

MIODRAG ĐUKIĆ

# OXYGEN

A PLAY

Translated by Christina  
Pribićević - Zone

Beograd 1999.

Naslov originala:  
Miodrag Đukić  
KISEONIK  
drama

CAST:

MLADEN SEKULOVICH, a writer  
VASSILY BORIS, a fireman  
DR. KELAVA, head of clinic  
VALERY, head nurse  
ROXANDA, a young girl  
YOSHKA, her father, an invalid  
DOC, a surgeon  
MITZY, a housewife  
JOLLY - YO VAN, her stepson  
MATA, an 80-year-old woman  
DRAGOYLO, a blind man  
TOD A, a hunchback  
KLYAKA, a carpenter  
OLD MAN  
MELYA  
MARISAV, an orderly  
TSOKA, another orderly

VOICES: a radio announcer, Yoshka's wife  
VASILKA, voices of doctors, nurses, mental patients and  
slum dwellers ...

The events take place in Belgrade, as of some time  
ago, but particularly now ...

# ACT I

## SCENE I

The play begins with cacophony. Rattles rattle, sirens scream, crowds roar, spotlights cut the air, exotic birds sing, birds as big as chickens, even bigger. Suddenly the spotlights dim, the cacophony gradually fades into absolute silence. A speaker's rostrum slowly rises in a single pool of light. A terribly hoarse voice shouts: "The Laureate! The Laureate!", followed by spontaneous applause. To the sharp, rhythmic beats of a drum, a powerful spotlight floods the back stage area, from which Mladen emerges at a dignified pace, carrying a limp piece of paper in his hand. Several clear and worried voices ring out: "Where's the watch? Get the gold watch over here. And the chain? Where's the chain? What? Stolen! Disgraceful, they've stolen the chain. The pigs!"

But, Mladen has already reached the rostrum, and smoothed out his limp piece of paper. Silence descends.

MLADEN:

What a beautiful day, what a blessed life, what happiness, joy, what an honour to be born and to live in these wonderful times, dedicated to man and his ideals. Prosperity and the concern I am surrounded by subtly ring, echo and tremble in my soul, painting a powerful picture of the future which will really be hard put, will need a lot of imagination to surpass our present situation, already colossal, not to say - gigantic. My tingling feelings about this age are indubitable, without any doubt. Because I'm a man who's not threatened, a fighter for something which goes without saying, a fighter for proof, if you like, which is why I'm writing this novel, because I want to leave at least one reliable piece of evidence of the grandeur of the age in which I live, should it ever happen that our descendents, degenerated by the prosperity we have generated, cast themselves upon us with underhanded lies, falsifications of history and smutty stigmas, in return for all that we have created for them, for having created them. Let no one try to tell me that I'm not a man, a man I am, and concern for man is a case of the first order in my case. And that's why I'm happy, and that's why my heart beats to the rhythm of prosperity, lightness of spirit and well-meaning assurances that we are well off today. And. I would generously even add ... very well off. Although I think, I believe, I'm sure, I contend, that is ... I've decided! I'm just fine, and that goes for me - here at the bottom of the barrel - so what does that say for others?! Well, as a writer it is here that for the first time I shake with anger and impotence because I have fallen into the poet's dilemma of

finding the right word to express all this grandeur, this glory - the gloriousness of this bright sunny morning. And so, my dear, and I'm sure my happy, reader: "Good Morning!!!" (Sister Valery, her washed-out, highly-starched white uniform rustling, stiffly walks up to him.)

VALERY:

We hope you have enough light and sunshine.

MLADEN:

It's hard to breathe, nurse. And the alarm clock isn't what it used to be.

VALERY:

We've spoiled you, that's your problem. We pamper you too much, and you take advantage of it.

MLADEN:

I asked for less light, and more air. My eyes hurt. It wouldn't be too bad if a tree could be persuaded to grow outside my window. When I was a kid, we had a great big walnut tree, and a well with mineral water in it. My late father once sat under the tree, and he was just getting ready to drink a glass of mineral water, when one of the walnuts fell off - right into his glass. It created such a splash that my late father was drenched, and we children laughed

ourselves sick.

VALERY:

How is your novel going? Are you going to finish it soon?

MLADEN:

(Pleadingly.) I don't ask for much, just a little more air. And somebody to repair the alarm clock. In fact, if someone just fixed the spring, if I could be sure, if a good repair-man could be found, one who wouldn't steal any of the parts, an honest man, so that I could wake up fresh in the morning and without fearing I'd be robbed ...

(Sister Valery leaves. Mladen shouts after her.)

I need to be in a good mood, you see, my novel calls for a feeling of all-pervading human happiness.

FADE OUT



## SCENE II

Dawn, in a narrow yard filled with overflowing garbage cans. All around the yard, low delapidated hovels, and looming over them decaying high-rises, crowded together and leaning against each other like desperately tired commuters in a crowded tram. Crooked balconies loom like ghosts over those below, who have sought refuge between walls so thin that often the neighbour's presence is more palpable than one's own breathing. No one can be alone here, and yet they all hate each other so much that instead of leading a normal life, they are engaged in a constant, cruel and perfidious war. They are sleeping now, but they are not resting. There is no sound, although the war is still on, their dry, erosive hatred has taught them that the winner can only be the one who survives the longest, and this turns them into ancient, self-absessed, malicious creatures who save up all their energy for the ultimate showdown. Front stage, under Mladen's window, are garbage cans, and on the narrow window-ledge, withered plants in pots. Mladen's room takes up a good half of the stage. One of the many doors onto the yard creaks open, and a sleepy old man emerges in dirty, ragged pyjamas,

carrying a garbage pail. He goes to the garbage below Mladen's window. He empties the pail into one of the overflowing cans, spilling the garbage. Then the old man puts down the pail, turns his back to the audience, undoes his pyjamas, and noisily urinates into Mladen's flowerpots, swaying sleepily. Judging by the increasing volume of noisy clangor, a tram is passing by outside. Suddenly, a cat is run over, letting out a piercing scream of pain, almost human in its suffering, which fills the damp air in the first light of dawn. The old man overbalances and almost falls into the garbage. Mladen leaps up from his wooden bed, which is so unusually large as to almost fill the room.

MLADEN:

(Yelling.) Hey! How much longer do I have to put up with this terror? (He opens the window abruptly and sleepily looks through the half-dark of the yard, while the old man grabs his empty garbage pail in fright and stumbles off to the safety of his own door.)

Well, well ... who was that, what did he want? Interesting. The hell it's interesting. What was he doing under my window? (Shouts.) Hey, there. If you think the darkness concealed you, that I didn't see what you were doing in the dark under my window, you're very wrong. (Yelling.) Hey, you! Stop, thieves and informers! (Stops to listen, but nothing is happening.) How could I fall asleep just now, when I almost had him. When I could have grabbed him by the neck and wrung the dirty truth out of him about the web they're weaving around me, about

every thread. (Grumbles.) Damned alarm clock, useless piece of junk, what a time to conk out on me, if it hadn't been for that cat getting run over, I wouldn't have seen a thing. As it is, I didn't see anything, just enough to make my life miserable. What a scream, it's almost human. So it got run over by a tram, so what?! It's a cat, it's not a man. A man doesn't scream like that when he's run over, he sort of whimpers or groans. Like me. They've cornered me, and now they're cutting me to pieces. Piece by piece. While I'm sleeping, they're hard at it, setting me up for the kill. Where's that coffee, what could have happened to the coffee? I've got some kind of lump in my throat, and I can't swallow a thing. Get out of there, lump, come on, get out, you're strangling me. (He coughs.) Serves me right for going to sleep, what's the matter with me? (Shouts.) Hey, Grandma! Is that coffee ever going to be ready? You know I can't start the day without a cup of coffee, that sleeping makes my brain go fuzzy, and that makes me lose the best hours of the day. (Grumbles.) And all because somebody's too lazy to make coffee when they should. She's a good woman, but frustrated. And frustrated people are dangerous to the environment and to its vital interests, and I'm part of her environment, coffee is my vital interest, though, again, the lack of coffee devalues my thinking, and pure thought is another thing that can endanger the environment, and so my environment protects itself from its environment, that is, from me. It's all connected, it's all a cycle, nothing changes. The only thing is that I don't get my coffee. That's the thing! Why me, what is it, why not somebody else? I'm an upright and honorable citizen. I'm a perfectly solid and solidary literary patriot. (Incensed, he

raises his voice.) I respect this system, I sing inspired praises to it, the rag-pickers, the scavengers, the pimps, and the con-men, and all the rest of the neighbourhood scum. (Sticks his head out of the window, yelling.) Oh, Alexis, if it's you, and it can only be you, because you're the biggest swine in Dorchol, why don't you learn how to tell the difference between the system and the people, and if you've already set the bastards from the yard against me, you don't have to set the authorities on me, too. Get it?! The people are the support, as proved by you, and the system is the supra-structure, as proved by the system, you philistines, you illiterates, you villains, you who use the cloak of darkness to piss in my flowerpots, in my little oxygen factory, my green paradise, in my glorious vision of the future!

(A draft opens the door of the other room with a bang, and Grandma Mata enters in her pyjamas, shakily carrying steaming hot coffee.)

MATA:

Here's the coffee. (She puts the coffee-pot down onto a shabby radio, kneels beside it, turns it on and twiddles the dial, looking for a station to the noise of unbearable static. Suddenly, the loud and cheerful voice of a radio announcer rings out.)

ANNOUNCER:

And now, for all our friendly listeners in Belgrade, I

suggest that instead of that old, bourgeois, antiquated and profoundly compromised "Good morning!" we start off the new day with an old hit!

SONG OVER THE RADIO:

"Old man drinkin'barley-water,  
But he just won't pay.  
Barley-water seller  
Gonna beat him up today ..."  
(Mladen is unpleasantly surprised.)

MLADEN:

What's he say, what's he say?! (Listens nervously, but hears nothing. Slams his fist on the radio, whereupon the alarm clock suddenly goes off, which almost paralyzes Mladen with fear.)

Well, well ... it rings when I'm already awake. And probably late at that.

(Grabs the alarm clock, which is still ringing, and towers over the old woman.)

Grandma! Didn't I say this alarm clock should be fixed, that it sounds all wrong, that it damn well ruins my concentration, it makes me nervous, that it doesn't ring, it knells, it doesn't toll, it yells, that if it goes on howling so uncontrollably, one day I'll ... (Waves the alarm clock around violently, and just as he is about to throw it on the

floor, he notices a letter in the old woman's outstretched hand.)

What's that?

MATA:

The mail, Sir. (Pause.) For you.

MLADEN:

Oh, it must be some mistake, Madam.

MATA:

It says, Sir, "Mladen Sekulovich".

MLADEN:

What does it say about my profession, there must be some kind of title?

MATA:

See for yourself, Sir: "Mladen Sekulovich, Physical Education Teacher".

MLADEN:

Well, then that's not me. I'm a writer. You go right

ahead and take it back, it's not for me.

MATA:

*Didn't* you used to teach in school?

MLADEN:

I kindly asked you not to mention that any more. I'm a writer now. I'm writing a novel about prosperity. Everything's very nice, people are tall, nobody under six feet, with a lung capacity between 6,500 and 20,000 cc-s. It's an optimistic novel, with sentiments. Very wholesome.

MATA:

Like the fireman gentleman.

MLADEN:

Which fireman?

MATA:



The one that Alexis dented his helmet with a crowbar, and then he used to come into the yard bareheaded for a while. But he shouldn't have done it... seeing as how it's his cousin.

MLADEN:

(

Sipping his coffee.) That Alexis is a shithead.

MATA:

A real swine, Sir. To ruin such a lovely helmet. (Mladen suspiciously eyes the letter; he can't bring himself to open it.)

MLADEN:

I dreamt I was in a strange hospital with padded walls and bars on the windows. I had to read my novel, Madam. Everyone applauded, but somebody stole the gold chain, and they were ashamed of themselves, and a fight almost broke out over it. Everything would have been all right if a horrible, dessicated nurse hadn't appeared at the end with a lewd look in her eye.

MATA:

Christ came into my dreams again. Last night he came all covered in blood, and said: "Grandma Mata, the end of the world is near." The young generation, he said, is degenerate, they don't even all wear silk scarves, and even those who do, have let the knots get loose. The ends are flapping in the wind, and they might even, God forbid, smack some illustrious person on the nose, or nick them in the eye.

MLADEN:

Did you ask him about you-know-what?

MATA:

I forgot, Sir. I was so confused by all that light. And the benevolence. He put his hand on me, and extended my life by another ten years.

MLADEN:

I asked you to ask him, Madam, why people are evil. What it is we actually breathe, and why people are evil and dirty. (Picks up a notebook and writes.) "How wonderful life is, what a magnificent day." (Puts down the notebook.)

(Works himself up.)

Who photographs feces, Madam, who's in charge of history, who's going to immortalize the little that sticks out of the shit before we sink for good?

(Leaps up from his bed, opens the window, sticks his head out into the yard and shouts.)

Why don't they breed their intestinal parasites somewhere else, why right here, under my window?

MATA:

With the geraniums?

(Mladert calms down. Picks up the letter again and fingers it suspiciously.)

MLADEN:

(Mumbling.) We cut down the forests, eat the plants, and the animals keep breeding and crapping all over the countryside. (He thinks.) Take it back. You take that back, Grandma. It can't be for me. Why should I open it when it's a mistake. Let the person it's addressed to be the one to open it. It's not even nice to open other people's letters. I wasn't brought up to do that sort of thing. I've mastered the principles of elementary culture, my dear.

(Absently.) Tell me, Madam, what sort of beauty were you in your day?

(Noisily slurping coffee.) Could somebody be suing me? Then again, maybe it's an answer to my complaint. I sued them all for poisoning the atmosphere, for filling my lungs with layers of black soot, I could pave the courtyard with the sludge that's stopping me from breathing.

(Shuts the window, goes back to bed, sips his coffee.)

MATA:

(Looks through the window.) The fireman gentleman is taking his dogs out for a walk again. (Pause) What a handsome man. What impressive dogs. What a grand

uniform.

MLADEN:

The fur will fly, I'll show 'em, they don't seem to realize, I'm a fighter, they'll scream to high heaven, but it'll be too late. Nobody does that to me. I can defend myself. I'm strong. Fighters are strong, Madam. (But Mata has already left the stage. He grabs the letter off the radio and tears open the envelope. For a moment he holds the open but still unfolded letter, hesitating again.)

(Shouts.) Did you water the geraniums? (There is no answer. He sips his coffee. Yells louder.) The asters and the daisies?! (Still no answer. Absently he holds the letter, gazes at it, sips his coffee.)

You should never skip your coffee, they're lying about coffee, coffee's good for you, particularly in the morning. Later - maybe, and in the evening ... herbal tea. Herbal tea without fail! (Builds up his courage.) That's the way, boy, you're still a young man, you can do it... open the window and fill your lungs with the fresh morning urine vapors!

(Shouts.) Hah, Mladen, you fine figure of a man you, morning has broken and another day's begun. "It's a new day, so ..." let's drink a cup of coffee to celebrate a new beginning, so ... (Sips his coffee in bed.)

... beginning ... (Slurps his coffee.) But first ... to begin with ... after the coffee ... (sips his coffee.) ... let's

see - the letter!

(Puts his cup of coffee down on the radio, then has second thoughts and takes another quick sip.)

What do they have to say, what do they want from us? Maybe it's a mistake, and then again, maybe it isn't. (Opens the letter and reads.) "You are requested to present yourself without fail for a medical check-up which will take place in the store-room of the Psychiatric Clinic, on the seventeenth day of September, 1979, at 10:00 a.m., as part of a regular health program for our esteemed citizens. Non-appearance will make you liable to legal prosecution, with a view to rectifying an impermissible attitude to society's concern for the nation's health."

What? What? Oho! ... Ho ... ho ... ho ... Grandma! Come see this, come and see the extent of their imagination. They're sending my brain for a check-up in a hospital store-room. Ha ... ha ... ha ... Oh, that's terrific. I'll get a new pair of pyjamas, Grandma, with long sleeves tied behind my back. In other words, I'm crazy, in other words, they're controlling the esteemed citizenry. They're concerned about my mental make-up. Because my physical health is beyond all doubt. They're aiming at my brain. (An old woman comes and noisily crams a pile of garbage into one of the overflowing cans.)

Good morning. Nice day today. Yes ... yes ... the gold of autumn has already spilled its hues over the fallen leaves

in the city's gutters ... (The din of the tram completely drowns out part of his speech. Meanwhile the old woman has vanished behind one of the doors in the yard.)

If you didn't take it out once a month, you could grow weeds in there. Beautiful, lush, green weeds, and you could lavishly water them with your own liquid manure, you could breed tiny green bugs, right here, under my window, and they could crawl every morning into my room to wish me a happy delirium.

(Bursts into hysterical laughter, then falls silent, stares off into space, tense.)

I'm damn well going to tell them, Grandma, so help me I am. I won't allow it. I have to breathe here, to use up oxygen. As an old athlete, I need a lot of oxygen. More than they do. (Whines.) Where's my oxygen, you thieving bastards?!

(Leaps out of bed, opens the window wide, sticks his head out and screams.)

I need it for my brain! The mind must breathe!

(Again the clatter of the tram. He storms into the yard, grabs the ashcans and moves them away no more than a meter, as much as the limited space allows. Then he sees he has blocked the passage, and moves them back about

half a meter. Suddenly, the doors in the yard begin to open one after another, and men, women and children appear in



the doorways, all in torn and dirty pyjamas. They observe the entire scene in silence, with no trace of expression on their gaunt, apathetic faces. Mladen looks at them searchingly. His feverish eyes move from one face to another.)

The weather's nice today. (Pause.) I got a summons for a medical check-up. Maybe one of you knows something about it? I'm not surprised it's in a store-room, but I don't understand why it's in a mental institution, and why it's for me. Maybe you know something about it? None of you got anything like it? Nobody but me? Of course, no one doubts your good health, look at how athletically you're built, how strong and rosy you are. The fact that some of you are hunchbacks, crippled, blind, deaf, drunk, that doesn't matter at all, that's part of the mentality, no one questions the mentality, mental strength must be undermined and ploughed under, that's what seems to be bothering somebody here, so they're systematically eroding my nervous system's perception of the world. But, I'm healthy, despite the poison all around me. My novel is the quintessence of positive mental states, and social orientations. I'm fighting for air!

(They all morosely withdraw into their unappetizing dwellings. Mladen looks sadly at the flower pots and shouts.) Grandma! Did you see what divine neighbours we have? Somebody's pissed in my geraniums again.

(He suddenly starts running in a circle and around the garbage, constantly shouting: "Hup - two - three - four,

hup - two - three - four ..." Breathing hard, he returns to the room still doing his exercises. Grandma Mata enters the room, sits on a stool, turns on the radio, and resting her head on her cupped hands, sits like a tiny dried-up insect, losing herself in the programme.)

ANNOUNCER:

And now, dear listeners, an important announcement! The invasion of caterpillars which has begun spreading in our green parks, our green streets, our green courtyards, the green lungs of our city, is a grim warning to experts that appropriate steps must be taken. We hope the City Park Administration will not let us down again, and deprive us of the right to this small piece of greenery which is ours by law, to this small dose of oxygen enriched by our fine, but unfortunately critically endangered vegetation. And so, in my opinion, we should throw ourselves into the fight against caterpillars, we should mobilize all available forces and means, and save Belgrade from this sinister and relentless enemy.

FADE OUT

### SCENE III

In the strong morning sunlight, the dirt and mess in the yard looks even grimmer, even more depressing, and 60-year-old Yoshka, in his wheelchair, with a blanket covering his amputated legs, completes this tragi-comic picture of human misery. He has just interrupted his breakfast and looks helplessly from time to time in the direction of a torn cardboard box from which comes a pitiful and piercing mewling.

YOSHKА:

Eh, if I only had something to belt you in the mouth with, to rip you apart, to tear you to shreds. You're spoiling my breakfast, my God-given right ... (Shouts.) Vasilka! Vasilka! Get that cat out of here, Vasilka. (Listens.) Oh, Vasilka, Vasilka ... (Shouts.) If I get up, I'll shake that motheaten hide of yours so loose you'll have to zip yourself up before you can go out.

(Turns to the cat.) Shoo, you goddamned bag of bones!

(Pause.) No good. It's made its mind up to die right here, next to me, and just when I'm eating frankfurters and horseradish. When I'm hog-tied, and I can't move anywhere without you, huh ... (Shouts.) Oh, you, can hear me, you can hear me all right, you're just pretending, you're making out you can't hear me because you're too busy chopping onions. (Listens, then shouts endearingly.) Vasilka, my sweet, love of my life ... (Listens. Sings to the tune of an old folk song.) "Vasilka my barefoot love, I'm so in love with you, Don't go out, Your pretty feet, Will dampen in the dew ..."

(Listens. No answer. He is amazed. Shouts angrily.) Roxanda, my little intellectual, forget your books, my child, and concentrate on quantum theory and nuclear physics, think of the glorious future your father the gravedigger has dug up with his shovel.

What? Still no-one to rescue me from this monster! Get lost, you freak! (Shouts.) Neighbour, neighbour! It's morning, cut the snoring, rise and shine! (He furiously races his wheelchair up and down and around the cardboard box. Tries to reach the box, but can't. A loud and angry death-rattle is heard from the box.) Come on, come on, stop fucking around, hold out a bit longer, I know it hurts, be a man, I mean be ... well, be a hero, hang in there, that's life, kid, I'll give you a frankfurter, who knows, maybe you'll choke on it. Here, look ... look carefully where I'm going to throw it, by that garbage can over there. See the garbage can? No, you can't see it, you haven't got anything to see with, your eyes have been

knocked out, but you've got a nose, you're a nice pussycat, follow your nose ... Follow the flying frankfurter! Come on, now! Sniff! Up! Hey, are you sniffing? (shouts at the top of his lungs.) Fetch!! (throws the frankfurter, but nothing happens. A rickety, noisy, clattering city tram rushes past the house in a flurry of clanging, ringing its bell. Moving slowly and mechanically, Yoshka doffs his cap.)

Damned tram, it's always disturbing me, a man can't sleep with all this noise.

(Suddenly, Jolly, a large, untidy, robust youths, and his stepmother Mitzy, an intriguer, and a woman of loose morals, burst upon the scene.)

MITZY:

Jolly, honey, throw it in the garbage, the yard's full of kittens, pick which one you want, and Daddy Alexis will catch it for you in my hairnet.

JOLLY:

(Sad.) Poor Mitchka. Look, mother, how its tummy aches. Look, Uncle Yoshka.

YOSHKKA:

Ah, he's had it, he can't feel a thing.

JOLLY:

(Sobbing, choking on his tears.) Look, ma, my Mitchka isn't anything like his old self. Somehow he looks different now, he's all cold and formal. And before, he used to come to be petted, he'd rub himself up against my hand, trying to get me to run with him, to chase the dog-catcher's van, and the dogs all whining and howling, and Mitchka and me just running like the wind, and hating them, and loving them, because the dog'-catcher's taking them away, because Mitchka's enemies are my enemies. Real friends die for each other. Isn't that right, Uncle Yoshka?

YOSHKKA:

Ah, so that was your cat?! I tried everything, believe me, Ma'am I even threw him a frankfurter, my best one, there it is, it rolled all the way over there to the garbage. Jolly, my boy, you see that frankfurter there by the garbage can?

(A door opens onto the yard. Roxanda appears. She is a young girl at the age of puberty, tall and thin, with thick glasses, carrying a basin of dirty water, which she spills in the middle of the yard.)

ROXANDA:

Oh, Daddy dear, my Daddikins, Mommy says that if you've finished your frankfurters, you shouldn't be angry and throw away the horseradish if it's stale. She'll be needing it for the meat.

YOSHKKA:

(Flares up.) You know what I'm gonna give you, you know what? Here's what I'm gonna give you. The finger! To you and your mother. When I was calling you a while back, calling and calling for you to take away that... dead body, you know how it is, Mitzy, I don't like to look at misery, a poor cat, she didn't suffer too much, but it looks as if some heel spilled its guts, you know, there are some bad people in this world.

ROXANDA:

Have you heard that the professor got a summons for a mental institution?

MITZY:

Thank God, they're finally onto him. What a vocabulary, God, and he claims to be a writer. Only, I think he's a dangerous lunatic, and it's good they're going to put him behind bars. Who knows, maybe he was the one who fixed Mitchka.

YOSHA:

Maybe so. And then again, maybe the tram ran him over, just like it did me, in my day, as you know, Miz Mitzy. Only, in my case it ran over my legs, and in his, it looks like it got him smack through the middle.

ROXANDA:

Who can say, Daddy dear.

YOSHA:

What do you mean, who can say? Don't talk stupid. Who else could it have been? Who else is so mean and blind in his hatred for us? Who? We're all cripples, and I'm an invalid. Why do so many people complain of stomach aches when they hear its familiar clatter? Why? Because we're poisoned with fear of the terrible things it can do to us.

ROXANDA:

Science teaches us that there is an answer to every question, Daddy dear. The only problem is the learning process. The course of study must be synchronized to its results, and the question must presume an understanding of the answer and the mysterious connection between them. Understanding is merely a question of establishing coordinates between numerous fields of life, science and politics. I hope you've understood me, because you're my wise, clever Daddy, who won't give the horseradish back



to Mommy, because it's gone stale, and because he doesn't want to renew the experience of insufficient stimulation of his taste-buds. Isn't that right?

YOSHKKA:

(Looks at her, frightened, with hatred and intolerance.)  
Get the fuck out of here, you freak! Get lost, get out of here. (Roxanda giggles and runs off. Yoshka is confused.)  
Please tell Vasilka what happened. You see, I lost my temper, I was provoked. When I just think about how right now she's putting me in Vasilka's bad books, I get an urge to pull her out of school.

MITZY:

Oh, Mr. Yoshka, I'm so happy that all this, our whole yard, will finally become safe for all of us. We're just poor folks, and we surely don't need lunatics around.

YOSHKKA:

Little creep.

(The thunder of a female voice comes from the house, filling the stage like a threatening cloud.)

VASILKA:

Yoshka, you old lush, you good-for-nothing lazy pig,

you champion gold-bricker, that's enough sitting around in the sun, get inside right this minute, which means NOW, and no back-talk. (A moment of stunned silence.)

YOSHKA:

(In a tiny, barely audible voice.) But, Vasilka, darling, a tram ran over Mitchka, what a tragedy! You know how attached Jolly was to it. (Listens tensely. Silence.)

And, let me tell you, about the meat, I didn't throw the horseradish away, Roxanda's lying, the little creep. Here, the frankfurter and the horseradish are right here. (He holds the horseradish and frankfurter in his outstretched hand. The same drunken voice screeches out of the house.)

VASILKA:

What?! (In fear, Yoshka lets go of the frankfurter and horseradish, which fall into the garbage.) I still don't hear any creeping and crawling. Does that mean that you still haven't had the courtesy to move your fat ass?! (There is a loud thump, as if someone has fallen, then complete silence, soon replaced by some music from a record-player.)

YOSHKA:

(Confused.) Ooh, she's gone and got soused again, and

I thought she was frying onions, making lunch, and I've had my breakfast ruined already. (Mladen comes out of the house and comes over to Yoshka.)

MLADEN:

Listen! Have you noticed the incredible stench in this yard? (Looks at the assembled company, notices the dead cat.) It gets worse with each passing day. What kind of people are we, what a way to live, letting filth creep up on us like this?

YOSHKKA:

(Yells.) Roxanda, you monster, turn off that record-player and see what your mother's doing. See to lunch together, the two of you, if she's not up to it herself. Don't let the onions burn. (The music is turned down. Roxanda appears at the window of Yoshka's house.)

ROXANDA:

Quiet, Daddy, Mother's asleep. She doesn't feel well.

MLADEN:

(Goes through his pockets. Takes out the summons.)  
Did you get one of these?

YOSHKKA:

What is it?

MLADEN:

(Cautiously.) You don't know what it is? You've no idea? Nobody knows anything? Look at me. Why are you lying? Look me in the eye. Right in the eye. (Yoshka looks at the summons, but Mladen roughly grabs it out of his hand.) Gimme that! What is it!? You want to take it away from me, eh? You want to read it, then go around the yard telling everybody the writer's sick, the writer's crazy.

ROXANDA:

Don't be afraid, Professor, go right ahead and give it to him. He can't read, anyway.

YOSHKA:

You're lying, you slut! I finished highschool.

ROXANDA:

What?

YOSHKA:

Why don't you get a new prescription, Roxy, honey, you keep tripping over things, and that's a fact.

ROXANDA:

Nobody's perfect, Daddikins, my sweet. (Shuts the window and withdraws).

YOSHKKA:

Ah, if only I had my health, I'd have shown her a long time ago.

MLADEN:

I just can't see why they're summoning me, and why there, when everybody knows I'm clean. I'm a proven friend, I'm writing an optimistic novel, I'm healthy, much healthier than the others. It's true I've been getting more of these spells of suffocation, but that's not my lungs, it's the bad air. Is it my fault there's something wrong with the oxygen? It seems to have lost its chemical purity, it just seems that world science is incapable of identifying the formula of what we've been breathing in. Oddly enough, a lot of people seem to be thriving on this smelly compound, it's poisoning them, but they eVen enjoy it. As far as I'm concerned, I'm suffocating. My soul is yearning for pure mountain air. (Energetically starts to leave the stage.)

YOSHKKA:

Professor!

MLADEN:

(Pauses.)

What is it?

YOSHKKA

:

Your don't really believe that little snake when she says I can't read?

MLADEN:

Roxanda is a "Wunderkind". She has willpower, and faith in the future.

YOSHKKA:

Yes, Professor, she's a lovely child, your best student. Actually, I've got an idea, I mean, if you're going there anyway, do you think you could try and get them to do something about this goddamn tram? I mean, see for yourself, even *your* nerves ...

MLADEN:

What about my nerves?

YOSHKKA:

I'm not saying they're shot, but, well ... look what it did to Mitchka. A person can't even go outside this yard anymore. You can, you're alright, you've got a summons,

but we haven't got one and we're stuck. Remember how I looked when it cut my legs *off*, when it threw me in the axle-grease and the dust, and when the brakeman pulled me out ... half a man! With what you might call an essential half of me missing. I'm not saying fate didn't have a hand in it all, but... if it hadn't been for that tram, maybe fate would have abandoned the project.

MLADEN:

I don't think so. (Leaves the stage.)

YOSHKA:

(Spits in disgust.) Pah! I just thought, while you were there, at that examination, you might drop a hint or two about the tram. They should get rid of it! If they can. (Meanwhile Jolly has been pondering deeply on Mitchka's fate.)

JOLLY:

Why did someone bash his head in so horribly, and I wonder how his belly could split open so funny in all directions.

YOSHKА:

Only a tram can do that. It either cuts you in half, or it crushes your bones, tears and rends your flesh like a wild animal.

JOLLY:

(Firmly.) If somebody killed my Mitchka, I'm going to kill them.

(Goes into the house.)

JOSHKА:

That's the spirit! Atta boy! I applaud you! I always do when I hear a young man speak out like that. These days, men of action are few and far between. They've all gone soft, a bunch of fairies, Jolly, my boy. Good for you, Mitzy, congratulations on your boy, you've really brought him up well. But I'm telling you again, it's the tram's fault! That's where you should avenge Mitchka, and Grandma Alexandra and my legs. You should figure out a way to turn over that iron coffin, and spill its guts in the hot dust and black axle-grease. Show it there's a power that can bring it down. Man - shit, even half a man and your strapping son, Yovan, known as Jolly! (Jolly comes back on stage holding himself upright, with a crowbar over his shoulder.)



JOLLY:

I've found a crowbar, we can start any time, I think it's strong enough, Dad once clobbered the fireman on the head with it, I bet he saw stars, if it hadn't been for his helmet he'd have been a goner ... ha ... ha ... ha ... even his fireman's axe wouldn't have helped.

MITZY:

Jolly, honey, how many times do I have to tell you that wasn't any old fireman, it was my cousin, your uncle, Vassily.

JOLLY:

(Brandishing the crowbar.) Ma, we're gonna turn the tram over.

MITZY:

Just hurry so your lunch doesn't get cold. Also, we have to get a good place in the yard for the picnic. I don't want to have to have to eat indoors again because of the crowd. It's so stuffy in this heat.

YOSHKKA:

Heaven forbid ... somebody might think I was trying to make up for that frankfurter of mine. You know Miz Mitzy, Mitchka didn't even so much as look at it. True, it

was his fault, his responsibility that frankfurter had to be thrown away, but I'm not that kind of man. Though, just to satisfy my curiosity, if I might just inquire, I mean, I deserve that much, don't I? (Pause.) What are you having for lunch?

JOLLY:

Dumpling stew with chicken giblets.

YOSHKA:

Ooh, don't mention giblets, they are my special weakness, I can turn anything down, but dupling stew with chicken liver, never. Even if you hadn't asked me, I would have come on my own.

MITZY:

Then I'll just go and add a bit more tomato. (Walks into the house with a lively, mincing step. Yoshka follows the sway of her hips with a burning look.)

YOSHKA:

And a teeny chicken heart, and the tiny eggs, Ma'am, clustered like grapes against the backbone on the inside, I hope that's a young chicken you're cooking, but if it's a rooster, then its balls are delicicus! (Mitzy smiles her way into the house.) Boy, does that Mitzy have a good ass.

JOLLY:

That's what Uncle Vassily says, and Dad says: "Jolly, my son, you're a big boy now, twice as strong as I am. Here's lookin' at you, I'm off on a trip, and don't you let anyone in the house, especially not Vassily the fireman, and I'll bring you a nice stuffed pussycat, so your Mitchka won't be lonely, (cries) so it won't grieve, so it has somebody to keep it company when I send you out to get my beer." (Softly, in a funereal way, Jolly solemnly carries the dead cat and in slow motion, full of piety, lowers it into the garbage can below Mladen's window.) Well, Mitchka my friend, farewell, all the best to you, I'll avenge you, don't you worry. (The tram clatters past the house. The two of them look at each other.) I'm gonna set a trap. And you take your time, I'll see you when you get there. (Leaves.)

YOSHKKA:

Wait for me, you fool! Don't do anything without me. I wanna be there when it happens. Jolly, my boy, don't rush things, you'll ruin the operation. I'm your brain. Remember, the brains of the operation. You can't do it without brainwork. Take me with you, you moron I Take your brain along. You can't do it without me, I'm the one that set it all up. I've got a plan (with trembling hands he takes out a crumpled piece of paper from his shirt), here are the details. You can't get along without details. It takes more than a crowbar to overturn a tram. You need brains. Jolly, baby, you forgot the brains. The brains, Jolly baby ... the brains! (Yoshka in his wheelchair has struggled to get

himself scross the yard, and when he finally makes it, he almost collides with his daughter Roxanda on the way out.) What is it now? Get out of my way! Clear the way!

ROXANDA:

Oh, Daddy, dear Daddy, Mommy's awfully sick, she's going to die. What do we do now?

YOSHKА:

Don't tell me. Vasilka? Now of all times? There was nothing wrong with her a minute ago. Hell, she sure picked a time!

ROXANDA:

She took a sudden turn for the worse.

YOSHKА:

Splash some cold water on her. (Shouts.) Hey, Jolly, wait, there's been a change of plan!

ROXANDA:

I've already splashed her with water, it didn't help. She fell flat on her face, gritted her teeth, and went all yellow.

YOSHKА:

Come on, don't bother me with that, just give me the

details. She's always been yellow.

ROXANDA:

But, Daddy, Mommy never shook like that, and her eyes have turned right round in their sockets. It's terrifying. I can't stand to look at her.

YOSHKA:

(Shouts.) Jolly, there's been a change of plan! Vasilka's sick, she's gonna die! There, you see, Roxanda, my child, the moron can't even hear me, he's too far away. Mommy won't die, I don't believe it, why now, when I've got the chance of a lifetime, and a while ago, when I was calling, when it was a question of life and death, when I was calling for help, shouting, screaming, nobody even so much as stuck their nose out, let alone tried to rescue me. All right, what do you want me to do now? Pour some more water on her, and if she doesn't turn pink, run for the doctor. But, not the same one, he'll just lecture us again. He'll tell us we live in a pigsty, how everything stinks of booze, as if he didn't know I use it for compresses, when the pain comes, and I'm dying. And, for God's sakes, put in a good word for me with Vasilka.

ROXANDA:

But, Daddy, she'll suffocate by the time I find another

doctor. Her breathing's bad, it's more like a rattle.

YOSKA:

Suffocate - aw, come off it. Why should she be suffocating? You just pour a bit of brandy down her throat, she'll loosen up her jaw, I betcha. (Moves off, shouting.) Here I come, Jolly! Don't do anything until I get there. (Stops for a moment.) If the doctor asks about me, say I've gone to the doctor. (He hurries off stage as quickly as his wheelchair allows. Roxanda follows him with her eyes, then shifts her gaze to the garbage cans, rummages through the garbage and pulls out a bit of tile. She then begins playing hop-scotch on the stage.)

FADE OUT

## SCENE IV

A white mobile screen covers the left half of the stage. On the right side is the admissions room for the psychiatric clinic. And while Sister Valery sits at her desk, writing in a large, thick book, Vassily Boris the fireman, wearing a magnificent uniform, and with his gleaming helmet in his hand, shifts nervously from one foot to the other.

VASSILY:

You don't really mean it, Sister. They're just sweet little dogs. Pedigreed dogs, well looked after, and properly trained. You're not really going to make me give up Puffy and his daddy Carmichael. Who's ever seen a proper fireman without a dog?

VALERY:

We've been too lenient with you already, Vassily Boris. You're our only patient who doesn't wear a uniform.

VASSILY:

But, what's this I'm wearing, Sister?

VALERY:

A fireman's uniform, not our regulation hospital uniform.

VASSILY:

But, that's what I am ... an officer in the Fire Brigade.

VALERY:

First and foremost, you're our patient. If the head of our clinic, Dr. Kelava, knew what kind of bloodthirsty creatures we kept in a medical institution ...

VASSILY:

They're not bloodthirsty, Sister! They're sweet little dogs. With a good, a truly refined nose for a potential arsonist. Unusual dogs.

VALERY:

We're sorry, Vassily Boris. But enough is enough.



VASSILY:

Sister ... Valery ... Have you forgotten, darling, that you're the one who allowed me to bring in Puffy and Carmichael in the first place?

VALERY:

(Screams.) Get back! (Pause. Breathes heavily.) How dare you?! You'll force me to have you put under restraint. I'm not your darling any more, Vassily. That's over with. Forever. You skirt-chaser!

VASSILY:

But, potential arsonists have to be afraid of something ... Now, wait, wait a minute, Valery, you know much I love you, but if someone thinks I'm crazy, just because I'm here, like the others ...

VALERY:

(Stands up in anger.) Oh, you're not crazy, Vassily, oh, no! We've given you complete freedom here, freedom to move around, and you use every opportunity to come out in your fancy uniform and play up to that whore in the yard next door.

VASSILY:

Don't be unfair, Valery. That's a close relation of mine

... a kissin'cousin, in point of fact.

VALERY:

Then why do you only go on patrol outside the building when her Alexis is away on a trip?

VASSILY:

Valery, how can you? You know I'm run off my feet patrolling every day.

VALERY:

Just you remember, Vassily dear, from now on you're a patient like all the rest.

VASSILY:

(Scared.) You're not going to take my uniform away, are you?

VALERY:

(Shrugs.) I don't know, it depends.

VASSILY:

Leave them to the proper authorities. We're a clinic, and you're our patient. You're ours, Vassily! Remember that! Forever!

VASSILY:

Valery, my love, at least leave me my helmet. Don't take a fireman's soul away from him. I swear I'll forget all about my cousin if you'll just promise you'll forgive me. Look, darling, do whatever you want with me, just don't take away my rank. I'm an officer. I couldn't stand the humiliation. How can I be like the others, dressed in stripes. Why, I'm a fireman, I'm not a zebra, my love. (Drops to his knees in front of her, puts his hand around her knees imploringly. She passionately grabs his head and presses it against her.)

VALERY:

Oh, sweetheart! Why do you do these things to me, why do you torture me, honey! I personally saw to it that Dr. Kelava never found out about your pets, and this is how you repay me, you ingrate. Your cousin, indeed! I'll let you keep your uniform and your dogs, but I'll have the workmen seal off the passageway between the clinic and that damned filthy yard. The crazy idea of letting the patients mingle freely with regular citizens creates nothing but problems. They've all started wearing striped pyjamas, and our orderlies can't tell them apart any more. Nor can the rest of us. The sane must be kept separate from the sick. That's why we decided to start checking up on all suspicious persons.

VASSILY:

That's right. You can't tell who's ours and who's theirs any more.

VALERY:

I'm expecting the first ones who were summoned to turn up for examination any minute now. We think most of them are our escaped patients anyway. Please, go now! And watch your step.

VASSILY:

Thank you, Sister.

VALERY:

So long, sweetheart.

VASSILY:

(Shouts.) Watch where you're going, stupid! Can't you see I'm an officer?! (Vassily leaves the stage. Mladen looks after him.)

MLADEN:

Hello. He must be crazy. (But Valery pays no attention.)

She is writing.) Hello, there, Sister. I say, that guy looks a bit peculiar. What was he yelling at me for?

VALERY:

(Raises her head.) Oh, it's you.

MLADEN:

What do you mean, me? (Looks over his shoulder.) Well, of course it's me.

VALERY:

Sit down.

MLADEN:

No, thank you. I've come to clear up a misunderstanding, then I'll be getting back home. You know, I haven't got any time to waste - I'm writing a book.

VALERY: Aha!

Sit down.

MLADEN:

You see, I got some kind of a strange summons which I fail to entirely understand. It says it's a summons for the store-room. A brain check-up, or something. (Hands her

the summons.) I'd like to know how you got my name, who gave it to you.

VALERY:

Why should anybody give us your name, Mladen Sekulovich? You're not afraid of us, are you? We're a humane institution. Man is our motto! By definition, our job is to care for your health!

MLADEN:

(Looks over his shoulder.) But, I'm healthy already.

VALERY:

Can you be quite sure of that? We have specialists who will make an expert and ... professional assessment of the state of your health. If everything's all right, we'll let you go. All right?

MLADEN:

No, it is not all right!

VALERY:

I would ask you not to get over-excited, and not to lose your temper. It tends to upset the patients.

MLADEN:

I am nobody's patient, Sister.

VALERY:

How can you be sure? For instance, you look kind of familiar to me. Open your mouth! (Mladen opens his mouth, she shines a light into it.)

MLADEN:

I'm a famous man. Hey, wait. What are you doing?

VALERY:

Open your mouth, when I tell you. Why are you so tense?

MLADEN:

I've got friends. (Pause.) Of course, I'm not perfectly certain, but, you know, I'm writing a chronicle of my times, a very exciting novel about a new age. For all of us, to us all, "Good Morning".

VALERY:

What do you mean, good morning?

MLADEN:

That's the title of the book. (Worried.) I hope everything's all right. About my health, I mean?

VALERY:

For heaven's sake, Mladen Sekulovich, you've already given a public reading of it, don't you remember? You got a gold watch.

MLADEN:

But, somebody stole the chain.

VALERY:

There, you see. You remember.

MLADEN:

No, I don't remember.

VALERY:

Ingrate. Have you forgotten me, too?

MLADEN:

I often dream of that event, and so I know it's a dream. True enough, I've remembered you, too, but that's pure



coincidence. You remind me very strongly, in fact you look uncommonly like, my ex-wife.

VALERY:

Where is she now?

MLADEN: I don't

know. VALERY:

Take a good look at me, my friend. Have you really forgotten me?

MLADEN:

Since when have we been friends?

VALERY:

I wonder if anyone can be sure of anything these days. We're dealing in exact science here, and yet we're never quite sure who's sick and who's perfectly healthy. Is anyone?

MLADEN:

So you're planning to keep me here?

VALERY:

No, no. What good are you to us if you're sick. We need healthy people, people who'll cooperate with us in their treatment.

MLADEN: I'm

sick, Sister.

VALERY:

(Quickly.) What's the matter with you? Where does it hurt? Where's the pain? Come on what are you all tensed up for? We won't hurt you. Relax.

MLADEN:

Please, let me out of here. I've devoted my life to children. For years, I taught them how to be healthy and how to preserve their health, and become the Titans of their age. See, in my novel, nobody's under six feet tall, and their lung capacity is beyond belief, amazing. You see, all that ambition calls for a lot of oxygen. Smelly air causes a reflex reaction in the human lungs. They contract, degenerate, and a man turns into a mouse. He's content with the scraps they toss him.

VALERY:

(Taking notes.) You mean, you lack air. To be more precise, oxygen. (Looks at him guardedly.) And of course that seems normal to you?

ML ADEN:

You may think it's normal, I think it's a perfect crime against humanity.

VALERY:

You know that, unfortunately, we don't have the money to move that eyesore out of our immediate neighbourhood.

ML ADEN:

I'm talking about our yard, sister. We're in the middle of that eyesore, or else the eyesore is in the middle of us.

VALERY:

We'll issue another order saying they shouldn't throw their garbage under your window. After all, you're an important person, and our institution cares about you a great deal. Please go into the next room. Have a nice rest until we see what we can do for you. For your hygiene.

MLADEN:

So, in fact, you really want to convince me that I'm not ... well.

VALERY:

No, no! What an idea. We just want to convince ourselves.

MLADEN:

From your viewpoint, the whole world's a madhouse, and people are either crazy or they're superficial.

VALERY:

All men are brothers.

MLADEN: And sisters.

VALERY:

You're too hard on us. We deal with people on a global scale. We only exceptionally deal with individuals. And so we're kindly asking you to go into the next room, quietly. We'll supply you with oxygen, and then you can go wherever you like.

MLADEN:

You're lying. I know you're lying. You want to trick me again.

VALERY:

You're an intelligent and reasonable man. Stop playing the fool. Are we going to have to force you? Anyway, where would you go to fill your lungs? (Reaches for the bell-push on the desk and rings.) You'll get air enriched with ozone, like after a rainfall.

MLADEN:

Just don't forget to project a rainbow on the horizon.

VALERY:

Come now, don't be sarcastic. Go slowly into the room, so I don't have to call an orderly. They're very strong, and pretty rough. They might hurt you unintentionally, and that would be bad for our reputation. (Two huge, muscular orderlies suddenly enter. They're wearing white short-sleeved summer uniforms. Valery speaks to them sharply.) What is it, boys. I told you not to come until you're called. But, since you're already here, show Mladen Sekulovich into the next room, and then go for the oxygen mask. You see, our writer is a little tired, and he needs to be refreshed, he needs oxygen. So give him the oxygen. Let him breathe his fill. (The orderlies open

the door of the room concealed behind the screen. MIaden stands helplessly for a long time, then turns like a broken man, and enters the room. The two orderlies follow him in. Valery waits expectantly. Soon, Mladen's shocked voice can be heard from the neighbouring room.)

MLADEN:

What's this? You bastards! What kind of a game is this, what do you want from me? I refuse! This isn't my house! (From inside, MIaden pulls away the screen which reveals his own room, with its familiar details.) Let me out of here! Don't play at imitations of life! I refuse to breathe, to think, to write for you! You play with those who agree to the rules of your game. I'm a serious man! I'm not crazy!

VALERY:

Hold onto him, boys. Don't let him hurt himself. He doesn't know what he's saying. He's not in his right mind. Shut the windows and door tight, and don't let anybody disturb the operation, let him get used to the idea that he's here. (The orderlies have just grabbed MIaden and are holding him tightly, while he tries to struggle free, screaming dementedly.)

MLADEN:

What operation, you phonies! I refuse to let them pick at my brain! I'm perfectly healthy, I just need oxygen, you

filthy scum. Let me go, asshole! You think I haven't seen through you, that I don't know what you've been plotting from the start. You deliberately poison the air, grow germs in my house, try and infect me, you're getting ready to operate and getting set to kill me! Why?! You don't like my clean habits, you're afraid of my novel, you're scared to death my health will outlive you. Only, you've forgotten that apart from you there are still people around, and I'm one of them. Me! Mladen Sekulovich, who can't, who won't, who refuses to live without air!

VALERY:

(Firmly, with a furious gleam in her eye, whispers.)  
He'll get used to it. He'll get used to it.

CURTAIN

## ACT II



## SCENE I

The sun blazes onto a completely empty and, to all intents and purposes, abandoned yard. The apocalyptic voice of the radio announcer can be heard thorough the wide open window of Mladen's room.

ANNOUNCER:

The caterpillars will no longer plague our green meadows, our brown branches and yellow autumn leaves. The culprits must be evicted from our joyful environment, from our great big happy family, from our definitively attained ideals. We will be embarking on the systematic annihilation of the cocoons and larvae, the silkworms and other technologically long-since outdated vestiges of ancient civilizations. Who needs silk, if they threaten our oxygen? The Commission for the Protection of the Human Environment is unanimous. For our part, we can only join in the drive which we have supported from the start, and salute it with a song, a golden oldie!

SONG FROM THE RADIO:

"Old man drinkin'barley-water, But  
he just won't pay, Barley-water  
seller Gonna beat him up today ..."

(MSaden and the two orderlies breathlessly sprint onto the stage. Sweating and puffing profusely, the three of them do their calisthenics, while Mladen shouts out instructions.)

MLADEN:

... Two, left, hup, right, two back, hup right, three forward, bend your knees, stand up, higher, three back, hup right, two left, move your ass, hands up, hup, two, three, four, half turn, sit down, hup, two, three, four, up again, look lively, big smile, big smile, hup, two, smile, three, four, now, one leg, hup, two, other leg, forward, back, forward, back, back, back, eyes front, hop, hop, bend your back, a little more, bend your spine, kneel down, hold it now, three, four, move your ass, left, right, look lively, three, four ... (Roxanda comes out of the house with a very grave expression on her face. She reaches Mladen and beckons to him with her finger to bend down so that she can whisper in his ear. Slightly uncomfortable, Mladen turns left, then right, but dares not bend, merely stands stiff, smiling artificially.) How's your dad? Have his legs grown? I don't see him around any more. So I says to myself, he must have grown new legs. (Roxanda insists,

Mladen wavers, and apprehensively looking at the orderlies, he bends down shyly, and she whispers long and seriously into his ear.) What? What's that you said? Huh? Huh? Not again? Run straight to the hospital and get the doctor here fast.

ROXANDA:

But why, if she's beyond help?

MLADEN:

Maybe she isn't. Maybe she's just in a coma.

ROXANDA:

Does that mean she'll surely die?

MLADEN:

It's hard to say, dear child. Don't cry, Roxanda, sweetie, your mommy won't die.

ROXANDA:

I'm not crying, I'm just asking. I'm curious.

MLADEN:

Hm, well, er ... it could happen. Today people die ever so easily. (She beckons to him again. He resists.) I've got important business. I've got guests, you see that I've got company, I have to go and breathe, I'll miss my share of the oxygen. And, it's time for coffee, too. (Roxanda grabs him by the jacket and forces him to bend down, then whispers long and earnestly into his ear.) Tell it to them, tell it to them, I can't help you there. All right, I'm going, dammit, don't pull at me like that, just this last time, though, and never again. No one has any understanding here for writers and their problems. Look, she tore my jacket. (Starts to follow Roxanda out. But the orderlies grab him and roughly pull him back. Roxanda looks at them with hatred.) You see, I have to go have my coffee. I'm afraid it'll get cold. Cold coffee's all right with whipped cream and ice cubes, but hot coffee has to be drunk before it gets cold. Otherwise it only upsets your stomach, and leaves the brain perfectly indifferent.

ROXANDA:

Pigs! (Spits at the orderlies, then turns sharply and runs out of the yard. One of the orderlies wipes his face and looks at the other in astonishment.)

MLADEN:

Well, gentlemen, what do you say to a turn around the yard? (The orderlies look at him in dismay. Mladen

suddenly starts running, counting aloud.) Hup ... two ... hup ... two ... (Seeing his chance, he bolts off the stage.)

TSOKA:

Hey. what happened? Looks like he's made a run for it.

MARISAV:

Looks like it all right.

TSOKA:

Go get him, Marisav, don't let him get out into the street.

MARISAV:

I ain't goin' after him.

TSOKA:

Shit, what the hell's goin' on?!

MARISAV:

I told you, we should've restrained him while he's still fresh, till he gets the hang of things. But you said ...

TSOKA:

Sister Valery will get us for this.

MARISAV:

The head doctor'll give us real hell if we don't catch him.

TSOKA:

So, we gotta go after him.

MARISAV:

But how, when he's long gone?

TSOKA:

Phew! Shit on mental therapy and the jerk that invented it. Makin' us take him out for exercises, and he gets away, the only one they really care about. Sound in body, empty in the head! And me, I'm all wet, I can barely breathe, and my shirt-tails are sticking to my ass, and now I'm supposed to have the energy to chase him. (While the confused orderlies are bending their intellects to finding a way out of the newly-emerged situation, Vassily Boris's voice thunders offstage, mingled with the growling and deafening barking of wildly elated dogs.)

VASSILY:

Get him, Puffy, baby! Carmichael! Surround him, boys! We got him! Ha, ha! That's right, Puffy my boy, tear

the dissident to bits! So he doesn't like it in our sanatorium?! One minute he wants to write books, the next he wants to break out! Sic 'im, boys, make him squeal. The air's not good enough for him, eh? He doesn't respect an officer. (Vassily Boris's joy and laughter ring out. Mladen runs back onstage, like a wild and frightened animal. His shirt is torn and bloody. In panic and alarm he practically runs straight into the outstretched arms of the orderlies, who grab him firmly.)

MARISAV:

(Surprised and delighted.) Ha! Look at this!

TSOKA:

Hold onto him, Marisav, tie his hands, and let's stick a needle into him. (They cross his hands across his chest and tie the long sleeves behind his back.)

MARISAV:

I'll give him what for, fuck the injection.

TSOKA:

Are you out of your mind?! Come on, now, tell me, have you flipped? How can you talk like that?

MARISAV:

All right, you. Did we do the calisthenics? Damn right we did. Did we give you V.I.P. treatment? We did. Do we listen to everything you say? Sure we do. We don't understand half of it, but we listen. Have you been getting the proper treatment? Too true. So what is this? (Pauses. Mladen is silent.) The hospital yard's too small for you, so you want to stretch your legs in town. And if you get run over, I'll be held responsible, you bastard!

TSOKA:

For goodness sake, Marisav, calm down.

MARISAV:

I will not calm down. I won't. Can't you see the trams are running up and down every two seconds, that the air's polluted, that germs are floating around freely, and you wanna run away from here like an idiot, from this paradise, and if anything happens to you, we'll be in for it.

TSOKA:

Hey, Marisav, don't talk to him like that. He's a gentleman, a writer.

MARISAV:

So what? I suppose he'll put me in his book. I'll eat



any book he writes and I read. (He suddenly slams Mladen on the back of the head. Mladen stumbles from the blow.)

TSOKA:

Geez, Marisav, look what you went and did.

MARISAV:

What I done, I done. And I ain't sorry.

TSOKA:

Boy, you really are crazy, honest to God. What if he reports us?

MAEJSAV:

Who's gonna report us? Him?! Look what he did to his shirt. A new, white, starched, state-owned shirt. Oh, Jesus, why did you land me with an intellectual, just when I'm up for retirement? Just look at his shirt, Tsoka, for Christ's sake, look at him, willya?

TSOKA:

Cool it, Marisav.

MARISAV:

What kind of man are you, you should be ashamed of

yourself. You wanna ruin me, and me due for retirement. You want my reputation ruined with the head doctor. You're supposed to *be* crazy, but you run like a sane man. Come on, you're an intelligent man at least, of course I had to hit you, when you tore my nerves all to shreds, is that humane? Is that a way to behave? Is that nice? And now, what are you going to tell the head doctor about getting torn up like that, getting your new shirt spoiled, getting all scuffed up, you asshole. (Belts him hard. Mladen falls. Wipes the blood from the corner of his mouth. The military tread of booted feet can be heard. The orderlies look apprehensively towards Vassily Boris who, straight, tall and handsome in his handsome fireman's uniform, his polished helmet on his head, enters the yard. From offstage comes the sound of wild growling, while Vassily gently calms his dogs in caressing words.)

VASSILY:

Don't be nervous, Puffy, boy, look at how calm your father, Carmichael, is. Not everybody's an arsonist, just tiny individuals, and they can never get away, Puffy, boy, papa-Carmichael is at the gate, you know none of them ever got away from me. (Mladen looks at him in fear. Vassily smartly salutes.) Vassily Boris, Lieutenant in the Palilula Fire Brigade!

MLADEN:

(Stammers.) Yessir ... Boris Vassily.

VASSILY:

(Patiently.) Sony, that's Boris.

MLADEN:

Boris?

VASSILY:

Thank you.

MLADEN:

You're welcome. (Tries to get up, but can't.)

VASSILY:

I said thank you.

MARISAV:

(Politely.) You're welcome, he said you're welcome, Lieutenant. Confusing, isn't it. For instance, let's say now my name's Vassily Boris, it's as clear as day, see. No, no that isn't it.

VASSILY:

Because, you see. Because, you see, it's my surname, you see ... If it were my first name, it wouldn't matter. I'm

used to having to explain it. I say it now because it isn't my real name. What? (Gives Mladen a nasty look.) No? I thought I heard you say something. (Looks suspiciously at the orderlies.) Maybe somebody did say something. Everybody seems to have something to say around here. (Looks Mladen up and down.) What happened to your clothes? (Bursts into laughter.) Ha ... ha ... ha ... (Turns serious and thoughtful.) Now, where was I?

MARISAV:

Well, it's time to go, Lieutenant. The literary gentleman's recreation period is over.

TSOKA:

(Coaxingly.) Come on, let's go do a little work, a little creating, a bit of writing.

MLADEN:

The hero of my novel's waiting, you see. The hero of my youth, my maturity, my old age, my dotage ...

VASSILY:

(Muses.) Oh, yes! Yes, yes, yes ... Now if, by some chance, my name was the other way around, you know, not Vassily Boris, but Boris Vassily, then it would be alright, then it would be: "Mr. Boris Vassily, Sir, permission to

report on the state of the fire-fighting equipment in the Palilula Casino!" You follow?

MLADEN:

I'm sorry, I didn't really understand your most esteemed name, your profession maybe, certainly your profession, but the name ... heh ... heh ... heh ... you know, really, there are some fatheads whose hair grows right out of their eyes, and your low forehead is in a way exemplary, it exudes a rudimentary sort of contemplativeness, if you don't mind my saying so. I have to go now. I have to work, to create, to leave a shining legacy for future generations. (Vassily angrily takes off his fireman's glove and violently strikes Mladen with it. Tied up, Mladen stumbles and falls against Marisav, who hits him so hard in the stomach that he collapses soundlessly.)

MARISAV:

Is that any way to talk to an officer, you jerk?!

VASSILY:

(Offended.) Leave him alone! Arrogant, vain, selfish, no respect for rank. All you writers are the same. Pretending to save the world, and all the time you're waving your bits of paper around and spreading fires. And how do you expect the world to get along without officers

of the Fire Brigade, who's going to put the fires out? Everybody knows what paper means in a Fire-Brigade context, and what its function is. It ignites, it flares up! Shame on you, saying I've got a low forehead. (Takes out a pocket mirror and looks at it.)

TSOKA:

It's no use, Sir. He can't hear a thing. Looks like he's fainted.

VASSILY:

You don't have to respect my luxuriant hair, you don't have to have understanding for public servants, but nobody knocks a man of my standing, I'm a tough nut to crack. All these pyromaniac writers. As far as I'm concerned, they should be kept in special homes until their time passes, until they become obsolete, until their boiling blood foams out of their mouth and flows away, until they're given transfusions to ease them painlessly into deep old age, old age should be protected from youth. (One of the windows opens, and Mitzy appears at it. Vassily moves to one side, although she still hasn't noticed anyone on the stage.)

MITZY:

(Calls.) Jolly, lunch is almost ready! Hurry up with that tram, you lazybones, if you plan to get a place in the yard for the picnic. Otherwise we'll have to eat indoors in this heat. There's time enough for the tram. If not today, then

tomorrow, Jolly, son. God, look how the vermin's flourishing.

MARISAV:

And I suppose nobody spares a thought to us working stiff's when there's a juicy picnic coming up.

MITZY:

(Taunts him.) Dumpling stew, slob! Little hearts and gizzards and liver, with lots of fried onions, and tomatoes and green peppers.

TSOKA:

Oh, boy.

MITZY:

Well, well?! Looks like your mouth can still water at the mention of chicken stew, you useless slob.

TSOKA:

I gotta admit, I love it. I won't say I don't, when I enjoy a good feed. And what's the point of being neighbours anyway, if we don't do each other a good turn from time to time. How about if we come in, what are we

waiting for, since you've practically invited us already. But, just for a minute. We'll have to eat and run. MARISAV:

And the Lieutenant will keep an eye on our literary gentleman, so he doesn't make a break for it again, until we get back, and then inside we'll give him a taste of some more therapy, to clear his head. It sure is hot, a man can hardly breathe.

MITZY:

(Notices Vassily.) Oh Vassily, you're here, too. Oh how nice. I knew you'd come, I felt it. Something kept telling me: "Get up, Mitzy, open the door, go and see, maybe it's Vassily." (Runs to him, but he brusquely pushes her away.)

VASSILY:

No, Madam. You will not place your charming mitts upon me. No more. And what, if there are still real men around, men that women like you still haven't managed to ruin. Not you, not Sister Valery. Take your long fingers off my broad shoulders. I'm interested only in essentials, my ladies. And I refuse to be taken in by your excesses, your female wiles, your challenges. This felonious abberation, this incitement to crime, to rape, a criminal action. The law has lost its head, too much democracy, the guillotine is the law, morals are disintegrating, crime is flourishing...it's become impossible for a weak man to preserve his dignity.



You don't know whether it's better when they cover everything up, tight, or lay it all bare. Between the tight trousers and short skirts - nudity! Who needs it, ladies, I'm an atheist, I don't believe in God, but where's the moral strength of the people! Ah, if these people only slammed their fists on the table and said: "Enough of this whoring!" But what people? They've all got mugs like hooligans. A man can't even be sure of his own integrity any more. I am. I have dogs! I have authority! And a helmet! The rotten people, damn their rotten souls, when did they get so rotten, everyone wants to put their paws on my broad shoulders, to take me on a friendly walk from the first spiritual darkness to a mental eclipse, to marry me, or at the very least to rob me. As if I were such a fool! Ha ... ha ... ha...

MITZY:

Heavens! He's taken leave of his senses.

VASSILY:

(Angry.) Tramp! Get the whore! She has to be taught a lesson, she wants to insult a man wearing a uniform of the state! The last time they dented my helmet, but they didn't touch my dignity in doing my duty. They want to buy me with chicken stew. We need law and order around here, respect for the system, and not bribing officials. When we take care of the writers, we'll take care of the whores, too! You have to have order at a clinic, otherwise there's no health without discipline. (The wail of an ambulance siren

is heard. Soon, Roxanda practically marches onto the stage, followed by the doctor and Sister Valery, wearing white, short-sleeved uniforms.)

DOCTOR:

A healthy nation is a crucial precondition for human happiness. Individuals aren't important. Your mother, I presume, is an individual?

ROXANDA:

She's dying, Doctor.

DOCTOR:

I told you to call me Doc.

ROXANDA:

She's dying, Doc.

DOCTOR:

That's better. See how they're amusing themselves here. And what's this? A fair? Amateur theatricals? There's no illness that can make a healthy nation afraid, unless, of course, it's the nation that's ill. (During this time the orderlies hold Mitzy roughly, spreading wide her arms as if they're going to pull her apart.)

VALERY:

Let that woman go. (The orderlies let her go.)

MITZY:

Oh, Vassily, I'll never forgive you for this. Calling me, a woman married to the best fisherman in Dorchol, a tramp?! You'll get yours when Alexis finds out you've been insulting his wife. Even those two mutts of yours won't save your crazy neck. (Goes into the house.)

VALERY:

What was that?

VASSILY:

Nothing.

DOCTOR:

What are we getting ourselves into, what is this? (Pause.) What's the problem? Why the rat-race? *This* is the way to live, relaxed, in comfort ...

VASSILY:

And in piety, Doctor.

DOCTOR:

(Corrects him.) Doc.

VASSILY:

(Embarrassed.) And in piety, Doc.

DOCTOR:

What are you doing here?

VASSILY:

(Salutes.) Routine patrol, Doc.

DOCTOR:

Your're a good guy. Good. (To Valery.) He's a good  
guy.

VALERY:

He gets around. Alexis is probably away from home  
today.

VASSILY:

I'm here in the course of duty.

VALERY:

I distinctly forbade you to sneak around here. (Notices Miaden.) Where'd he come from?

ROXANDA:

Why, that's the professor! Oh, Doc, they beat him up, they kicked the shit out of him. Animals!

MARISAV:

No! No! He had an attack of nerves.

DOCTOR:

Is that the patient? Is that your mother? Poor child, she's in a state of shock. (To himself.) Lord, how ugly she is.

ROXANDA:

Hang in there, Sir. Don't let them get you. But quiet, so they don't hear you.

VASSILY:

I don't know what came over him. He suddenly had a nervous breakdown. He says he can't get any air. He says he's suffocating.

MARISAV:

That's right. He collapsed all of a sudden. We tried to catch him to stop him hurting himself. We didn't quite make it.

TSOKA:

Not quite. Looks like we didn't quite make it, all right.

ROXANDA:

Mommy! Mommy! Oh, Mommy, they killed the professor, they squelched him like a bug. (Runs into the house in tears.)

DOCTOR:

But, hold on, this is irresponsible. Where's the patient we were called in to see? What's with her mother?

VALERY:

They're in the house, Doc.

DOCTOR:

Why didn't you say so in the first place, dammit! And, you should have told me it was here. Why did we use an official car just to come next door? Anyway, what's the point of all this luxury if the patient's dying. (Follows Roxanda into the house.)

VALERY:

What did you do to the writer, Vassily?

VASSILY:

Why, nothing. He wanted to run away, and he ran into Puffy. And Puffy's a very small baby, he's over-eager, he only wanted to play with him a little, and there you are ... Papa Carmichael couldn't resist temptation ... and then ... the two of them ... and there you are ... so in the end I...

VALERY:

Why, you're crazy!.

VASSILY:

I'm a fireman.

VALERY:

If Dr. Kelava, the head, learns we've been beating up patients ...

VASSILY:

But we haven't been beating them up. You're not beating them up. Together we're not beating them up ... He wanted to run away. He says there's something wrong

with the air. On the contrary! The atmosphere should be abolished, everyone should be given a tank of oxygen, stick a gas mask on their faces, and then let them go to it, let him use his portion to set fire to schools and universities. (Valery goes up to Vassily and yanks his epaulettes off his shoulders.

VALERY:

Take off his uniform!

VASSILY:

Valery, sister, what are you doing? My uniform, my parade uniform, dyed naturally, dark blue, with gold buttons, and you want to cast it into the dust! To throw my helmet into the dust! My insignia ... I sweated blood to get them in the face of human depravity. Lieutenant, yeah, with good outlooks for being promoted to captain, and she has the nerve to say to me: "Take off his uniform."

VALERY:

Take it off, don't just stand there, you idiots, that's an order.

MARISAV:

(Ingratiatingly.) But, Sister, how can we, he's an official.



VALERY:

Official, my ass. He's as crazy as all the others. (Vassily angrily raises his glove to hit her, but just manages to control himself.)

VASSILY:

Tramp!

VALERY:

What?!

VASSILY:

(Hoarsely.) Gimme back my insignia.

VALERY:

I'll give you just what you deserve, Vassily. You'll get yours for everything you got out of us, you ingrate. We let you be a fireman, have your uniform, we gave you the rank of Lieutenant. I personally got hold of a helmet for you, and despite my explicit orders, you come skulking around this garbage-heap, you frustrated sex-maniac.

VASSILY:

(Half-whispers.) You cow.

VALERY:

What? He's insulting me! That this should happen to me! The head nurse of the city psychiatric clinic?!

VASSILY:

You pile of cow dung.

VALERY:

I'll have you put in a room, Vassily, with no windows and padded walls, and a wooden bed, with no mattress. Just bare boards. Get him undressed, morons, you'll see, he'll be as quiet as a lamb when he's in his negligee. In our uniform. (Valery rushes at Vassily and starts taking his uniform off. It falls off, piece by piece, into the dust, while Vassily stands in his white hospital underwear.)

VASSILY:

What's going on, friends? How can they undress *me*, a minion of the law, down to my bare skin? How can you let it happen, a fireman has his dignity. Don't do it, Sister! I didn't touch the writer, he touched me, my air. What does

he mean the air's no good, when we all breathe, the whole nation! What does he want! To fight for air for the birds, water for the fish, he wants us to neglect industry, to stop the progress of our glorious presence on the planet Earth! We are advancing in giant steps, and she says to take my uniform off. Who ever heard of such a thing? I want our sewers to be pure again, no shit flowing in our city sewerage, just milk and honey, and all our people will have free and undisturbed access, and cleanliness will attain an enviable level. So please, people, friends, you're the ones who gave me my stripes, to guard the corridors, to put out the fires, to stop the arsonists, and now you want to let my poor, my precious little dogs go hungry, deprive them of their father, their mother almost, I was everything to them, both father and mother. Don't let them put me in the same room with the writer. For him the air's no good, he's suffocating, and for me it's fine, it's sweet and tasty, the only air I want to breathe. Why, we're an oasis of happiness, our clinic is a paradise for patients, and the head doctor is a medical genius, there's no one he hasn't cured. Only guys like him think it's hard, he's too poisoned with the idea that there's no oxygen, and maybe he should just be left to suffocate by himself, maybe we should even help him along a bit, and strangle him a bit, not too much, just enough to save him from this mess. What's going on, friends, don't touch my trousers, Valery, leave my helmet alone, don't give her my boots. You've ruined my dignity. How am I going to do my duty, once my innocence is proved, once it's proved I didn't touch Mitzy, that I was only catching the writer, to stop the bastard from running away and afterwards saying how we locked him up in a

madhouse, how he's healthy and we're the dangerous ones. They're dangerous! They're dangerous! (They've already taken his uniform off.)

VALERY:

(Waves her hand disdainfully.) Take that shit away! (The orderlies grab Vassily and take him off. Valery goes up to Mladen and kneels beside him.)

VALERY:

Oh, Sekulovich, you fool, all this trouble over you, and I wonder whether you're at all worth it.

(Roxanda enters and goes up to Valery.)

ROXANDA:

Doc wants you. (Mockingly.) So you can bring Mommy back to life through your concerted effort.

VALERY:

(Gets up and looks at her searchingly.) Come on, admit it. You don't really love your mother. You don't love anybody. If you want to be a nurse, I'll help you get a job with me. Think about it. You're a smart kid. We need professionals. (Valery goes into the house. Roxanda and

the unconscious Mladen are left onstage. Roxanda falls across Mladen's chest and cries bitterly. The sound of a motor announces the arrival of a City Park Administration car with large speakers on its roof. Roxanda shrinks back, but the car gets stuck between the garbage cans and stops. The loudspeakers blare out.)

"Attention! Attention! The esteemed citizens are to take note that today, for the first time, a super-effective pest-control spray will be tested. The spraying will be carried out by a special low-flying plane specially obtained for the purpose by the City Park administration. The spray has still not been fully laboratory-tested, and therefore the esteemed citizens are advised to stay inside their comfortable homes when they hear the characteristic sound of the low-flying plane. Health is wealth!" (With a great deal of grinding and groaning, the car reverses off the stage.)

FADE OUT

## SCENE II

The rosy light of the autumn sunlight breaks through the shabby, crooked high-rises into the yard. This picture of heavenly beauty is irrefutable proof that an autumn afternoon in Belgrade is a time of beauty, and the overflowing overturned garbage cans speak of the prosperity and filth in which the people bathe.

The rhythmic tapping of a stick heralds the appearance of Dragoyio, the blind man, who walks out from behind an awry, creaking doorway. He carries a small stool and a boiled egg. With an obviously habitual movement, he feels for his usual place, puts down the stool, and sits among the garbage cans. In the same rhythm, he hits the boiled egg against the edge of the stool, breaks the shell and begins to peel it, throwing the shells around him. Hereupon a multitude of respected tenants of both sexes and all ages appear, silently and stealthily appropriating the free space in the yard. Some spread out rugs, others put down stools or old, fire-singed pieces of log, take off their outer garments and expose their skinny, yellowish, corpse-like limbs to the strong autumn sunlight. If this weren't all happening on a

stage, one would also see clouds of shiny bluebottle flies and all kinds of other flying and crawling vermin, but this has to be left to the imagination, which isn't hard, because the people keep warding them off, flapping their hands, or waving filthy rags, trousers, or anything else at hand. Still, one couldn't say that the mood of the assembled company is below par. On the contrary! When he's eaten his egg, the blind Dragoylo smacks his bare belly in satisfaction and breaks into song:

DRAGOYLO:

"One of the Caliphs of Nish ...  
Drowned in the Nishava,  
Hard by the township of Fleetship ...  
All the craftsmen of Nish ...  
Rushed off...  
To see Alexis ...  
He's all bloated..."

(The people onstage pick up the refrain. Their happy faces are not smiling, although an almost religious exaltation can be observed in their glowing eyes. A feeling of happiness and spiritual integrity prevails, all the people are united in god who has given them in return this heavenly space in which to exist, to reproduce and to pursue other pleasures. And, who knows how long this contented crowd would go on singing, if, at one moment, Dragoylo didn't suddenly choke, fighting for breath, his eyes watering, in the grips of a prolonged fit of coughing.)

DRAGOYLO:

Anybody got a drink of cold water? That egg almost choked me. God fuck the cock that fertilized it and the chicken that laid it. Gimme some water, godamn them peasant poultry, I'll never look at another egg again, not a turkey's egg, or a goose's egg, not a duck's egg, or a pheasant's egg, or even a quail's egg ...

TODA:

Swan's balls. (Pause)

DRAGOYLO:

(Drawls.) Oho! Izzat so! Now, let's take a look-see who said that. (Pause. Gets up.) You'd better own up yourself, instead of making me come and find you. (Tall, upright and skinny, with the sepulchral expression of a blind man who wants to see, he waits threateningly.) You think I didn't see ya, huh?! You think, Dragoylo can't see, you're forgetting he's Milan's son, one of the Yoykitches, the famous Dorchol builders. Hey, Milan could bring down a bird in flight, when he got back from the front. A bird! Let alone I should miss you, you prick, you should just know how many cats I've skewered with this iron-tipped cane, how many of their heads I've smashed, and how many I've stuck on the end of this spike!



TODA:

Shove it up your ass. Dragoylo.

DRAGOYLO:

Fillshove it up your old lady and her chicken that laid the egg that almost killed me. (Sits down.)

OLDMAN:

Heavens, gentlemen! Please, restrain yourselves.

MELYA:

That's right! Let's not forget the reason why we assembled here today.

KLYAKA:

To stuff our faces.

TODA:

Either that tram's gotta go, or else the Council should move the tracks out into the middle of the street.

DRAGOYLO:

Whadda you mean, it's gotta go! Who's gonna do it?

It's a tram, you idiot. It's a power-house.

TODA:

Whadda you mean, power-house. Jolly's the power-house.

KLYAKA:

Jolly's stupid!

TODA:

Yoshka's smart. He's got the details. He's worked out a plan.

MILYA:

Hey, people, these beans look funny to me.

KLYAKA:

(Leaves his observation post and runs in excitement to center stage.) Tram! Tram! The tram's coming!

TODA:

(Shouting.) Silence! I wanna hear! Attention!  
(Everything falls silent. Nothing can be heard. The blind man Dragoylo takes advantage of the silence to sing his favorite solo.)

DRAGOYLO:

"One of the Caliphs of Nish ...  
Drowned in the Nishava,  
Hard by the township of Fleetship ..."

(The tram arrives. Its deafening clatter drowns out all other sound, and the blind man's wavering song is lost in the din. And then, just as quickly as it arrived, it's gone, and fades into complete silence.)

OLDMAN:

(Nervously.) What are these two doing, gentlemen?  
(Pause.)

TODA:

Hey, blind man, fuck off with your song, you're all puffed up like some kind of a frog, croaking like you want to get a lady frog all excited.

DRAGOYLO:

(Jumps up as if he's been stung.) What the hell's going on here? Who doesn't like my song?

OLDMAN:

(Pleadingly.) Gentlemen, please let's get down to

essentials. Forget about fighting.

TODA:

(Angrily.) What do you mean, forget. Don't you see they're setting up an ambush for the tram, and he's been croaking away on purpose to warn it about Yoshka and Jolly.

OLD MAN:

Another one will come along, gentlemen. At least there are plenty of trams around.

TODA:

A traitor's not a man. That's what I say.

DRAGOYLO:

So, I'm not a man, you bastard! I'm the one who made half of all of you here, and that with both eyes, so you can see right off how ugly and disgusting you are, and how lucky your father is that he can never lay his eyes on you, so you won't give him nightmares. (Swinging his cane around violently, he easily clears a path for himself, and goes into the house with amazing speed.)

KLYAKA:

(Angrily.) Blind man, you've gone too far this time.

(He carefully goes up to Dragoylo's porch and talks to the people in the yard, referring to Dragoylo up in his house over the porch.) Did our old men sit around yawning during those hard pre-war times, or did they work their asses off to feed and raise us, the blind man's bastards?

MILYA:

Hey, people, my stomach's killing me. It must be the beans.

KLYKA:

(Shouts.) So now who's ugly and disgusting? Us or the blind man, who screwed our old ladies while our old men were slaving under the repressive conditions of an unpopular regime?

ALL TOGETHER:

(Angrily.) Blind man!

KLYAKA:

(Works himself up.) If that's the way it is, then, blind man come and tell all of us orthodox Dorchol folks what your claim to Dorchol is, how you got here, and how you can have the nerve to say that Milan the carpenter was the best carpenter in Dorchol, when everybody knows that my old man was also a carpenter from Dorchol, and what's more that I'm a natural born Dorchol carpenter myself.

TODA:

And now the famous Danube fisherman! (The distant sound of an engine is heard.)

OLD MAN:

(Excited.) Gentlemen! Thank God, the tram's coming again! Our time has come! God bless our avengers!

TODA:

Stop farting around, old man. Can't you see that's a plane?

OLD MAN:

A plane, gentlemen? Why a plane, when we're expecting a tram? What do you mean, a plane in peacetime?

KLYAKA:

Brothers! It looks like it's aiming straight at us.

TODA:

(Shouts.) Watch your heads, lie down! Get your asses down! (His warnings are lost under the sound of the roaring plane engine as it flies low overhead. Everyone throws themselves on the ground in panic and fear. Toda

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OLD MAN:

A plane, gentlemen? Why a plane, when we're expecting a tram? What do you mean, a plane in peacetime?

KLYAKA:

Brothers! It looks like it's aiming straight at us.

TODA:

(Shouts.) Watch your heads, lie down! Get your asses down! (His warnings are lost under the sound of the roaring plane engine as it flies low overhead. Everyone throws themselves on the ground in panic and fear. Toda

looks up.) Hey people, what's all this shit falling all around us? (Everyone looks up and sees a cloud of yellow dust descending. A little further on, Milya is writhing in pain.)

OLD MAN:

It looks like they're improving the air.

MILYA:

(Shouts, bent over in pain.) Gangway! Ooh ... I feel so bad, these fucking beans are poisoning me! My guts are falling apart. (Runs to the outhouse.)

OLD MAN:

(Grabs his stomach, his face distorted with pain.) How come it got me too, I didn't touch the beans?

TODA:

(Thunders.) Fire away, Milya, don't save your ammunition, son, give it everything you've got, for the glory of Dorchol's carpenters and their heroic sons!

KLYAKA:

Is that any way to talk, Toda? Brothers, is that a way for him to talk to us carpenters, us working people of this suffering profession?! (Dragoylo now appears on the porch with his cane in one hand and another boiled egg in the other.)



DRAGOYLO:

Up yours, Klyaka!

KLYAKA:

We're talking here about the great and honorable profession of carpentry, which sired and fed half of Dorchol. (Dragoylo hurls his steel-tipped cane with all his strength, and like a lance it lands in the crowd. Everyone is frightened and immobile.)

DRAGOYLO:

(Hits the egg against the porch rail, cracks it and begins shelling it, throwing the shells below.) Maybe if you're talking about the half I didn't sire, but they've all croaked from over-eating on rich food. There they are, when the full moon shines over the cemetery in Karaburma, nobody in the area can sleep from all their hammering and sawing, (Suddenly, the clatter of a tram and the screeching of brakes, crashing, screaming. Complete silence descends.)

OLD MAN:

(Gets up and takes off his cap.) Gentlemen, it looks as if the tram has claimed another victim.

TODA:

Depends where it caught him, whether he bounced off or under. Because if he bounced under, then it depends on which side, and under what.

DRAGOYLO:

There goes another one.

KLYAKA:

What's that rat Milya up to? Now I've got a pain in my gut, I'm dripping with sweat. (Roxanda comes out of the house. She is exalted, in a strange trance, which is obviously damaging her mental stability.)

ROXANDA:

Oh, Mother, get up out of bed, if you can, to see what a lovely bright day it is. Daddy seems to have made his lifetime dream come true. He's turned the tram over! Uncle Toda, Klyaka, Uncle Milya! Where's Uncle Milya?

TODA:

In the John. He's got the runs.

(Roxanda runs to the outhouse and shouts in delight.)

ROXANDA.

Hurry up. Uncle Milya, the tram's down! I saw it from my window hurtling round the corner, and then crash! Bang! My daddy, my sweet old man, has finally avenged his legs, Mitchka, and Grandma Alexandra! Don't you see, my darlings, how much I love you, my sweet uncles and aunts. The tyrant has fallen! Finally, Uncle Toda, freedom has come knocking at our door.

TODA:

Yes. Get your ass outa here.

ROXANDA:

Uncle Toda, shame on you. my Mommy's very sick. She may be dying at this very minute, but my daddy's a hero, and I'm full of pride, and you've filled the whole yard with your stink. Phew! Is your shit a yardstick for man's immemorial dream? (Klyaka jumps up. Goes to the outhouse, and starts banging in panic on the door.);

KLYAKA:

Hey, Milya, for crying out loud, get out of there, let me in, I'll make a spectacle of myself here in front of all these people! They can hardly wait to see me slip, and that harpy of Yoshka's will gloat.

MILYA:

(Shouts from the outhouse.) This is my John!

KLYAKA:

(Tearfully.) I can't hold out long enough to get up to the tenth floor. The elevator isn't working. (Drops down writhing and cringing, but the others, with the exception of Roxanda and Dragoylo, who's fallen asleep on the porch, gradually start showing signs of acute attacks of gastric pain. Some fall silently, almost mechanically, some writhe, fighting the pain. Roxanda goes from one to the other, shaking them and comforting them.)

ROXANDA:

Come on, get a move on ... get a move on. Freedom is coming! The tram has fallen! Ha! Ha! What is it?! The gentlemen have given up the ghost. Shame, the hardened generation, the heart of humanism and the personification of health. They've stuffed themselves with food, and they want to die. What about freedom?! What'll the world believe in if you kick off with your plants full?! What will science do without your philosophic thought? What will youth do without poetry? Come on, have some more ... thaaat's right! No, Not that. Not that. This. Hey, you! Look how ugly and disfigured you all are, where's the beauty you inspired us with so long and so artfully?!

TODA:

(Groans.) Fin dripping with sweat, too, as if somebody poured a bowl of stale soup over me.

ROXANDA:

But, why? I'm suffocating with happiness.

TODA:

We're all suffocating, but not so much from happiness as from that fucking dust from the plane.

KLYAKA:

(In agony.) Brothers of Dorchol! It looks as if somebody's put something in our food. (Collapses. Grandma Mata appears at the door. Her hair is loose, blowing untidily in the strong breeze. Her face is contorted, her mouth pinched in hatred.)

MATA:

Fools, croaking right before her very eyes, and you can't see she's been poisoning you. She's laughing at you and killing you. Hold on! Catch the witch and stone her. Dragoylo, you blind man! You're revelling in your boiled eggs, and you don't see that this little viper has killed all your issue and ended your line.

DRAGOYLO:

(Wakes up with a start.) Fuck off, old woman! (But Grandma Mata is furious. With wild hatred, she attacks the girl, who has pulled a mask of innocence over her features once again.)

MATA:

Snake! Damned poisonous snake, you foul bitch, when I get you by the hair, I'll tear your heart out of your disgusting snake-like body, I'll throw it down the sewer together with your revolting snake's eyes ... at your age, I was a sweet beauty, with long blond curls, and sky-blue eyes, and you call me a witch. You ... the devil himself would be scared to death at the sight of you.

ROXANDA:

Don't be mad at me, Grandma. It's not my fault I'm ugly.

MATA:

Oh, my Lord, you're not so ugly, you're evil. If you had something decent to wear, a little dress cut low like this ... even Dragoyio the blind man would see again to watch you take the slops out into the yard. Then we could maybe even marry you off to the fireman gentleman. Lord, how handsome he is! Watch out for Sister Valery, though. They say she'll even get violent over him. She took away

his uniform and sent the dogs to the dog pound. Poor gentleman. Oh, lord, what lovely dogs!

ROXANDA:

What about the professor, Grandma. Is he alive?

MATA:

What about him? He's all right. The head doctor ordered him to be prepared for an urgent operation,

ROXANDA:

Did he have a concussion?

MATA:

No, he just won't wake up. They say he got angry because of the air, and he won't breathe. He could do it now, alright. Strange how nice they look when they're not in pain. Tell me, did you ...

ROXANDA:

No, no. The plane was spraying the caterpillars. Let's go inside and help the doctor with mommy. She's been gritting her teeth and rolling her eyes since this morning. You could do one of your spells, with the ashes, or with the glasses, not because you're a witch, but because you're wise. You're a beauty. A real belle.

MATA:

You really mean it?

ROXANDA:

Of course I do, Grandma. Listen, it looks like daddy and Jolly turned over the tram. Now you'll be able to go out into the street whenever you want. To see Belgrade. How it's grown. If it's not too late. (The two of them go into the house, but they almost run into the doctor and Valery, who are just coming out.)

DOCTOR:

It's certainly late. We couldn't do a thing. She was  
dead ages ago.

ROXANDA:

What did I tell you, Doctor?

DOCTOR: .

Doc. (He notices the grotesque scene in the courtyard and stands in amazement) What is this?



ROXANDA:

A picnic, Doc.

DOCTOR:

A picnic?!

ROXANDA:

Yes.

DOCTOR:

(Fascinated.) How strange, what a scene, my God. Sister Valery, no, this is fantastic! Today, in the middle of modern Belgrade, those peaceful faces, such blissful rest after lunch ... Meanwhile people out there are dying ...

ROXANDA:

Be careful not to wake anybody. It would be a pity. Such an innocent picture of the world.

DOCTOR:

Oh, God. How proud I am of my nation's health. Come on, who wants to bet that none of these people has gastritis. Gastritis?! They don't even have heartburn.

MATA:

I'm going to bathe the deceased, dress her up and get her ready for her eternal resting place. (She leaves.)

ROXANDA:

I'll wait for Daddy. To tell him, so he's not shocked. (Delightedly.) He turned over the tram!

DOCTOR:

I've always had unlimited faith in the people's health, and in their cuisine! Who invented pickled pigs'feet, if not the people, stuffed peppers with cheese, pepperoni, and aspic with vinegar and crushed chillies? Who?! Certainly not my boss, the head doctor, Kelava, the head of the city mental asylum, and a dangerous type whom nobody likes, even I'm afraid of him, but I respect him because of his original attitude that garbage isn't garbage, that garbage is a man who overdoes it with detergents, soaps, shampoos, and all other conceivable preparations for the battle against vermin. Gimme a healthy, thriving generation of vermin, says the head doctor, Dr. Kelava, and don't worry about the people's health, because a healthy rat means the people are eating well, and a well-fed body means the spirit is well-nourished. Sister Valery.

VALERY:

Yes, Sir.

DOCTOR:

(Excited.) Here, take his pulse. Be careful not to wake him. Come on, let's take a look at this one with his mouth hanging open from a surfeit of bliss and joy. (Sister Valery kneels near Klyaka and takes his pulse.)

VALERY:

He's as cold as a fish.

DOCTOR:

What do you mean cold? What about the others?

VALERY:

(Frightened.) I don't dare, Doctor.

DOCTOR:

(Shouts) I told you, Doc!

VALERY:

They all look kinda cold to me.

DOCTOR:

In this heat? There, you see, it's hard to get into the

psychology of life. You would have lost your bet. Now, what could be wrong if at this delicate moment, for instance, I had an urge to taste a piece of real homemade pie, to take a slug of brandy and give a traditional whoop? (Screams.) Whoopee! (Pause.) Whoopee! (Surprised.) They certainly are sleeping soundly.

DRAGOYLO:

(Wakes up with a start and throws a pile of eggshells at the doctor.) Shuddup down there! What are you yelling for, you moron, an honest man can't even take a nap after lunch anymore.

DOCTOR:

(Delighted.) Aren't you lucky, what a nice setting, aren't you lucky? Look at how everybody's enjoying himself here, eating black pudding, chewing crackling, ... and you, friend, you're probably getting some sausage-meat ready.

DRAGOYLO:

Nah. I'm blowing up a pig's asshole. (Gets up and walks demonstratively into the house.)

DOCTOR:

(Irritated.) What's with the pulse?

VALERY:

This one isn't working either, Doctor (Quickly.) Doc.

DOCTOR:

Well, that's funny. That's unnatural. How can that be?  
Take a look at this one.

VALERY:

Why, this one's ... oh, God! It looks as if they're all...  
dead!

DOCTOR:

Dead?! What do you mean dead! She said this was a  
picnic.

ROXANDA:

It is a picnic. This is our day, you see, my daddy turned over the tram and the people came out to celebrate, to celebrate the liberation, and they got a little tired of waiting, nothing's happening, nothing's changed, who'll wait it out. Mommy didn't hold out either, but I'm young. Maybe I'll live to see the day. I can't think I'll spend the rest of my life like them, in the garbage heap, living in fear, as it clatters day and night, cutting, smashing, and breaking everything in its path. But it's over now. No more terror, at least not for long. My daddy liberated the entire neighbourhood, and I'm proud. (Notices Jolly who enters

the yard all black with axle-grease, his clothes in shreds, carrying a flattened wheelchair and with a bent crowbar over his shoulder. Roxanda runs up to him, but stops short in fear.)

ROXANDA:

No! You succeeded, oh, Jolly, you finally did it, oh, I'm so happy. Tell me about it, how it shivered and how it fell apart. Where's my daddy? Where's your crowbar? Is that it? Oh God, it's bent, just the way it should be for when they display it in the museum. Let it testify for future generations to your great achievement. You know, Jolly, Mommy died, and now all I have left is my sweet daddy. But he shouldn't worry. I'll cook his frankfurters. And tomorrow there will be plenty of room in the yard anyway, he won't have to come out at the crack of dawn to reserve a place for us, he'll be able to sleep in longer. I'll grate the horseradish myself. I don't care if it makes my eyes water, just so long as he has avenged his legs, just so long as he cast that iron monster in the dust. Speak up. Tell me. Where did you get that wheelchair? Who squashed it like that? You don't mean .. (The clangor of the tram is heard. She is confused, astonished.) But ... How is it possible? Another one already? How could they recover so fast? No, you mean, you didn't make it ... so, that means Daddy is ... I'm completely ... (Frightened, she turns and looks at the doctor and Valery.)

JOLLY:

I tell you we didn't make it. We missed, and how. We

made a bad mistake. The angle was all wrong, and we were on the wrong side. Uncle Yoshka was right, but not all the way, he missed by a fraction. He'd had it in a second. I just turned around and he was gone, we only managed to pull the wheelchair out, me and the brakeman. Look what it did to my brand new crowbar, and the brakeman slammed me a couple of times, I barely got away. But, there's time. I've got his number, I know where its weak points are. The angle's got to be smaller, because the gradient is steep, and it adds to the acceleration, but next time I'll be waiting on a different corner. It's flat down below, and it skids and sinks a little into the melting asphalt. That's the only way. That's a sure way to avenge Mitchka, Grandma Alexandra, Uncle Yoshka's legs, and the rest of him, the part that just got it. So long. I'm off to lunch, I'm running very late, my Ma will kill me. (Jolly goes into the house, tired. Roxanda can't recover from the shock, and looks horrified at Valery, who calmly walks up and puts her hand on her shoulder.)

DOCTOR:

(Points to the corpses in the yard with a shaking finger.) What about them?! (Valery looks questioningly at Roxanda. She nods her head several times.)

VALERY:

(Brusquely.) Send for the undertaker's men to clean them up and cart them off to the morgue!

FADE OUT

### SCENE III

An operating room with a large crystal cupola in the middle of the ceiling. The light in the cupola is dim, scarcely discernible, so that the modern instruments and fixtures gleam ghostly in the semi-darkness. The dimmed lights are reddish, enhancing the morbid impression that the operating room is drenched in blood. Weightless and insubstantial as a ghost, dressed in an impeccable pure white uniform, Roxanda enters the empty room, and while she's still at the door she gasps in surprise, begins to look around the room, turns on the light, plugs in the instruments, so that suddenly everything is blinking and humming, which contributes even more to the general impression of a nightmare. Sister Valery appears at the door, observing Roxanda.)

VALERY:

The light doesn't help, my dear, to penetrate into the dark depths of the human brain. (Roxanda runs up to her, but with a brusque movement of her hand Valery coldly stops her.)



ROXANDA:

Oh, how I love you, my darling, how grateful I am to you that you pulled me out of that garbage and put me on the right track. How profoundly grateful my family would be if they were still alive.

VALERY:

As soon as I saw you I realized that you were one of .] us, and so it was a question of putting things in their proper place, and not so much of helping you. Remember, I'm your superior. Sometimes I may choose to be familiar with you, but you've got to remember your place. In future, take care you don't make any mistakes. Because I'm the head nurse here and you're just a beginner. Maybe with time you'll get ahead, even further than me. But for now things are the way they are. Is that clear?

ROXANDA:

I think I understand, my dear. What's important is that nothing stops me from regarding you in the same light as I always have. (Valery looks at her in surprise, but Doc and two orderlies walk in at that very moment.)

DOCTOR:

The struggle for air! Or, better yet, for breathing. The air's here, but the patient has to be convinced of it. You'll

admit yourselves, gentlemen, that this is something of a rarity in the world.

ROXANDA:

Maybe, Doc, the air should be filtered with artificial ozone, so that ... when the patient wakes up ...

DOCTOR:

That's right, Nurse. That means that we must revive the desire to breathe, and the air will take care of itself, but if we slap a dose of ozone on him, after rain, I mean after the operation ... Who are you, anyway?

ROXANDA:

I'm Roxanda. Your new nurse. My mother is ...

DOCTOR:

Oh, yes ... the one who ...

ROXANDA:

That's right.

DOCTOR:

Never mind, you're a smart kid, true, you're no beauty, but you're smart. What I like about you is that you forgive

and forget. (Turns to Valery.) I like her, sister. (Shouts to the orderly.) Bring in the patient, dammit, what are you waiting for, and turn off the lights, you want to annoy the ingenious Head Doctor Kelava before he starts this unique operation? Whenever I'm nervous, whenever I'm anticipating some great event, I always get hungry, my stomach growls with hunger, and my hands begin to shake. And watch out that crazy fireman doesn't barge in on the Head and ruin our operation. (The orderlies leave the stage.)

Sister Valery. You didn't by any shance buy doughnuts this morning? You wouldn't happen to have one or two left over? Just a bite or two to kill this nervousness.

VALERY:

I'm fasting today. I'm on a diet.

DOCTOR.

What? Aren't you thin enough as it is? Look at yourself. You're like a dried fish. I think I even smell something like that, a mell offish, or ... what is it? What's that terrible stench?

ROXANDA:

Why, it's the ozone. I told them to filter it in through the air vents.

DOCTOR:

Ah! I didn't know, I really had no idea that was ozone.  
So that's what it's like.

ROXANDA:

The smell of the Baltic.

DOCTOR:

Yes, but it's still a bit disgusting, don't you think?

ROXANDA:

You can almost hear the ocean waves crashing against  
the sharp rocks in the Baltic sea.

DOCTOR:

And millions of fish flapping all around in the sand,  
slowly rotting. (The high-pitched giggle of Head Doctor  
Kelava rings out, as, surrounded by a gaggle of men and  
women in impeccable white uniforms, he appears at the  
door.)

KELAVA:

Dorchol smells to high heaven, worse than ever  
before, it's like Chukaritsa when the sugar plant spills its  
cloying waste into the Sava, and the fishermen's wives

cook fish in it afterwards. Ha ... ha ... ha ...

(Uproarious laughter from the whole group of attendants.)

SURGEON:

That's a new one on me, Dad, it sure is a good one, ha ... ha ... ha ... you're great, Dad! You're the greatest ... I'm gonna split my sides laughing. Hey, everybody, Dad's a genius. It's like somebody keeps tickling my ear with a straw, ho ... ho ... ho ...

KELAVA:

They've washed their little face and cleaned their bottoms for them...ha...ha...ha...ha...

SURGEON:

Hey, everybody, I'm dying with laughter...Dad's a genius. This is Dad's day. I'm gonna die laughing...ha...ha...ha...Save an old trooper, Dad's right-hand man.

KELAVA:

You can't recognize them, there they are, they all smell like lilac. Some idiot sprayed them with perfume, and then ... ha ... ha ... ha ... I walk into the morgue and what do I smell ... spring! And I say to myself, what does this mean,

lilacs in autumn, and in the city morgue at that. And then ...  
oh ho ... ho ... ho ... that fat-assed Sister Mileva comes up  
to me rolling her eyes, grinning, and she says: "Dad, what  
after-shave lotion did you use this morning?", and ha ... ha ...  
ha ... so, she says, "You smell irresistibly of lilac." He ...  
he ... he ...

SURGEON:

Ooh ... hooo,hoo .. Dad's a scream, isn't he? Dad's the  
greatest. Dad, don't be mad at me for laughing so hard, but,  
really, you're. ...

KELAVA:

A clown? Ha ... ha ... ha ...

SURGEON:

No! No, Dad. That's not what I meant. Honest. I never  
even thought of it. I meant that you're really the greatest, a  
real genius.

KELAVA:

- OK, OK, let's not overdo things. Geniuses are men,  
too, and they have their faults, and you shouldn't try and  
take advantage of them. Get it?

SURGEON:

I get it, Dad. I have always ...

KELAVA:

(To Valery.) Come here.

VALERY:

(Goes up to him.) Yes, Dad. (The Head Doctor slaps her on the rump.)

KELAVA:

Huh?! Ha ... ha ... ha ... shall we open up his skull and see what's inside, where the little problem is, where the air's not getting through? .. ha ... ha ... ha ...

VALERY:

I'm for that, Dad, body and soul.

KELAVA:

Better body ... better body ... What's that nice smell here?

DOCTOR:

The ozone, Dad.

KELAVA:

Ozone, you don't say! I thought the level of the Danube was rising again, and forcing the sewage back up the pipes ...  
ha ... ha ... ha ...

DOCTOR:

Well, it's true, it does smell a little, Dad, but I think that, in the patient's interests ...

KELAVA:

OK. OK. So long as we've got plenty to eat, we'll worry about the gasses later. And now, bring in the patient. Come on, don't stand around like that. We're standing on the threshold of mankind's future destiny, and I have been personally assigned to resolve this positively.

SURGEON:

Naturally, Dad. That's part of being a genius. We're just ordinary folk, Dad, ordinary surgeons and hack doctors.

KELAVA:

Vulgar, gross butchers of human flesh, which has its laws, which only rare individuals are allowed to learn.



SURGEON:

That's right, Dad.

KELAVA:

Children, surgeons, and other medical riff-raff! There are already vast regions of our planet where the oxygen shortage is dangerously threatening modern man. And the air is here! It may smell, but it's here. We've become over-sensitive, so what if it smells. Man is a strange animal, there's nothing he can't turn to his own advantage, if he has to. Or, to somebody else's advantage and his disadvantage. There lies the greatness of our venture on this day, and why I demand perfect discipline during today's operation. Is that clear?

EVERYBODY:

(All together.) Perfectly clear!

KELAVA:

Bring in the patient. (Double doors open upstage and Marisav and Tsoka wheel in Mladen on a stretcher, completely covered with a white sheet. They transfer him to the table, right under the cupola.)

KELAVA:

All right, open up his skull and let's see what's in there, and strike a blow against the enemy.

SURGEON:

Let's make our bid for glory, Dad. (The surgeons, anesthesiologists and other specialists and nurses surround Mladen.)

KELAVA:

It's as easy as carving turkey, huh? Ha ... ha ... ha ...

SURGEON:

(To one of the other surgeons.) No, not like that, you peasant. I'm sorry Dad, he may have finished medical school, but he thinks he's still on the farm. You think a scalpel's a hoe and the human brain's your potato-patch? Look, like this, first you grab it on this side, then you pull up, there you are, Dad, there you are, it's finished. We've lifted his lid off.

DOCTOR:

(Excitedly rubbing his hands.) Ups-a-daisy! That's the way. Where's the bit that controls the air?

KELAVA:

Watch it, you pig. Why don't you look where you put your big feet? He just stepped on my bunyon.

DOCTOR:

Sorry, Dad. But all this is so exciting. Oh, wow, look how it's steaming! Shall I fan it with my hankerchief to cool him off a bit?

KELAVA:

There you are, children. This is the brain of a writer. Like that of a piglet. No difference, at first glance, but watch out. Watch out.

DOCTOR:

I prefer braised sweetbreads, Dad. I didn't have time for lunch today, and ... and wouldn't you know it, today of all days Sister Valery didn't go out for doughnuts. She's on a diet.

KELAVA:

I say, fuck any place where you can't get a decent education and say a prayer for success, for becoming a useful and valuable member of society.

SURGEON:

What now, Dad? When we're through with him, he'll be working as smooth as an air conditioner.

KELAVA:

Science improves with each passing minute, children, especially neuro-surgery. The brain has nothing left to say for itself.

DOCTOR:

A true blessing, Dad.

KELAVA:

A true blessing for true bovines. Hey, what's that? What are you doing? You want me to smack your fingers with my scalpel? Where do you think you're shoving your mitts?

DOCTOR:

(Mumbles.) Why, into the c ... c ... cranium, Dad.

KELAVA:

(Angrily.) Whose cranium, what cranium? Can't you

see I'm in there already?

DOCTOR:

I thought I'd just straighten out this little ridge ... Look, Dad, how it's gone all crooked. I figure maybe you didn't notice how crooked it is.

KELAVA:

(Solemnly.) The brain is a great mystery! Remember that. Poke around whenever you've got the chance, but leave all the really important cutting to me.

SURGEON:

Naturally, Dad. We never miss a chance, particularly as we're lucky enough to have you as our head.

(Kelava warmly slaps him on the back and makes him almost drop his scalpel.)

KELAVA:

That's the boy! That's the true way to look at true science. And hold onto that scalpel. You almost dropped it. It almost fell in there. You could have cut the man.

SURGEON:

Ha ... ha ... ha ... Dad, I've already cut him, pretty

drastically, too. He's in for a surprise when he wakes up, if he wakes up ... ha ... ha ... (All the doctors shake with laughter. Suddenly they all notice that Kelava isn't laughing and fall silent.)

KELAVA:

(Softly.) What did you say? (Pause.) I'm asking *you*, you jerk, repeat that!

SURGEON:

(In panic.) When he wakes up, I mean, honestly, Dad, that's what I meant, look, anyone can tell you, the whole group, they're all honest people, friends, did I say anything which could cast a slur on Dad's success? He'll be a happy man, I mean, when he wakes up, he'll be able to breathe even without oxygen. I mean, he won't even need it, you know, I mean, he'll be completely cured. Beyond all expectation. As usual, when you're operating.

KELAVA:

All right, all right... Let me have some gauze, to stuff this hole up. Then you'll see how perfectly everything will function.

SURGEON:

Shall we wake him up?

KELAVA:

So, what do you have to say about the operation, eh?

SURGEON:

What can I say, Dad? Mankind has never dreamed that it could reach such heights. Tall oaks from little acorns grow. That's all I can say.

KELAVA:

OK. Wake him up.

DOCTOR:

Shall we give him some room?

KELAVA:

Yes, let's move back. (Except for Valery, everybody moves back, leaving Mladen in center stage. Valery pulls off the white sheet and at that moment all the lights shine out onto the stage, blinding everyone. The operating room is bright and sterile.)

KELAVA:

I'm so excited, children. Look, my palms and the soles of my feet are sweating. Touch my hands. (The surgeon touches his hands.) I expect a great success. Look! He's

moving. Good work, kids! I'm a genius! God, what's this? Looks like he's actually opening his eyes. The operation's a success! This is the greatest day of my life. I did it! Bravo! He's opened his eyes, but can he see? What will he say? Is he breathing? Can he talk? (Whispers.) Say something, say something, come on, whisper ... (Silence. Everyone waits for Mladen's reaction, but nothing is happening on the operating table yet. Suddenly loud banging is heard on the door and Vassily Boris's voice says:

VASSILY:

(Offstage.) Dad! Where's Dad?! Let me in!

KELAVA:

(Confused.) What's that?

VASSILY:

Have mercy on me, Sir. Gimme back my uniform!

DOCTOR:

That's you-know-who. (Imitates a salute.) He got loose, looks like.

VASSILY:

(Shouts.) Here, Dad, skin me alive with that scalpel,



kill me with your own hands, oh wise father, destroy my manhood, but don't destroy my rank. I'm a talented man. I can smell a fire out like a dog, I can feel it coming a mile away. You never know where it'll strike.

KELAVA:

(Angrily.) What's he talking about? Who does he think he's talking to? Here, in the middle of my operation ... get that guy outa here! (All the doctors stand uncertainly. Tsoka and Marisav look questioningly at Valery, but she just nods her head at them. The two of them go out.)

VASSILY:

(Pleadingly.) That's my helmet, Doctor.

KELAVA:

(Hysterically shouting.) Shut that idiot up. Get him out of there. He'll ruin the effect of my operation.

VASSILY:

(Still outside.) What do these two want, Dad? Dad? Don't let them hit me. Hey, Tsoka, Marisav, brothers, friends, don't you recognize me? It's me, the fireman, Vassily Boris, the lieutenant. Only I haven't got my uniform on right now. Ow! Not in the kidneys! Marisav, my friend, my pal, oh, Tsoka, Dad, don't let them hit me.

Valery, honey, they're beating me to a pulp. (And while Vassily Boris is shouting and howling outside the door as Tsoka and Marisav rain blows on him, something strange is going on under the cupola.)

(Mladen sits up like a robot, and rises in all his physical splendor. He is wearing the shining uniform of an officer of the Fire Brigade, with a captain's insignia, and a shining helmet on his head. A cry of admiration rings out in the operating room, and applause and shouts of: "Bravo!" can be heard, drowning out Vassily's cries. Then everything goes quiet, as they wait for Mladen's reaction. But, unexpectedly, there is confusion again. Marisav and Tsoka open the double doors and wheel in Vassiy on a stretcher. He is barefoot, bruised and battered in a torn pair of pyjamas. When they reach the Head Doctor, they dump him off the stretcher. Like a rag, he falls limply at his feet.)

VASSILY:

(Looks at Mladen in astonishment.) Oh, God! Why, they've promoted him! They do whatever they like and nobody can say a word.

(He runs shakily towards Mladen, but weak from his beating, collapses just short of his highly polished boots.) Captain, Captain Mladen Sekulovich! Don't let them do it, don't let them land you with a fireman's axe and hose, you're a tender-hearted soul, you need oxygen, not promotions. True, there isn't any oxygen, and I'm the one

who needs the insignia. I can't function without them, it's the air I breathe! They sent my dogs off to the dog-pound, Puffy and Carmichael, remember what sweet dogs they were, with all of true dogs' virtues, children of the law? Gimme back my uniform! Who am I without it, and who are you with it! Don't let them play with us like this, don't let them destroy our law and order, after all, the mental institution is only inside these walls, there's a whole city out there. And beyond the city is the world! And in the world is light! (But he loses consciousness when Marisav hits him in the back of the neck. Mladen raises his hands as if he wants to speak. All eyes turn to him in anticipation. But Mladen continues to raise his hands, he raises his head and wails).

MLADEN:

Lord, why did you give people such big lungs when the universe is so small?

(Then Mladen begins to choke, cough and splutter, the helmet falls off his head and rolls over to Vassily's leg. Everybody looks at the Head Doctor in amazement.)

SURGEON:

What's the matter with him, Dad? Why is he suffocating when the operation was a success?

KELAVA:

That's just a momentary weakness. He'll make it.

DOCTOR:

No, he won't, Dad, you want to bet?

KELAVA:

Yes, he will. He has to. I didn't make a single mistake. And he's got a heart like a horse. Hold him so he doesn't fall.

(Valery and Roxanda run up to Mladen.)

ROXANDA:

Professor, why are you frightening us like this? What's the matter with you? Remember how at gym classes you taught us how to breathe properly? Why don't you do it that way, if you can. Come on, breathe in, breathe deeply, raise your diaphragm, pull it in, just keep filling and emptying your lungs, that's all, that's what you used to say. Expand your ribs.

VALERY:

Mladen Sekulovich, don't fool around. You have to breathe. Remember the introduction to your book 'Good Morning'. Remember how lovely everything is, how

happy the people are, how carefree. Think of the work that lies ahead of you. You've got to finish all the chapters, to prove that this is a happy time, that medicine is all-powerful. You've got to write about the Head Doctor, his achievements, about us. His loyal helpers, the pride and prosperity it has brought us. Don't you see how wonderful the air is? Can't you smell the ozone?

MLADEN:

(In a coma.) There's no oxygen.

VALERY:

But, of course there is, what about us? What do you think we're breathing?

MLADEN:

You're different. (Expires.)

(Pause.)

VALERY:

He's dead.

ROXANDA:

He suffocated.

KELAVA:

Who says? (Looks around wildly.) Who dares to say the operation wasn't a success?

SURGEON:

But, Dad! Who would even think of such a thing? You're a genius, and this is your most successful operation. We're proud of you, honestly, our whole clinic.

KELAVA:

What can I do if he won't accept the latest achievements of modern medicine? Is it my fault he won't breathe? It's not the lack of oxygen that's his problem, but the fact that he's been poisoned by the idea of its non-existence. That's the problem! Despite our concerted efforts, we're often faced with the fact that our obvious results go unrecognized, that science is under attack, and scientists, and that their patients stubbornly refuse to comply, and then they're gone, they die. And so what! If they refuse to live, it's their funeral. Let's get out of here.

VASSILY:

(Regains consciousness.) Dad. He doesn't need my uniform anymore.

KELAVA:

Go on, take his helmet and get lost. They'll give you back your uniform later.

VASSILY:

(Grabs the helmet and immediately puts it on his head.)  
And the insignia, Dad, will I get my insignia, maybe even these new captain's bars?

KELAVA:

Get out of my way, you idiot. Let me pass. Take whatever you want.

VASSILY:

Oh, but I didn't do anything to deserve this, Dad, such mercy, thank you, oh wise one, I'll be as loyal as a dog. I'll be grateful to the grave.

KELAVA:

Whose grave?

(Energetically walks out and everyone follows him. Vassily happily runs after them, trying to push his way through to the Head doctor.)

VASSILY:

But, Dad. It never crossed my mind, honestly, pray God you don't go before me. No, what am I saying? Why you're immortal. But we're all mortal and we have to bear that in mind, Dad, don't hold our terrible ignorance against us. (Everyone hurriedly leaves the operating room and only Mladen's corpse is left lying on the floor. At the back of the room Grandma Mata appears with a broom. She goes up to a shelf and turns on the radio, music is heard. Then, she sweeps the floor. Soon, the music stops and the radio announcer's voice is heard.)

ANNOUNCER:

Part success, part failure! The enemy would say failure, friends will say success. And we, dear listeners say - right on, to new victories for air, without which we couldn't advance a single step, as you know very well for yourselves. Enough wavering, enough hesitation! It's time to prove the effectiveness of this new spray to the masses. That is, it should be released for general use, regardless of the occasional report that there have been alleged poisonings among the population. That's just enemy propaganda meant to blacken and disavow our grandiose efforts for ... greenery. For air. For the progress of our dear listeners, who, we hope, all regularly pay their radio and television and other subscription fees, and for their road into the future which, if you'll forgive me, but I must say it categorically, must not differ appreciably from our glorius past, because, then, why the effort, why the sacrifices. It's



high time to put our cards on the table and see what the future has in store for us. But at the same time we must caution that we will no longer tolerate those who deliberately and provocatively attack and criticize the City Park Administration and certain other city administrations, which I must insist are completely reliable. And now permit me to reward you for your attention, for your patient listening to what we've been repeating day in and day out, what we've been filling your ears and souls with incessantly, all in the intention of unstintingly rewarding our working man and his unlimited patience, for the umpteenth time, once again, today only, the rave hit song "Old Man Drinking Barley-Water!"

(To the sounds of the familiar song.)

CURTAIN