltaire ... *Cher ami* ... *(sighs)* Ah, well. Even in death, I suppose old men must grow weary and long for sleep. Would that I were older ... It is hard to be so ever wakeful, so ... always ... alert ...

(CATHERINE, too, falls asleep.)

*

Scene 6

(TATIANA's apartment; JULIA is asleep in bed; CATHERINE becomes TATIANA, who is sleepwalking; she holds an imaginary music score and turns its pages.)

TATIANA. Oh, it is beautiful. It is the most beautiful music I've ever heard. And it is for me, you say? You created it just for me?

JULIA *(awakening)*. Tatiana?

TATIANA. Such a wonderful gift. It leaves me breathless. Thank you.

JULIA. Are you ... asleep?

TATIANA *(as before)*. Asleep? Yes, I suppose it must be so, my sweet Ilyusha. This is too beautiful a moment for waking. So let us dream, my friend—let us dream some more. I am not ready to be awake, are you?

(JULIA watches and listens, wary of awakening TATIANA.)

TATIANA *(as before)*. But—what is it called, this music that is now my own?

You don't know, you say?

But it tells a story, you say?

A story to be of my own choosing?

Oh, yes, Ilyusha, I know the story. I heard it in the very opening bars.

It is my own story ...

... the story of a childhood lost ...

... of all I lost in those terrible years ...
... the story of Little Tatiana in a world gone mad.
Play it again and I will show you and tell you.

(JULIA continues to watch and listen; TATIANA enacts the story she tells in a simple dance/pantomime to unheard music; as her performance unfolds, the lighting constricts so that JULIA fades into the background, and TATIANA appears to be alone in her dream.)

TATIANA. It is a story of the vanishing days of kings and queens, when the magic power of crown and scepter waned from the world, and people everywhere fancied themselves alike in—in capacity and worth, and a new kind of tyranny took root—the tyranny of property and wealth.

Pretty Little Tatiana's mother was a penniless countess who married a wealthy bourgeois gentleman, and the three of them lived together in a mansion filled with—with paintings and statues and all the wonders of civilization. They even had a little theater where Tatiana and Papa put on, oh, puppet shows for no one else but Mama. And they played music for Mama upon the guitar and keyboard and they sang, and they danced—oh, how they danced.

Alas, poor Mama! Those shows only bored her, and she never read books, and she had no taste for paintings or statues, or song or dance.

But Mama, bless her heart, did believe in God.

Now Papa did not believe in God, which was odd, because God, well, he was very good to Papa. For you see, Papa owned a little factory where godly things were made—glittering, eh, lamé for priestly vestments, chalices and—and crosses and bulbous miters leafed and sprinkled with gold and precious stones, and crozier staffs topped with golden serpents—all things to fuel the, eh, mesmeric mystery of churches. And the little factory kept Tatiana and her family wealthy and happy.

And never mind that Papa did not believe in God, and that Tatiana herself did not know what she believed.

Mama did enough praying for the three of them.

Now Mama fell ill one day, and she called Tatiana to her bedside, and as she lay dying, she gave her a little—a little doll, so pure and perfect, its cloth had never been pierced by a needle nor cut with scissors, and the doll's name was Lialia, Mama said.

“Keep Lialia close, and never let her go,” Mama told Tatiana, “for she will be your guardian and guide in the terrible times to come.”

And then came the Revolution.

Do you remember the Revolution?

All around the mansion came shouting and riots, bombings and machine gun fire as mobs rose up in rebellion, and police and Cossacks trampled and slaughtered them by the hundreds, and the stench of—of tear gas and gunpowder and corpses was everywhere. And when the killing ended, the poor prevailed over the rich, and there was no place for—for God in the new way of things, nor were there priests or churches to buy the holy makings of her father's factory. So all the workers went away, and Tatiana and her papa became terribly poor.

And then Papa became sick—as sick as Mama, or so Tatiana feared—and the girl asked her doll what must be done.

“You must go out into the forest to make a living for both you and Papa,” Lialia said. “Take me with you, and I will show you how.”

And so Tatiana left home for the first time in her life and went deep, deep into the forest. Now, in those days of so much violence and death, well, music was hard to come by, so songbirds brought a good price far and wide.

So Lialia showed Tatiana how to make a net, a hoop, and a cage out of reeds and leaves and branches, then how to capture songbirds unawares—a goldfinch singing among the turnip-tops; a white-cheeked titmouse, curious and trusting; a pompous bullfinch exiled from his flock on account of his boastful ways; a rust-red spotted thrush; a yellow-browed bunting; and most precious of all, a clever talking hawfinch.

By the time Tatiana finished catching those birds, night had fallen, deep and silent and dark and cold, and she didn’t—she had no idea of the direction home.

“Never fear, dear girl,” Lialia said, “the way is lighted, even at night.”

And sure enough, tucked away in the crooks and forks of trees were hundreds of—of human skulls, invisible by day, but by night with little candles burning inside them, so their empty eye sockets cast beams of light.

“But who put these here?” Tatiana asked her doll.

“Never ask the source of a blessing,” Lialia said. “Just keep thoughts of gratitude in your little heart. Put a skull on a stick to carry as a lamp, and let its shining dead eyes show you your way home.”

And so she did. But at the end of her night’s journey, Tatiana found her childhood home burned to the ground, and lying in—in smoking, glowing embers. And among the ashes she found a pile of charred bones—all that was left of poor Papa.

Tatiana wept and asked Lialia what had happened.

“The world of men and women is all aflame with violence and change,” the doll told her. “It was only a matter of time before those fires came to sweep away your home, and also the last frail treasures of childhood. That was why I—I led you away, to keep you safe. But now you must sleep, for your wanderings to come will be long, long, and—and, oh, so hard.”

“But where can I find a bed?” Tatiana asked.

“Right here among these ashes,” the doll replied. “The air is cold, but the ashes are warm and will make a fine bed, at least until they cool tomorrow morning, and by then you will be on your way. Sleep well, my sweet, and do not fear the darkness. For the morning is wiser than the night.”

(TATIANA’s dance/pantomime comes to an end; still asleep, she falls weeping to her knees. The pool of light has expanded again to show JULIA, who is still listening and watching. JULIA steps toward TATIANA and puts her arms around her.)

JULIA. Come with me, Tatiana. Come with me to bed.

(VOLTAIRE enters.)

VOLTAIRE. Pardon me, ladies ... but I seem to have lost my way in a dream.

JULIA (*shaking* TATIANA). Tatiana.

VOLTAIRE. Would you be so kind as to wake me up?

JULIA (*as before*). Somebody's here.

TATIANA. Who?

JULIA. It's Voltaire ... I think.

TATIANA. You're dreaming.

JULIA. No, you're the one who's dreaming. Just look.

VOLTAIRE. I was having a most interesting chat with the Semiramis of the North, and I must have dozed off.

JULIA. The Semiramis of the ... ?

VOLTAIRE. Catherine.

JULIA. The, uh, Great?

VOLTAIRE. Well, yes, but she doesn't like to be called that. "My height is neither great nor small," she likes to say.

JULIA. Tatiana, I think it's really him.

VOLTAIRE. I suppose it's only proper to tell you I'm dead. And you two ladies—are you dead too?

No, surely not, let me guess.

You are denizens of some future world, witnesses of things to come.

JULIA. Uh, something like that, I guess, but are you really ... ?

VOLTAIRE. Yes, unless I much mistake myself, I am who you say I am—wry Voltaire, the witty learned one, philosopher and sage, with answers to every riddle on my glib and facile tongue, now just another village idiot facing the infinite world-riddle of eternity, and I am at your service.

TATIANA. I'm going back to bed.

JULIA (to TATIANA). Listen to me. This is what you wanted. You've been doing all this—this spooky stuff to reach him. And here he is. I don't know what to say to him. Don't leave me alone with him.

TATIANA. You go back to bed too.

JULIA. You wanted to talk to him. Now's the time. Ask him something.

VOLTAIRE. Yes, anything you like. I'll try to give an impertinent answer.

(*Pause*)

TATIANA. What went wrong?

VOLTAIRE. Eh?

TATIANA. You were the—the embodiment of reason, of enlightened thought. The age you lived in, your century—it promised humanity so much. But the centuries since, so wretched, getting worse with every passing year ... Never in human history has so much promise been broken.

VOLTAIRE. So I've been gone for centuries?

JULIA. A couple of centuries, anyway.

VOLTAIRE. How extraordinary. But—where is Catherine? She's missing the best part of my afterlife dream. We were talking just now of how people may best be governed.

TATIANA. That is the question, isn't it? And you and the rest of your—your oh-so-wise, eh, generation failed to answer it, failed miserably. Since you've been gone, untold millions have been slaughtered, and to what possible purpose? Civilization has been destroyed and rebuilt, and destroyed and rebuilt, over and over again, and botched each and every time, for what else can be done with a—a house built out of cards in the first place? Those cards were the words of the men of your age. "All men are created equal ..."

JULIA. ... with the right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

TATIANA. Words that can be toppled by the puff of a spring breeze. You can't build worlds out of cards, nor out of words, especially when the words are so empty and so, eh, mendacious. "Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." How easily those words get turned against what's generous and good—turned toward grudges, resentment, tribal hatreds, bigotry, and—and selfishness. And the most, eh, insidious words of all were those promising a government *of*, *by*, and *for* the people—that insanely stupid promise that every individual may be—what?

JULIA. A tyrant.

TATIANA. Yes, a tyrant over all other individuals, over all other tyrants. And now we Americans have become a nation of selfish idiots too lazy for self-rule.

JULIA. Carnivorous sheep.

TATIANA. Exactly. And we've chosen the most selfish idiot of all to stand above us to uphold our selfishness. We've chosen a filthy sock-puppet for our president.

VOLTAIRE. President?

JULIA. Uh, the chief executive.

VOLTAIRE. Good Lord, is that really what you call him?

TATIANA. It is the death of shame. Fair play, charity and kindness, gallantry of spirit, all, all dead. For every winner, there must now be a hundred—no, a thousand losers, and to lose is now the only shame, and so it shall continue from this day forth.

VOLTAIRE. And I'm somehow to blame for this?

TATIANA. You ... you *promised*.

VOLTAIRE. I don't remember promising anything. Though I wish I could say otherwise, I'm not especially surprised at what you're telling me. Did I ever claim to be an optimist?

Such a peculiar sort of death I'm having.

And in this sleep of death, what dreams I'm dreaming ...

Well, they're much the same dreams I had in life, I suppose.

Just before I met you two ladies, I was dreaming again about Lisbon—the earthquake there. Foundations lurching and reeling in a savage drunken tarantella; whirlwinds of flame sweeping the streets and public squares; ash and embers falling in hellish scorching heaps through air too hot to breathe; houses, churches, palaces alike unspared, crumbling as if of sand; the churning sea, like a boiling cauldron, splintering the docks and the anchored ships; thousands upon thousands of souls—*tens* of thousands—crushed to death in the shattered seeming safety of their very homes.

The fate of Sodom and Gomorrah, visited upon a city neither more nor less sinful or virtuous than any other in Christendom.

And why?

Say, when you hear their piteous, half-formed cries,

Or from their ashes see the smoke arise,

Say, will you then eternal laws maintain,

Or pray to God, when prayers are in vain?

Yes, Lisbon, O Lisbon, always Lisbon!

It is the question that always makes mockery of reason: How may people be ruled when God's very creation proves to be ungovernable—even, it would seem, by God himself?

JULIA. What makes you think there is a God?

TATIANA. You didn't tell me you were an atheist.

JULIA. You didn't ask.

VOLTAIRE. But God is a demonstrable fact. Just think, what a piece of work is a man, or even the lowliest plant or animal—so much more vastly complex than any timepiece. And just as the mere existence of a watch proves there's a watchmaker, so the existence of man proves there's a God.

But Lisbon, O Lisbon, always Lisbon!

What kind of watch keeps ticking after its spring is broken? They say even a broken timepiece is right twice a day, but this watch of God's can't even boast of that.

If ever its hands strike upon the right time, it is by the merest random accident, and no one even knows it when it happens.

TATIANA. God is love. And God lives in horror of his creation.

VOLTAIRE. The horror of creation. Do you think it's so?

JULIA. Oh, be quiet, the both of you. There is no God, and human beings are what they are, and they're certainly not watches. (*mockingly, to VOLTAIRE*) Oh, Lisbon, Lisbon, always Lisbon! Boo-hoo! Were you even *in* Lisbon when it happened? No, I didn't think so. And do you have any idea how people *behaved* when it was over? Well, let me tell you. People did all sorts of things. Some robbed the dead and some helped bury the dead; some sneered at the grieving and some comforted the grieving. There was looting and killing, cruelty and selfishness—the worst of what people can be; and there was nursing and caring, aid and sacrifice—the best of what people can be. There were hard hearts, and there were bleeding hearts; there were brutes, and there were saints. Because what's good about people, and what's bad, they always grow side by side, all tangled up together, like—like weeds and flowers.

TATIANA. But the earthquake goes on and on.

JULIA. Yeah, Tatiana, as a matter of fact it *does*. And like I said before, boo-hoo. It didn't start in Lisbon either. The earthquake has been going on throughout all history, before there was such a thing as history, before there were people or—or amoebas even, before there was a planet Earth, ever since the Big Bang happened—

VOLTAIRE. Big Bang?

TATIANA. Don't ask.

JULIA. —and it will never *stop*. Nothing stands still on this crazy planet, nothing is safe. But a bunch of clever guys a couple of hundred years ago pretended otherwise, and had the nerve to call it empiricism. It took what happened in Lisbon to catch this—*enlightened* gentleman's attention, so he'd notice that the earth under his feet is always shaking, and then he got all upset with God about it. Okay, so it *is* shaking—so what? What are we going to do about it?

(*Pause*)

JULIA. Let's all just—just stop it, okay? Stop all this *building* while an earthquake's going on. Stop building with cards and words and even with bricks and mortar and steel, because all this *building* is just—just ...

TATIANA. Writing in water.

JULIA. Yeah. But *growing* is real and lasting. Even in an earthquake, things keep growing out of the earth, life goes on and on, reaching out for sunlight and water and—and nutrition, growing and *creating* all the time. So let's just look out for what's growing, always, all around us, and do what we can to *help*. Let's weed out

the selfishness and nurture the compassion, let's *grow* the good, try to help it thrive.
Let's grow the—the *love*.

(Pause)

TATIANA. Monsieur Voltaire, remind me—what were the last words in *Candide*?

VOLTAIRE. *Il faut cultiver notre jardin.*

TATIANA. “We must cultivate our garden.”

JULIA. Wow. That pretty much sums it up.

(BRUNO appears, standing separately, with a bottle of brandy.)

BRUNO. Good morning, ladies.

VOLTAIRE. Well.

BRUNO. Dierdre and I have come to make peace.

VOLTAIRE. There it is, then.

BRUNO *(holding out the bottle)*. And we've brought a peace offering.

VOLTAIRE. Perhaps there's no cause for optimism.

BRUNO. We hope you'll be so kind as to accept it.

VOLTAIRE. But perhaps there's cause for hope.

*

Scene 7

(TATIANA's apartment; VOLTAIRE is DIERDRE again; she and BRUNO have just entered and are facing TATIANA and JULIA. BRUNO offers TATIANA the bottle.)

TATIANA. What is this?

DIERDRE. Something you'll like, we hope.

BRUNO. You have a taste for fine brandy, don't you?

DIERDRE. It's an Armagnac with an excellent reputation—next door to cognac, the experts say, ripe, round, soft, with a taste of caramel. Bruno and were saving it for some special ... well, we never decided exactly what sort of occasion. And now we think the two of you should have it.

JULIA. Thank you, that's sweet of you, but we really couldn't possibly—

(TATIANA takes the bottle away from BRUNO and sits, silently studying its label.)

BRUNO. It's a 1967 vintage.

DIERDRE. The year of Sergeant Pepper! How could it not be good?

JULIA (*to BRUNO and DIERDRE*). Maybe we should all have a glass.

DIERDRE. That would be nice.

JULIA. Coming right up.

(*But when JULIA reaches for the unopened bottle, TATIANA holds onto it.*)

TATIANA (*to BRUNO and DIERDRE*). Thank you, we're much obliged, I'm sure. And now I suppose you must be very busy, and I'm sure you must be going.

BRUNO. Really, Tatiana, I was hoping we might all be ready to ...

TATIANA. Bury the axe?

JULIA. You mean the hatchet.

BRUNO. I still don't understand what happened yesterday, do you? Such an odd thing, I'm sure we're all embarrassed about it, I know I am. We must have all gone momentarily ... well, just a little crazy, don't you think?

DIERDRE. We apologize for anything we said to upset you.

BRUNO. Indeed, we do. Surely there's no cause to hold grudges. Dierdre and I thought maybe we could pick up where we all left off yesterday. Of course, you ladies have continued on without us, so we've got some catching up to do. Kindly update us, would you?

TATIANA. Julia said she showed you the contract. Are you going to sign it?

BRUNO. Oh, really, Tatiana—and please don't get cross again—but you of all people know better than that. It just isn't done, and it's a good thing, too. It's lucky the Dramatists Guild isn't an actual union, just a paper tiger with no real bite to its bark. Equity is already enough of a nuisance, God knows. And if I may be absolutely frank, I think it was rather unkind of you to put such a silly idea in the girl's head.

JULIA. I'm not a girl.

BRUNO. After all, she flew all the way out here from Idaho just yesterday—

JULIA. Iowa.

BRUNO. —and she has no experience in *professional* theater at all, and she's such a babe in the woods about such things, and—

JULIA (*interrupting*). Okay, what's going on here?

BRUNO. I beg your pardon?

JULIA. Why are you doing here, really?

DIERDRE. We want to do justice to your wonderful play, of course.

JULIA. Bullshit. You don't care about the play. I've known that all along. So what's this all about?

TATIANA. It's about money, dear. Everything is.

JULIA. But how? It doesn't make sense. Look, all this "international hit" talk sounded nice, but really, I know better, I wasn't born yesterday. This play isn't Broadway bound. It's scheduled for a reading in a church basement, and if all goes really super miraculously well, it just might get *produced* in a church basement on a budget of, oh, maybe a buck ninety-five. That's all I expect, and really, I'm okay with it. All I care about is getting it in front of—some *people*, that's all, and nobody expects anything more. So what could this possibly have to do with money?

TATIANA. They've applied for a grant, my dear. I recognize the distinct and familiar stench of fakery, pretension, and deceit. And as always, there is some kind of, eh, *catch*, something they must do to get their itchy hands on all that cash. Their company—the Perdita Theatre Company, did you say it was called?—it actually has to do some—some *theater*, which I suspect is not something these two charlatans are used to doing. And *Lady Leviathan* is the only thing they can even pretend to be working on right now.

Your play is merely a commodity, my child. As are you. And as am I.

It's a sign of the times.

Welcome to the 1980s.

Welcome to the foreseeable future.

BRUNO. Oh, Tatiana, really—

TATIANA. Am I wrong, Bruno?

BRUNO. It's mean of you to put it that way, but yes, we have applied for a generous grant from the NYSCA, and the funds are earmarked to develop *Lady Leviathan* for production. It's not a done deal, but we've got reason to be optimistic. Now the question for both of you is—do you want to be part of it?

(Pause)

BRUNO (to JULIA). Young lady, I wouldn't blame you if you said no. We rode roughshod over your play, and I for one am sorry. But why you're still here hanging around with this—this harridan, I don't understand. Things won't get better with her, they'll only get worse, believe me.

Listen.

Dierdre and I are ready to make everything right. I'll tell you what, let's just go back where we were yesterday when you first walked through that door. We'll still do the scheduled reading, and we'll stick to the script word for word, exactly how it was written before we started monkeying around with it. What do you say?

(Pause)

JULIA. The script is shit.

BRUNO. Pardon?

JULIA. Tatiana and I already decided to scrap it. Didn't we, Tatiana? We've already moved on to another play. We're writing it together.

(TATIANA is speechless; this is the first she has heard anything of the kind.)

BRUNO. Well, tell us all about it.

JULIA. Oh, it's not ready to talk about, not yet. And besides, we're sure it wouldn't interest you.

DIERDRE. But—

JULIA. I know, I know, you need *Lady Leviathan* to get your grant money. Well, you should have told us that yesterday. The ship has sailed, so to speak. We're striking out on our own.

(Pause)

TATIANA. Bruno, what's the matter? You look rather unwell. And upset, too. Oh, dear, it's not about the curse, is it? You remember the curse, Julia. You scolded me about it and talked me into lifting it. How right you were, and how wrong I was, and, oh, I'm very ashamed of myself, so sorry.

(This is the first JULIA has heard of any curse, but she plays along with it.)

JULIA *(to TATIANA)*. You *ought* to be ashamed. Very.

DIERDRE. What curse?

TATIANA. It's just a little Russian curse—no, more of a *Soviet* curse, Stalin was said to have used it against his enemies. I suppose Khrushchev put a stop to all that sort of thing when he De-Stalinized everything, which was well and good. It's rather hard to put into English, but ... Well, to begin with, that tough bristle in your bone sockets, your knees and elbows and knuckles ... *(to JULIA)* What is it called?

JULIA. Cartilage.

TATIANA. Yes, your cartilage, it gets all brittle and—and sandpapery, and every little movement of your arms and legs sets you screaming with pain. And your, your ... *(to JULIA)* What is the polite word for balls?

JULIA. Testicles.

TATIANA. Right, your testicles become so—so swollen and so sensitive and achy, you can't wear clothing over them, and so heavy they weigh down your scrotum and drag themselves scraping across the floor. And your—your ... *(to JULIA)* What is the word for the, eh, asshole?

JULIA. Anus.

TATIANA. No, I'm thinking something different.

JULIA. Rectum.

TATIANA. Yes, your rectum, it fills up with scabs and sores, and every shit you take burns like fire and makes you wish you were dead. Oh, it was very rash and stupid of me, and Julia made me change my mind, thank goodness, and I lifted the curse immediately, didn't I, dear? But—perhaps—did I miss some stray loose ends? Did I leave some—some unintended residue? If so, I'm terribly sorry. How are your balls, Bruno? How is your—asshole?

DIERDRE. Did you leave me out of your curse entirely?

TATIANA. Oh, not at all. Stalin had a separate special curse for, eh, post-menopausal women. But I lifted that one too. And you don't look any the worse for it, so I guess it didn't ... take.

(Pause)

BRUNO. I'm not angry, Tatiana. I pity you. I really do. And you don't even know why, do you? You've got no idea ... how truly finished you are, now that you've self-sabotaged your last chance to get back on your feet again. We wished you the best, didn't we Dierdre? "Wouldn't it be wonderful," we said, "to give the great Tatiana Svoboda another—crack at being the legend she was?" Your name isn't exactly a household word anymore, and you're not spoken of fondly even at that. Why, John Houseman himself said you're a—a *pain*. You're a crank, people say—a vain, bilious, senile, mean-spirited, self-destructive, desperate old woman with nothing to live for except past glories—practically rabid, they say, incapable of kindness or gratitude, and best left to die alone and unloved.

How right they were.

How little we knew.

We should have listened.

(Pause)

BRUNO. We should go now, Dierdre.

Good day, ladies.

We wish you all the best.

(BRUNO and DIERDRE turn to leave.)

TATIANA. Dierdre ...

(DIERDRE turns toward her.)

TATIANA. Thank you again for the brandy.

DIERDRE *(brightly)*. Oh. You're very welcome.

(BRUNO and DIERDRE exit; pause.)

TATIANA. The script isn't shit, Julia.

JULIA. Maybe not, but it's right to scrap it. We got stuck telling the wrong story, Tat. We keep reaching into the past, trying to understand what went wrong with—with *everything*, with civilization and history and all. But the past has no answers, not for the present, because the past is—it's *absent*, just not there anymore, so we've got to ...

(Pause)

JULIA. Tell me about Little Tatiana. What happened to her that morning after she slept all night in the smoking embers of her childhood home? Where did she go after that? What did she do?

TATIANA. I've never told that story.

JULIA. Then tell it now, why don't you? It's your story to tell, Tat. Let me help you tell it.

(Pause)

TATIANA. Tatiana awoke to the cold glimmer of dawn, and to the voices of the birds in her cage—the *chit* and the *wheeze* of the goldfinch, the *peter-peter-peter* of the curious trusting titmouse, the out-of-tune *per-lee*, *poo-ee*, *soo-ee* of the pompous bullfinch, the fluty clear *ee-oh-lay* of the rust-red spotted thrush, the chromatic *plik-plik-plik* of the yellow-browed bunting, and the words—yes, the words—of the clever talking hawfinch.

JULIA. And what did the hawfinch say?

TATIANA. "Set us free, Little Tatiana! Don't keep us caged! Please! Set us free!"

JULIA. And she did set them free, didn't she?

TATIANA. Yes, so she did. And as she stood amid those ashes that were once her home, she asked Lialia, her doll, "Where must I go? What must I do?"

JULIA. And what did Lialia say?

TATIANA. Not a thing. Lialia was only a doll, after all, with buttons for eyes, yarn for hair, and a sash of printed muslin.

But now Tatiana's heart was strong and brave ...

(The actor who has played DIERDRE appears separately, again playing VOLTAIRE.)

VOLTAIRE. Listen.

TATIANA. ... and so she followed her heart into the world ...

VOLTAIRE. Wake up and listen.

TATIANA. ... and the birds circled around her head ...

VOLTAIRE. Do you hear it too?

TATIANA. ... singing and dancing upon the wing ...

VOLTAIRE. Just listen, Catherine!

TATIANA. ... her faithful companions everywhere she went.

JULIA. Tell me more.

TATIANA. Oh, I will, sweet Julia, but not now, not just yet. I didn't sleep a wink last night, and now I'm tired, and all this—this excitement has been too much for someone so old as I. Give me your shoulder, would you?

(JULIA offers her shoulder, and TATIANA rests her head upon it.)

TATIANA. Thank you. Oh, thank you. It is death to grow old, my dear, and you must not grow old if you can possibly help it. If you are really lucky, the world will come to an end before you grow old, and ...

VOLTAIRE. It's the most extraordinary thing!

TATIANA. ... and you'll never live to see ...

VOLTAIRE. Wake up and listen!

TATIANA ... such ... such dreadful ... such terrible ...

(TATIANA falls fast asleep, her head on JULIA's shoulder.)

*

Scene 8

(The same undefined space where CATHERINE and VOLTAIRE have spoken together before. TATIANA is CATHERINE again, and DIERDRE is VOLTAIRE; CATHERINE is asleep at first, but as she awakens, JULIA inconspicuously steps out of the play.)

VOLTAIRE *(nudging CATHERINE)*. Wake up, I tell you! Wake up and share this—this moment with me!

CATHERINE *(awakening)*. What is it?

VOLTAIRE. Listen. Do you hear it too?

CATHERINE. Yes. Yes. It is the flutter of wings and birdsong.

VOLTAIRE. So it's not just my imagination.

CATHERINE. But of course it is. Imagination is all we have, wherever this is, wherever we are.

VOLTAIRE. It's beautiful nonetheless.

CATHERINE. Yes, such happy birds, singing their song of freedom—but not the narrow, selfish freedom of our own age, your times and mine, but a reborn transfigured freedom that revels in love, that sparkles fresh with generosity, a freedom that breeds more freedom, that gives of itself endlessly as we dream of future history—dream it into being!

I feel strangely intoxicated.

VOLTAIRE. As if you were drunk? So do I. It's as though the best and worst of all possible worlds were at our fingertips, within our power to shape and build and invent. I sense that we are in a realm of infinite possibilities, in time as well as space. You know as well as I do, Newton's laws work both backwards and forwards, into the past and into the future. And so it is here, only more palpably so. All of time, the past and the future, is the nursery of our imaginings, and all its men and women merely playthings for our endless creativity and invention. We can foresee the past. We can remember the future. And we are not alone. We are surrounded by many others, watching and listening, and they are free to join us, as free to create as we are.

CATHERINE. How delightful.

VOLTAIRE. Isn't it?

CATHERINE. Then let us begin to play.

VOLTAIRE. Yes, let us play.

END OF PLAY.