

DESCRIBE THE NIGHT was first presented in 2014 in a student production at New York University's Graduate Acting Program (Mark Wing-Davey, Chair). It was directed by Giovanna Sardelli, the set design was by Brendan Boston, the costume design was by Michelle Roy, the lighting design was by Michael McGee, and the stage manager was Caroline Englander. The cast was as follows:

ISAAC Carlos Dengler
 NIKOLAI Stephen Stocking
 YEUGENIA Erin Neuffer
 VOVA KeLyn Durrel Jones
 RYAN Jonathan Louis Dent
 URZULA Carol Yvonne Brown
 FELIKS Tim Nicolai
 MARIYA Emma Duncan

The world premiere of DESCRIBE THE NIGHT was commissioned and produced by the Alley Theatre (Gregory Boyd, Artistic Director; Dean R. Gladden, Managing Director) in October 2017. It was directed by Giovanna Sardelli, the set design was by Tim Mackabee, the costume design was by Amy Clark, the lighting design was by Lap Chi Chu, the original compositions and sound design were by Daniel Kluger, the stage manager was Rachel Dooley-Harris, and the production stage manager was Lori Lundquist. The cast was as follows:

ISAAC Jeffrey Bean
 NIKOLAI Todd Waite
 YEUGENIA Liv Rooth
 VOVA Jason Babinsky
 URZULA Melissa Pritchett
 FELIKS Stephen Stocking
 MARIYA Elizabeth Bunch

The New York premiere of DESCRIBE THE NIGHT was presented by Atlantic Theater Company (Neil Pepe, Artistic Director; Jeffrey Lawson, Managing Director) in November 2017. It was directed by Giovanna Sardelli, the scenic design was by Tim Mackabee, the costume design was by Amy Clark, the lighting design was by Lap Chi Chu, the sound design and original music were by Daniel Kluger, the fight master was J. David Brimmer, and the production stage manager was Lori Lundquist. The cast was as follows:

ISAAC Danny Burstein
 NIKOLAI Zach Grenier
 YEUGENIA Tina Benko
 VOVA Max Gordon Moore
 URZULA Rebecca Naomi Jones
 FELIKS Stephen Stocking
 MARIYA/MRS. PETROVNA Nadia Bowers

DESCRIBE THE NIGHT was developed at TheatreWorks, Palo Alto, California, as part of their New Works Festival.

CHARACTERS

(in order of history)

* denotes actual historical figure.

ISAAC*

Russian, Jewish. He is the writer Isaac Babel.

In 1920 he is twenty-five years old, a quiet, shy young man with dreams of being a successful writer, but traumatized from the Polish-Russo war, where he is a wire service journalist—a job he took in order to experience something in life he could write about.

In 1937–40 he is a successful writer of fiction and films. He has robust appetites, and is far more self-assured, he is not intimidated by anyone. He craves danger.

NIKOLAI*

Russian. Last name: Yezhov. A captain in the Russian Red Cavalry in 1920, when he is twenty-five years old. He is enormously self-assured, an accomplished military man. A violent man.

In 1937–40, he is the head of Stalin's Secret Police which will become the KGB.

In 1989, when he is ninety-four, he is a living relic of Russian history, and knows it. He enjoys tormenting young KGB agents.

YEVGENIA*

Russian, the wife of Nikolai Yezhov. In 1940, she is thirty-six. Bright, beautiful, drawn to astrology and supernatural topics. Unhappy in her marriage, but would never say so.

In 1989 she is eighty-six years old. Mischievous, with a humor that is rooted in pain and tragedy.

VOVA*

Russian, a KGB agent stationed in Dresden, East Germany, in 1989, at which time he is thirty-five years old.

In 2010, he is a politician of enormous stature. Deeply self-assured, yet terrified of the world.

URZULA

Twenty-one. Polish, and in 1989 an immigrant, living in Dresden. The granddaughter of Yevgenia.

FELIKS

Polish. Thin, a dreary disposition. An orphan. At twenty-one, in 2010, he feels middle-aged.

MARIYA

Russian, thirties, a journalist for a state-run newspaper in 2010. Moscow born and bred. Strong and steady.

PLACES

Poland, Russia, East Germany

TIME

1920–2010

NOTE

Actors should not speak in any dialect.

CHAPTER HEADINGS

ACT ONE

1. Lies—1920—Polish Countryside (Isaac, Nikolai)
 2. Car Rental—2010—Smolensk (Feliiks, Mariya)
 3. Fate—1937—Moscow (Isaac, Nikolai, Yevgenia)
 4. Bureau 42—1989—Moscow (Vova, Nikolai)
- ### ACT TWO
5. Blood—1989—Dresden (Vova, Yevgenia, Urzula)
 6. State Approved Nostalgia—1940—Moscow (Nikolai, Isaac)
 7. Escape—1940—Moscow (Yevgenia, Isaac)
 8. Glasnost—1989—Moscow (Vova, Nikolai, Urzula)

ACT THREE

9. Freedom—1989—Dresden (Yevgenia, Vova)
10. More Lies—1940—Moscow (Isaac, Nikolai)
11. Silence—2010—Moscow (Mariya, Vova)
12. Even More Lies—2010 (Feliiks, Mariya)

NOTE

If the play is done in two acts, an intermission should follow Scene 4.

DESCRIBE THE NIGHT

ACT ONE

Scene 1

Lies—1920—Polish Countryside

A man in a box (Vova) in a suit with big headphones (circa 1989) speaks into a microphone.

VOVA. Recording session 16-KR-30.

File 490: Herein, regarding incident 9-7-2. This is...during the time of the Russo-Polish War.

Somewhere in the Autumn of Nineteen Hundred and Twenty...1920?
Yes.

Report states:

“Male, aged seventy-one. Cause of death: Heart attack. The man was old, the man was very old. He was a rebel soldier, armed with weaponry that threatened advancing members of the Red Cavalry, and so was justifiably detained, after which he suffered cardiac arrest and died.”

Reported by YugROSTA Wire Services State Reporter, *I. Babel*.
Verified by Area Supervising Captain, *N. Yezhov*.

That's all the information available in our records of this single, unimportant event during the Russo-Polish War of 1920.

And yet, this is not the last time wire services reporter *I. Babel*, first name Isaac, is connected with Area Supervising Captain *N. Yezhov*, first name Nikolai.

Theirs is an allyship that would begin this night and last two decades.

As he speaks, lights up elsewhere... Isaac, twenties, sits writing in his journal in the woods.

In twenty years' time they will both be sentenced to death for betraying the Soviet Union.

They were traitors and they deserved to die.

Lights out on Vova.

Isaac writes, unhappy with his writing. The sound of crickets... horses murmuring... the wind...

Nikolai, twenties, a stern, imposing soldier enters behind him.

NIKOLAI. Writing.

ISAAC. What?

NIKOLAI. Writing, writing. This is you:

He pantomimes furious writing.

Writing.

ISAAC. It's what I do.

NIKOLAI. *Babel, I.* Correspondent. YUGROSTA. Wire Service.

ISAAC. Yes, that's me, it's what I do.

NIKOLAI. *Babel, I.* "Y" stands for?

ISAAC. Isaac.

NIKOLAI. What?

ISAAC. Isaac...

NIKOLAI. What?

ISAAC. Isaac.

NIKOLAI. *Isaac.* Isaac Babel.

Introduces himself.

Yezhov, N. "N" stands for: Nikolai.

ISAAC. Yes, I know, I know who you are.

NIKOLAI. What kind of accent is that?

ISAAC. I'm not sure. Odessa.

NIKOLAI. Jew?

ISAAC. What kind of accent is yours?

NIKOLAI. Standard Russian. Straight across the middle. Little to

no affect. Man of the People. What are you writing? A report for today? Wire services? *"Here is the war. Here is the war in writing. So, you who are not here, at the war, can know what the war is like."*

Beat; he expects Isaac to respond, but Isaac doesn't.

So? Is that the wire report?

ISAAC. No. Just writing.

NIKOLAI. Just writing what?

ISAAC. In my journal.

NIKOLAI. A journal is for journalists.

ISAAC. No, my journal is my diary. Personal reflections on my daily life.

NIKOLAI. I don't understand you. Maybe the accent.

ISAAC. Okay.

NIKOLAI. Okay what?

ISAAC. Okay, you don't understand me.

NIKOLAI. Army journalist, correspondent from YUGROSTA, you report on such events as the Red Cavalry does. You send reports across the wire. Such reports are based on observations, or, as you say, "personal reflections." You have a "journal" in which you write these. But your reports to YUGROSTA: not personal reflection?

ISAAC. Not really, no.

NIKOLAI. Then they are lies!

ISAAC. I mean, I write facts.

NIKOLAI. Facts, then. Facts are not personal reflections?

ISAAC. My diary is just for me to write to myself.

NIKOLAI. I don't understand you. Maybe the accent.

ISAAC. Sometimes I write to myself to make sense of the day.

NIKOLAI. Point is, Correspondent Babel: The report for today. What of it?

ISAAC. Today?

NIKOLAI. Today's actions. What did you write today?

Isaac realizes why Nikolai is here.

ISAAC. Today?

NIKOLAI. YOUR REPORT! HAVE YOU WRITTEN IT?

ISAAC. Not yet.

NIKOLAI. When?

ISAAC. Commander Yezhov, you can be assured—I won't.

NIKOLAI. You won't what?

ISAAC. (*Trying to spit this out.*) You are concerned that I will write about you. What you did today. That I will send it along the wire.

NIKOLAI. (*Flustered.*) Write what you will write, I don't care what you write, as long as you write facts! As long as everything is TRUE.

ISAAC. (*Sighs; in despair.*) I don't know what's true. I'm the worst person to determine what is true.

NIKOLAI. Don't be stupid. True is what happens. False is what does not happen.

Beat.

Writers.

I don't care what you write.

So, a man was killed today in Zhytomyr. This happens. I did it in front of everybody and everybody saw, and the man had an axe.

ISAAC. Of course.

NIKOLAI. The man had an axe.

ISAAC. I know.

NIKOLAI. And so the man was killed.

It doesn't matter if he was old. If he was very old.

Old people fight, too.

Old people die, too.

If you are old, and if you have an axe, and if you approach a soldier, a soldier like me... then you should expect...

You should know what to expect.

ISAAC. I agree with you. And anyhow it wasn't newsworthy.

NIKOLAI. It wasn't?

ISAAC. No. Wire services want basic, generalizations, with a touch of humanity.

NIKOLAI. I have humanity.

ISAAC. Of course you do.

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NIKOLAI. But you don't write about me.

ISAAC. Not to date.

NIKOLAI. I'm saying, in the future, you could write about me. About my humanity.

ISAAC. Of course.

NIKOLAI. You're saying you will?

ISAAC. If something happens newsworthy, yes.

NIKOLAI. Right, well, you wouldn't just make something up. True is what happens. False is what does not happen.

Nikolai tosses his cigarette, checks, finds he is out of cigarettes. There are never enough cigarettes.

Beat.

ISAAC. Describe the night.

NIKOLAI. What?

ISAAC. The night. Describe it.

NIKOLAI. Which night?

ISAAC. This night. Right here. Now.

NIKOLAI. Why?

ISAAC. I just described it in my journal. I'm wondering how you would describe it. And if we both describe the same thing at the same time, will one of our descriptions be more true than the other?

NIKOLAI. What? No! Shut up.

Beat; he decides to describe the night.

Black.

Quiet.

Not so quiet,

Not so black.

I don't know, the night can't be described.

The night is for sleeping.

The night is for smoking when one can't sleep.

He looks off in the distance.

Low in the eastern sky, over there: Venus.

ISAAC. Where?

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NIKOLAI. That glow, there. Venus is called a Morning Star, but it's not a star, it's a planet.

Beat.

How did you describe the night? Give me your book. Let me see.

Isaac hands him his book. Nikolai reads it.

Mine is more true than yours. This doesn't make any sense. Too many words.

Nikolai reads other pages of the book.

(*Chuckles.*) Lots of things described here! Kitchen. River. Market-place, yes...

ISAAC. Don't read the rest...it's personal...

Nikolai walks away, engrossed in it.

NIKOLAI. (*Getting angry.*) What? What? WHAT THE HELL IS THIS?!

ISAAC. It's nothing! It's not supposed to be true! Give it back!

NIKOLAI. You said facts! These aren't facts!

ISAAC. That's not for the wire report, damnit, it's just my personal diary!

NIKOLAI. THIS ISN'T REAL!

ISAAC. Of course it isn't real! I told you that! Give it back!

NIKOLAI. The daughter didn't cry out like this! She didn't cry out like this when he was killed. She simply knelt beside him and cleaned his face. She didn't cry out.

Beat.

And you blame the Poles for this. When it was me who killed the old man, not the Poles.

DON'T LIE ABOUT ME!

ISAAC. I didn't!

NIKOLAI. *YOU DID!*

ISAAC. Listen!

NIKOLAI. No!

ISAAC. Have you ever put your nose into the ass of a goat and just breathed in?

NIKOLAI. *What?*

ISAAC. If you do this, then you can read people's minds.

NIKOLAI. That's not...read their minds how?

ISAAC. The gaseous interiors of a goat inspire supernatural clarity.

NIKOLAI. *What?*

ISAAC. I love goat ass, I love reading minds.

NIKOLAI. (*Looks around, nervous.*) Where are these goats?

ISAAC. Ah, but I have such advanced powers of smell, I detect goat ass from miles away!

NIKOLAI. Really?

ISAAC. NO! None of these things are true! I've never smelled a goat ass, I can't read people's minds! Am I a liar? No, I'm not. *I tell stories.*

A moment of shocked silence and then Nikolai laughs hysterically, truly impressed at Isaac.

NIKOLAI. You made all that up? You just invented it?!

ISAAC. Yep.

NIKOLAI. No...no...whoa...Tell me another lie.

ISAAC. My father was a French spy.

NIKOLAI. Really?

ISAAC. No.

Nikolai erupts in laughter again.

NIKOLAI. Tell me another!

ISAAC. I only have seven toes.

NIKOLAI. Really?

ISAAC. No.

NIKOLAI. How do you DO that?!

ISAAC. I stole some wine from the Zhytomyr cathedral, would you like to share it with me?

NIKOLAI. (*Laughing.*) Too much! Too much!

Isaac takes a small bottle from his coat.

ISAAC. No, I'm serious, I stole some wine. Look: Wine. Unconsecrated. Not yet the blood of Christ, but still wine.

NIKOLAI. I like you!

Wondrous lies!

(*Tasting wine; wincing.*) Ugh... Polish wine.

ISAAC. It's no wonder... Here in Poland, wine is made from squeezing bread, not grapes.

NIKOLAI. Really?

ISAAC. No.

NIKOLAI. (*Smiles.*) You are different, Isaac Babel. You are different.

ISAAC. Writers are different than soldiers.

NIKOLAI. But here we sit, together, under the same Polish sky, drinking Polish wine, suffering through Poland.

Beat.

(*Sadly.*) The food is different here.

ISAAC. In these parts of rural Poland, they have a leech soup...

NIKOLAI. Disgusting.

ISAAC. A national delicacy. Lukewarm broth with living leeches swimming within. Once served, you prick your finger with a needle, and dip your bleeding fingertips into the soup. The leeches immediately begin to feed upon your blood, and they engorge themselves. And then you eat the soup, *and* the engorged leeches. They say it cures forgetfulness.

NIKOLAI. But *how*?! And *why*?!

Beat.

No... *Another lie?*

He smiles, puts his arm around Isaac.

I can't believe how good at lying you are.

ISAAC. Tell me a lie.

NIKOLAI. How?

ISAAC. Make something up.

NIKOLAI. I can't.

ISAAC. Everyone can.

NIKOLAI. I don't know how.

ISAAC. Just prepare to say something true, and then say the opposite.

Nikolai looks like he's thinking, prepares to say something then can't.

NIKOLAI. I can't. Lies are lies are lies.

I can't.

Beat.

The old man was actually an old woman.

And she...

She had twenty-two children.

No, I don't like that.

The old man was an old man and he had an axe.

Maybe it wasn't an axe.

My lie is: The old man didn't have an axe, he had a shovel.

And he was going to dig a grave.

For his son.

And he wasn't angry or attacking, but merely weeping.

And I didn't like the sight of him weeping and dressed in stupid rags and the idea of digging a grave for his son was disgusting to me so I cut his throat and the world is happier for it.

Is that a lie?

ISAAC. Is that a lie?

NIKOLAI. I'm asking you.

ISAAC. Only you can say.

NIKOLAI. It is a lie. A man attacked me with an axe and so I killed him.

You are better at lying than me.

Beat.

ISAAC. Is that really Venus?

NIKOLAI. Particularly visible this month, at this hour.

ISAAC. How do you know about planets?

NIKOLAI. My wife studies these sorts of things. You would like her. She thinks she can predict the future.

ISAAC. Is she ever right?

NIKOLAI. Nah. All she predicts is war. What sort of prediction is that?

ISAAC. And yet, here we are. At war.

NIKOLAI. I say to her, *well, darling, if all you do is predict the same thing over and over, then it's not really a prediction.*
War.

There will be *war*.

What kind of prophecy is that?

Wars should be done by now.

ISAAC. But they're not.

NIKOLAI. No. They're not.

And anyhow we aren't at war. Not at this moment.

ISAAC. We aren't?

NIKOLAI. No, look. Look:

The sky is like a chandelier in Moscow.

And we are like men having tea.

And the crickets are some violins, and the horses breathing over there, are the quiet, soft murmuring of pretty women in the tea house.

Beat.

Maybe one of them is about to sing.

Scene 2

Car Rental—2010—Smolensk

Vova appears in his box.

VOVA. Recording session...

Regarding Smolensk Air Disaster.

The date of this...

Ten April 2010.

Reads.

"On April 10, 2010, an aircraft carrying Polish President Lech Kaczyński and ninety-five others crashes in the Smolensk military airfield in Western Russia, killing all on board.

Casualties include Poland's presidential couple, commanders of its ground, sea, air, and special forces, and the head of its central bank. The officials had been on their way to commemorate the seventieth anniversary of the Katyn Massacre, in which some twenty-two thousand Polish intellectuals and prisoners of war were murdered in 1940 by the Nazis."

"Cause of crash: Engine failure."

"Alternate cause of crash: Low visibility due to fog led to collision with the trees of the Katyn forest."

"Alternate cause of crash: Pilot error."

"Alternate cause of crash: Redacted."

He discovers another file within the file...

Oh...

Something else...it was...it was stuck to the inner side of the folder, somehow...

As he looks at this, elsewhere we come up on a dim and rundown, generic car rental office in Smolensk, Russia.

Mariya—an urbane, attractive woman in her late twenties stands across from Feliks, twenty-one, the clerk. They stare at each other with anxiety and intensity.

"Tokareva-comma-Mariya, reporter, *Gazeta*."

"Woman reporter from Moscow, present among accepted and vetted journalists at Smolensk airport, to interview President Kaczyński..."

"Tokareva-comma-Mariya does not report back to authorities after the plane crashes in the forest."

"Reporter never found."

"She is presumed dead."

Vova disappears.

MARIYA. I need to rent a car.

FELIKS. We're closed, get the fuck outta here!

MARIYA. Look, it's freezing out there. You can help me out, right?
I can tell you're a good guy.
FELIKS. I ain't a charity!
MARIYA. I just need to—
FELIKS. *I don't need people pounding on my door today!*
MARIYA. No, I wanted—
FELIKS. You wanted what? Huh? You wanted what? We are
CLOSED and so I want you out of here NOW before I—
MARIYA. NO! NO! YOU DON'T YELL AT ME! I'VE HAD A
REAL FUCKING BAD DAY AND I DON'T CARE IF YOU'RE
CLOSED I NEED TO RENT A FUCKING CAR, SO LET ME DO
THAT AND I WILL LEAVE YOU ALONE!

*As if both startled by their respective ferocity, they just stand
there in awkward silence...*

FELIKS. I only have mid-size sedans.
MARIYA. Good yeah. That's fine.

Feliks goes to the other side of the counter. He takes a clipboard.

FELIKS. How long?
MARIYA. How long for what?
FELIKS. (*Irritated.*) *How long you wanna rent the car for?*
MARIYA. Okay! I got it!
One day. Just, only...one day.
FELIKS. License...
MARIYA. What?
FELIKS. Driver's license...do you have one? Necessary. And
credit card.
MARIYA. Yes, here...
She gives him both.
FELIKS. Fill this out. Please write legibly. I have a hard time
reading messy handwriting.
MARIYA. Okay, well that's good, because I have very legible
handwriting.
FELIKS. I'm not making a joke.

MARIYA. Can I return the car in Moscow?
FELIKS. That requires an additional form.
MARIYA. I don't care about forms!
FELIKS. And you gotta rent it for a full week, with full insurance.
And that's non-negotiable, it's non-negotiable!
MARIYA. What's your accent?
FELIKS. What? Nothing. I don't got an accent.
MARIYA. Are you Polish?
FELIKS. No.
MARIYA. You're not?
FELIKS. No.
MARIYA. Where're you from?
FELIKS. Nowhere. Warsaw. Poland. Yeah, okay, I'm Polish. *Why?*
You got a problem with that?
MARIYA. Do you *know* who was on that airplane?
FELIKS. I dunno. People.
MARIYA. The President of *Poland* was on that airplane.
FELIKS. That's not true.
MARIYA. It is.
FELIKS. No it's not! That's a lie. It was just a normal plane with
normal people!
MARIYA. Did you see it crash?
FELIKS. What? *No.*
I didn't see it.
I didn't see it, it was in the corner of my line of sight, I was outside.
I was looking away.
MARIYA. You saw it?
FELIKS. That's not what I said! I heard it and I saw an explosion.
MARIYA. You saw it explode...
FELIKS. I guess when a plane crashes it explodes! There was fog!
They came in too close. They hit the tops of the trees in the woods
and there was nothing left to do.
MARIYA. So you saw it crash.

FELIKS. No. What I just said, that's what I inferred.

Beat; he eyes her warily again.

The police cut the whole area off. This whole area...nobody can come in here.

Why are you here?

Who are you?

MARIYA. I came with a crew of reporters.

FELIKS. *(A whole new thing.)* You're a reporter?

MARIYA. Yes...

FELIKS. You didn't tell me that! You should say something like that, you should say it outright!

MARIYA. I'm not here writing about...*that!*

I only came down here to do a stupid human interest story on the President and the First Lady of Poland, who are now *dead*...right over there in the woods.

FELIKS. You're not supposed to be here. ...They're looking for you, aren't they?

MARIYA. No, I...

FELIKS. You come barging in here! You're trying to escape, and now I'm helping you...

No! You can't rent a car! I'm not getting mixed up with you! Get out! MARIYA. Listen! Please... They don't know I'm here! There were like ten of us in the press room, and I went out to smoke and the plane crashed, and then I...I watched them lead the reporters into a police van...everyone was arrested just because they were *there!* And my one friend in the bunch, this guy Yuri, who's big, you know, he's like a big guy, starts asking questions and they... They clubbed him in the head and he...

He just went down.

And so I've spent the last six hours hiding in a dumpster.

So I'm not exactly a reporter at this precise moment, I'm just a very scared person who wants to get the hell out of Smolensk!

FELIKS. What do you think you're going to do? Rent a car and then drive out down the road? There's police at every turnoff. You'll get stopped and picked up as soon as you leave.

This only just occurred to Mariya. She has to sit down.

MARIYA. Fuck.

(To herself; with despair.) What am I going to do?

(More to Feliks.) What am I going to do?

He ignores her; he goes back to peering out the window.

Hey. What's your name?

FELIKS. I'm not telling you my *name*.

MARIYA. Fine. I'm just being friendly.

FELIKS. Well don't be.

MARIYA. I'm Mariya. Mariya Tokareva.

FELIKS. Great. So great. So great to meet you.

MARIYA. Look, can I stay here?

FELIKS. What?

MARIYA. You're right, I can't rent a car and drive down the street. I don't know what I was thinking, I've been...I've been...

She takes a deep nervous breath; trying to keep it together.

I've had a rough day, okay?

FELIKS. You can't *stay* here.

MARIYA. Not forever! Just until...*all that*...is over.

FELIKS. No, you can't stay here! Police have already been by here once, and they said they're coming back and so—

MARIYA. The police have been here?

FELIKS. What do you think? Of course they came here. And I didn't know why... They're lookin' around so much, I think maybe they wanted to rent a car. And they're giving it to me, asking questions, and it was off, something was wrong, they were going to kill me I thought...

And then one of them gets a call, and they're out of here. But said they'd be back, so now I'm sitting around waiting for *that* pleasant experience to continue. And so *No*, Mariya Tokareva, you can't *stay here*. The last thing I need is for police to come back here and find I'm harboring a fugitive reporter.

Beat.

I don't like police, and I don't like soldiers, and I don't like people who like police and soldiers, and I don't like people in general.

An explosion outside that makes them jump...

Then the lights go dead.

MARIYA. What happened? I can't see...

FELIKS. Don't move...

MARIYA. What happened to the lights?

FELIKS. Don't move... There's people out there, don't move!

Emergency lights come on...

Then there are gunshots heard, men yelling, the screech of something ungodly... Mariya and Feliks are both so scared, she sits on the floor in a ball, and he scoots across the room and leans against his desk, both like frightened children.

The sounds that follow make no sense. Then it's silent again.

Both Mariya and Feliks sit across from each other, both afraid to move or speak.

(Quietly.) Mariya...

MARIYA. Are you okay?

FELIKS. I did something bad. I did something... that I shouldn't have done...

Beat.

I went out there. I went into the woods.

MARIYA. You did? You went out there after the—

FELIKS. —Everything smelled of gasoline. I can't get the smell out of my nose, fuel. Gasoline. And there were airplane seats, chunked into the ground like tombstones. Just partial bodies in each one. But there was a woman.

She was older, she was still alive. She sees me and she smiled at me. She had a piece of metal coming out of her neck. But she was holding a book... she had a book in her hands and she handed it to me.

MARIYA. What was it?

FELIKS. A diary. A really old diary... I mean look at this...

He pulls out an old diary from under the desk. It is Isaac Babel's diary from 1920.

It's from like 1920... I can't read most of it... it's very messy handwriting.

He hands it to her... But it's too dark for her to really look at it. She handed it to me and I took it and she said, "thank you my son."

Beat.

Why would she say that to me?

Why's someone got to say something like that, and really formal too, as if she meant it, not like it was some nickname. People should think more when they have dying words especially if they utter them to strangers. I grew up in an *orphanage*, and this woman doesn't know that, but then she says something crazy like call me her son and then dies?! What kind of messed up shit is that?

MARIYA. People see things when they die.

FELIKS. That's fine, they don't need to talk about it while they do.

MARIYA. You grew up in an orphanage?

FELIKS. The Warsaw State Commorancy for Boys. Yeah.

It wasn't so bad.

Beat.

We used to play a game, "whose mother is worst?" Sit around thinking up the worst people for our mothers.

It was the only way we could think about them. Ugly, whore witches who shit outside and then eat their shit.

MARIYA. Okay...

FELIKS. Look, we never imagined they were nice or sitting in a seat, dying, smiling, calling us "son."

Long beat.

MARIYA. She probably wasn't so nice.

FELIKS. Who?

MARIYA. That bitch in the seat. She probably drank her own piss.

FELIKS. *(Manages a chuckle.)* Yeah...

MARIYA. She probably chewed her toenails off and ate them.

FELIKS. Yeah, she tortured animals.

MARIYA. With a fork she did.

FELIKS. Yeah. With a fork.

They quietly laugh, not hard, but just enough to relax microscopically. Gallows humor.

My name... My name is Feliks.

MARIYA. *Feliks.* That's a good name.

Beat.

What's happening out there?

Everywhere?

FELIKS. Bad stuff.

MARIYA. I'm sitting in that dumpster today, thinking...I was thinking I was going to die today. And I couldn't stop thinking about my landlady. This old lady...She runs a laundry and I live above it...She gives me a rate if I help her fold. She's mean and sour and she never smiles or laughs. And if I disappeared, the only person in the entire world who would notice would be her. Old Mrs. Petrovna.

FELIKS. *Mrs. Petrovna.*

I can picture her.

MARIYA. Talk about terrible breath.

FELIKS. She probably steals one sock from every load of laundry she does.

MARIYA. That's not the half of it. I bet she's like a former KGB or something.

FELIKS. She probably pulled people's fingernails out once upon a time.

MARIYA. No regrets either.

FELIKS. What a bitch.

MARIYA. She probably works for Putin. She probably crashed that plane herself.

FELIKS. That's not funny.

MARIYA. I'm just kidding.

FELIKS. Don't kid about that.

MARIYA. It's a joke.

FELIKS. Doesn't matter, don't joke about that.

MARIYA. Okay...

FELIKS. There was a fog and they hit the trees! Wasn't nothing on purpose!

People talk about everything like it's a big spy novel. Life isn't like that.

MARIYA. I know, I agree.

FELIKS. You "agree" but you're a media person, and so you you love to make up stories that are more interesting than what the truth is and what the truth is that sometimes planes crash.

MARIYA. Clearly. Especially planes carrying the entire government of Poland.

FELIKS. Go ahead, write your news story about it, that's what they pay you for. But don't expect me to be any part of it.

MARIYA. I'm not writing anything about it, I'm not that kind of journalist. I write stupid puff pieces about nothing. I don't care about the world or important things anyway, so just relax.

FELIKS. Yeah, right, "relax." Look, there's an old access road, from before they renovated the airport, it's mostly covered over by weeds now, but it leads out of here and through an abandoned factory lot. There's a gate chained shut, but the chain is busted and if you slightly move the car into it, it'll pop. And then you have to lug this dirt road next to this swamp...it's like pure sewage, smells like death, and if the car falls in it would probably disintegrate, but that's a way out. That's a way you could drive if you wanted to get out. There won't be any police along that way, I guarantee you.

He goes behind the desk and finds a pair of keys.

I have an old truck out back, it's not even on my registry. You could take it.

Take it. Just get out before they come back.

Headlights of a car beam through the window. A car, pulling in the driveway...

Fuck they're here. Police are here!

Take the truck. Get out of here. Out the back door!

He grabs the diary.

And take this diary with you...I don't even know why I have it...
The police will come back, search this place, and if they find this...

MARIYA. I don't want it!

FELIKS. I'm giving you a fucking truck! Take the book, will you?

MARIYA. OKAY! Okay...

FELIKS. Now go! Get out! Go!

Mariya rushes out the back door. Feliks stands up. He stares at the front door...A loud pounding on the door...The echoes of which lead to the next scene.

Scene 3

Fate—1937—Moscow

As the pounding slowly diminishes, we come up on a warm parlor of a home...

Nikolai and Isaac at Nikolai's home. Both men older, forties, successful in their fields.

NIKOLAI. ...When the police come, to your house, when they pound that door and demand entrance, what do you do? I'm asking you, this isn't some pomp-litery-rhetorical question, Isaac Babel, what do you do when the police come and pound on the door?

ISAAC. I open it?

NIKOLAI. Exactly. That is precisely what you do, you open it. Because if you don't, we will break it down. And don't bother with the back door, we already have men there waiting. You see, we have thought ahead.

ISAAC. It seems so.

NIKOLAI. And then, once the door is open, then what? Police are standing in your living room, what do you do then?

ISAAC. Offer them a drink?

NIKOLAI. Well, we wouldn't say no—although some might think it's a bribe.

ISAAC. It's just good hospitality.

NIKOLAI. I'm trying to tell you about protocol.

ISAAC. Say I offered them a drink.

NIKOLAI. These are working men, after all, they deserve a drink.
ISAAC. Or tea.

NIKOLAI. If it's the morning.

ISAAC. They would come in the morning?

NIKOLAI. NKVD comes at all hours!

ISAAC. Morning is not so good for me.

NIKOLAI. We give no consideration to your personal whim! When police come, police come!

ISAAC. But you, Nikolai, Chief of the NKVD, Joseph Stalin's bulldog can't massage the works?

Nikolai laughs, finally hands Isaac wine.

NIKOLAI. Bulldog! That's good.

Sometimes this business happens quick and word might not reach me in time. This is why I'm briefing you—in case I can't intercede. You're my old friend, and I'll always do what I can, but justice is swift. Also stay out of trouble and don't write anything subversive.

ISAAC. What does "subversive" mean?

NIKOLAI. You're the writer, you tell me.

ISAAC. It always means something different to someone else.

NIKOLAI. It means what it means. I didn't invite you over here to just drink wine.

ISAAC. I was wondering. It's been a long time. Seventeen years, I think.

NIKOLAI. Seventeen years?! No!

ISAAC. The war was what, 1920?

NIKOLAI. Yes, but...

He painstakingly does math in his head.

My God. Seventeen years!

ISAAC. Too long.

NIKOLAI. Which is why! I have to tell you: Things are going to become very difficult for writers.

ISAAC. What writers?

NIKOLAI. All writers. Especially creative-type writers like you.

ISAAC. Very difficult how?

NIKOLAI. Just stay out of trouble and don't write anything subversive.

ISAAC. Okay, and then?

NIKOLAI. Then, this is the most important part of everything. Remember this over anything else I ever tell you. Are you listening?

ISAAC. Yes.

NIKOLAI. Never confess.

ISAAC. Never confess what?

NIKOLAI. What did I just say?! Never confess! You need me to translate into your dirty Odessan street talk? Never confess! Doesn't matter what, never confess!

ISAAC. Okay. "Never confess." So lie?

NIKOLAI. I didn't say that I just said "never confess." Even if they torture you.

ISAAC. (*Almost laughing.*) They're going to torture me?

NIKOLAI. NEVER CONFESS.

ISAAC. Okay. Good advice.

NIKOLAI. It's good to see you, it's been too long.

ISAAC. Here's to your promotion.

NIKOLAI. No, here's to your fame and fortune.

ISAAC. Here's to the shit wine of Poland.

NIKOLAI. Here's to your stinking, miserable lies.

ISAAC. I've never told a lie ever. I categorically deny the accusation.

NIKOLAI. Wait! Do you want cakes?

ISAAC. No thank you.

NIKOLAI. You don't like cakes?

ISAAC. I like cakes.

NIKOLAI. (*Shouting out of the room.*) Yevgenia! Bring cakes! (*To Isaac.*) My wife. (*Shouts.*) Yevgenia!

She sits in there all day, reading, like a mouse.

ISAAC. Nikolai, I do not need any cakes, I assure you, I...
He stops when he sees Yevgenia, thirties, standing in the door. He is taken with her.

NIKOLAI. Yes, good, Yevgenia! This is my old friend from the war in Poland.

YEVGENIA. Isaac Babel. Stories and poems and screenplays! My husband speaks of you often.

NIKOLAI. No I don't, I don't speak of him often.

YEVGENIA. Forgive me—not often—but he speaks of you...he speaks of you with great fondness.

NIKOLAI. No I do not.

YEVGENIA. I have read your work, Isaac Babel.

NIKOLAI. I told you, she reads and reads!

ISAAC. And? How did you find it? My work.

YEVGENIA. Vivid! Awful. Wonderful. Sad.

Isaac is moved by this appraisal.
He touches his chest, slightly bows.

ISAAC. Madam...

NIKOLAI. (*As he exits; annoyed.*) I will fetch the cakes, I will get them, I must do everything around this miserable house...

Nikolai exits.

YEVGENIA. You wrote a film! What is that like to write a film and then watch a film become a film?

ISAAC. Thrilling.

YEVGENIA. Is that so?

ISAAC. One watches their own deepest notions come alive across a screen.

YEVGENIA. That strikes me as terrifying, actually.

ISAAC. But isn't it so? That terror and excitement can walk hand in hand?

YEVGENIA. Is it so?

ISAAC. In my experience.

YEVGENIA. I have always dreamed about what it might be like to be in a film.

ISAAC. Well then, let's arrange that. You could be in *my* film.

YEVGENIA. What do you...NO!

Nikolai enters with cakes.

ISAAC. Nikolai, don't you think so?

NIKOLAI. What?

ISAAC. Yevgenia should act in my film.

NIKOLAI. (*As if this is the funniest thing he's ever heard.*) Ha! Ha! Yes, that's good, that's perfect!

ISAAC. You could, you could!

YEVGENIA. But I am not an actress...

ISAAC. Nikolai... You've told me yourself, haven't you? Your wife is very talented.

NIKOLAI. She's okay.

ISAAC. Let us cast you then! A starlet of the silver screen!

YEVGENIA. Don't be silly...!

NIKOLAI. Babel... Wives are not actresses, wives are wives.

YEVGENIA. Isaac Babel, are you married?

NIKOLAI. No.

ISAAC. Yes.

NIKOLAI. *WHAT?* You married?! When did you marry?

ISAAC. Nine years ago.

NIKOLAI. Nine years?!

You never told me you were married! You never told me that! You didn't invite me to your wedding!

YEVGENIA. Dear...

NIKOLAI. No!

Is this one of your stupid lies again?

ISAAC. I'm afraid I am married.

NIKOLAI. (*Forceful to Isaac.*) Why wouldn't you tell me you were married?

ISAAC. It's not something I speak about. She lives in Paris and...

NIKOLAI. (*The weirdest thing he has ever heard.*) *Your wife lives in Paris?*

ISAAC. Yes. And I live here. In Moscow.

NIKOLAI. Why does your wife live in *Paris*?

ISAAC. Yevgenia, have you been to Paris?

NIKOLAI and YEVGENIA. No.

ISAAC. Well! Paris is...

Beat.

Nikolai, in Paris... there are *no rules*.

NIKOLAI. (*Hushed.*) *My God...*

ISAAC. Once you've been, you'll never want to leave. So she stayed. She's happier in Paris.

And I'm happier that she's in Paris.

NIKOLAI. Oh. Well. I understand that.

ISAAC. Nikolai, many actresses are married and so they are both wives and actresses... and all I'm saying is that Yevgenia could be both, too.

YEVGENIA. That's quite enough! My husband is right: I am a wife. Besides, no actress is just cast in a role simply because the writer feels like it.

ISAAC. I mean...

YEVGENIA. Actors audition!

NIKOLAI. Yes, you see? There are specific regulations one must follow to achieve acting.

ISAAC. Then audition. For me. Right now. I will tell you what to say and then you "perform" it.

NIKOLAI. Terrific! Yes! Do this!

YEVGENIA. This is foolishness, plain and simple! I will leave you gentlemen to your jokes and wine.

NIKOLAI. No, Yevgenia! Audition! This is good fun.

YEVGENIA. (*Smiling.*) Writerly mischief, is what it seems like, but yes, carry on.

ISAAC. Wonderful!

You play...*Daria*. You are speaking to *Gashpar*, a man who has a briefcase with something very important inside of it. You need the briefcase, but you can't let him know that. And so you are trying to be charming. Also you are in love with him. And he loves you, but you don't know that yet.

NIKOLAI. What a character!

YEVGENIA. What's in the briefcase?

ISAAC. Information.

YEVGENIA. About what.

ISAAC. About who you are. *Daria* has amnesia, and she is trying to figure out who she is.

YEVGENIA. Fine. Go.

ISAAC. *Gashpar* is sitting on a park bench near a lake in Odessa. You walk to him.

She does.

Wonderful! Wonderful!

YEVGENIA. Go.

ISAAC. "There used to be more ducks in this lake."

YEVGENIA. "*There used to be more ducks in this lake.*"

ISAAC. Oh, that's excellent, that's very good...

Beat.

"But I heard they were all killed."

YEVGENIA. "*But I heard they were all killed.*"

ISAAC. At which point *Gashpar* says: (*Performs.*) "*Madam, they were not killed, they just flew away.*"

Beat.

And then she replies: "How lovely to think so."

YEVGENIA. (*Staring into Isaac's eyes.*) "How lovely to think so."
ISAAC. And then he says, "Not as lovely as your eyes."

YEVGENIA. That's what he says?

ISAAC. It's the style of the piece. And then she sits and she says, "Do you have information for me?"

YEVGENIA. "Do you have information for me?"

ISAAC. And *Gashpar* replies: "I do."

And then *Daria* says... "You remind me of someone I have known forever."

YEVGENIA. ... "You remind me of someone... I have known forever."

ISAAC. And he says, "I AM the man who has known you forever. I am the man you have seen since you opened your eyes. It's me. Look at me. Look at me and remember."

And then she looks at him and she says, "I remember."

NIKOLAI. Say the line, Yevgenia!

YEVGENIA. This is so challenging! I'm struggling. Nikolai, you be *Gashpar*.

NIKOLAI. What? No.

ISAAC. He doesn't want to... Just pretend I'm *Gashpar*, you're doing very well.

YEVGENIA. Niki... Please be *Gashpar*.

ISAAC. Fine, let's go back. Nikolai, say: "*Those ducks were not killed, they just flew away.*"

NIKOLAI. (*As flat as possible.*) "They were not killed, they just flew away."

ISAAC. And now you ask if you may sit down.

YEVGENIA. "May I sit?"

ISAAC. And he says yes.

NIKOLAI. "Yes."

ISAAC. And you say, "No, the ducks were lined up and executed, each of them shot in the back of their duck heads..."

NIKOLAI. What kind of rubbish is this.

YEVGENIA. Hush, Niki.

Now she addresses all the lines directly to Isaac.

"No, the ducks were lined up and executed, each of them shot in the back of their duck heads..."

ISAAC. "By other duck gangsters."

YEVGENIA. "By other duck gangsters."

NIKOLAI. WHAT KIND OF RUBBISH IS THIS?!

ISAAC. (*Starts to get carried away with the story.*) "The duck gangsters rule this town of Odessa and they have either killed the other ducks or put them to work in illegal black markets, which is why the price of eggs is so high, also because the ducks have arrested all the chickens." But then Gashpar says, "But those are chicken eggs." And then you say...

YEVGENIA. That's too many words...

ISAAC. Nevermind, and then Gashpar says, "Don't I know you?" Say it, Nikolai.

NIKOLAI. "Don't I know you?"

ISAAC. And she says, "You don't know me, but I know you."

YEVGENIA. "*You don't know me, but I know you.*"

ISAAC. And he says, "Don't talk about ducks. There are no more ducks."

NIKOLAI. (*Eating cake.*) "Don't talk about ducks. There are no more ducks."

ISAAC. And then she reaches into her coat pocket and pulls out a baby duck.

NIKOLAI. No! No! No! This story makes *no sense!* What ducks?! Nothing you're saying is making any sense!

YEVGENIA. Niki—

NIKOLAI. NO! I told you nothing subversive.

YEVGENIA. Darling, that's not subversive!

NIKOLAI. You don't even know what that word means, Yevgenia!

YEVGENIA. It means *against the rules.*

NIKOLAI. Exactly! *That's* what it means! And I told you *Nothing Subversive!*

ISAAC. There is nothing subversive about a duck.

NIKOLAI. Yes! *Gangster* ducks are subversive!

ISAAC. But not *baby* ducks.

Not *baby ducks*, Nikolai.

NIKOLAI. You listen to me, you fool! The world is about to change and I'm trying to warn you! Why can't you...why can't you...*SEE?! Tell him Yevgenia!* Tell him what lies ahead for those who speak of ducks!

YEVGENIA. Niki why don't you both have some vodka and I will prepare dinner?

NIKOLAI. No! Tell him what lies ahead!

She tells the future, is what she does! Tell the man his future!

YEVGENIA. What nonsense.

ISAAC. Of course, I remember. Long ago Nikolai told me of your powers.

NIKOLAI. What? When did I?

ISAAC. The night we met.

NIKOLAI. I don't remember the night we met!

ISAAC. Of course you do...outside of Zhytomyr...You showed me Venus in the eastern sky, and told me of your wife.

She could tell the future, he told me.

She could tell men's fortunes.

NIKOLAI. Which is why! Which is why. Tell him Yevgenia! Tell him what lies ahead.

YEVGENIA. I think there have been enough games for one night.

NIKOLAI. Just as well, she only predicts war.

YEVGENIA. Don't be silly! I've predicted many things...I predicted your promotion, your glorious career, your long life...

NIKOLAI. (*Hostile towards her.*) And many children. The many children we were to have.

Awkward beat. He goes to her.

Tell his fortune. Babel's. He needs to see. He needs to see what's in store.

This hangs in the air...

YEVGENIA. We need blindfolds.

Nikolai takes off his tie and gives it to Isaac.

ISAAC. What is this?

NIKOLAI. Blindfold yourself, you idiot.

As Isaac does, Nikolai undoes Isaac's tie and blindfolds himself, as Yevgenia, using a scarf, blindfolds herself.

Nikolai finds a chair and sits, waits.

Yevgenia approaches Isaac, finds his hands. What ensues is a sort of palm reading, except with both hands, forearms, as if they were almost dancing.

It's intimate, erotic, she touches his face, she breathes deeply...

Isaac reaches out for her face, and she snatches his hand away...she becomes rougher with him, pulling at his arms, his hands, his fingers...

She steps away in horror. She tears off her blindfold and stares at Isaac in pity and fear.

YEVGENIA. There is nothing but war ahead.

Beat.

You have only three years to live.

She kisses him. He kisses her back, as Nikolai sits, blindfolded, oblivious.

As the lights shift...Isaac disappears.

Nikolai stands, still blindfolded.

Nikolai and Yevgenia begin a process of a costume change.

Both make themselves age fifty years.

It's slapdash, angry, expressionistic.

Their postures hunch over as they take on the almost comic roles of their older selves.

As all this happens, Vova appears in a box.

VOVA. Regarding Commander of the NKVD Yezhov, he was executed by the state for treason at the age of forty or forty-two. His wife Yevgenia, driven mad by hysterical lust and promiscuity,

was admitted to the state asylum for the insane shortly after, whereupon she died of consumption at the age of thirty-eight. Both were traitors of the state and both deserved to die.

He shuts a file...puts it away.

Unrelated, being as it is or was or is,

This date: A date remembered by few, but important to many: Sixteen June 1989.

Access 17-DH-890.

Bureau 42.

Here it is. State files contain the first confidential notation of a certain Agent Sub-Deputy Directorate S.

He takes off his headphones.

Which is...

Who was...

Me.

He steps into a space to represent an elevator. It begins to go down, down down, endlessly.

Scene 4

Bureau 42—1989—Moscow

The elevator doors open. Vova enters Bureau 42, a vast underground office. An archive. It is filled entirely with files carefully, manically organized on shelves that go on forever. The files are old, dusty, decrepit. But well organized.

In the midst of the archive is one desk, empty except for a ledger, a fountain pen, and a bell.

Vova looks as if he has never been here. He looks around. He taps the bell on the desk. It rings.

Nikolai Yezhov, now in his nineties, shuffles from out of the mountains of information.

NIKOLAI. Who rings my bell?

VOVA. Me sir. I was summoned.

NIKOLAI. You were summoned by whom?

VOVA. Fifth Chief Directorate, by proxy of Ninth Deputy Directorate, by proxy of Twenty-Seventh Operational Collegium Assistant Deputy Directorate.

NIKOLAI. So you are the Dresden man.

VOVA. Yes sir. Sub-Deputy Directorate S.

NIKOLAI. What is your accent?

VOVA. Standard Russian. Straight across the middle.

NIKOLAI. No. Nothing is straight across the middle. Nothing is standard.

Your accent: Leningrad.

Leningrad, yes?

VOVA. Yes sir.

NIKOLAI. What is your cover?

VOVA. Translator and interpreter.

NIKOLAI. How is your German.

VOVA. Good enough.

NIKOLAI. Don't say "Good enough" say "Good." Phrasing of the truth is vital.

VOVA. Yes sir.

NIKOLAI. When we say that something is true, it becomes true. When we say that something is false, it becomes false.

Beat.

How is your German?

VOVA. "Good."

NIKOLAI. Good! How is Dresden?

VOVA. "Good."

NIKOLAI. Good! How is KGB?

VOVA. "Good."

NIKOLAI. Is it clear now how this works?

VOVA. Yes sir.

NIKOLAI. Good!

Sit.

The Dresden Man! From Leningrad.

Name of Vladimir...but your *friends*, such as they are, call you "Vova." Ah, you are surprised I know your nickname. Nicknames! I like them. I will call you "Vova."

VOVA. Yes sir.

NIKOLAI. Yezhov, N. "N" stands for Nikolai.

VOVA. Yes sir, I know who you are, Yezhov Comrade, sir.

NIKOLAI. First Chief Directorate, Level Double "A" and Chairman of Bureau 42.

He gestures to the files around them.

Have you ever been to Bureau 42, young Vova?

VOVA. No, Yezhov Comrade.

NIKOLAI. That is because it is Top Secret and you don't have clearance!

There's a lot of censorship within the Soviet government, yes?

VOVA. *Censorship?*

NIKOLAI. Every story that is told, officially, from the state, has been sheared and shaped, some might say *distorted*, and ultimately changed.

But all that information—everything that's cut away and struck from the record? It all ends up down here. Here in Bureau 42, we have the history of the Soviet Union. The real history. This endless lair, sixty-five meters beneath the streets of Moscow is a repository for The Truth. Unvarnished, untrammelled, *truth*.

In *addition to that*, the KGB, or before that, the NKVD, have been spying on hundreds of millions of people since 1917, and every document, every last note scribbled on a napkin is down here, carefully documented and filed away.

As he talks, Nikolai pulls a drawer out from a cabinet...a drawer that is impossibly long, it continues to roll out, far longer than any realistic drawer might be...from this he takes a sizeable file out.

Nikolai waves the file at Vova.

This is *your* file, Sub-Directorate S! Your entire life is in here! Test me!

Flips through it; skimming it.

How many times have you broken your nose?

VOVA. Sir?

NIKOLAI. Your nose! How many times has it been broken?

VOVA. I don't know...

NIKOLAI. Twelve times!

Twelve times! Poor Vova! Schoolyard bullies.

VOVA. That's not how my nose was broken!

NIKOLAI. Then how?

VOVA. Doing sport.

NIKOLAI. Doing what sport?

VOVA. Doing judo.

NIKOLAI. *Doing judo.*

Okay.

Nikolai takes out a black magic marker and opens Vova's file and crosses something out. Then writes something...

"Doing...judo..."

Now your file has been adjusted. It said here you were bullied, now there is no mention of bullies.

Now there is "judo."

Beat.

Do you understand what that means?

Respond please: Yes, No.

VOVA. Yes.

NIKOLAI. What does it mean?

VOVA. It means... When you say that something is true it becomes true.

Nikolai waves the magic marker like a wand.

NIKOLAI. Behold, Young Vladimir: The Black Magic Marker: The most useful tool in all of communism. There is nothing that cannot be eventually crossed out, and changed...

Beat.

I understand you wish to be assigned to deep cover in the United States.

VOVA. Yes sir, very much.

NIKOLAI. This is your "dream."

VOVA. Very much Yezhov Comrade.

NIKOLAI. I don't trust agents who "dream" for the United States because, naturally, I assume they are treacherous and intend to defect. Is this your intention?

VOVA. No, Yezhov Comrade, absolutely not.

NIKOLAI. Why do you "dream," then, for America?

VOVA. That is where the fight is. I am a man who goes toward a fight, not away.

NIKOLAI. How has that worked out for you and your nose?

VOVA. I will let a man break my nose if I might break his skull.

NIKOLAI. A blunt strategy, but yes, okay: effective.

VOVA. I would never defect! When we bury them, Yezhov Comrade, I will be holding a shovel.

Nikolai is taken aback.

NIKOLAI. You will be holding a what?

VOVA. I will be holding a shovel.

Awkward beat, before Nikolai goes back into Vova's file.

NIKOLAI. I have a job for you. Carry it out expeditiously, and you will receive a transfer to your post of choice.

VOVA. That is... That's very good... Sir, that's... "Good." "Good."

NIKOLAI. But wait! I am not convinced that I can trust you.

VOVA. You can trust me!

NIKOLAI. *(Imitates him.) You can trust me!*

Leningrad accent! Coarse. It is the dialect of thugs, which is what you sound like to me: a thug.

VOVA. I am not a thug.

NIKOLAI. *(Reading his file.)* How can I be so sure? This file states that while attending KGB academy, you received fifteen citations of insubordination.

VOVA. That's not true!
NIKOLAI. It's clearly notated. Fifteen citations.
VOVA. Not once. Not once was I insubordinate.
NIKOLAI. Fine.

Nikolai crosses out another section of the file.

"Never...insubordinate..."
(Reads.) You were born in Moscow?
VOVA. No! Leningrad!
NIKOLAI. But here: State: Place of birth: Moscow.
VOVA. It's wrong. Again, it's wrong!

Nikolai uses the magic marker again, crosses out, writes.

NIKOLAI. (Reads; surprised.) You were born in a brothel?
VOVA. That's...No, that's absurd.
NIKOLAI. (Reads.) "To a brothel in Moscow he was born."
VOVA. It's a lie!
NIKOLAI. (Not reading; looking at Vova.) So your mother was a whore!

Awkward, tense beat. Vova changes; this is unacceptable.

I say: Your mother: A whore.
VOVA. When I was eight years old I threw a brick at a man's head because he swore at my mother, for no reason, in the middle of the street. I wanted to kill him, but I missed his head and the brick hit his neck instead, and crushed his voice box. He was never able to speak above a whisper after that.
This is the thing I am most proud of in my life. That I took away a man's voice.

Beat.

Is that in my file?
NIKOLAI. You're a reckless little shit, aren't you, Vova?
VOVA. I love my momma.
NIKOLAI. Vova loves his momma! Why don't you ask me about the rumors?

VOVA. What rumors?
NIKOLAI. (Exasperated; this should be obvious.) The rumors about your mother!
VOVA. I don't believe rumors, rumors are lies.

Beat.

(Uneasy.) What rumors?
NIKOLAI. Nobody remembers you before the age of five. Nobody remembers your mother being pregnant. Your parents are both frail and skinny and small. You are not. People in your neighborhood remember a woman bringing a child to the building one night, but the facts are clouded and dim.

Beat.

You have spent your entire life wondering if your parents are your parents. If your mother is your mother.
VOVA. None of that is true.
NIKOLAI. Are you calling me a liar?
VOVA. No, but...

NIKOLAI. Because I am calling you a liar. You have always wondered these things, and I know you have, because you wrote about it in *this* notebook when you were sixteen years old, an adolescent epic screed of how you wondered if your real mother left you in a basket on a river like Moses. *Here.*

From Vova's file, Nikolai holds up a crumpled, torn-and-taped-together old piece of notebook paper.

He hands it to Vova, who takes it.

VOVA. I didn't...
How do you...?
I didn't write this.

Beat; he says it with more authority.

I did not write that.
NIKOLAI. I used to stand by Stalin's side! His right-hand man! His chief of police!
But then I was erased! I was removed from every official photo the

government has... They proclaimed me dead, buried in a mass grave with the enemies of the state!
But did I die? Was I erased? Answer!

VOVA. No...

NIKOLAI. No! I remain! Through the force of my own will. I exist.

I reclaimed the truth.

And now I control the truth.

Beat.

As for you...

In this file, young Vova, are things you have wondered about your whole life.

Terrible secrets.

Unfathomable gossip. Rumors.

Would you like to know it?

Would you like to read it?

Or would you state the truth about yourself... I can, I will make those changes for you *right now*.

Read *this*. Or dictate. Choose one.

Nikolai holds out the file for Vova to read. He stares at it. It seems to glow, to beckon... every answer to every important question he ever had.

He considers and then he turns away, faces forward like a good soldier.

VOVA. I was born in Leningrad, in the wake of a siege.

My brothers: dead.

My uncles: dead.

My aunts: dead.

Everyone except my parents.

...My mother is good, is decent... My mother... is my mother.

Nikolai crosses out large swaths of Vova's file with the magic marker. Vova watches, then continues.

I am a field agent for KGB.

My record is impeccable.

I have never been insubordinate.

I am expert at judo.

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NIKOLAI. *Expert.*

VOVA. It is said...

It has been said that...

Beat.

I am a good man.

NIKOLAI. Good and not good, these are not considerations. But everything else...

He scratches, writes.

Yes.

Nikolai continues to systematically cross every line out of the file. As he does it, Vova looks over, watching his history become erased.

I like you, Nineteenth Sub-Deputy Directorate S. And I like your brutish Leningrad accent, and I like that you hail from the streets of that city, and I like that you're a thug. Embrace your thuggish roots.

Be who you are and you might rise high in tomorrow's Soviet Union. When the world is a gang fight, people want a gangster to lead them.

VOVA. Yes Yezhov Comrade.

NIKOLAI. I have a granddaughter.

She was born in Poland. In *Warsaw*. But then she slipped away... disappeared... Intelligence has recently put her in Dresden. And you... are the Dresden man.

VOVA. When did you last see her?

NIKOLAI. I have never seen her.

Beat.

You are to place her under surveillance. *She is not to be arrested.* She is not to be harassed. You are simply to contain her. Succeed and I will place you in deep cover within the United States.

VOVA. I will do everything you ask of me.

Nikolai gives him a file.

NIKOLAI. This is her file.

Nikolai takes out a box and from the box takes out enormous eighties-era headphones.

47

And these! These are headphones. New. Developed by top engineers. They hear...everything.

Vova puts on the headphones. First he hears delicate sounds...dripping, an echo of something, the plucking of strings or bristling of a broom...

A woman singing, a woman laughing or crying? A jumble of many sounds as the lights fade on everything except Vova, who stands there, listening...

The sound goes silent and Vova stands in one shaft of light. He is not in his box. He stands there, headphones on, gradually transformed by what he hears.

VOVA. Active Investigation Case File. MJS-621. Dresden Bureau.

Subject is to be contained.

Subject name:

Subject's name is...

Beat.

"Urzula."

As he continues, in the dim light apart from him, Urzula, twenty-one, appears. She goes about what seems daily routines, but what it is she is doing is packing a suitcase.

Her friends call her "Zula."

Hair: Brown. Eyes: Blue.

Accent is Standard Polish, straight across the middle, little to no affect, except when...

Except when she sings.

Beat.

I watch her.

I listen.

She sleeps late. She sings in the morning. She washes her hair.

She sings while she eats.

She reads.

She defecates.

She leaves the apartment and takes a bus to the grocery where she works.

She is a bad employee, often late, often leaving early, but the man,

the grocer, a certain A. Schwartz, file KL-119, is a lecherous man who is easily swayed by her charms. She uses these charms. She uses them.

URZULA. She knows what she / does.

VOVA. / She knows what she does.

She leaves early. She goes to a bookstore.

She knows the man in the bookstore.

She fucks the man in the bookstore, a certain A. Schultz, file 288-

G4. He will soon be detained. He will soon be sent to a work camp.

She goes about her life.

She brings men home.

URZULA. She drinks.

VOVA. She drinks.

URZULA. She smokes.

VOVA. She smokes.

URZULA. She sings. She cooks. She eats.

VOVA. She wants things.

She has appetites.

She has political leanings.

URZULA. She longs for the West.

VOVA. Her hair is wet in the afternoon.

URZULA. She sings.

VOVA. She sings.

URZULA. She has many friends. They listen to music, they smoke, they drink.

They make plans.

VOVA. They make plans. They make secret plans. And I must contain her.

There is such a world out there, forbidden to her.

She wants it.

She wants that world.

So she's going towards it.

She's going to escape. Tonight. She's packing her bags.

She's leaving. She's going to escape.

ACT TWO

Scene 5

Blood—1989—Dresden

To freedom.

To *freedom*.

No.

She must be contained.

A loud knocking on the door.

Urzula turns to look at it.

End of Act One

An insistent knocking at the door.

Urzula stands over a suitcase, opened, half full.

She stares at it. She shuts the suitcase, shoves it into a corner.

She is terrified, but tries to gain a sense of calm.

She goes to the door. Opens it.

Vova is there.

VOVA. Urzula Solomonovna?

URZULA. Yes.

VOVA. Good evening.

I'd like to speak to you.

URZULA. About what?

VOVA. May I come in?

URZULA. What do you want, sir?

VOVA. I want to come in.

Perhaps you welcome me into your home. Perhaps you don't.

But hospitality breeds hospitality. Generally speaking.

She lets him enter. He looks around. She stands still in the corner, terrified.

Taking a trip?

URZULA. What?

VOVA. (*Points.*) Suitcase. Taking a trip somewhere?

URZULA. No. No, dirty laundry. It's easier to carry.

VOVA. You take your clothes to a laundry?

URZULA. Yes.

VOVA. Why don't you wash your clothes here?

URZULA. We have no machine.

VOVA. But you have a clothesline, from your terrace. It's visible from the street.

URZULA. Is there a problem, sir?

VOVA. Is there a "problem"?

URZULA. Yes?

VOVA. When has there ever *not* been a problem?

URZULA. I mean a problem here. With me.

And what a man like you would want.

VOVA. A man like me.

A man like... Police.

He goes to her, too close. It takes everything in her not to recoil.

Being this close to her also has a disorienting effect on him.

His heart races.

Your file says your eyes are blue. But your eyes aren't blue.

URZULA. I suppose my file is wrong, then.

A tense moment, they stare at each other.

VOVA. Open the suitcase.

Open it, and show me.

She's tense, reluctant. But opens it.

URZULA. Mostly clothes... Dirty laundry.

VOVA. You fold your dirty laundry?

URZULA. Sometimes.

VOVA. (*Picks up Babel's diary from suitcase.*) What's this?

URZULA. Just a book.

He flips through it.

VOVA. Is this your diary?

URZULA. It was my grandfather's. I like to read it.

VOVA. "Describe the kitchen."

Beat.

"Describe the marketplace."

Beat.

"Describe the women in the marketplace."

This is nonsense.

URZULA. It's just an old diary.

Vova flips more; reads more.

VOVA. All he does is describe things.

He tosses it back into the suitcase.

You should read better books.

URZULA. I'll do that.

VOVA. It's better to read books with stories, not just descriptions.

URZULA. Okay.

VOVA. Do you like stories?

URZULA. Yes. I don't know.

VOVA. How about I tell you a story?

URZULA. Okay...

VOVA. Two men and two women were arrested this evening by an undercover police officer. They were attempting to flee to the West.

Beat.

See?

It's such a good story, you can barely move. You're so interested in what comes next.

Beat.

Two men, two women. Arrested. I was able to speak to each of them, individually.

In speaking to them, and explaining the consequences of their illegal action, *two* people provided your name. They said you were part of their plan and that you, like them, were plotting to escape to the West. The other two lied so as to not implicate you.

Beat.

Who is it, do you think, who betrayed you? The women or the men?

Beat.

It was the women.

Does that surprise you?

URZULA. I haven't done anything wrong. I didn't leave my home. I had nothing to do with them.

VOVA. That's your story.

URZULA. That's the truth. You can't arrest me for simply being at home, doing laundry.

VOVA. *I can arrest you for whatever I like.*

I could arrest you for being *mentioned* by those two women.

I could arrest you for having an incorrect file.

I could arrest you for not having blue eyes.

Or folding dirty laundry.

Or for lying about laundry being dirty in the first place.

I could arrest you for being in possession of that seditious book.

URZULA. It's not a seditious book.

VOVA. What?

URZULA. It's not seditious, it's just my grandfather's diary.

Like you said, it's just descriptions.

He almost laughs; as if he's charmed by her. But he shakes it off.

VOVA. A description is selective. It says "this quality is important."

And, in doing so implies, "this quality is unimportant."

But who gets to make such distinctions?

I might say: "The room is quiet and dark."

He looks around as if to see if this is accurate.

"The room is quiet and dark."

Beat.

That's a description of this room, and yet it's a lie, as it neglects to convey that I am the person I am, and you are the person you are. It neglects to convey that we are together, alone in here, discussing what is true and not true.

It neglects to convey that your eyes are brown.

Or some variation of brown and green.

Beat.

Descriptions are lies. Lies are seditious.

URZULA. So why haven't you arrested me?

VOVA. What?

URZULA. If I have broken the law, you should have arrested me by now. Why haven't you?

Why are you here, talking in circles?

What do you want?

Vova is unbalanced, but regains composure.

VOVA. Urzula, I am here to give you advice.

And the best advice I can give you, for your general life, is—

Yevgenia enters, an old woman in her eighties.

YEVGENIA. Zula! Who's this?!

VOVA. *(Startled.)* Who are you?

YEVGENIA. No, boy, who are you?

Zula, who's this man? You didn't say we had guests!

VOVA. *(Trying to regain his authority.)* Good evening, mum. I am here to speak to your...daughter?

YEVGENIA. *(Flattered.)* My daughter. You are a sweet man. She's my granddaughter! My daughter is dead, she had the cancer. I am an old woman. I am Yevgenia! Who are you?

VOVA. Mum, please excuse, I'm here speaking / to...

YEVGENIA. / Come in! Sit! Sit! Such formalities with young people these days. We are eating soup, you'll eat soup too, yes? *Qureshi.*

Yevgenia exits to bring soup.

URZULA. *Babcia, he doesn't want any Qureshi.*

VOVA. No, that sounds lovely, mum, thank you. I would love to have soup with you.

URZULA. Please, sir, I'm sure you didn't come over here to eat dinner with us.

VOVA. No, I didn't. But your *babcia* just extended a courtesy. And I am hungry.

Yevgenia enters, with a tray of soups.

YEVGENIA. Qureshi is ready. Doesn't it smell good?

VOVA. No.

YEVGENIA. Smells bad?

VOVA. No! It doesn't smell one way or the other, mum, I'm just saying—

YEVGENIA. Ohhhh... You got no sense of smell!

VOVA. I can too.

YEVGENIA. You can't smell things!

VOVA. It's a common condition.

YEVGENIA. I never met a man who couldn't smell.

VOVA. (*Defensive.*) I operate fine.

YEVGENIA. You're a handicapped.

VOVA. I am not a handicapped person, I merely can't smell, because of sport, because of judo.

YEVGENIA. Got bullied!

VOVA. I didn't get bullied! I was a champion. Enough!

YEVGENIA. Zula, come! Before it gets cold!

Urzula, although it's the last thing she wants to do, joins them at the table.

Yevgenia and Urzula, as if second nature, take needles and prick a couple of their fingers and then dip their fingers in the soup.

VOVA. What is that? What are you doing?

YEVGENIA. You prick your fingertips!

VOVA. Are those needles?

YEVGENIA. You need to feed them.

VOVA. (*Looking in the soup.*) Are those...?

He stirs; sees; freaks out.

Those are leeches...

URZULA. Yes.

VOVA. They're alive.

URZULA. It's a Polish soup.

VOVA. — They are sucking your blood.

YEVGENIA. Give me your hand...

Yevgenia takes his hand and pricks his fingers...

VOVA. Ow!

YEVGENIA. Ow he says.

Yevgenia takes Vova's hand and pricks two more fingers quickly and then puts his hand in the soup.

VOVA. OW! What are you doing!

YEVGENIA. You have to feed them.

They all sit with their fingers soaking in the soup.

Vova's face reflects how one must look the first time they've ever done this sort of thing. He may throw up.

VOVA. Is this real?

YEVGENIA. They feast upon you...and then you feast upon them...

URZULA. (*Begrudgingly finishes the joke.*) ...Like children.

YEVGENIA. (*Laughing, this is an old joke.*) Like children! HA!

(*To Vova.*) Do you get this joke?! Because the infant sucks the teat and then the meddlesome parent sucks dry the will of the child to live! HA! Give and take. Do you get this joke?

VOVA. (*Hushed.*) Oh God, no...!

(*Quietly; based on the leeches.*) Aaggh!

YEVGENIA. Do you get this joke?

VOVA. No, I don't get the joke!

YEVGENIA. Ah, well, if you have to explain it, what's the point?

Beat.

Now red pepper.

She takes a teaspoon of some red pepper and sprinkles it in their bowls. They stir their soups.

They will die soon.

VOVA. The leeches die?

URZULA. Their bodies swell with blood until they burst. Then they drown in their own blood while the red pepper burns their flesh.

YEVGENIA. This is my favorite soup.

URZULA. Eat only a little bit. Someone who's never had Qureshi should only eat a little bit.

VOVA. I will not eat this soup.

YEVGENIA. This soup goes straight to the brain!
You're confused? Now you understand.
You're stuck? It loosens you.
Forgot something? Now...you remember.

Beat.

The leeches are dead. Let's eat.

The women take their fingers out of the bowl. On each of the three pricked fingers are large, bulbous, swollen leeches.

Using their spoons, they pluck the leeches off their fingers.

The leeches plop into the soup.

They stir their soups and look at Vova.

He tentatively does the same thing, but it is one of the most unnerving experiences of his entire life.

The women begin to eat their soup with spoons.

Vova begins eating his soup with a spoon. A tentative and tiny sip, followed by a bigger one, a bigger one...

Vova likes it so much that, after a moment, he puts his spoon down and holds the bowl to his face, slurping.

VOVA. *(With increasing appreciation.)* Mmm...MMMMMM...
MMMMMM...

URZULA. Not too much! I told you!
Babcia!

When Vova's done, he puts the bowl down and stares straight ahead, as if waking from a dream. He begins to experience something akin to hallucinatory visions.

VOVA. Oh...oh my God...

URZULA. Why'd you give him so much soup?

YEVGENIA. He said he was hungry!

VOVA. Ohhh...Okay...Sorry.

I'm sorry but...

Do you see that?

YEVGENIA. *(Lying.)* Yeah yeah, we see it.

VOVA. Look at her...

She was throwing rocks.

With each sentence, a new memory dawns upon him.

She wasn't afraid.

We were children.

She was protecting me.

Beat.

It was a dog!

YEVGENIA. Oh, a dog!

VOVA. Some stray dog.

Probably starving.

What is it, some alleyway.

Trash. Broken glass. Rocks.

The dog barks. *It wants to eat me.* And I can't move. I'm cornered.

And then POK. A rock, pok, across its face.

YEVGENIA. Oof!

VOVA. It's her. She has rocks. She's throwing them, pok...

Then he's after her. Teeth. Growling and pok she goes again.

And now the dog is really mad. And he's on top of her, and bites her face and I run.

Beat.

I ran.

I left her. The dog biting her face. I ran away.

The biggest revelation.

(Quietly; to himself.) She was my sister.

Beat.

I had a sister.

A strange silence. The women watch him. He's utterly lost.

As a result, incapacitated.

YEVGENIA. He's had too much soup.

Urzula gets up, annoyed, begins to clear the table.

URZULA. He'll be fine. But he shouldn't stand up.

YEVGENIA. DON'T STAND UP!

He tries to stand, falls over.

URZULA. Did he fall down.

YEVGENIA. He had too much sou—YOU HAD TOO MUCH SOUP!

He scrambles to a seated position, as if trying to play off his clumsiness...but he can't stand.

He might be crying, but it's hard for anyone to know for sure.

VOVA. Can I...can I go, please?

URZULA. The door is over there.

VOVA. Okay.

Beat; he can't move.

Can I...Could I sit here for a moment before I leave?

Urzula is further irritated. Sits down and takes two cigarettes from a pack, lights them both from her mouth, then hands one to Yevgenia, who takes it, and they both smoke and watch Vova as if he were an amusing pet.

YEVGENIA. Well now what? Eh? There's a man on the floor. Now we know what to do, don't we?

Beat.

Nothing gets you nowhere. Okay.

She gets up, puts cigarette out.

Good night, my kittens.

Yevgenia exits.

VOVA. I don't know anything about myself.

URZULA. It happens.

VOVA. Why am I like this?

URZULA. I don't know.

VOVA. Who am I?

URZULA. Give me your fingers. The ones that got sucked.

VOVA. Why?

URZULA. I can tell your fortune.

Babcia says the best way to tell a person's fortune is to smell their fingers just after they eat Qureshi.

Beat.

Do you want me to try?

VOVA. No.

URZULA. Why not?

VOVA. Stop. Stop doing what you are doing.

URZULA. What am I doing?

VOVA. You think I am incapacitated, but I'm not. I am not incapacitated.

URZULA. Okay...

VOVA. You don't know the things I know.

URZULA. I'm sure that's true.

VOVA. How well do you think I know you?

URZULA. You don't know me at all.

VOVA. I know you want to be a singer.

URZULA. Lots of people want to be singers.

VOVA. You work in a grocery.

URZULA. So what?

VOVA. You're trying to escape.

URZULA. No I'm not.

VOVA. You're sleeping with four different men.

Urzula, stunned, doesn't answer.

I know you, Zula.

You have been under my surveillance for the last six months.

Beat. Urzula is stunned.

URZULA. That's not true.

VOVA. Albert is the funny one.

Sebastian is the political one.

Martin is the romantic one.

And then Nico. Who I arrested.

Beat.

URZULA. *What do you want.*

A long beat; they stare at each other.

VOVA. You think you can be a singer in the West? Your voice isn't even that good.

She hears this. Realizes she has to approach this differently.

URZULA. I have a good voice. I'm a good singer.

VOVA. It's *fine*. It's not...It doesn't make me weep with emotion.

URZULA. Do you *want* me to make you weep with emotion?

VOVA. No.

That's not what I...

You know what I mean, I'm not talking about myself, I'm talking about you.

You won't be a professional singer, especially not in the West.

URZULA. Have you ever wept with emotion?

VOVA. Stop saying that.

URZULA. They're your words.

VOVA. That's not what I said.

URZULA. What *are* you saying?

VOVA. Nothing!

You *are* a good singer.

I listen to you sing when you clean and I...
You're good.

Beat.

What I am saying is, I almost weep but then I don't, and so this is a fault with you, in your singing.

URZULA. What should I do instead?

VOVA. There are ways to work on singing to achieve an emotional response from someone who is listening.

URZULA. But I didn't *know* you were listening.

VOVA. No. You didn't.

URZULA. Do you like spying on me?

VOVA. No.

That's not something I think about, whether I like something or not.

URZULA. Do you think I'm a good person?

VOVA. Good and not good, these aren't considerations.

Beat.

But you have intentions to escape to the West, which is unlawful.
And so, bad.

No. I don't think you're a good person.

URZULA. How do you feel when you hear me with a man?

Beat.

Do you like hearing that?

VOVA. No.

URZULA. Do you stop listening?

Beat.

Let me see your fingers.

VOVA. No.

URZULA. I can tell your future.

VOVA. I don't want to know.

URZULA. (*Offers her hand.*) Then tell mine.

VOVA. I can't, I have no sense of smell, and I don't believe this nonsense anyhow.

URZULA. Try.

She sits near him and gives him her hand. He looks at it...she touches his face, his mouth, his nose, dragging her fingertips over his face.

Vova smells her fingers.

Do you smell anything?

VOVA. (*Quietly.*) Yes.

URZULA. Describe it.

VOVA. I don't know how.

URZULA. Say something. What do you smell?

He thinks.

VOVA. Gasoline.

Fuel.

Fire.

Beat; he sees something.

You will die in an airplane crash....

Beat.

...holding that diary in your hands.

He starts to cry...

I'm sorry...I'm so sorry...why did I...

I'm sorry I saw that...

I'm sorry I said that.

She takes his hand, where he had pricked his fingers. She kisses the tips of his fingers, and then smells them.

Let go of my hand. Stop it. Stop doing this.

URZULA. Stop what?

VOVA. You're trying to seduce me.

She kisses his fingers, his hand...

URZULA. No.

VOVA. You're playing a game.

URZULA. No I'm not.

VOVA. This isn't who I am. This isn't me. This is wrong...

URZULA. This is not wrong.

This is good.

This is who I am, this is who you are.

We are here. Together. In a room.

She kisses him.

Look at it. Listen.

See?

The room is quiet. And dark.

She kisses him, he kisses her back.

Scene 6

State Approved Nostalgia—1940—Moscow

Lights up on Nikolai, forties, sitting at an empty bar. Isaac, forties, enters.

NIKOLAI. Babel! I've cleared this grimy tavern so we might talk alone.

ISAAC. What's going on?

NIKOLAI. Let's have a drink.

ISAAC. You're making me nervous.

NIKOLAI. Why, what do you have to be nervous about?

ISAAC. Nothing.

NIKOLAI. Everyone has something to be nervous about.

ISAAC. Okay.

NIKOLAI. You have plenty to be nervous about.

ISAAC. Tell me, please.

NIKOLAI. You should leave the country.

ISAAC. *What?*

NIKOLAI. France. Or something like France. *Paris.*

ISAAC. I can't do that.

NIKOLAI. What have you been up to?

ISAAC. In terms of...

NIKOLAI. Have you been doing shit?

ISAAC. I don't know what that means.

NIKOLAI. Good.

ISAAC. Good?

NIKOLAI. Things are bad. We might all need to leave the country.

ISAAC. Who's we?

NIKOLAI. Everyone.

ISAAC. Everyone in Russia?

NIKOLAI. Perhaps.

ISAAC. All Russians.
NIKOLAI. Perhaps.
ISAAC. All Russians need to leave Russia.
NIKOLAI. He wants everyone dead.
ISAAC. Who? *Stalin?*
NIKOLAI. Shhhh!!!!
What is your problem, man?
You can't say that...
ISAAC. You said don't write anything subversive, and so I really haven't—
NIKOLAI. That was then!
In '37, it was fine: Medium caution. Fine.
In '38...less fine...Mild to medium panic.
Then '39? Bad. Very bad.
But now? 1940? No. We must leave. We must go.
ISAAC. Nikolai...
NIKOLAI. Just remember, remember what I told you. What did I tell you?
ISAAC. Never confess.
NIKOLAI. Even when they torture.
ISAAC. I'm going to be tortured?
NIKOLAI. Everyone is tortured! Nobody confesses as soon as they sit down.
ISAAC. So what if they torture it out of me?
NIKOLAI. NEVER CONFESS!
ISAAC. I know, but what if—
NIKOLAI. What if nothing! Never confess!
Now before it gets to that, get out of the country. Like, presently. Maybe Paris.
ISAAC. What about my work?
NIKOLAI. What about it?! Your work will kill you if you stay here. Leave. Meet me in Paris.
ISAAC. Meet you?

NIKOLAI. I also may be accused of some dreamt-up crime, and so I may be fleeing the country like you.
ISAAC. You might flee the country?
NIKOLAI. Now you understand! I'm telling you, nobody is safe.
ISAAC. But you'll bring Yevgenia, of course. You won't just leave her.
NIKOLAI. No, Yevgenia will not be coming.
ISAAC. You can't leave her!
NIKOLAI. Arrangements have been made. She is being protected.
ISAAC. Protected how?
NIKOLAI. I had her committed to the state asylum for the insane.
ISAAC. WHAT?
NIKOLAI. Quiet! Will you shut your mouth?! If I am seen speaking to you like this? Having a vodka with you like this? No! We will both be arrested. And then tortured and put to death. They wouldn't even ask us questions first. *So don't yell.*
ISAAC. (*Trying to be quiet.*) Yevgenia is not insane!
NIKOLAI. I am aware of this, but she knows too much. So she might as well be.
ISAAC. What does that mean?
NIKOLAI. It means, it's better than prison! What am I telling you?! Nobody is safe! Unless you are committed to the state asylum for the insane. Then they can't arrest you and take you in and torture you until you confess. And so Yevgenia is safe.
ISAAC. She's safe...
So when does she get out?
NIKOLAI. Out of what?
ISAAC. (*Trying to be quiet, but can't contain himself.*) *I'm talking about the asylum, when does she get out of the asylum!*
NIKOLAI. You can't "get out" of the asylum. The insane don't suddenly become uninsane.
ISAAC. *She's not insane!*

NIKOLAI. Why are you so upset about this? This doesn't concern you.

Awkward beat.

ISAAC. Nikolai... *Your* wife should not be in an asylum.

NIKOLAI. I know that, you know that, but according to the state... Yevgenia is insane, and so...she will be insane forever and... That's the way it is.

She'll simply be there now. From now on. It's better than prison.

ISAAC. I don't know if it is!

NIKOLAI. It is.

ISAAC. Which asylum is she in?

NIKOLAI. Moscow First Dominion. Best there is.

ISAAC. We are talking about your wife! *Your wife*, Nikolai!

NIKOLAI. (*Snide.*) She was less than that, ultimately.

ISAAC. What does that mean?

NIKOLAI. She was having an affair!

Beat.

ISAAC. Really? That doesn't sound like her.

Beat.

How would you suspect something like that.

NIKOLAI. A husband's intuition.

ISAAC. Yeah, but I mean... You think she was having an affair?

NIKOLAI. Yes.

ISAAC. But with whom?

NIKOLAI. I *must* know the bastard. I must know *of* him at least. I don't imagine I'll ever find out. What idiot would ever confess to something like that. Sleeping with *my* wife?!

ISAAC. Nobody would ever confess.

NIKOLAI. As well they shouldn't.

Listen to me: Go to your study or office or whatever squalorous den it is where you write...and collect your works! Gather it all and take it with you!

ISAAC. Gather my works?

NIKOLAI. Put it in a box! Otherwise it will be found and dealt with. Do you want to be dealt with?! Or do you want to go to Paris?

Beat.

What if you and I, Isaac, what if you and I went to Paris.

ISAAC. You have to get Yevgenia!

NIKOLAI. Hypothetical notion! That say, for example, you and I left, the two of us, and went to Paris...

He tries to imagine, but it's hard.

What would life... what would that look like?

ISAAC. (*Bitterly, with anger about Yevgenia.*) We would be foreigners. We would have thick accents. No one would read my work, nobody would salute or respect you... There are no rules in Paris and so... there is nothing for a Russian man there.

NIKOLAI. And here there is?

Beat.

I need to go.

ISAAC. Nikolai.

Nikolai suddenly, and not gently, holds Isaac's face in one hand and looks deep into his eyes.

The way he's grabbed him could mean he's either going to kill him or kiss him.

Nikolai kisses him. Once on each cheek.

NIKOLAI. You are my friend and I love you.

Nikolai abruptly leaves. Isaac suddenly sees Yevgenia sitting in the corner. He is no longer in a bar, but rather, in an asylum.

Scene 7
Escape—1940—Moscow

Yevgenia sits silently, staring into space. A sickening glow of institutional light fills the space.

Isaac enters carrying a suitcase.

ISAAC. Yevgenia. Yevgenia...

She turns to him slowly, sees him, turns away from him, ashamed.

It's okay, it's okay, it's okay, it's okay...

Beat.

I know a doctor. I bribed him. That is how I am here, I am not allowed to visit you like this. I am sorry to surprise you, to come calling without notice, I know how you like fair warning, how you appreciate rules of society or wherever. But what else could I do? Yevgenia...

YEVGENIA. Why do you have a suitcase?

ISAAC. This is my work. Everything I could pack in. Everything I have written in the past few years...I need to take it with me everywhere I go because...

Beat; he considers his work, then Yevgenia.

This is nothing.

Beat.

What is there for you to eat?

YEVGENIA. Cabbage. And cabbage soup.

ISAAC. To drink?

YEVGENIA. Water.

ISAAC. No tea?

YEVGENIA. No tea.

ISAAC. How could there not be tea?

YEVGENIA. No tea.

ISAAC. Where do you sleep?

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YEVGENIA. A cot.

ISAAC. Is it comfortable?

YEVGENIA. No.

ISAAC. Are there activities for you to do during the day?

YEVGENIA. You must have paid the man a good sum to stand here now.

ISAAC. I did.

YEVGENIA. What did you ask?

If there are activities for me to do during the day?

I bite my fingernails.

And I sit alone and wonder how long before I start to lose my mind.

ISAAC. This place is a misery.

Yevgenia, I swear to you, I will get you out of here. I will bribe every man in Moscow if I have to!

YEVGENIA. Isaac...

ISAAC. I will!

YEVGENIA. Where would you get so much money?

ISAAC. I'll rob the Kremlin!

YEVGENIA. Stop it. Please. Isaac.

ISAAC. Right now: This moment: What can I do?

YEVGENIA. Give me something to read...?

ISAAC. Something to read...? Of course, but I didn't bring anything to read.

YEVGENIA. You brought everything.

ISAAC. You mean...my work...?

He excitedly opens up his suitcase on the floor. It is indeed packed to the hilt with papers, journals, books, etc.

Of course! Of course, let me see...I could give you...*this!*

He pulls out a stack of papers.

These are stories I wrote about my hometown of Odessa! The gangsters and street crime there that...

Changes his mind.

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No. Too gloomy. Not...*Inspiring* enough. Let me see...

Looks through suitcase.

Here! This is a novel I wrote about...

Changes his mind.

No, not this.

Looks.

THIS! This is the screenplay I wrote that you once recited about Daria and the ducks...and...oh.

YEVGENIA. Yes.

ISAAC. ...Daria is killed.

YEVGENIA. Yes.

ISAAC. You never liked that she was killed.

YEVGENIA. No.

ISAAC. (*Goes back to looking.*) Okay! Let's find something else! Something inspiring and humorous and lovely and...DAMNIT everything I have is about DEATH!

Why didn't I write anything about...how some magical, beautiful woman could walk through walls...

YEVGENIA. (*Trying to imagine, too.*) Walls, prison walls, like soft cheese.

ISAAC. Soft cheese, yes...and she could fly and she could walk on water...

YEVGENIA. That would be a perfect story. Too perfect. Too much.

Beat.

Anything, dear Isaac...anything to read is fine.

Isaac looks through his suitcase and then finally finds his journal.

ISAAC. Then take this.

This was my first journal. The diary I kept in Poland—when I met Nikolai.

This is why I am who I am.

He hands it to her, she takes it.

YEVGENIA. I am pregnant, Isaac.

ISAAC. You are pregnant.

YEVGENIA. Yes.

ISAAC. We can't waste time. NOW. NOW. I can bribe the doctor. YEVGENIA. You had to pay him simply to step foot inside of here. He will never risk his life to help an inmate escape.

ISAAC. I could set a fire in here right now. They would have to evacuate the entire building. And then we could run away into the night, and leave Russia and move to Paris and I will write and you can sing and act and we can be liberated Russian nationals and tell the world of the ills of this miserable Stalin rule.

YEVGENIA. Or we'd burn to death.

ISAAC. We will get you out of here.

YEVGENIA. There is no way out.

ISAAC. You are pregnant...

YEVGENIA. Yes...

ISAAC. If you complain of pain in your womb, they will take you to another hospital.

YEVGENIA. I will be restrained.

ISAAC. But if we plan on when this might be, I can be there too, and I can cause a diversion, and I can unlock your restraints...

YEVGENIA. How.

ISAAC. I know a man. A locksmith. In fact, he *owes me*. He will be there to meet you at the specified time. He will unlock you and you can disappear into the night. Walk due west out of Moscow into the woods where I will be waiting with clothes, food, money and we can wend our way out of this endless land. And you will give birth to a...to a...

YEVGENIA. A girl, a daughter...

ISAAC. A daughter! And we will raise her as a true citizen of the world! Even further away...we can go to Northern Europe! Scandinavia! Some place cool and blue with ice floes and fjords.

YEVGENIA. Salted fish.

ISAAC. And tea.

YEVGENIA. And tea!

ISAAC. We will teach her the Russian preparation of tea, exiles who keep the best parts of their country, like how we will be drinking tea the proper way, hot, hot hot, until it sweats out of your stomach, until beads of tea appear on your belly, the hot way.

YEVGENIA. Condensation!

ISAAC. Our child will smile at people because she will never know the cruel gaze of communism. She will only know fjords and fish and tea.

YEVGENIA. And words. She will know words.

The weight of them...

She will be an exiled Russian intellectual of the highest rank!

ISAAC. We will be so proud of her.

Beat.

YEVGENIA. (*Quietly.*) ...Fjords and fish and tea.

They hold each other for a moment, lost in a dream.

But how will I find you in the woods?

ISAAC. What?

YEVGENIA. After I fake illness, after I am brought, in restraints, to the maternity ward, after your locksmith friend loosens my chains, and I escape into the night, walking due west out of Moscow into the woods...how will I find you in the woods? Isaac, the woods spill out in every direction, and they are cold and damp and wild. You will be somewhere in the woods, how could I find you?

ISAAC. How will you find me.

YEVGENIA. How will I find you.

Beat. They almost wake from their dream, and fall back into despair, until...

ISAAC. I will play a cello.

YEVGENIA. A cello!

ISAAC. I will play a cello in the woods. Stand in the woods, Yevgenia, and listen for the low thrum of a cello...

The sound of a cello playing, lonesome, far away is heard. They both hear it.

YEVGENIA. Where will you get a cello?

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ISAAC. I know a cello maker. He owes me. Can you hear it?

YEVGENIA. I hear it.

ISAAC. Listen for me in the woods, woman.

I will play for you until you are there, and you come to me, and we are together.

Scene 8

Glasnost—1989—Moscow

Bureau 42. Vova descends in the elevator again.

Vova enters from the elevator. He carries himself with confidence, swagger, he has a briefcase.

VOVA. Yezhov, N. "N" stands for Nikolai.

Born St. Petersburg, One May 1895.

(*Reading file.*) You served in the Russian Imperial Army, the Red Cavalry, and thereafter Chief Commander of the NKVD. You used to stand by Stalin's side. His right-hand man!

Flips through file.

And then some details that seem decidedly false: You were...

Executed for treason.

Buried in a mass grave.

(*Surprised.*) And you were a dwarf!

Nikolai enters...

NIKOLAI. (*Defensive; insecure.*) I'm not a dwarf!

VOVA. Your nickname: "The Poison Dwarf."

Nikolai frantically locates the magic marker and wields it.

NIKOLAI. That's not my nickname! You don't call me dwarf!

VOVA. Also: "The Bloody Dwarf."

NIKOLAI. (*Holding up marker.*) I erased that! It is no longer official state knowledge!

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VOVA. You no longer preside over official state knowledge. Yezhov, N. You are hereby relieved of your duties as First Chief Directorate, Level Double "A" and Chairman of Bureau 42. Here. Read.

NIKOLAI. *What is this...?*

VOVA. I have been promoted to your position!

NIKOLAI. YOU?!

VOVA. I have been deemed an appropriate replacement!

My file clearly indicates I am a superlative agent for the KGB. My record: impeccable. Never insubordinate. Expert in judo and all martial arts. Fluent in German, English, and Chinese! My record states, even: I am a Good Man.

NIKOLAI. Good and Not Good, these are not—

VOVA. —Considerations! Yes. They are. These are now considerations. Changes abound. Modernity! The world has changed, Yezhov Comrade, and you are of a *different time*. And so, at long last, after a...confusing and mishapen career...you will finally retire from this business. Perhaps you might retreat to some coastal town...I hear Sochi is nice.

NIKOLAI. How dare you! Descending into my Bureau and tell me this...

VOVA. (*Points to form.*) Acknowledge the affidavit, please. It has been signed, stamped, and confirmed by ranking members of the Kremlin!

NIKOLAI. You... You are a sub-standard, low-level...*thug*. You don't have the authority...I am I am IN CHARGE HERE!

VOVA. (*Sharply; accusing.*) In 1940 you were designated a *non-person*.

But you did not accept this.

And so, in a flagrant violation of Soviet bylaws, you resurrected your existence. And so you are insubordinate.

Being alive when you are dead: This is against the law.

NIKOLAI. Don't tell me what is the law.

Don't tell me who is alive and who is dead.

You don't know your own life.

And this is MY Bureau! No one else knows where to find things, I've spent years organizing every file!

VOVA. The information in this dank cell will be compressed and shrunk into microbytes of easily accessed data.

He takes out a floppy disk, circa 1989.

Behold Yezhov, the floppy disk! The most powerful tool in all of communism...In the New Soviet Union, computers will be the key to everything.

He hands the disk to Nikolai, who holds it as if he's never seen anything like it—with disgust and curiosity.

Nikolai wanders away from his desk in a daze. Vova takes his place behind the desk.

NIKOLAI. Wait... WAIT...! What of my granddaughter! You were to contain her! *That* is your current assigned mission! Where is she?

VOVA. Your granddaughter... Urzula... I contained her.

She tried to escape and I prevented her from doing so. Better: I convinced her of acceptable alternatives to escape...

NIKOLAI. That was not your assignment! Insubordinate!

VOVA. I appealed to her deeper self. Her Russian roots. I implored her: Understand the blood in your veins.

And she did.

We fell in love.

She carries my child.

NIKOLAI. Ohhhh... I see... I see the games you play. Truth-Lies! Lies-Truth!

You learned from me these little games!

VOVA. No games. I eat dinner with her every night. We eat soup.

Prepared by her grandmother. *Yevgenia*.

NIKOLAI. That's a lie!

VOVA. No lie.

NIKOLAI. Yevgenia is dead! She died in the asylum!

VOVA. She is very much alive.

NIKOLAI. No! She died giving birth to a child!

And the child was whisked away—with millions of others—in the chaos of war.
This is why we built our wall in Berlin: To hold the earth steady... so we could find the people who were lost to us.
So I could find my daughter...
So I could find my granddaughter...

VOVA. Urzula is not your granddaughter... She is no blood of yours. She is the offspring of Isaac Babel, the Jewish writer.
NIKOLAI. No no no...

He shuts his eyes tight; then recovers.

So I will tell you a story! Everything you've said is a lie. This affidavit is a lie. Floppy disk is a lie! Your stupid, pinchy face is a lie. Yevgenia is dead, Urzula is my blood, and—

VOVA. —Urzula and I, and our child... AND Yevgenia... will repair to Leningrad. My birthplace, where my mother lives, and we will raise our child together, and he will be a true citizen of the Soviet Union, a boy who will understand in his bones the virtues of communism, the glory of Russia, the pride of Leningrad. And he will be a champion at judo.
Like his father.

A distant rumbling is heard...

NIKOLAI. Ohhh...ho ho ho...Do you hear it?

VOVA. You are dismissed!

NIKOLAI. Listen! Listen!

Vova does hear it...he's alarmed...

That is the rumbling of Glasnost! Openness!
Do you know what results from "openness"? *Escape!*
I dreamt about this! I had a nightmare about Gorbachev! That rascal!

And in my dream, that Gorbachev, he was wearing the cowboy hat! And he was singing the rock 'n' roll! And he tore down our wall. Our beautiful Berlin Wall, keeping us secure and safe from the lies of the West!

Do you hear the rumbling of Glasnost...the clawing of demented youth, digging their way to the West?!

VOVA. Get out!

NIKOLAI. The Berlin Wall is Falling!
Listen for it! Go back to East Germany and see!

VOVA. This is nonsense what you are saying! Get out!

NIKOLAI. And what of Urzula?

Is she a young lady who waits for her Stasi Man?

Or is she already scampering West?

To Freedom...To Freedom! Ha!

To FREEDOM!

The rumbling increases...Nikolai shuffles away...

A wall of Bureau 42 suddenly crumbles into a rubble of stones...A very pregnant Urzula, with a bag, and a coat, steps over the rubble...and into freedom.

Vova watches in horror as she walks, holding her belly...

Loud, Anarchic, Rock 'n' Roll...Free.

End of Act Two

ACT THREE

Scene 9

Freedom—1989—Dresden

Urzula and Yevgenia's apartment.

Yevgenia is already on stage (she watched Urzula leave).

VOVA. *Where is she?* Old Woman! Where is she?

YEVGENIA. Who now?

VOVA. Your granddaughter! Where did she go?

YEVGENIA. Who can say?

VOVA. *You know... You know where she went.*

She didn't leave Dresden! She wouldn't leave Dresden.

YEVGENIA. Oh yeah, she did. Off she went! First chance she got, she took it; good girl. Now: Do we want soup?

VOVA. But she wouldn't leave you here... She wouldn't leave you all alone.

YEVGENIA. And who says Yevgenia doesn't have a say in the matter?! Me, who's been pushed about through the last ninety years like some wheelbarrow!

If I want to stay put for once, I'll stay put!

VOVA. She must have told you where she went!

YEVGENIA. She's gone, flying south like so many ducks.

VOVA. I will find her!

YEVGENIA. Although, I heard they were all killed.

VOVA. Who?

YEVGENIA. *The Ducks!*

VOVA. Stop talking nonsense. I'll find her. I will...

YEVGENIA. Maybe, maybe not.

VOVA. I will. I'll search every country in Europe to find a woman with a newborn child...

I will put this world back together to find her! I will put that wall back together, piece by piece!

Beat.

(*Truly aggrieved.*) Why did she leave me? She carries my child. I am the father of that child.

YEVGENIA. Poor Boy. *Sadness.*

But you will survive this and other insults.

VOVA. Don't mock me.

YEVGENIA. The problem with being Yevgenia is, I know the truth about the world. I see it every time I open my eyes. Look at your hand. See it. It will tell you everything.

He goes to her, gives her his hand.

VOVA. Tell me. Tell me what it says. *Tell me.*

She takes his hand, looks at it.

YEVGENIA. One day, you'll be *President of Russia.*

Beat.

There is nothing but war ahead.

Scene 10

More Lies—1940—Moscow

An interrogation room.

Isaac, badly beat up, sits in a chair, handcuffed to a desk. He may be unconscious, or he may be deep in thought.

His suitcase with pages of typed and written words is on a table near him.

Nikolai enters.

NIKOLAI. (*Reads from a paper.*) Babel, I. Writer.

You are accused of active participation in anti-Soviet Trotskyite organizations, of being a member of a terrorist conspiracy, and you are a spy for France.
(*With distaste.*) A French spy.

You have written seditious, subversive, anti-Soviet literature, and you have portrayed Joseph Stalin, on more than one occasion, as a duck.

How do you plead?

ISAAC. Nikolai...

NIKOLAI. How do you plead?

ISAAC. Nikolai, please...

NIKOLAI. You don't call me by this name. That is not my name. I am Chief Commander, you call me Chief Commander. Do you understand? How do you plead?

ISAAC. I deny everything. I didn't break a single law. I am not a spy. I am a loyal member of the Communist Party, I have never written ill of the Soviet Union or of Stalin, I have never portrayed him as a duck or as any bird or waterfowl. I was once a member of YUGROSTA, stationed with the Red Cavalry in the Russo-Polish War in 1920.

I am a good man.

NIKOLAI. "Good" and "Not good" these are not considerations.

ISAAC. I'm innocent!

NIKOLAI. You are NOT innocent!

This: Your work! All of it: Subversive. Weird. Unorthodox. Trying too hard to be funny. Describing ugly things instead of beautiful things. Describing filth. Describing suffering. Describing Russia in such a way that does not inspire pride, but rather, a gloomy sense of doom.

Do you deny you have written these pages?

Beat.

Do you deny you have written these pages?

ISAAC. Nikolai, those are...

NIKOLAI. You call me Chief Commander! And do you deny or do you not deny that you have written these words, all these words?!

ISAAC. I deny!

NIKOLAI. You're calling me a liar, then?

ISAAC. Not a liar, just mistaken. You have the wrong man.

NIKOLAI. I have the wrong man...

ISAAC. Yes.

NIKOLAI. So somebody else wrote these pages, these words.

ISAAC. Did you...

Did you read the pages?

NIKOLAI. I need not wade through filth to know that it is filth.

ISAAC. (*With sudden unexpected rage.*) *Just because it is murky does not make it filth!*

Beat; he speaks quickly, desperately.

There is a story within that...case there...There are many stories, plays, poems, essays, notes, ideas, questions, exclamations, verses, doodles, sketches, wonderments about the world...But there is one story in particular about a man—I want you to listen to this—a young soldier who has gotten lost in a strange land, separated from his troops, and is all alone in some vast, terrifying countryside, trying to stay alive, trying to avoid enemy soldiers, wondering if he will ever find his comrades, or his way home, or see his friends again, or see his wife, whom he loves, even though he doesn't understand her and she doesn't understand him.

Because he is lost, because he is more alone than he has ever been—more alone, in fact, than he ever thought anyone could ever be, he begins to discover truths about himself—for example that he doesn't understand his wife, and she doesn't understand him. It's about self-awareness...

NIKOLAI. Seditious. Topics like these: Self-awareness. No.

ISAAC. Let me finish.

He has been slowly walking east, in hopes of finding his division, or at the very least, his homeland.

NIKOLAI. Which homeland?

ISAAC. That's immaterial and not mentioned.

NIKOLAI. How could that be immaterial?

ISAAC. Immaterial for the purposes of the story.

NIKOLAI. The "purposes of the story" is to praise the Soviet Union! If not, you are engaging in some Western mode of thinking that lauds "individuality" which always sounds fancy, but is in fact a wart

upon the soul of mankind, and if you were loyal to Stalin you would understand this, but apparently you don't. And you have now admitted to writing these words, and so you have confessed—

ISAAC. I have not confessed! I never said anything about writing anything! I am just describing one of the pieces of writing within that case, which technically isn't a crime! Am I right?

NIKOLAI. You are mamby-pambying.

As Isaac continues, Nikolai, in spite of himself, gets drawn into the story, and looks away, allowing himself to listen.

ISAAC. The lost soldier wanders east, and decides to stay the night in a haystack. The night is a shivering cold: dry and crisp, every breath blooms white.

He is awoken by a strange sound, and he walks around the haystack to find an old man digging a hole. The man is weeping, and before the soldier can hide, the old man sees him, and just begins talking to him, as if they were old friends, and not strangers, not enemies. The old man's son has died of a fever, and he is now digging a grave in the hard, frozen earth, and he is not making much progress. The old man is weak, the body of his son, wrapped in a cloth, is laid out to the side. The old man is overcome with grief. He can't stop crying, and snot runs down his face...

NIKOLAI. Ugh...

ISAAC. So the soldier, not knowing what else to do, digs the grave for the man. As he does, the old man explains that he is alone now, he is the last of his family, and everyone else's graves dot the premises. And when the grave is dug, and the boy is lowered into it, the old man begins to sob, uncontrollably, and the whole scene is actually rather disgusting to the soldier, and not only that, but the old man also has symptoms of a fever, and also an infection on his hand that looks to be gangrenous.

So the soldier kills the old man with the shovel. In a supreme act of pity. Of love, even. In a supreme act of kindness, in a supreme act of self-interest. He buries the man—the now peaceful man—with his son. He goes to their distant hovel, eats their remaining stew, warms himself by the fire, and realizes he does not love his wife.

And that if he never returned home, perhaps it wouldn't be shameful or wrong. He longs for a place he has never seen, a metropolis somewhere, where strangers commingle, where men are kind, where there is no pity to be found and nights are warm and cigarettes are cheap. A place where men can love each other.

Beat.

Is there such a place? Where men can love one another?

Beat.

Maybe. The soldier wonders. Maybe.

A long beat.

NIKOLAI. *(So quiet he can barely be heard.)* What are you saying then?

ISAAC. What?

NIKOLAI. What are you SAYING THEN? I want to love men all of a sudden?

ISAAC. The story isn't about you and even if it—

NIKOLAI. THAT STORY IS ALL ABOUT ME!

I know how you work. Never telling a story just the way it is! Always getting fancy! I killed an old man because it *pleased me*. I didn't think about it before, I didn't think about it afterwards, I wasn't lost from my troop. And none of the other lying shit lies you've just said.

Tries to regain his composure, reads.

Babel, Isaac. Writer.

You are accused of active participation in anti-Soviet Trotskyite organizations, of being a member of a terrorist conspiracy, and...

Breaks.

You think I'm some faggot?! *Why?* Because my whore of a wife can't keep her legs shut for the entirety of Moscow?! Or is it something else. What did she tell you? What did she tell you about me?

ISAAC. Nothing.

NIKOLAI. What gives you the right to know her better than me? What gives her the right to whisper my secrets to any famous writer who comes to the door with cake? I'm a man!

I am my own man!
I have a wife and a good job!
I fought in wars!
I am the Chief Commander of the NKVD, my parents would be so proud!

ISAAC. Yes...yes...

NIKOLAI. Why are things always symbols to you? Truth is lie, lie is truth. *Metaphor*: Do you want to see something that is not a metaphor?

Nikolai opens the furnace.

The furnace is not a metaphor.

Do you know what goes into the furnace and is burned and disappears forever?
Subversive and seditious writing.

He takes a ream of paper from the case.

ISAAC. Nikolai, no...no...please...

Nikolai dumps it down into the furnace.

THAT'S MY ONLY COPY! I DON'T HAVE ANY MORE, IT'S MY WORK YOU'RE BURNING! THAT'S MINE!

Nikolai takes more reams and dumps them into the flames.

WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS?! IT'S JUST STORIES! IT'S MY WORK! GOD DAMNIT, NIKOLAI?!

NIKOLAI. So you confess! You confess these are your writings!

ISAAC. YES! I CONFESS! EVERYTHING HERE IS MINE!
Nobody else could have written any of it!

NIKOLAI. You confess!

ISAAC. YES! I confess!

NIKOLAI. Are you a terrorist, are you a French spy?!

ISAAC. NO!

Nikolai picks up more of the papers and stuffs them into the furnace.

YES! Okay, just stop! I'm a terrorist! I'm a member of an anti-Soviet Trotskyite organization! I spy for the fucking French! Just stop burning my work!

NIKOLAI. You confess. You confess to all these crimes.
ISAAC. Just stop burning my work. My only copies...

A long beat. A terrible silence. Finally...

NIKOLAI. Did you engage in an extramarital affair with Yevgenia Solomonovna?

Beat. They stare at each other.

ISAAC. The answer to such a question is so obvious that to even speak the words would make fools of us both.

Nikolai simply gathers the rest of the writing and the case they were in and stuffs it all down the furnace.

Isaac stares, can't even shout anymore, is emptied.

NIKOLAI. Babel, I.

Writer.

You are found guilty of terrorism, espionage, treason, and writing subversive texts.

Nikolai turns to leave.

ISAAC. Nikolai, wait, please, wait, listen, you just have to let me...

He begins to sob in panic.

You have to let me finish!

You have to let me finish my work!

Scene 11

Silence—2010—Moscow

The same interrogation room.

Mariya sits in the same chair as Isaac did.

Vova enters. He is older, in a fine suit.

VOVA. Tokareva, M. First name, Mariya. Journalist.

MARIYA. (*Stammering*.) What are you...

Why are you...

What do you...

VOVA. Shhhh shh shhhh...

MARIYA. Mr. President, I...

VOVA. Shhh... You do not need to use this honorific: "Mr. President." It is so stuffy. Of course, I am, of course, the President, and so it's not inappropriate, and I do appreciate your formality, even under duress.

But you could call me any number of things. My friends call me "Vova."

We have a box filled with your possessions—what you had with you upon your arrest for littering.

MARIYA. I didn't litter!

VOVA. Shhh... Bus pass. Lip balm. Cash. A .38 caliber pistol. A pair of handcuffs. With keys. A nail file. A laptop computer that has curiously, suspiciously even, been erased of any information. Cleaned out.

And a condom.

But no photo ID.

Paints quite a picture.

He presents Babel's journal.

One last thing. This. A very, very old book.

A unique book.

How do you have it?

Beat.

Ah.

Silence.

I respect silence.

Beat.

This is an old room.

In the 1930s and in the 1940s... this was called a *confessional booth*. As a joke.

But today this is no longer an operational precinct.

People are no longer brought here for questioning. You are special. You *are* special, aren't you?

Beat.

Do you know what this book is?

MARIYA. No.

VOVA. And isn't it interesting!

First, there was: *Silence*.

A wall of silence offered by: *You*.

Now, there is: "No."

Isn't that interesting. I didn't even have to use techniques.

Do you know what I mean by the word "techniques"? It's a fancy word for something not so fancy. "Techniques."

Do you know what this term means?

MARIYA. Yes.

VOVA. Ah! And now: "Yes." Again, without techniques.

Yes.

Do you know what techniques have taught us? They have taught us one absolute truth.

Would you like to know what it is, this absolute truth?

Everyone. Speaks.

Beat.

Do you think you are going to die today? Answer yes or no.

MARIYA. No.

VOVA. No. Good. I agree with you. Nobody wants anyone to die.

Beat.

Of course, some people have, of course, died.

In this room, so many people:

Back then things were much much different than they are today.

Back then, the head of the NKVD, a monster named Nikolai Yezhov, proclaimed that "It would be better that ten innocent men die than one traitor go free."

This is hardly a sustainable justice. Yes?

MARIYA. Yes.

VOVA. *Yes!* Yes yes yes yes.

Of course, many have died.

You would agree?

MARIYA. Yes.

VOVA. Yes.

Your friend, Yuri Egorov, who like you, was a reporter, your friend, tragically, was a victim of street crime. Yes?

Beat.

Mariya, yes?

MARIYA. Yes.

VOVA. Yes.

MARIYA. No.

VOVA. No?

MARIYA. (*Whispers.*) No.

VOVA. But this is a fact. It was officially designated as so. Go to the public records, find his death certificate. Yuri Egorov was robbed at gunpoint and then shot and killed. This is a fact.

You appreciate facts, don't you? As a journalist?

MARIYA. He was not a victim of street crime.

VOVA. Well.

Perhaps you prefer conjecture. Speculation. *Lies.*

MARIYA. No, I don't prefer lies, I prefer to not lie, I prefer to not build a world of lies to hide behind. Like a frightened little boy.

VOVA. Is that comment directed at me?

Beat.

Do I look frightened to you? Tell the truth.

MARIYA. A man who arrests journalists, kills journalists... a man who desires only for journalists to sing his praises... that looks like a frightened man to me.

VOVA. Perhaps we could play a game: "Who becomes more frightened." The winner gets to be... *not frightened.*

She stares at him for a moment, gauging how frightening this is...

Why do you *think* you are here?

MARIYA. I was in Smolensk the night of the Polish airline crash.

VOVA. You are a reporter for the *Gazeta!* You were on assignment to cover a diplomatic event, this is no crime. Why would this warrant your arrest?

She is silent.

Of course, tragedies such as the Smolensk crash—political ones, with global implications—these always suffer the insult of *conspiracy theory*.

Malevolent forces are shooting airplanes down from the skies!

Media outlets indulging in this behavior should be punished, wouldn't you agree?

Beat.

Or is this something you are engaged in. Are you writing lies you intend to publish? About that morning in Smolensk.

MARIYA. No.

VOVA. That's a lie.

MARIYA. It's not.

VOVA. In the seven months since the Smolensk crash, you have quit your job at the *Gazeta*, moved to Poland, and commenced erratic behavior including an attempt at changing your name, an attempt at acquiring a fake passport, the purchase of a firearm, and a meeting with a Polish filmmaker who has made it his purpose in life to spread lies about that crash. So I don't believe you when you tell me you're not one of the liars out there aiming to disgrace the memories of people far better than yourself.

Beat.

People who lie are scum.

Beat.

How are we doing with our game? I can assure you I am far from being frightened, so I'm confident I can win. Are you confident you can win?

She just stares at him, which suggests that she might be hanging in there. She does not betray fear.

He picks up Babel's diary.

Where did you get this diary?

MARIYA. A woman gave it to me.

VOVA. A woman?

MARIYA. Yes.

VOVA. That's a lie.

MARIYA. It's not a lie.

VOVA. This book was given to you by a car rental clerk in Smolensk. Name of Feliks.

He was brought in for questioning shortly after the crash. There was nothing suspicious about his whereabouts or behavior so he was let go.

He seemed...insignificant.

We had "bigger fish to fry?"

You, for example. A woman reporter who had gone missing. Your supervisors at the *Gazeta* had no idea where you were.

So we tapped your office phone.

And who should call one day, months after the crash?

An insignificant car rental clerk named Feliks.

So he was taken back into custody.

And after a lengthy conversation with him in a room not unlike this one, he confessed to so much...including that he gave you this book.

Beat.

If it is of any comfort to you... "techniques" were necessary to acquire this information.

This book is the original diary of the Russian writer Isaac Babel. He was a homosexual and one of the great liars of his age. He betrayed his fellow writers and was a spy for the French government.

MARIYA. Have you read it?

VOVA. What?

MARIYA. The diary, have you read it?

VOVA. I've perused it. He was a bad writer. It's bad writing. You read it?

MARIYA. I read it.

VOVA. And?

Beat.

MARIYA. It made me want to write...about different things.

Vova is irritated by this diversion, and shrugs it off and inspects a file.

VOVA. According to the car rental clerk, he purchased Babel's diary from a bookseller in Warsaw and never knew of its import. He said you saw it on his desk and asked to purchase it and he sold it to you. Is that true?

MARIYA. Yes.

VOVA. (*Again refers to file.*) But then, at the time, this confession did not seem true! And so more techniques were used.

"Feliks" then confessed that he gave it to you in exchange for sexual favors. Intercourse. The men questioning him, they believed this.

MARIYA. It's true. Yes.

VOVA. That's true?

MARIYA. Yes.

VOVA. Because that seems like a lie to me.

MARIYA. It's not.

VOVA. You fucked a man for a book?

MARIYA. I like to read.

VOVA. Ha.

You have mettle, Mariya Tokareva. But you are a bad liar.

Why don't you ask me a question.

You must have questions for me.

MARIYA. No.

VOVA. No questions? A journalist gets to have a private audience with *Me*...and she has no questions?

Come now, Mariya...you strike me as a curious girl.

MARIYA. Was the Smolensk crash an assassination?

VOVA. What a question.

MARIYA. That's all it is.

VOVA. It was a terrible tragedy. An unfortunate accident that took place in the dark of dawn, in a thick fog, over the Katyn Forest.

Beat.

Do you know President Kaczyński was coming to Smolensk to honor the Katyn Massacre?

MARIYA. Yes, I knew that. That's why I was there. That's why Yuri was there.

VOVA. The Katyn Massacre. Twenty thousand Poles were murdered in that forest by the Nazis in 1940.

MARIYA. It wasn't the Nazis.

VOVA. According to some people. Everyone has competing narratives, isn't it so?

MARIYA. It's not so.

VOVA. Perhaps you like Nazis.

MARIYA. I don't like Nazis, but they didn't...they didn't do that. It wasn't the Nazis. It was Russia. Gorbachev admitted as much after the Berlin Wall fell.

It was the NKVD who killed those Poles. Not the Nazis.

VOVA. This is what happens when misinformation is pressed hard enough.

Blame gets passed from one people to another. It is our burden now.

Beat.

The plane crashed at the very site of that mass grave. Where they had been executed seventy years earlier...

MARIYA. ...On the exact anniversary of the massacre.

VOVA. (*Smiles.*) The world is mysterious.

Beat.

Now, this diary. Isaac Babel's diary is a lost Russian artifact designed by the Kremlin as a Top Level Interest.

We have a list of things that belong to us, things that have been lost to time.

We want them back.

Beat.

I put this book on the list myself.

I have been looking for it for twenty-one years.

That's why I'm here right now.

Where did you get this book, Mariya?

I don't believe Feliks, I think he was a liar.

Mariya stares at him for a moment, and then begins...

MARIYA. We were in the press room at the airport.

I went outside. The plane was delayed anyhow, they said.

VOVA. Why did you go outside?

MARIYA. To smoke.

VOVA. There are no cigarettes in your bag.

MARIYA. I quit.

VOVA. Good for you, it's a filthy habit.

MARIYA. Outside, I saw the forest. And I was smoking... And then the plane crashed.

She is quiet.

And then there is fire everywhere... Darkness and blazing light. And I don't know why, but I ran towards it, the crash.

And then there was a woman sitting in front of me.

She was still in her seat, her seat had been torn out. She was sitting there. A piece of metal in her neck.

And she was holding that book. And she was smiling. She held it out for me. "Take this, dear..." She said. And I did. And then she died.

VOVA. That's a lie.

MARIYA. It's not—

VOVA. That is a LIE. Stop talking. I know the woman who owned this book, and she was not on the Smolensk flight, that is a fact, and so I know you are lying to me.

MARIYA. Ninety-seven people died in that crash. Of those, twenty-one were women. I went to Poland, I talked to people, I studied state files. I narrowed my search until I found her.

Her name was Izabella Gorniak.

VOVA. Whoever that is, she did not own this book, so again I want you to tell me *where did you get it?*

MARIYA. Izabella Gorniak was not her real name.

The woman had changed her name.

She used to be called Urzula Solomonovna.

She was the granddaughter of Isaac Babel.

Long beat.

VOVA. That's not...
How do you know that is true?
MARIYA. I spoke to her grandmother.
VOVA. (*Slams table; begins to get up.*) No you didn't. This is over. I am finished playing games!

MARIYA. Her name is Yevgenia.

VOVA. (*Quietly; frightened.*) Yevgenia.

MARIYA. She lives alone in an apartment in Warsaw. She is a hundred and ten years old. But she's spry.

Beat.

She was heartbroken about her granddaughter's death. I tried to give her the diary, but she insisted I keep it.
We spoke for many hours. We held hands while we talked. She made me soup.

Beat.

VOVA. (*Quietly; frightened.*) Were there leeches in the soup?

MARIYA. Leeches? No...

Beat.

She told me Urzula had escaped from East Germany after the wall fell, given birth to a boy in Warsaw, and then given the child up for adoption.

She said the father of the boy had been a Stasi agent, who had threatened Urzula with arrest if she didn't sleep with him.
Yevgenia said he was a clown, with many faces, faces he had cut off of people who wronged him.
She said that clown...

In this moment Mariya realizes who the clown is.

...She said he would be the most powerful man in the world one day...but that he would never know his own blood.

Beat.

What could she have meant by that, do you think?

Vova gets up and walks away, shaken. Trying not to show it.

A long beat.

Ah.

Silence.
I respect silence.

Vova remains still for a long time. Then he leaves.

Scene 12 Even More Lies—2010

Feliks enters and sits on the table. Maybe Mariya is facing away from him and doesn't notice him at first. She turns and looks at him.

MARIYA. There's an old joke from East Germany. Sorry—the "German Democratic Republic."

So...A German worker gets a job in Siberia.

He knows when he goes there, all his mail back home will be read by censors, so he tells his friend:

"Let's have a code: if you get a letter from me written in blue ink, it's true; if it's written in red ink, it's false."

After a month, his friend gets a letter written entirely in blue ink.
It reads:

"Everything is wonderful here: The food is great, the weather is great, all the movie theatres have films from the West, and all the women are beautiful. We have everything you could possibly want. The only thing we don't have is red ink."

FELIKS. I'm so sorry.

MARIYA. For what?

FELIKS. Calling you. Your office. I didn't know they were tapping your phone. I panicked.

MARIYA. It's okay.

I'm sorry too. For getting you into this. For coming to you. As soon I stepped into your car rental I fucked you up.

FELIKS. No. It wasn't you.

MARIYA. It was.

FELIKS. It wasn't.

As soon as I walked into that crash and saw that woman and took that book, I was fucked.

MARIYA. As soon as that plane crashed we were both fucked.
FELIKS. I dunno.

We were both fucked long before that.

She laughs. He laughs.

MARIYA. Yeah. I guess so.

Feliks picks up two files that were on the desk.

FELIKS. This one's mine, and this one's yours.
Which one do you want?

MARIYA. Give me yours, read me mine.

He gives her a file.

So? What happened to me?

FELIKS. (*Reads.*) "Mariya Tokareva.

Born 25 May 1975, Moscow.

Died 12 November 2010, Moscow.

A victim of street crime."

MARIYA. Fuckin' street crime. Real creative.

FELIKS. What about me?

MARIYA. "Feliks Novak.

Born 31 December 1989.

Died 19 October 2010 of injuries sustained while intoxicated."

FELIKS. Is that better or worse than street crime?

MARIYA. It's worse.

FELIKS. I probably was drunk. But that's not how I...

MARIYA. No, I know.

What else?

FELIKS. "Journalist for the *Gazeta*."

MARIYA. "Polish national."

FELIKS. "Unmarried. No children. No family to speak of."

MARIYA. Jesus, fuck off. I did my best.

"Orphaned, raised in the Warsaw State Commorancy for Boys."

FELIKS. "No arrest was made in her murder."

MARIYA. "He fell onto the tracks at the Central Railway Station in Smolensk."

FELIKS. "Eyewitnesses reported two men, possibly homeless, robbing her at knife-point."

MARIYA. "A railway attendant stated: 'It was otherwise a very quiet night.'"

FELIKS. "It was dark."

MARIYA. "The man was drunk, the man was very drunk..."

FELIKS. "The men had thick accents."

MARIYA. "No one claimed his body."

FELIKS. "No one claimed her body."

MARIYA. "The night was otherwise quiet and dark."

FELIKS. "A streetlight had gone dead."

MARIYA. Check it out. This page: Redacted.

FELIKS. Pages two through six: Redacted.

Crossed out with a black magic marker.

MARIYA. "Warsaw accent."

FELIKS. "Moscow accent."

MARIYA and FELIKS. "Standard, straight across the middle."

MARIYA. It's a fucking template.

FELIKS. He was drunk.

She was robbed.

MARIYA. "The night was quiet and dark."

FELIKS. "The night was quiet and dark."

They toss the files down. A beat.

MARIYA. You seemed like a good guy.

This sentence has a sorrowful effect on Feliks.

FELIKS. I wasn't.

I wasn't a good guy. I wasn't a bad guy. I was twenty-one.

I was nothing. I was an orphan. I never knew anything about myself.

I was nothing, and now...

(*The file.*) Look at this: I am nothing.

Awkward beat.

MARIYA. Hey.

Hey.

Look at me you dumb fuckin' orphan.

He does.

Have you ever put your nose into the ass of a goat and just breathed in?

Beat.

If you do this, you can read people's minds.

FELIKS. That's an old wives' tale.

MARIYA. No, it's true. You wanna read my mind?

FELIKS. There's no goats around here.

MARIYA. These stupid files... These stinking miserable lies...

I bet they smell the same as a goat ass.

Feliks picks a file up and smells it deeply.

FELIKS. *Fuuuuuuck...*

MARIYA. Yeah right? Breathe it in. I'm thinking of a number between one and a million. What is it?

FELIKS. *(Plays along.)* Five thousand nine hundred seventy-two.

MARIYA. Exactly!

FELIKS. Amazing.

MARIYA. I'm thinking of a color.

FELIKS. Midnight blue.

MARIYA. You're good at this. What am I thinking about right now?

FELIKS. *(Thinks.)* ... Your mother.

MARIYA. Yep. What about her?

FELIKS. What a real bitch she was. A nasty little wench with dirty teeth.

MARIYA. Exactly. She was the worst.

FELIKS. I can't believe how good I am at reading minds!

MARIYA. You're a natural.

What else am I thinking about?

He sniffs the file again, a big whiff... then concentrates.

FELIKS. You're thinking about...

Huh...

Soup.

He actually got this one, and Mariya is a little taken aback.

MARIYA. Yeah...

FELIKS. An old woman and soup.

MARIYA. Yeah...

FELIKS. She smokes and drinks and tells stories.

MARIYA. Yeah...

FELIKS. She tells the future...

She knows things.

She's in an asylum.

She's pregnant walking through the snow.

She's listening for a cello.

She's in Moscow.

She's in Warsaw.

She's in Dresden.

She's in Warsaw again.

She's eating soup.

She had a daughter. Her daughter died.

She had a granddaughter. Her granddaughter died.

Everyone she's ever known has died.

But not her.

She'll live forever maybe.

Maybe it's the soup.

MARIYA. Yeah.

FELIKS. She had a great-grandson.

MARIYA. Yeah.

FELIKS. He was an orphan.

MARIYA. Yeah.

FELIKS. In Warsaw.

MARIYA. Yeah.

FELIKS. And he fucked around and ended up in Smolensk, where he died, beaten to death by police for seeing an airplane crash.

And for going into the airplane crash.

And for seeing a woman in a chair.
A woman who was his mother.

Beat.

Is that true? Is that a lie?

MARIYA. *Is that a lie?*

FELIKS. I'm asking you.

Beat.

MARIYA. Only you can say.

End of Play

PROPERTY LIST

(Use this space to create props lists for your production)