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SF PERUSALS

The Suicide

A Play by Nikolai Erdman

Translated by Peter Tegel

A Samuel French Acting Edition



New York Hollywood London Toronto

SAMUELFRENCH.COM

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A NOTE ON THE TRANSLATOR

Peter Tegel, writer and translator, was born in Czechoslovakia and educated in England, reading Russian at Oxford. His own work includes *Blim at School, Poet of the Anemones* (Theatre Upstairs) and numerous plays broadcast on radio. Translations include Brecht's *Baal* (Phoenix Theatre and RSC, published by Methuen), Toller's *Machine Wreckers* (Half Moon Theatre) and Erdman's *The Mandate* (broadcast BBC Radio 3, 1976).

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I wish to acknowledge Barenreiter Verlag who, by making available to my agent, Michael Imison of Dr Jan van Loewen Ltd, Ingeborg Gampert's German translation of *The Suicide*, first drew my attention to the work of Erdman and who later at my request made available to me the original Russian text.

THE SUICIDE

The name of Nikolai Erdman (1902-70) is an unfamiliar one. Unlike Bulgakov, Babel or Mayakovsky, who wrote plays but made their reputations in other genres, Erdman was primarily a playwright — hence his obscurity. He wrote, it seems, only two plays, both while still in his twenties. The first, *The Mandate*, was produced by Meyerhold in 1925. The second, *The Suicide*, was banned while in rehearsal in 1932, but is considered by Nadezhda Mandelstam in her memoirs as 'the best play in the Soviet repertory'.[1] Gorki claimed Erdman as 'our new Gogol'.[2] And outside Russia, Brecht admired his satire in *The Mandate*. But in the USSR there have only been two productions, both of *The Mandate*; the Meyerhold production of 1925 and a revival by one of the original cast during the thaw of the fifties. *The Suicide* remains unperformed in the Soviet Union and neither play has been published there.

Not much is known about Erdman and some of the details about him which have been published in accounts of the Soviet theatre are not necessarily correct, nor do all accounts mention *The Suicide*. His biographical details are as follows: he was born in 1902, the younger brother of Boris Erdman, who is sometimes described as an artist, sometimes as a poet and set designer. He was only fifteen when the Bolsheviks took over, and not yet twenty when he began working in the theatre in political cabaret with his elder brother. In 1924 he collaborated in a comic revue *Moscow from a Point of View*, which opened the Moscow Theatre of Satire. And in the same year, while working at the Vakhtangov Theatre on a revival of Russian nineteenth-century vaudeville, he met Meyerhold, the controversial director of a rival theatre.[3]

Meyerhold had supported the Bolshevik Revolution and launched a new movement 'October in the Theatre' in which he hoped to see an artistic revolution as well. Sometimes described as a Constructivist, he was responsible for a number of theatrical innovations, later denounced as Formalism. At the time that he met Erdman, Meyerhold's position was very strong, despite Lenin's opposition to the avant-garde. Among his supporters in the government he counted Bukharin, Rykov and Lunacharsky and, with the beginning of NEP, he was given his own theatre, named after him, and made Head of the State's High Workshop for theatre directors, whose pupils included Eisenstein.[4] Meyer-

hold recognised talent in the young Erdman, then only 22, and offered to produce his full-length comedy the following year.[5]

The Mandate opened in the spring of 1924 and was one of the few modern plays which Meyerhold produced. It was acceptable subject matter, as it satirised the has-beens of Soviet society, in particular the petty bourgeoisie and admirers of Russian royalty. But Erdman also satirised the opportunists in the party and the political hangers-on by his use of a symbol, the party membership card as the all powerful mandate of the title. Lunacharsky, Commissar for Culture, hailed the play as the 'first truly Soviet play' as well as the best comedy of the year.[6] Shortly thereafter *The mandate* was translated into German and performed in Berlin. Presumably it was through this production that Brecht became familiar with Erdman's work.

It was against this background that three theatres vied with each other to produce Erdman's second play, *The Suicide*. This play is also a satirical comedy, though its target is somewhat different. *The Suicide* satirises the plight of an unemployed 'little man', Semyon Semyonovich Podsekalnikov. Word gets round that he is contemplating suicide and he is immediately besieged by spokespeople of various discontented groups, from intellectuals to butchers, who beg him to kill himself as a gesture on their behalf. The idea is that Semyon will leave behind a note, accusing and denouncing, as 'nowadays, only the dead may say what the living think'. Through the dead Semyon the intelligentsia, business, the church, and others can make their complaint. What ensues is not only a lively farce, the satire as funny as in *The Mandate,* but also a passionate plea (if a comical one) for the little man against the bureaucratic state. At one point Semyon, made brave by the idea that he is soon to die, even phones the Kremlin to complain. The play was apparently written in 1928, but by 1932 when it was banned, Lenin had been dead eight years and Stalin was undisputed master.

The Vakhtangov Theatre worked on *The Suicide* first, postponing a Gorki play to do so, but seem not to have got far with it. Then Meyerhold and Stanislavsky competed with each other, Meyerhold challenging Stanislavsky to 'socialist competition'.[7] Stanislavsky thought it 'a splendid play' and in a letter, written in 1934 two years after the play had been banned, recalls his impression of Erdman's reading of the play to him: 'He reads quite exceptionally well and in a manner very instructive to a director. In his way of speaking is hidden some new principle that I cannot make out. I laughed so much I had to ask for a long interval, or my heart could not have stood up to the strain.' Maxim Gorki,

Erdman's champion, favoured a production of the play by Stanislavsky, being of the opinion that Meyerhold would turn *The Suicide* into 'a coarse and unnecessary farce'.[8] It was, however, with Meyerhold that the play went into production. Permission for it to be staged was given after Gorki had interceded with Stalin.[9] But after eighteen months in rehearsal the Central Licensing Board refused permission for the play to open. This was perhaps not surprising, as the play's 'supervisor' was Lazar Kaganovich, then one of Stalin's tough new young men.

We know of Stalin's response to *The Suicide*. When both Stanislavsky and Meyerhold were working on the play (Meyerhold objecting to Stanislavsky's involvement, as he already had a contract) Stanislavsky's theatre, in an attempt to circumvent possible censorship by the Central Repertory Committee, sent the play direct to Stalin.

Stalin's reply to Stanislavsky is dated 9 November 1931, almost a year before the play was finally banned:

Dear Konstantin Sergeivevich

I do not have a very high opinion of the play *The Suicide*. My closest comrades consider it empty and even harmful. You can see the opinion (and reasons) of the Repertory Committee in the enclosed documents. It seems to me that the Repertory Committee's opinion is not far from the truth. Nevertheless, I am not against the theatre experimenting and showing its skill. Provided that the theatre achieves its aims. The Cultural Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of our party (Comrade Stetski) will help you in this matter. Comrades will judge who know about artistic matters. I am a dilletante in this.

Regards,
J. Stalin

Meyerhold, who knew of this letter and regarded it as a hopeful sign, proceeded with his production.[10] But after a closed dress rehearsal before the authorities in October of the following year, he was refused permission to open the play. Consequently *The Suicide* has never had a public performance in the USSR, nor has it been published there.

Of course, knowing the play, one is not surprised that it was not allowed to open. But clearly, the situation at the time must have been a much more fluid one than we are now led to expect. This fluidity of the early 1930s is exemplified not only by the fact that Erdman felt he could write such a play — and plays after

all are meant for production; but that Stanislavsky, Meyerhold and the Vakhtangov Theatre felt they could produce the play, that Gorki felt he could intercede with Stalin on behalf of the play, and that even Stalin himself, in 1931, did not want to be seen to condemn the play outright. The decision not to do the play was made almost a year later and left to the Central Licensing Board. But by 1938, when Meyerhold's theatre was officially closed, the attempt to produce *The Suicide* could be cited as one of the reasons for its closure, and the play described as one that 'calumnied Soviet reality'.[11] But in 1931 Stalin was still only a 'dilletante' in the arts.

Not much is known about Erdman after *The Suicide* was banned. Despite conflicting reports, he does not seem to have been arrested, or disappeared into a labour camp, as happened to Meyerhold and Babel. He scripted some Soviet films, but seems never to have written again for the theatre, and died in relative obscurity in Moscow in 1970.[12] Nadezhda Mandelstam, who knew Erdman, writes in her memoirs that during the thirties Erdman lived in a 'poky little hole of a room with a bunk to sleep on and a small table' in Kalinin, about 150 kilometres outside Moscow, and that he first got into trouble for some fables he had written which a friend, Kachalov, had been irresponsible enough to recite at an evening in the Kremlin. It was a joke that sent Kachalov to a forced labour camp, and Erdman into exile, possibly to Siberia, as he is supposed to have signed his letters home from wherever he was sent with the name of a minor nineteenth-century novelist that works as a pun meaning 'Mummy's Siberian'. Before going Erdman left behind the following verse:

> Once the GPU came by
> and grabbed old Aesop by the ass.
> The moral of this tale is clear —
> No more fables needed here.[13]

Nadezhda Mandelstam also comments that 'not for nothing was the best play in the Soviet repertoire called *The Suicide*', and if in the end the hero Semyon chooses life, then Erdman like his hero also chose life.[14] Like Semyon, Erdman meant to survive. And perhaps as a satirist he had the resiliency and detachment to enable him to do so. Thus he died at the age of 68, a ripe age for a Soviet writer of his generation. This was possibly because he had not been a playwright since he had reached the age of thirty.

Peter Tegel

NOTES

1. Nadezhda Mandelstam, *Hope Against Hope,* trans. by Max Hayward, Harmondsworth, Penguin 1970, p. 66.
2. Nikolai A. Gorchakov, *The Theatre in Soviet Russia,* trans. by E. Lehrman, London, Columbia U.P. 1957, p. 192. Gorchakov refers to *The Mandate* by another title, *The Warrant.* He calls the play 'a genuine masterpiece . . . towering above all the other plays of the period' (p. 191).
3. Marjorie Hoover, 'Nikolai Erdman: A Soviet Dramatist Rediscovered', *Russian Literature Triquarterly* No. 2, pp. 414, 415, 432.
4. Marc Slonim, *Russian Theatre, From the Empire to the Soviets,* London, Methuen 1963, p. 248.
5. Hoover, p. 414.
6. *ibid.* pp. 416, 417.
7. *ibid.* p. 424.
8. Vinogradskaya, *Zhizn' i tvorchestvo K. S. Stanislavskogo* vol. 4, Moscow 1976, pp. 247, 255.
9. Gorchakov, p. 429.
10. Carl Proffer, 'Erdman's The Suicide: An unpublished letter from Stalin to Stanislavsky', *Russian Literature Triquarterly* No. 7, Fall 1973, pp. 425, 426.
11. Hoover, p. 415.
12. *ibid.* pp. 413–16.
13. Mandelstam, pp. 385, 391–3.
14. *ibid.* pp. 66, 396.

THE SUICIDE was first produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company at The Other Place, Stratford, on 13 June 1979. The cast was as follows:

SEMYON SEMYONOVICH PODSEKALNIKOV . . *Roger Rees*
(a man refused employment)
MARIA LUKIANOVNA (his wife) . . . . . *Susan Tracy*
SERAFIMA ILINICHNA (his mother-in-law) . . *Lila Kaye*
ALEXANDER PETROVICH KALABUSHKIN
Geoffrey Hutchings
MARGARITA IVANOVNA PERYESVETOVA
Heather Canning
ARISTARCH DOMINIKOVICH GOLASHCHAPOV *Nigel Terry*
(a member of the intelligentsia)
CLEOPATRA MAXIMOVNA ('Kiki') . . . . . *Emily Richard*
EGOR TIMOVYEYEVICH (a postman) . . . . *Peter Clough*
NIKIFOR ARSENYEVICH PUGACHOV . . . . . *Ian McNeice*
(a butcher)
VIKTOR VIKTOROVICH (a writer) . . . . *David Threlfall*
RAISSA FILIPOVNA . . . . . *Shirley King*
FATHER ELPIDI . . . . . *Clyde Pollitt*
KOSTYA . . . . . *Robert Gwilym*
OLEG LEONIDOVICH . . . . . *Timothy Spall*
GYPSIES, a choir, a deacon, ZINKA PADESPAN,
GROONYA, a dressmaker, a milliner, old women,
OLEG LEONIDOVICH and others

DIRECTED BY RON DANIELS
DESIGNED BY KIT SURREY

THE SUICIDE was broadcast on BBC Radio 3 on 5 January 1978, produced by Richard Wortley.

The period: Russia in the late 1920s, early 1930s.
GYPSIES, *a choir, a deacon,* ZINKA PADESPAN, GROONYA,

THE SUICIDE

ACT I

(*A room at* SEMYON SEMYONOVICH PODSEKALNIKOV'S. *Night.*)

(*The* PODSEKALNIKOVS—SEMYON SEMYONOVICH *and* MARIA LUKIANOVNA—*asleep in a double bed.*)

SEMYON. Maria! Maria! Are you awake, Maria?

MARIA. (*Cries out.*) Aaaaah!

SEMYON. What is it? What's the matter? It's me.

MARIA. What is it, Semyon?

SEMYON. There's something I want to ask you, Maria . . . Maria! Maria! Are you awake, Maria?

MARIA. (*Cries out.*) Aaaaah!

SEMYON. What is it? What's the matter? It's me.

MARIA. Is that you, Semyon?

SEMYON. Yes.

MARIA. What's the matter, Semyon?

SEMYON. There's something I want to ask you, Maria.

MARIA. What . . . What are you doing, Semyon? What . . .

SEMYON. There's something I want to ask you, Maria. Is there any liver sausage left over from dinner?

MARIA. What?

SEMYON. I said, is there any liver sausage left over from dinner?

MARIA. Semyon, I realise I am supposed to be ready for anything with you. But it is beyond me how you could have the nerve to ask an exhausted woman for a bit of liver sausage in the middle of the night. You're insensitive, that's what you are. I slave for you all day like a cart-horse, you'd think at least I could have a moment's peace at night, even in bed you ruin my

nerves. You really have done it this time, you have destroyed me with your liver sausage. You are supposed to let other people sleep, Semyon, even if you can't sleep yourself. Is that beyond your comprehension? Semyon, I'm talking to you! Are you asleep, Semyon? Semyon!

SEMYON. Aaaaah!

MARIA. What is it? What's the matter? It's me.

SEMYON. Is that you, Maria?

MARIA. Yes.

SEMYON. What's the matter?

MARIA. I said, you are supposed to let other people sleep, even if you can't sleep yourself.

SEMYON. All right.

MARIA. No it is not all right! Why don't you eat at the proper time? Mother and me go out of our way to give you all your favourite meals, you get more than anyone else.

SEMYON. Oh do I! And why? Because what you two dish up for me is a bit of crafty elementary psychology. So it can be seen that Semyon Semyonovich still gets the biggest helping even though he doesn't have a job. Don't you worry. I know what I am being served up, humiliation, pure humiliation. I know . . .

MARIA. All right.

SEMYON. No it is not all right! Here am I, telling you within the privacy of the bedroom that I am famished. And just because there are no witnesses, you start to economise over a bit of liver sausage.

MARIA. Me, economise! Oh Semyon, pet, poor thing! Just you eat your fill! Wait, I'll get it for you. (*She gets up out of bed, lights a candle, goes candle in hand and barefoot to the door.*) God almighty, what a miserable life! Still, what can you do. (*She goes to the other room.*)

(*It is dark.* SEMYON lies *in bed without speaking.*)

(MARIA LUKIANOVNA *returns, a candle in one hand, a plate with bread and sausage in the other.*)

MARIA. Do you want the sausage on black bread, pet, or on white?

SEMYON. Makes no difference to me, because I'm not having any.

MARIA. Not having any?

SEMYON. I wouldn't touch it if you buried me in it.

MARIA. Why ever not?

SEMYON. Because you are going to serve it up to me with a sermon. You'd squeeze the soul out of me and spread it.

MARIA. But, pet . . .

SEMYON. No. Get into bed.

MARIA. What did you say?

SEMYON. I said get into bed.

MARIA. I am spreading you a slice first.

SEMYON. You are not.

MARIA. I am.

SEMYON. Who wears the trousers, you or me? Just what goes on in your head? You think because I don't have a job you can order me around, just as you please. You had better start taking into account the terrible effect this life is having on me, Maria. Look, see what you've done to me . . . (SEMYON *sits up in bed. Throws off the blanket. Crosses his legs. Taps his knee with his knuckles. His leg jerks up.*) Look!

MARIA. What?

SEMYON. A nervous tic. (SEMYON *lies down again and covers himself.*)

MARIA. We can't go on like this, Semyon. It'll do for a circus act, but it's no way to live.

SEMYON. We can't go on? What are you suggesting I do? Drop dead? You'd like that, wouldn't you. You want me dead. Why don't you say so? Go on, say it.

You're waiting for me to croak. Well, just between you, me and the bedpost, you're a stupid cow.

MARIA. What did you say?

SEMYON. You're a stupid cow! And a bitch!

(*The candle falls from* MARIA'S *hand, and goes out. The room is dark again.*)

(*Pause.*)

(*In the darkness* SERAFIMA ILINICHNA *enters the room and stumbles over* MARIA.)

MARIA. (*Cries out.*) Aaaaah! Now you've made me drop the candle.

SERAFIMA. What's going on? What happened?

MARIA. Is that you, Mother?

SERAFIMA. Yes.

MARIA. What do you want?

SERAFIMA. Would you mind telling me, Maria, what all this crashing about is for in the middle of the night? You're breaking the house apart. Are you crying, Maria? Maria? What's going on?

MARIA. Ask Semyon, I'm not saying a word.

SERAFIMA. Semyon? Semyon? Could you answer me, Semyon?

MARIA. Semyon . . . Semyon . . . pet . . .

SERAFIMA. Semyon Semyonovich!

MARIA. I think he's had a stroke, Mother.

SERAFIMA. Really, Maria! A stroke! . . . Semyon Semyonovich!

MARIA. I'm going to see . . . (MARIA'S *cautious footsteps can be heard in the dark.*) Pet . . . Semyon . . . pet . . . Mother!

SERAFIMA. What?

MARIA. Light the candle.

SERAFIMA. God give me strength! Is something the matter with him?

MARIA. I said light the candle.

SERAFIMA. Where is it?

MARIA. It's somewhere on the floor. Get down on your hands and knees, Mother. You won't find it standing around. Oh Semyon, don't frighten me, pet . . . What are you doing, Mother?

SERAFIMA. I'm crawling.

MARIA. Well, don't crawl over here . . . Crawl over there, by the rubber plant, that's where I dropped it. (*Silence. Then something falls.*) God almighty, what was that?

SERAFIMA. The rubber plant.

MARIA. I shall go mad, Mother.

SERAFIMA. Patience, Maria, patience. I'm on my way to the chest of drawers. God give me strength! Here it is!

MARIA. Light it, Mother.

SERAFIMA. Patience, Maria, patience. (*She strikes a match.*)

MARIA. I cannot wait any longer, Mother. Something terrible has happened, I know it.

SERAFIMA. (*Goes over to* MARIA *with the candle.*) Now, let's see. Well, what's the matter with him?

MARIA. (*Pulls back the blanket.*) Look!

SERAFIMA. Where is he?

MARIA. He's gone.

SERAFIMA. Gone where?

MARIA. The bed's not even warm. Semyon . . . Semyon!

SERAFIMA. Semyon Semyonovich?

MARIA. Bring the candle over here, I'm going to look under the bed. (*She snatches the candle from* SERAFIMA, *puts it on the floor, kneels and looks under the bed.*) Here they are, right by the wall. (*She crawls under the bed.*)

SERAFIMA. What are you doing, Maria? Get a hold of yourself.

MARIA. (*Under the bed.*) I'm looking for my shoes, I'm going out. (*She crawls out from under the bed with her shoes.*) Hand me my skirt.

SERAFIMA. In heaven's name, what are you doing, Maria?

MARIA. I'm going out to find him. The state he's in . . . He showed me his nervous tic.

SERAFIMA. He did what?

MARIA. And you know what else?

SERAFIMA. What?

MARIA. He is going to do himself an injury.

SERAFIMA. An injury? Why didn't you say so before? Get your shoes on, Maria. Quickly!

MARIA. My coat, give me my coat.

SERAFIMA. Look, his trousers! Thank God for that.

MARIA. His trousers.

SERAFIMA. If they're here, he's here.

MARIA. What if he went out without his trousers? The state he's in . . .

SERAFIMA. A man without his trousers is as good as blind, Maria. He won't be running about like that.

MARIA. Where is he then?

SERAFIMA. Perhaps he's on the toilet.

MARIA. He's gone there to do himself an injury.

SERAFIMA. How?

MARIA. How should I know? Perhaps he's going to blast his brains out.

SERAFIMA. God give me strength.

MARIA. What are we going to do? What if he . . .

SERAFIMA. Sssssh . . . Did you hear anything?

MARIA. No . . . Did you?

SERAFIMA. No.

MARIA. God almighty, this is a nightmare. I'm banging on the door, come what may.

(MARIA *leaves.* SERAFIMA *turns to the ikon and crosses herself.*)

SERAFIMA. (*Crossing herself.*) Holy Mother of Vutiavansk, of Vatopedsk, of Okovitsk, of Novonikitisk, of Arapetsk, of Nokovsk, of Vidropusk, of Sviatogorsk, of Venok, of Svensk, of Iversk and Smolensk, of Abalatsk-Snamyenye, of Bratsk, of Kiev, of Pimenovsk, of Ispansk and Kazansk, pray for the safety of your son my son-in-law. (*She crosses herself, turns to look at the door, crosses herself again, falls on her knees.*) Blessed among women, take pity on us . . .

(MARIA *comes running in.*)

MARIA. The toilet's locked, I can't get in.

SERAFIMA. Did you say anything to him?

MARIA. I did, yes.

SERAFIMA. And what did he say?

MARIA. He didn't, it's silent in there.

SERAFIMA. What are we going to do now?

MARIA. I'm going to wake Alexander Petrovich. He can break down the door.

SERAFIMA. You can't do that, not Alexander Petrovich.

MARIA. Why not?

SERAFIMA. Alexander Petrovich is a broken man. He only buried his wife last week.

MARIA. Good, he'll understand. (*She runs to the lavatory door.*)

SERAFIMA. I hope you are not about to make things worse than they already are, Maria.

MARIA. We need a man, Mother. That's all there is to it. We can't manage without a man. (*She knocks on the door.*) Semyon, are you in there? I heard something just then. You stay here and listen, Mother. I'm getting Alexander Petrovich . . .

(SERAFIMA *goes to listen outside the lavatory.*)

(MARIA *runs to* ALEXANDER PETROVICH'S *door.*)

MARIA. (*Knocking.*) Alexander Petrovich . . . Comrade Kalabushkin . . . Comrade Kalabushkin . . .

ALEXANDER. (*Behind the door.*) Eh?

MARIA. It's me, Maria Lukianovna. Podsekalnikova.

ALEXANDER. (*Behind the door.*) Who?

MARIA. Maria Podsekalnikova. How are you?

ALEXANDER. (*Behind the door.*) What?

MARIA. I need you badly, comrade Kalabushkin.

ALEXANDER. (*Behind the door.*) What for?

MARIA. I need a man.

ALEXANDER. (*Behind the door.*) Now then, comrade Podsekalnikova. Not so much noise.

MARIA. I know you're in no condition, comrade Kalabushkin, but I'm on my own, you see, I'm all alone. What am I going to do?

ALEXANDER. (*Behind the door.*) Go take a cold bath, comrade Podsekalnikova.

MARIA. But, comrade Kalabushkin . . . comrade Kalabushkin . . .

ALEXANDER. (*Behind the door.*) Can we have some quiet?

MARIA. I'm going to break down the door . . .

ALEXANDER. (*Behind the door.*) Good Lord! . . . Now see here! . . . Wait! . . . (*Noise from behind the door.*)

(MARGARITA IVANOVNA *appears in the doorway. A large woman in a nightdress.*)

MARGARITA. Break down the door, did you say? Remarkable behaviour, I must say, for a young lady. You trollop, if you'll pardon the expression.

MARIA. What have I done? Comrade Kalabushkin . . .

MARGARITA. Forcing yourself on him like that, it's obscene. We were sitting in there quietly, talking about his dear wife, the poor soul. And you want to break down his door!

MARIA. Not his door. What do you take me for?

MARGARITA. Women these days are sluts, the way they walk, the looks they give when they think a man's at all interested, it's disgusting.

ALEXANDER. (*Sticks his head out of the door.*) Margarita Ivanovna?

MARGARITA. Yes, Alexander Petrovich?

ALEXANDER. Don't start anything with her, you're not registered with the police at this address. (*His head disappears behind the door.*)

MARIA. What have I done?

MARGARITA. Chasing after strange men.

MARIA. You listen to me, I'm a married woman.

MARGARITA. So am I.

MARIA. He is going to shoot himself.

ALEXANDER. (*Sticks his head out again.*) Who's going to shoot himself?

MARIA. Semyon Semyonovich.

ALEXANDER. Where?

MARIA. On the toilet.

MARGARITA. Who is?

MARIA. My husband!

MARGARITA. Shoot himself? On the toilet?

MARIA. There's not much else a man can do with himself when he doesn't have a job.

(ALEXANDER *comes out. He wears shirt, trousers, goloshes on his bare feet.*)

ALEXANDER. You should be doing something, comrade Podsekalnikova. Not standing about.

MARIA. I'm not standing about. You're a military type, comrade Kalabushkin, you run a shooting gallery at the fair. Help my mother and me break down the door and get to him.

ALEXANDER. You should have said so in the first place.

MARGARITA. What are we waiting for?

ALEXANDER. Let's get on with it, Maria Ilinichna.

MARIA. Only you see, if we do break down the door, then he really will shoot himself. That's what I'm scared of.

ALEXANDER. We'll creep up on him and take him by surprise. Like this, comrades, on tiptoe.

(*He takes off his goloshes and tiptoes to the door,* MARIA *behind him with candle, behind her* MARGARITA.)

ALEXANDER. Sssssh . . .

MARIA. Sssssh . . .

(*She tiptoes to the door. Suddenly a gasp of 'aaaah' from behind the door.*)

ALL. (*Drawing back.*) Sssssh!

(SERAFIMA *runs into the room.*)

SERAFIMA. Don't go in there! Don't go in!

MARIA. Semyon's dead!

ALEXANDER. What's happened?

SERAFIMA. It's not Semyon in the toilet, it's old Volodkina from across the hall.

MARIA. Are you serious, Mother?

SERAFIMA. I saw her with my own eyes, I stood outside listening, just in case . . . Oooof!

ALEXANDER. You've been barking up the wrong tree, comrade Podsekalnikova.

MARIA. It's all your fault, Mother. I told you he'd gone out. Alexander Petrovich, go out after him please.

SERAFIMA. How can he be out on the street without his trousers? Look here, Alexander Petrovich, here are his trousers.

MARIA. A man on the point of death isn't bothered whether he's got his trousers on.

MARGARITA. That depends where he is, comrade

Podsekalnikova. In the city centre nobody is going to be allowed to die without his trousers on, that I guarantee you.

ALEXANDER. Have you looked everywhere in the house?

MARIA. Absolutely everywhere.

SERAFIMA. Or just in the kitchen.

MARIA. The kitchen, no, I never looked there. You go in the kitchen for me, comrade Kalabushkin, quickly please . . .

(*They rush to the door,* MARGARITA *following them.*)

ALEXANDER. Stop following me, Margarita Ivanovna. You come with me, comrade Podsekalnikova . . .

(*They run out.*)

MARGARITA. That's just like him, tells me not to follow, then asks her. He can't stand to be alone, it's a regular neurosis he has. I'm going anyway. Come on!

SERAFIMA. (*Runs after her.*) I can't . . . Wait! Look, listen . . . Wait . . .

(*At this moment, from the direction of the kitchen, in the following order—the word 'stop!' from* ALEXANDER*; the sound of a door slamming; a scream from* SEMYON*, and lastly, the thud of a body falling. After which, complete silence.*)

MARGARITA. What was that?

SERAFIMA. It's all over. He's done it. He's shot himself.

MARGARITA. What are we going to do?

SERAFIMA. I shall scream, I can't keep it in. I'm going to scream.

MARGARITA. For God's sake!

SERAFIMA. I'm petrified.

MARGARITA. So am I.

SERAFIMA. Aaaaah . . . They're coming.

MARGARITA. Aaaaah . . . They're not!

SERAFIMA. Oooooh . . . They're bringing him!

MARGARITA. They are not!

SERAFIMA. They are!

MARGARITA. In here?

SERAFIMA. They're bringing him in here.

MARGARITA. Oooooh!

SERAFIMA. Here they come!

MARGARITA. Here they come!

SERAFIMA. Oh well, you can't change fate, can you.

(ALEXANDER *drags in a terrified* SEMYON.)

SEMYON. What are you doing to me?

ALEXANDER. Don't get excited.

SEMYON. Let me go. I said, let go. Let me go! What are you doing?

SERAFIMA. Whatever you do, comrade, don't let him go.

MARGARITA. Hold him tight.

SERAFIMA. Where is Maria? Where is she?

ALEXANDER. She's on the kitchen floor.

SERAFIMA. On the kitchen floor! What for?

ALEXANDER. She fainted.

SERAFIMA. God give me strength, what are we going to do?

(*She runs out of the room.* MARGARITA *follows.*)

SEMYON. Will you get your hands out of my pockets! What are you doing? Stop it! Let go!

ALEXANDER. I saw you put something into your mouth.

SEMYON. I did not put anything in my mouth, you're imagining it. Let me go at once! Let go!

ALEXANDER. All right, I will, only you are going to give me your word, comrade Podsekalnikov, that you will listen to me with your entire attention, and while you do so you will not attempt to lay a hand on yourself. I am asking you to listen to me, comrade, as a friend. I'm asking you to listen, that's all.

SEMYON. Go on, I'm listening.

ALEXANDER. Good, thank you. Sit down. (*He sits him down, then takes up a pose in front of* SEMYON.) Comrade Podsekalnikov . . . Just a moment . . . (*He goes to the window, draws the curtain. The sickly light of a big city in the early morning reveals the crumpled bed, the broken rubber plant, the depressing room.*) Comrade Podsekalnikov, life is wonderful!

SEMYON. So what!

ALEXANDER. What I mean is, where are you, comrade? You are in the twentieth century. The age of enlightenment. The age of electricity.

SEMYON. And if you can't pay the bill? And they cut off the electricity? Where are you then? In the Dark Age.

ALEXANDER. Yes, the Dark Age. You'll have me believe you belong there. And that's why you don't want to live. Good heavens, why not? Come on now. You won't get me down, you know. Life is wonderful.

SEMYON. So I've read in *Izvestia*. But if you ask me, there's going to be an official denial soon.

ALEXANDER. Don't believe it. Don't think. Work.

SEMYON. The unemployed are not allowed to work.

ALEXANDER. You must wait for a permit. Life is a struggle, comrade Podsekalnikov.

SEMYON. Haven't I struggled, comrade? Here, look at this . . . (*He takes a booklet from under a pillow.*)

ALEXANDER. What is it?

SEMYON. Instructions on how to teach yourself to play the tuba.

ALEXANDER. The what?

SEMYON. The tuba . . . music. You can learn in twelve lessons. It's a gold mine. Look—I've worked it out. (*He shows him a piece of paper.*) Say twenty concerts a month a five and a half roubles, that makes one thousand three hundred and ten roubles pure profit per annum. Not bad, eh, comrade Kalabushkin. All I do is play. The basics are right, the will, the economics, the instructions . . . only no tuba.

ALEXANDER. That's life, comrade Podsekalnikov. What can you do? You go on living.

SEMYON. Agreed, comrade Kalabushkin.

ALEXANDER. Then I've convinced you. Thank you! Wonderful! I'll take the gun, comrade.

SEMYON. Gun? What gun?

ALEXANDER. Don't start that again. I saw you put it in your mouth.

SEMYON. Eh?

ALEXANDER. I saw.

SEMYON. Me put a gun in my mouth! What for?

ALEXANDER. Don't take me for a fool. We all know you're going to kill yourself.

SEMYON. Who's going to kill himself?

ALEXANDER. You.

SEMYON. Me? Wait a minute! I am going to kill myself?

ALEXANDER. Yes, comrade, you are going to kill yourself.

SEMYON. Why am I going to kill myself? Would you mind telling me?

ALEXANDER. You don't know?

SEMYON. You tell me.

ALEXANDER. Because for one whole year you have been out of work and you are ashamed to be living off other people. But actually it's not a bad idea at all.

SEMYON. Now wait . . . Who told you that?

ALEXANDER. Calm down! Your wife.

SEMYON. Ah! Go away, will you! Leave me alone! Get out of here, damn you!

ALEXANDER. Give me the gun, then I'll go.

SEMYON. How, comrade, should I come to be in possession of a gun? Where would I get one from?

ALEXANDER. That is not hard these days. Panfilich will trade you one for a razor.

SEMYON. Really, for a razor?

ALEXANDER. It's a bad bargain. You'll never get a licence. If they catch you, that's it. Six months' hard labour. Give me the gun, comrade.

SEMYON. I will not.

ALEXANDER. On your head be it. I shall have to use force. (*He grabs him by the arm.*) You won't get away now.

SEMYON. Won't get away! Comrade Kalabushkin, if you don't disappear instantly I shall shoot myself before your very eyes.

ALEXANDER. You wouldn't.

SEMYON. I wouldn't. I shall count to three. One . . . (*He puts his hand in his pocket.*)

ALEXANDER. No, no, no . . . don't!

SEMYON. Two . . . (*He puts his hand deeper in his pocket.*)

ALEXANDER. I'm going . . . (*He runs into his own room.*)

(SEMYON *alone.*)

SEMYON. Three . . . (*He takes a liver sausage out of his pocket.*) What am I going to do with this sausage? Where's a plate? (*He puts it on a plate.*) I'm not ready to die yet, I don't have the time. You wait, Maria, I'll show you . . . just how ashamed I am to be living off other people . . . Oh, I'll show you! Ah, here's the razor . . . (*He takes the razor.*) Stainless steel . . . belonged to my father. Never mind, I won't be needing it again in this life! (*He runs out.*)

ALEXANDER'S VOICE. Comrade Podsekalnikov! I'm in my room, I won't come out . . . I just want to tell you something. Comrade Podsekalnikov! Life is wonderful, comrade, you take my word for it. Comrade Pod . . . (*He opens the door, puts his head out, looks round.*) Where's he gone?

(ALEXANDER *comes out of the room, looks about.*)

ALEXANDER. (*Runs to the door.*) Comrade Podsekalnikov! Hello, there! Don't do anything, I'm not coming in. Comrade Podsekalnikov, I expect you're amazed at my persistence, but I am taking the liberty of drawing your undivided attention to one fact . . . Life is wonderful, comrade!

(SERAFIMA *and* MARGARITA *drag in the unconscious* MARIA.)

SERAFIMA. What are you doing? Don't drag her like that, pick her up by the legs, Margarita Ivanovna.

MARGARITA. Be careful with her! Be careful!

ALEXANDER. Are you mad? Why are you dragging her by her hair. Stand her on her feet.

SERAFIMA. Undo the buttons.

ALEXANDER. My pleasure.

MARIA. Who are you?

ALEXANDER. Family and friends, no need for embarrassment.

MARIA. Semyon! Where is he? How is he? Is he dead?

ALEXANDER. Not yet, no, Maria Lukianovna. But to tell the truth, he's well on the way.

MARIA. We must get to him quickly.

ALEXANDER. No! It could be fatal. He said to me, if you, he said, don't disappear out of my sight this instant I shall shoot myself, he said, before your very eyes.

SERAFIMA. What did you say?

ALEXANDER. I said one thing and another, pleaded, begged . . . nothing worked.

MARGARITA. You don't beg in a case like that, you order. Go right now and report him to the police. Let them arrest him. He'll be put on trial.

ALEXANDER. There's no such law, Margarita Ivanovna. They can't sentence you to live. To death, yes—but to life, never.

SERAFIMA. What's the answer then?

ALEXANDER. A tuba.

SERAFIMA. A tuba?

ALEXANDER. A tuba or some kind of trumpet. That is your answer and his salvation.

MARIA. What should he do with a tuba?

ALEXANDER. Earn a living, Maria Lukianovna. If he gets his tuba I guarantee you he will not shoot himself.

SERAFIMA. How much does one of these tubas cost?

ALEXANDER. Five hundred roubles. Perhaps more.

MARIA. Five hundred roubles! If we had that much he wouldn't want to shoot himself even without a tuba.

ALEXANDER. I'm sure you're right, Maria Lukianovna.

MARGARITA. I'll have to tell my musicians to rent him a tuba.

SERAFIMA. Have you got your own musicians then?

ALEXANDER. They work together in the same restaurant.

SERAFIMA. You talk to them, Margarita Ivanovna.

MARIA. Please ask them.

SERAFIMA. Don't put it off.

MARIA. We'll go with you, Margarita Ivanovna. Get some clothes on.

(MARGARITA *and* MARIA *go to* ALEXANDER'S *room.*)

(ALEXANDER *and* SERAFIMA.)

SERAFIMA. I dread the thought that he will do something to himself before we get to him.

ALEXANDER. You stay here and distract him until we get the tuba.

SERAFIMA. How am I going to distract him?

ALEXANDER. This is what you have to do. You go into his room, a bit cheeky . . . You know, flirtatious. As if you didn't know what was going on. And you chat him up.

SERAFIMA. Chat him up! How?

ALEXANDER. Nothing specific, tell him how good it is to be alive. Tell him something funny, a joke.

SERAFIMA. I don't know any, comrade Kalabushkin.

ALEXANDER. I don't know . . . Make one up . . . Your son-in-law's life is hanging by a thread, it's no laughing matter. Tell him a funny story, gossip, who's doing it with whom. Make him forget himself, distract him. We'll come straight back with the tuba and . . . he's saved. Go on now, go to him, don't be afraid. Chat him up . . . (*He goes.*)

(SERAFIMA *stops at the door.*)

SERAFIMA. God give me strength, what am I going to say to him . . . Oh well, you can't change fate. (*She leaves the room.*)

(SEMYON *enters, looks warily about him, takes a gun out of his pocket, loads it. He sits at a table, takes ink and paper.*)

SEMYON. (*Writing.*) In the event of my death . . .

(SERAFIMA *comes back into the room.*)

SERAFIMA. Where can he be? (*She sees him.*) There he is, God give me strength! Hello, isn't it a lovely morning! Would you like to hear a joke? You'll die laughing. Guess what the Germans did?

SEMYON. What?

SERAFIMA. They ate a live dog.

SEMYON. What Germans?

SERAFIMA. I don't know . . . Just you listen though. It belonged to someone . . . that had just died. Well, it wasn't wartime then. Oh, we did laugh. Hot dog, you see. Dog, hot dog. Sausage.

SEMYON. So?

SERAFIMA. Well, the Germans ate it.

SEMYON. So?

SERAFIMA. That's it.

SEMYON. What do you mean, that's it?

SERAFIMA. God give me strength, what am I going to tell him next? The funniest things do happen, for instance . . .

SEMYON. Why don't you just take yourself off, Serafima Ilinichna?

SERAFIMA. Oh but you'll die laughing, Semyon.

SEMYON. Stop bothering me, can't you see I'm busy. Go away!

SERAFIMA. No. You listen. It was during the war, there was a Turk in our village, a prisoner of war, in the prison. He was wounded, of course. Our soldiers wounded him. He kept shaking his head like this, as if he was saying no. Couldn't help himself, you see. Well, it was a scream. So we thought something up, because we had to do something. We all went to him one evening with some bread and a piece of sausage. We showed him the bread and we said, do you want it? The Turk was dying for it, but he couldn't speak Russian, could he? All he could do was jump about, well, he was half out of his mind with hunger. Only his head kept shaking, as if he was saying no. We knew he was going to do that of course. So we just wrapped up the bread and the sausage again, as if to say, well, if you don't want it, and we went home again. He did give us a good laugh, that Turk. Well, isn't that funny?

SEMYON. Leave me alone! Clear off! Go to hell!

SERAFIMA. Now then Semyon, now then . . . Here's another one, this is about the coronation . . . (SEMYON *leaps to his feet, takes pen, paper and ink.*) Wait, Semyon, wait! Where are you going? (*She runs after him.*) This one is about how a Jew was crushed to death at the Tsar's coronation. (SEMYON *disappears into another room.*)

(SERAFIMA *alone, at the door.*)

SERAFIMA. He wasn't distracted. How am I going to think up more funny stories for him? God give me strength. (*She runs after him.*)

(ALEXANDER PETROVICH, MARIA LUKIANOVNA *and* MARGARITA IVANOVNA *come from* ALEXANDER PETROVICH'S *room.*)

ALEXANDER. Hurry, Margarita Ivanovna! Hurry!

MARIA. But we can't leave him all on his own.

ALEXANDER. Don't worry, he's with his mother-in-law. I told her what to do.

(*All go.*)

(SEMYON *rushes into the room, holding pen, ink and paper.*)

SEMYON. (*At the door, shouts.*) You tell me that one about the dog once more, and I'll flatten you. Stop following me, you stupid old bag! (*He slams the door, sits down, smooths the paper and writes.*) In the event of my death . . .

END OF ACT I

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