ACT I

(A room in Semyon's apartment. Night)

SCENE ONE

(The husband and wife Semyon and Mariya are asleep on a double bed)

SEMYON. Masha, hey Masha! Masha, are you asleep, Masha?
MARIYA. (Cries out) A-a-ah...
SEMYON. What's the matter? What's the matter? It's me.
MARIYA. What do you want, Semyon?
SEMYON. Masha, I just wanted to ask... Masha, hey Masha... Are you sleeping again? Masha!
MARIYA. (Cries out) A-a-ah...
SEMYON. What's the matter? What's the matter? It's me.
MARIYA. Is that you, Semyon?
SEMYON. Uh-huh, it's me.
MARIYA. What do you want, Semyon?
SEMYON. Masha, I just wanted to ask...
MARIYA. Uh-huh. Well, what is it you want, Semyon? Senya....
SEMYON. Masha, I just wanted to ask... Do we have any liverwurst sausage left over from dinner?
MARIYA. What?
SEMYON. I said, do we have any liverwurst sausage left over from dinner?
MARIYA. Well, Semyon, I might have expected anything from you. But a midnight conversation with an exhausted woman about liverwurst sausage—well that I didn't expect. That is so inconsiderate. So inconsiderate. I work days on end like a horse of some kind, or an ant, and instead of giving me a moment's peace at night, you make my life a bundle of nerves! You know, Semyon, you and your liverwurst sausage have simply destroyed me, destroyed me... Can't you understand, Senya? If you can't sleep yourself, at least let someone else get their sleep. Senya, who do you think I'm talking to? Semyon, are you sleeping? Senya!
SEMYON. A-a-ah...
MARIYA. What's the matter? What's the matter? It's me.
SEMYON. Is that you, Masha?
MARIYA. Uh-huh, it's me.
SEMYON. What do you want, Masha?
MARIYA. I said if you can't sleep, then at least let someone else get their
sleep.

SEMYON. Wait a minute, Masha.

MARIYA. No, you wait a minute. Why didn't you eat when you had the chance? If I'm not mistaken, mama and I prepare everything specially for you, just the way you like it. If I'm not mistaken, mama and I serve you more than anybody else.

SEMYON. And why do you and your mama serve me more than anybody else? You don't do that for nothing. You dish up psychology with every meal you serve. You want to prove to everybody that Semyon Semyonovich, here, doesn't have a job anywhere, but we serve him more than anybody else. I know why you serve me more than anybody else. You serve me more than anybody else to humiliate me. You...

MARIYA. Wait a minute, Senya.

SEMYON. No, you wait a minute. Because when I lie here starving to death all night long with you in the conjugal bed without any witnesses, tête-à-tête under the same blanket, you start economizing on liverwurst with me. MARIYA. You think I'm economizing, Senya? Sweetheart, eat all you want. I'll bring you something right now.

(SEMONYON slides off the bed. Lights a candle and walks to the door)

lord above, what is happening to us? Huh? It's terribly sad to live like this.

(Goes into the other room)

SCENE TWO

(Darkness. Semyon lies silently on the double bed)

SCENE THREE

(MARIYA returns holding a candle in one hand and a plate with some bread and liverwurst in the other)

MARIYA. How do you want your liverwurst spread, Senya, on white or black bread?

SEMYON. The color bears no importance for me because I refuse to eat.

MARIYA. What do you mean you won't eat?

SEMYON. Even if this liverwurst sausage proves to be the death of me, I still refuse to eat it.

MARIYA. What for?

SEMYON. Because I know how you want to spread it. You want to spread it with an introductory speech. First you'll defile my very soul, and only then you'll start spreading your liverwurst.

MARIYA. Listen here, Semyon...

SEMYON. Yeah, I hear you. Get into bed.

MARIYA. What?
SERAfIMA. Semyon Semyonovich! Semyon Semyonovich! Why don't you say anything, Semyon Semyonovich?
MARIYA. He's being difficult, mama.
SERAfIMA. Semyon Semyonovich, what are you talking in pantomime for?
MARIYA. Senya! Semyon!
SERAfIMA. Semyon Semyonovich.
MARIYA. What if he's had an attack, mama?
SERAfIMA. Oh, come now, Mariya! What makes you think that? No, it couldn't be. Semyon Semyonovich!
MARIYA. I'm going to go look for him, mama.

(Her careful steps are heard in the room)

Senya. Senya! Mama!
SERAfIMA. What happened?
MARIYA. Light the candle.
SERAfIMA. My God, what happened to him?
MARIYA. Just light the candle, I tell you.
SERAfIMA. Where is it? I can't find it.
MARIYA. On the floor, mama. On the floor. Rummage around on the floor, mama. Senya, sweetheart, please don't frighten me. Senya... Mama, what are you doing?
SERAfIMA. I'm crawling, Masha.
MARIYA. Mama, you're crawling in the wrong place. Crawl over there near the rubber plant, the rubber plant.

(All falls silent, and then something falls)

God Almighty, what was that?
SERAfIMA. The rubber plant, Masha. The rubber plant.
MARIYA. I'm going out of my mind, mother, I hope you know that.
SERAfIMA. Wait a minute, Masha, wait a minute. I still haven't crawled over to the chest of drawers. Holy Mother of God, I found it!
MARIYA. Well then, light it, light it.
SERAfIMA. Just a minute, Masha. (Strikes a match)
MARIYA. I can't wait any longer, mother. This is torture.
SERAfIMA. (Runs to MARIYA with the candle) What happened to him?
MARIYA. (Throws back the blanket) You see?
SERAfIMA. No.
MARIYA. Me neither.
SERAfIMA. Where is he, then?
MARIYA. He's not here, mama. And the bed's gone cold. Senya... Senya...
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SERAFIMA. Holy Mother of God!
MARIYA. What are we going to do? Huh? If he...
SERAFIMA. Shh! Do you hear anything?
MARIYA. No... Do you?
SERAFIMA. I don't either.
MARIYA. Lord what a mess! I'll go knock on the door, mama, come what may.

SCENE FIVE

(Mariya leaves. Serafima turns toward the icon and makes the sign of the cross)


SCENE SIX

(Enter Mariya at a run)

MARIYA. The door is locked. I can't get it open.
SERAFIMA. Did you talk with him?
MARIYA. Yes.
SERAFIMA. Well, what's he doing?
MARIYA. He wouldn't answer my questions and he didn't make any noises.
SERAFIMA. What are we going to do, Masha?
MARIYA. I'll go wake up Alexander Petrovich. He can break down the door.
SERAFIMA. You can't bother Alexander Petrovich.
MARIYA. Why not?
SERAFIMA. Alexander Petrovich is in mourning. He buried his wife last week.
MARIYA. So much the better. He's bound to sympathize with my situation.

(Runs to the door)

SERAFIMA. I just hope nothing goes wrong, Masha.
MARIYA. One way or another, we need a man. We'll never be able to cope without a man, mama. (Knocks on the door) I can't believe it, mother...
SERAFIMA. What?

(Serafima leaves)

THE SUICIDE — ACT I

SCENE SEVEN

(Mariya)

MARIYA. (Knocks) Alexander Petrovich... Comrade Kalabushkin... Comrade Kalabushkin...
ALEXANDER. (From behind the door) Who's there?
MARIYA. Please don't consider me rude, comrade Kalabushkin. It's me.
ALEXANDER. (From behind the door) Huh?
MARIYA. It's me, Podsekalnikova.
ALEXANDER. (From behind the door) Who?
MARIYA. Podsekalnikova! Mariya Lukyanovna. Good day to you.
ALEXANDER. (From behind the door) What do you want?
MARIYA. I need you terribly, comrade Kalabushkin.
ALEXANDER. (From behind the door) What do you mean you need me?
MARIYA. I need a man.
ALEXANDER. (From behind the door) What are you saying, Mariya Lukyanovna? Shh!
MARIYA. I realize you're not up to it right now, comrade Kalabushkin. But comrade Kalabushkin, you must understand that I am alone, utterly alone. What else can I do, comrade Kalabushkin?
ALEXANDER. (From behind the door) You'd better take a cold shower, Mariya Lukyanovna.
MARIYA. What? Comrade Kalabushkin... Hey, comrade Kalabushkin.
ALEXANDER. (From behind the door) Keep it quiet, dammit!
MARIYA. I'm going to have to break the door down, comrade Kalabushkin. ALEXANDER. For God's sake. Listen to me. Wait a minute. Just wait a minute!

(The door swings open noisily)

SCENE EIGHT

(Margarita, an enormous woman, appears in the doorway in a nightgown)

MARGARITA. Break down the door? Now there's a fine way for a young lady to spend her time. Aren't you a little slut, if you'll pardon the expression.
MARIYA. What do you mean? Please... Alexander Petrovich!
MARGARITA. What are you chasing after Alexander Petrovich for? What kind of filthy business are you up to? We are sitting here together in deepest mourning, reminiscing about the dear departed, and meanwhile you want to break his door down.
MARIYA. You mean you thought I wanted to break down the door? What do you think I am, a crook?
MARGARITA. Modern women are worse than crooks. As God is my witness, they're always looking for something to snitch. Why, you...
ALEXANDER. (Sticking his head out the door) Margarita Ivanovna!
MARGARITA. What do you want?
ALEXANDER. If you are planning to beat her up, Margarita Ivanovna, I don't recommend it. Don't forget, you don't officially live here.

(Alexander's head disappears)

MARIYA. Uh, pardon me, but why would you want to do that?
MARGARITA. Why are you chasing after another woman's man?
MARIYA. You seem to have misunderstood me. I assure you. I'm married.
MARGARITA. What's there to understand? I'm married myself.
MARIYA. But, listen. He's going to shoot himself.
ALEXANDER. (Sticking his head out the door) Who's going to shoot himself?
MARIYA. Semyon Semyonovich.
ALEXANDER. Where's he going to shoot himself?
MARIYA. Please don't laugh, Alexander Petrovich. In the toilet.

(Alexander's head disappears)

MARGARITA. Who, may I ask, shoots himself in the toilet?
MARIYA. Where else can a man go when he's out of work?

SCENE NINE

(Alexander emerges hurriedly through the door)

ALEXANDER. What the hell are you standing here for? We've got to do something, Mariya Lukyanovna.
MARIYA. That's why I came for you, Alexander Petrovich. You're a militant type, you run a shooting gallery. Help me and my mother break down the door.
ALEXANDER. Why didn't you say so right away?
MARGARITA. What were you waiting for?
ALEXANDER. Come on, Mariya Lukyanovna. We'll sneak up on him and snare him before he knows what hit him. But shh... like this... on tiptoes.
MARIYA. Shh... (Tiptoes up to the door)

(As soon as they are flush with the door, a cry rings out: "Ah!")

ALL. (Falling back) Ah!

THE SUICIDE — ACT I

SCENE TEN

(Serafima runs into the room)

SERAfIMA. Don't go in there! Don't go in there!
MARIYA. Oh, my God!
ALEXANDER. What happened?
SERAfIMA. Picture this, if you will. That wasn't Semyon Semyonovich in there at all. It was the old Volodkina woman from across the hall.
MARIYA. What do you mean, mama?
SERAfIMA. Word of honor. I saw her with my own eyes. She just came out. And there I was, Masha, listening through the door like a damn fool!
ALEXANDER. Looks like we've lost him, Mariya Lukyanovna.
MARIYA. It's your fault, mama. I told you he went out. Alexander Petrovich, I beg you to go out and find him.
SERAfIMA. But how could he go out without his pants? Look here, Alexander Petrovich. His pants are right here.
MARIYA. A man confronting death has no need of pants.
MARGARITA. It depends on where he is, Mariya Lukyanovna. For example, the authorities would never let a man without pants die in the center of town. That I can guarantee you.
ALEXANDER. Have you looked everywhere in the building?
MARIYA. Absolutely everywhere.
SERAfIMA. Except the kitchen.
MARIYA. Except the kitchen, that's right. Let's go look in the kitchen, comrade Kalabushkin.

(They race for the door with Margarita in pursuit)

ALEXANDER. You wait here, Margarita Ivanovna - we'll take care of this together.

(Alexander and Mariya run out)

SCENE ELEVEN

(Serafima and Margarita)

MARGARITA. That's just like him. Always pairing off with somebody. It's a genuine neurotic disorder. Let's go after them.
SERAfIMA. (Chases after her) No, what for? Listen. Just wait a minute.

(At that moment the following sounds are heard from the kitchen in the following order: Alexander shouts "Wait!", followed by the slamming of a door, the squeal of Semyon, and finally, the sound of a body hitting the floor. Then, total silence)
MARGARITA. Saints alive, what was that?
SERAFIMA. It’s all over now. He’s shot himself. Shot himself for sure.
MARGARITA. What are we going to do?
SERAFIMA. I think I’m going to scream or something.
MARGARITA. Oh, no, don’t.
SERAFIMA. I’m afraid.
MARGARITA. Me, too.
SERAFIMA. Someone’s coming!
MARGARITA. Where?
SERAFIMA. They’re bringing something.
MARGARITA. What?
SERAFIMA. They’re bringing him!
MARGARITA. They’re bringing him in here.
SERAFIMA. You’re right, they’re bringing him in here.
MARGARITA. Oh, my God!
SERAFIMA. Here they come.
MARGARITA. Here they come.
SERAFIMA. What’s going to happen? What’s going to happen?

SCENE TWELVE

(Alexander drags in the terrified Semyon)

SEMYON. What happened? What happened?
ALEXANDER. Don’t you worry, Semyon Semyonovich.
SEMYON. What are you holding me for? What are you doing? Unhand me.
Let go of me! Let me go this instant.
ALEXANDER. All right, I’ll leave you alone, Semyon Semyonovich. But give me your word, Semyon Semyonovich, that you won’t attempt to do any­thing to yourself until you have heard me out. I beg you as a friend, Semyon Semyonovich. Just listen to what I have to say.
SEMYON. Go ahead. I’m listening.
ALEXANDER. Thank you. Have a seat, Semyon Semyonovich. (Seats him and strikes a pose) Citizen Podsekalnikov... Wait a minute. (Runs to the window and throws back the curtain. The unhealthy urban morning light illuminates the messy bed, the broken rubber plant, and the whole room’s melancholy appearance) Citizen Podsekalnikov. Life is beautiful.
SEMYON. So what’s it to me?
ALEXANDER. What are you talking about? Citizen Podsekalnikov, where do you think you are you living? You are living in the twentieth century. The age of enlightenment. The age of electricity.
SEMYON. And when they turn off the electricity because I can’t pay the bills, what kind of age am I left in? The Stone Age?
ALEXANDER. Exactly. The Stone Age, citizen Podsekalnikov. It’s as though we’ve been living in caves for ages. It’s enough to make you suicidal. Dammit all! What am I saying? Don’t confuse me, citizen Podsekalnikov! Life is beautiful.
SEMYON. I read about that in the newspapers, but I think they’ll print a retraction any day now.
ALEXANDER. You’re wrong to think like that. Don’t think. Work.
SEMYON. The unemployed aren’t allowed to work.
ALEXANDER. You’re always waiting for permission from someone. You’ve got to struggle with life, Semyon Semyonovich.
SEMYON. You think I haven’t struggled, comrade Kalabushkin? Take a look at this, if you will. (Pulls a booklet out from beneath the pillow)
ALEXANDER. What’s that?
SEMYON. Instructions for playing the tuba.
ALEXANDER. The what?
SEMYON. The tuba. It makes music. It’s a wind instrument that makes heavenly, spiritual sounds. You can learn to play it in twenty lessons. And then it’s easy street. I even drew up an estimate. (Shows a piece of paper) Approximately twenty concerts a month at five-and-a-half rubles per concert. That makes a yearly income of one thousand, three hundred and twenty rubles. As you can see yourself, comrade Kalabushkin, I am fully prepared to begin playing the tuba. I have the desire, I have the estimate and I have the instructions. The only thing I’m lacking is the horn.

SCENE THIRTEEN

(Alexander and Semyon)

SEMYON. Excuse me, but what are you digging in my pockets for? What do you want? Leave me alone, please.
ALEXANDER. First, give me that thing.
SEMYON. What thing? Give you what? I don’t have anything. Absolutely nothing, don’t you understand?
ALEXANDER. But I saw you sticking it in your mouth.
SEMYON. That’s a lie. I wasn’t sticking anything in my mouth. Unhand me. Let me go this instant.
ALEXANDER. All right, I’ll leave you alone, Semyon Semyonovich. But give me your word, Semyon Semyonovich, that you won’t attempt to do any­thing to yourself until you have heard me out. I beg you as a friend, Semyon Semyonovich. Just listen to what I have to say.
SEMYON. Go ahead. I’m listening.
ALEXANDER. Thank you. Have a seat, Semyon Semyonovich. (Seats him and strikes a pose) Citizen Podsekalnikov... Wait a minute. (Runs to the window and throws back the curtain. The unhealthy urban morning light illuminates the messy bed, the broken rubber plant, and the whole room’s melancholy appearance) Citizen Podsekalnikov. Life is beautiful.
SEMYON. So what’s it to me?
ALEXANDER. What are you talking about? Citizen Podsekalnikov, where do you think you are you living? You are living in the twentieth century. The age of enlightenment. The age of electricity.
SEMYON. And when they turn off the electricity because I can’t pay the bills, what kind of age am I left in? The Stone Age?
ALEXANDER. Exactly. The Stone Age, citizen Podsekalnikov. It’s as though we’ve been living in caves for ages. It’s enough to make you suicidal. Dammit all! What am I saying? Don’t confuse me, citizen Podsekalnikov! Life is beautiful.
SEMYON. I read about that in the newspapers, but I think they’ll print a retraction any day now.
ALEXANDER. You’re wrong to think like that. Don’t think. Work.
SEMYON. The unemployed aren’t allowed to work.
ALEXANDER. You’re always waiting for permission from someone. You’ve got to struggle with life, Semyon Semyonovich.
SEMYON. You think I haven’t struggled, comrade Kalabushkin? Take a look at this, if you will. (Pulls a booklet out from beneath the pillow)
ALEXANDER. What’s that?
SEMYON. Instructions for playing the tuba.
ALEXANDER. The what?
SEMYON. The tuba. It makes music. It’s a wind instrument that makes heavenly, spiritual sounds. You can learn to play it in twenty lessons. And then it’s easy street. I even drew up an estimate. (Shows a piece of paper) Approximately twenty concerts a month at five-and-a-half rubles per concert. That makes a yearly income of one thousand, three hundred and twenty rubles. As you can see yourself, comrade Kalabushkin, I am fully prepared to begin playing the tuba. I have the desire, I have the estimate and I have the instructions. The only thing I’m lacking is the horn.
ALEXANDER. You're not the only one, citizen Podsekalnikov. But what can you do? You've got to live on.

SEMYON. No doubt about that, comrade Kalabushkin.

ALEXANDER. You agree?

SEMYON. I agree, comrade Kalabushkin.

ALEXANDER. Then, I've convinced you. Thank you. Hurrah! Give me the revolver, citizen Podsekalnikov.

SEMYON. Revolver? What revolver?

ALEXANDER. There you go again. I saw you sticking it in your mouth.

SEMYON. Me?

ALEXANDER. You.

SEMYON. My God! Me, sticking a revolver in my mouth. What for?

ALEXANDER. Stop trying to make an idiot out of me. Everybody knows you are trying to shoot yourself.

SEMYON. Who's shooting himself?

ALEXANDER. You're shooting yourself.

SEMYON. Me?

ALEXANDER. You.

SEMYON. My God! Wait a minute. Me personally?

ALEXANDER. You personally, citizen Podsekalnikov.

SEMYON. Would you like to tell me why I would want to shoot myself?

ALEXANDER. You mean you don't know yourself?

SEMYON. I am asking you why.

ALEXANDER. Because you haven't worked anywhere for a whole year and you are ashamed to be living off of somebody else's wages. Now isn't that stupid, Semyon Semyonovich?

SEMYON. Wait a minute. Who told you that?

ALEXANDER. Don't worry. It was Mariya Lukyanovna herself.

SEMYON. Ah! Get out of here. Leave me alone. Get the hell out of here!

ALEXANDER. Give me the revolver and I'll leave.

SEMYON. Don't tell me you don't believe me, comrade Kalabushkin. Where could I have gotten a revolver?

ALEXANDER. These days that's no problem. Go see Panfilych and he'll give you a revolver in exchange for a razor.

SEMYON. A razor? Is that so?

ALEXANDER. It's a bad trade, though. It's illegal. If the police show up—wham!—six months hard labor. Give me the revolver, Semyon Semyonovich.

SEMYON. I won't give it to you.

ALEXANDER. Well, don't blame me if you get hurt. I'll just have to take it by force. (Grabs him by the arm) You won't get away from me now.

SEMYON. Is that so? Well, hear this, comrade Kalabushkin. If you don't clear out of here this instant I'll shoot myself before your very eyes.

THE MAJOR PLAYS OF NIKOLAI ERDMAN

THE SUICIDE — ACT I

ALEXANDER. Don't shoot.

SEMYON. You don't believe me? All right, I'll count to three. One...

ALEXANDER. My God, he'd do it!

SEMYON. Two...

ALEXANDER. All right, I'll leave! (Like a bullet, races into his own room)

SCENE FOURTEEN

(Semyon)

SEMYON. Three. (Pulls a stick of liverwurst out of his pocket) Now, where am I going to put this? Where's a plate? (Puts the liverwurst on a plate) Just as it was. They'll never notice a thing. All right, Mariya, you just wait. I'll show you. (Runs to the table, begins shuffling for something) I'll show you how ashamed I am to live off of your wages. Just you wait. I'll show you. Here it is. (Pulls out a razor) My father's Swedish razor. To hell with it. I won't be shaving in this world again. (Runs out)

VOICE OF ALEXANDER. Citizen Podsekalnikov, I promise I won't come back out. Only, listen to me. Citizen Podsekalnikov, take my word for it, life is beautiful. Citizen Podse... (Pokes his head in the door and looks around) Where is he?

SCENE FIFTEEN

(Alexander enters from his room and looks around)

ALEXANDER. He's probably in there. (Runs to the door) Citizen Podsekalnikov, whatever you do, don't shoot yourself. I won't come in. Citizen Podsekalnikov, you're probably amazed by my offensive nature, but once again I would like to direct your unwavering attention through this wall, here, to the fact that life is beautiful. Citizen Podsekalnikov...

SCENE SIXTEEN

(Serafima and Margarita drag in an unconscious Mariya)

SERAFIMA. What are you doing? What are you doing? Grab her by the feet, Margarita Ivanovna.

MARGARITA. Easy does it. Easy does it.

ALEXANDER. Have you completely lost your minds? What are you dragging a woman like a sack of potatoes for? Put her down on her rear end.
SERAFIMA. Now, unbutton her blouse.
ALEXANDER. My pleasure.
MARIYA. Who's there?
ALEXANDER. We're all family, Mariya Lukyanovna. Don't be shy.
MARIYA. Where is he? What happened to him? Is he dead, comrade Kalabushkin?
ALEXANDER. Not quite yet, Mariya Lukyanovna. But I have to tell you that he's working on it.
MARIYA. Let me go to him.
ALEXANDER. Don't even think of it, Mariya Lukyanovna. You'll ruin the whole thing. He told me himself, "If you so much as cross the threshold, I'll shoot myself," he says, "right here before your very eyes."
SERAFIMA. So what did you do?
ALEXANDER. Well, I did what I could. I begged and pleaded, but nothing worked.
MARGARITA. You've got to give orders, not plead. Go report him to the police this instant. Let 'em arrest him and send him to court.
ALEXANDER. There's no such law, Margarita Ivanovna. No court can sentence you to life. Death... yes. Life... no.
SERAFIMA. So what do we do?
ALEXANDER. Get a horn, Serafima Ilinishna.
SERAFIMA. What do you mean, get a horn?
ALEXANDER. There's this horn, Serafima Ilinishna, a b-flat bass flugelhorn or something, and this horn is the salvation to all his problems.
MARIYA. What is he going to do with a horn, if may I ask?
ALEXANDER. Amass money, Mariya Lukyanovna. If we get him a horn, I can guarantee you he won't shoot himself.
SERAFIMA. How much does a horn cost?
ALEXANDER. I imagine five-hundred rubles or more.
MARIYA. Five-hundred rubles? The day we get five-hundred rubles he won't need a horn to keep him from shooting himself.
ALEXANDER. You're probably right, Mariya Lukyanovna.
MARGARITA. I'll have to get my musicians to lend him a horn.
SERAFIMA. You mean you have your own musicians?
ALEXANDER. She has a spectacular orchestra of symphonic music at her restaurant, Serafima Ilinishna.
MARGARITA. They're called "The Free Artists Trio."
SERAFIMA. For God's sake, my dear, have a chat with them.
MARIYA. Please, do ask them.
SERAFIMA. But do it now, and hurry.
MARIYA. I'll go with you, Margarita Ivanovna. Put some clothes on.
(Margarita and Mariya go into Alexander's room)
die laughing. Did you ever hear the one about the Germans?
SEMYON. No. What about ‘em?
SERAFIMA. Some Germans ate a live pug.
SEMYON. What Germans?
SERAFIMA. Well, I don’t remember, but they ate a pug. My late husband
used to tell about it. That was in peacetime, Semyon Semyonyovitch. We all
darn near died laughing. (Pause) A pug is a dog, you know, Semyon
Semyonyovitch.
SEMYON. So?
SERAFIMA. People don’t eat dogs.
SEMYON. So?
SERAFIMA. Well, the Germans ate one.
SEMYON. So?
SERAFIMA. That’s all.
SEMYON. What’s all?
SERAFIMA. Lord Almighty, now what do I tell him? Here’s another funny
one in the same vein.
SEMYON. I wish you would leave, Serafima Ilinishna.
SERAFIMA. This one’ll kill you, Semyon Semyonyovitch.
SEMYON. Don’t bother me. You might have noticed that I’m busy.
SERAFIMA. No, no. Listen here. Picture this. It was during the war and there
was this Turkish prisoner in the village. They took him captive. Well,
naturally, his head was bashed in. Our soldiers had rung his bell pretty
good. It was so bad his head kept shaking like this. Everybody died laugh­
ing. So what did they do? Every evening, everybody in town would get
together. Somebody would bring bread, somebody else would bring meat­
jelly, and they’d set off to see the prisoner. They’d dangle the food in front
of him and say, “You want to eat?” Well the Turk was dying for some of that
Russian meat jelly, but he didn’t know a word of Russian. Well, he’d just
jump up, and he was starving so bad his whole body was shaking. And his
head would start shaking back and forth like he’s saying “no.” Well, that’s
just what everybody was waiting for and they’d start wrapping all the food
back up. “If you don’t want anything, that’s fine with us,” they’d say, and
then they’d all go back home. God how they laughed at that Turk. What do
you say to that one?
SEMYON. Get the hell out of here. You understand me?
SERAFIMA. What’s the matter, Semyon Semyonyovitch? And then there’s the
one about the coronation.

(Semyon leaps up, grabs a pen, paper and ink)

Wait. Wait. Where are you going, Semyon Semyonyovitch? (She chases after
him) Blessed Alexander cornered a Jew in the palace entryway.
ACT II

(Same room as in Act I. All has been tidied up)

SCENE ONE

(Semyon sits on a stool with an enormous tuba positioned on his shoulder. An instruction booklet lies open before him. Mariya and Serafima sit on two chairs off to the side)

SEMYON. (Reads) "Chapter One. 'How to Play.' In order to play the bass tuba one must apply the proper three finger combination. The first finger is applied to the first valve. The second finger is applied to the second valve. The third finger is applied to the third valve." All right. "Upon exhalation the note 'B-flat' shall be achieved." (Blows. Blows again) What the hell kind of surprise is this? All air and no sound.

SERAFIMA. Look out, now, Mariya. If he loses faith in this horn...

SEMYON. Wait, wait, wait! Here we are. Here’s a chapter specially about the exhalation of air. It’s called, "How to Blow." "In order to exhale properly, I, the world-famous artist of sound, Theodore Hugo Schultz, propose a simple and inexpensive method. Tear off a piece of yesterday’s newspaper and place it on the tongue."

SERAFIMA. On the tongue?

SEMYON. On the tongue, Serafima Ilinishna. So. Give me a newspaper.

(Serafima runs up with a newspaper)

Tear off a piece.

MARIYA. Not so big, mama. Not so big.

SEMYON. Now, put it on my tongue, Serafima Ilinishna.

SERAFIMA. Well. Did that help, Semyon Semyonovich?

SEMYON. Ee-a-i-i-a-a. Ee-a-i-i-a-a, a-e-u. MARIYA. What?

SEMYON. Ee-a-i-i-a-a. MARIYA. What?

SEMYON. Ee-e-e-a, a-e-u. MARIYA. What are you saying, Senya sweetheart? I can’t understand a word.

SEMYON. (Spits out the newspaper) Idiot, I said. Now do you understand me?

MARIYA. Dear Lord! If you truly do exist, please send him a sound.

At that very instant the entire room is filled with the deafening roar of the tuba)

SERAFIMA. God exists! I told you all along. There’s cash on the barrel head for you.

SEMYON. All right, Mariya, hand in your resignation. You won’t be working anymore.

MARIYA. How’s that?

SERAFIMA. What are we going to live on?

SEMYON. I figured it all out in advance. Approximately twenty concerts a month at five-and-a-half rubles a concert. That gives me a yearly income of... Wait a second. (Rummages in his pocket) I’ve got the figures right here someplace. (Pulls out a piece of paper) Here they are. Listen. (Unfolds a piece of paper and reads) "In the event of my..." (Pause) Wait a minute. That’s not it. (Hides the paper. Pulls out another) Here it is. Right here. In black and white. "I shall realize a yearly income of one thousand, three hundred and twenty rubles." That’s right. And you ask, what are we going to live on.

SERAFIMA. But you still haven’t learned how to play, Semyon Semyonovich.

SEMYON. Learning is as easy as spitting, now, Serafima Ilinishna. (Picks up some paper. Spits. Blows. The tuba roars) Did you hear that? This tuba is the ticket to a life in clover, Serafima Ilinishna. Masha, just imagine how grand it will be to come home from a concert with a sack of money and sit down on the sofa surrounded by my happy family. "So, did they polish the floor today?" "They certainly did, Semyon Semyonovich." "And did you buy that statue I had my eye on?" "Yes, we bought the statue, too, Semyon Semyonovich." "Marvelous. Now, bring me some egg-nog." That’s what I call living. By the way, from this moment forth I demand that you serve me the aforementioned egg-nog for dessert every day. First of all, egg-nog
clears the chest, and second of all, I like egg-nog. Is that understood?

MARIYA. Eggs are expensive, Senya.

SEMYON. Expensive for who? Who does that concern besides me? Who's
the breadwinner now, you or me?

SERAFIMA. But...

SEMYON. You are constantly interrupting my planning sessions. Quit
contradicting me, Serafima Ilinishna. You'd be better off listening to some
music. (Blows) And, in general, I demand relative quiet during moments
of creative inspiration. (Reads) "'The Scale.' The scale is the belly-button
of music. Your mastering of this belly-button signifies your birth as a
musician." Well, now I can finally get down to learning the rest. "In order
to learn the scale properly, I, the world-famous artist of sound, Theodore
Hugo Schultz, propose to you the most inexpensive method. Buy yourself
a cheap pi... (Turns the page)... ano." What piano?

SERAFIMA and MARIYA. Piano?

SEMYON. Wait a minute, here. That's not possible. "I propose to you the
most inexpensive method. Buy yourself the cheapest pi... (Checks to see
whether the pages aren't stuck together)... ano." What's that supposed to
mean? What's a piano got to do with it?

SERAFIMA. Consult the footnotes for
the proper method of playing the scale. Play the scale on the piano and then
repeat it on the tuba." What's going on here, comrades? What is going on?
Then, it's all over. It's all over. This guy is a scoundrel! And he calls himself
an artist of sound. You're no artist, Theodore, you're a bum. You're a crook,
Serafima Ilinishna! I've got nothing to buy a piano with. What has he done
to me? I considered him my saviour! I considered this tuba my eye-glass to
the future...

SERAFIMA. Calm down, Semyon Semyonovich. Forget it.

SEMYON. How are we going to live, Serafima Ilinishna? Masha, who's going
to support us now?

MARIYA. Don't even think about it, Senya. I'll support us alone.

SERAFIMA. Look how long we lived on Masha's salary alone. We'll just go
on that way.

SEMYON. Oh, so you think we've only been living off of Masha's salary?
You mean to say I'm worthless here, Serafima Ilinishna? Well, there's one
thing you haven't taken into account, Serafima Ilinishna. She had every­
thing else supplied for her from the beginning. Who bought these glasses,
Serafima Ilinishna? I bought them. And who bought these saucers,
Serafima Ilinishna? I bought them. And when these saucers break, Mariya,
can you afford to buy new ones?

MARIYA. Yes, Senya, yes.

SEMYON. You can?

MARIYA. Yes.
picks up the note. Reads) "I shall realize a yearly income of one thousand, three hundred and twenty rubles." (Tears up the note. Pulls out another and puts it on the table. Again raises the revolver to his head) There's egg-nog for you, Senya. (Squints. Suddenly there is a deafening knock at the door. Semyon hides the revolver behind his back) Yes? Who's there?

(The door swings open and Aristarkh enters)

SCENE THREE

(Aristarkh and Semyon with the revolver behind his back)

ARISTARKH. I beg your pardon. Perhaps I'm intruding? Please do excuse me. If you were doing something, by all means, please do go on.

SEMYON. No, no. I'm in no hurry. Who are... uh, what can I do for you?

ARISTARKH. With, uh, what's-his-name... Podsekalnikov.

SEMYON. Who told you? That is, no. Just a slip there. Now they'll arrest me.

ARISTARKH. Very happy to meet you. Allow me to inquire, are you the same Podsekalnikov who is planning to shoot himself?

SEMYON. Who told you? That is, no. Just a slip there. Now they'll arrest me for keeping a firearm. I'm not him. Really, I'm not him.

ARISTARKH. Is that so? But how is that possible? I have the right address and... (Notices the note) "In the event of my death, I blame no one." And it is signed, "Podsekalnikov." Is that you, Podsekalnikov?

SEMYON. Me. Six months hard labor.

ARISTARKH. Tell me, with whom I have the pleasant honor of speaking?

SEMYON. With, uh, what's-his-name... Podsekalnikov.

ARISTARKH. Very happy to meet you. Allow me to inquire, are you the same Podsekalnikov who is planning to shoot himself?

SEMYON. Who told you? That is, no. Just a slip there. Now they'll arrest me for keeping a firearm. I'm not him. Really, I'm not him.

ARISTARKH. Is that so? But how is that possible? I have the right address and... (Notices the note) "In the event of my death, I blame no one." And it is signed, "Podsekalnikov." Is that you, Podsekalnikov?

SEMYON. Me. Six months hard labor.

ARISTARKH. Now, see here. That's impossible, entirely impossible, citizen Podsekalnikov. Tell me, if you please, what good does it do anyone to blame no one? On the contrary, you must accuse and blame, citizen Podsekalnikov. You are shooting yourself. Splendid. Beautiful. Shoot yourself in good health. Only, please, shoot yourself as a social activist. Don't forget you are not alone, citizen Podsekalnikov. Look around you. Take a look at our intelligentsia. What do you see? A great deal. What do you hear? Nothing. Why do you hear nothing? Because the intelligentsia is silent. Why do you think it is silent? Because it is forced to be silent. But you can't force a dead man to be silent, citizen Podsekalnikov. That is, if a dead man decides to speak. In times like ours, citizen Podsekalnikov, only a dead man can say what a live man thinks. And I have come to you as if to a dead man, citizen Podsekalnikov. I have come to you in the name of the Russian intelligentsia.

SEMYON. Pleased to meet you. Won't you have a seat?

ARISTARKH. You are parting with life, citizen Podsekalnikov. And on that score you are correct. Living is truly impossible. However, someone must be to blame for that. And if I can't talk about it, citizen Podsekalnikov, you can. You have nothing to lose. You have nothing to fear. You are free now, citizen Podsekalnikov. So speak up honestly, openly and bravely, citizen Podsekalnikov. Whom do you accuse?

SEMYON. Me?

ARISTARKH. Yes.

SEMYON. Theodore Hugo Schultz.

ARISTARKH. Someone from the Communist International, I presume? Doubtless he is to blame, too. But he is not alone, citizen Podsekalnikov. You foolishly accuse only him. Accuse them all. I fear that you still don't understand properly why you are shooting yourself. Allow me to explain it for you.

SEMYON. Please do. That would be very kind of you.

ARISTARKH. You want to perish for the sake of truth, citizen Podsekalnikov.

SEMYON. There's an idea for you.

ARISTARKH. Only the truth does not wait, citizen Podsekalnikov. You must perish quickly. Tear up your note this instant and write a new one. Be sincere and name everyone who deserves it. And defend us in it. Defend the intelligentsia and challenge the state with the following merciless question. In all of their constructive work, why have they not utilized the services of such an obviously sensitive, loyal, and knowledgeable person as Aristarkh Dominikovich Grand-Skubik.

SEMYON. Who?

ARISTARKH. Aristarkh Dominikovich Grand-Skubik. That's written with a dash.

SEMYON. Who is that?

ARISTARKH. Me. And when you have written this note, citizen Podsekalnikov, you will shoot yourself. You will shoot yourself as a hero. Your shot will be heard throughout all of Russia. It will wake the nation's slumbering conscience. It will serve as an alarm to the makers of public opinion. Your name will be on everyone's lips. Your death will become the hottest theme of public disputations. Your portrait will be printed in newspapers and your name will become a slogan, citizen Podsekalnikov.

SEMYON. Hey, I like that, Aristarkh Dominikovich. Go on. Go on. Tell me more, Aristarkh Dominikovich.

ARISTARKH. The entire Russian intelligentsia will gather at your grave, citizen Podsekalnikov. The nation's finest will carry you out into the street. You will be buried in wreaths, citizen Podsekalnikov. Your bier will be drowning in flowers, and splendid horses in white horsecloths will bear you to the cemetery, citizen Podsekalnikov.

SEMYON. Holy Moses! Now that's what I call living!
ARISTARKH. I myself would shoot myself, citizen Podsekalnikov, but un­
fortunately I can't. It's a matter of principle. (Looks at his watch) So, Here's
what we'll do. You draw up an outline for a suicide note... Or perhaps I
should do it myself and you merely sign it and shoot yourself.
SEMYON. What for? I'll write it myself.
ARISTARKH. You are Pozharsky. You are Minin, citizen Podsekalnikov.1
You are a titan. Allow me to embrace you in the name of the Russian intelli-
gentsia. (Embraces him) I didn't weep when my own mother passed away.
My own poor mother, citizen Podsekalnikov. And now... and now... (Leaves
weeping)

SCENE FOUR

SEMYON. I will suffer. I will suffer for all. Splendid horses in white horse-
cloths. I definitely will suffer. Where's some paper? (Looks around) I'll
expose all of them. Where's some paper? I'll accuse everybody. (Looks
around) Now you've had it. You can all shake in your boots. I'll write the
whole truth. And nothing but the truth. Because I know more truth than is
good for me. (Looks around) What the hell? They call this living? You finally
find the truth and there's no paper to write it down on. (Goes to the door and
opens it) I am leaving.

SCENE FIVE

(Mariya and Serafima enter at a run)

MARIYA. Where are you going?
SEMYON. To get some paper. For the truth. Give me my hat and a ruble,
Serafima Ilinishna. And Masha, I must have a word with you. Look at
yourself. Look at yourself, will you? This can't go on. I have guests.
MARIYA. What do you think I need to do, Senya?
SEMYON. Stick a pin or something on your blouse, or at the very least try
washing your hair. Don't forget that you bear the name Podsekalnikov.
That entails a thing or two, you know.

(Serafima gives him his hat and a ruble)

Now, get yourselves to the kitchen.

1 Dmitry Pozharsky and Kuzma Minin are national heroes for their part in defending the
Russian state from Polish interventionists in the early 17th century. In order to avoid
obscenity in performance, these first two sentences might be replaced by, "You are a
hero, a national hero, citizen Podsekalnikov."

SCENE SIX

(SEMYON puts on his hat, examines himself in the broken fragment of mirror)

SEMYON. I do bear a resemblance to Pozharsky, don't I? And there's even a
little Minin in me. But I'd say there's more Pozharsky than Minin.2

SCENE SEVEN

SERAFIMA. (Poking out her head) Some lady has come to see you, Semyon
Semyonovich.
SEMYON. Let her in.

SCENE EIGHT

(Enter Cleopatra)

CLEOPATRA. Are you monsieur Podsekalnikov?
SEMYON. Oui, madame. Me personally.
CLEOPATRA. Make my acquaintance. (Holds out her hand) Cleopatra
Maximovna. But you can simply call me Capochka.
SEMYON. My goodness!
CLEOPATRA. And now that we're acquainted, I would like to ask a small
favor of you.
SEMYON. Of course. Please do. How may I help you?
CLEOPATRA. Mister Podsekalnikov, you're planning to shoot yourself
anyway, so be a darling and shoot yourself for me.
SEMYON. What do you mean, for you?
CLEOPATRA. Don't be so egotistical, monsieur Podsekalnikov. Shoot
yourself for my sake.
SEMYON. Unfortunately I can't. I'm already promised to someone else.
CLEOPATRA. To whom? Raisa Filippovna? Oh, how could you? What is the
matter with you, monsieur Podsekalnikov? If you shoot yourself for the
sake of that piece of trash, Oleg Leonidovich will drop me like a hot rock.
You'd do better to shoot yourself for me and then Oleg Leonidovich will
drop her like a hot rock. Because Oleg Leonidovich is an aesthete and Raisa
Filippovna is simply a bitch. I tell you this because I am a romantic. She
even gnaws on glasses when she gets excited. She wants him to kiss her
body. She herself wants to kiss his body. Body, body, body, nothing but
body. I, on the other hand, only want to worship his soul. I want him to

2 If, in performance, the lines referring to Minin and Pozharsky in scene three above are
replaced, these lines may be replaced by, "Yes, I do have the look of a Russian hero, don't I?"
worship my soul. Soul, soul, soul, nothing but soul. Defend the soul, mister Podsekalnikov, shoot yourself for my sake. Resurrect love. Resurrect romance. And then... hundreds of young girls will gather at your grave, monsieur Podsekalnikov. Hundreds of youths will carry you on their tender shoulders. And beautiful women...

SEMION. ...In white horsecloths.

CLEOPATRA. What?

SEMION. Pardon me. I got carried away, Cleopatra Maximovna.

CLEOPATRA. What? Already? You are a madman, monsieur Podsekalnikov. No, no, no! Don't kiss me, please!

SEMION. I assure you...

CLEOPATRA. I believe you, I believe you. But now it's obvious that you have to reject Raisa Filippovna.

SEMION. I've never even seen any Raisa Filippovna.

CLEOPATRA. You haven't? Then you will. You'll see that you'll see her. She may even show up any minute now. She'll probably tell you that everyone is just crazy about her stomach. She tells that to everyone everywhere. Only it's not true, monsieur Podsekalnikov. She has a very ordinary stomach. I assure you. And anyway, a stomach isn't a face. Even when you're kissing it, you can't make out what it looks like. But a face... Come over here. Have you noticed?

SEMION. No.

CLEOPATRA. What do you mean, no? Monsieur Podsekalnikov, if you can't tell that I am gorgeous in the face, then come away with me to my place and you will definitely see it. I have a photograph hanging over my bed. You won't believe it. The instant you see it you'll cry out, "Cleopatra Maximovna, you are a beauty!"

SEMION. You don't say.

CLEOPATRA. I assure you. You'll be stunned. Well, let's go, let's go, monsieur Podsekalnikov. You can finish writing over coffee at my place.

SEMION. What do you mean finish writing? Writing what?

CLEOPATRA. Everything that you feel. That I crushed you with my charms and that you have no hope of seeing your love reciprocated, and, for that reason, alas, you are shooting yourself. I feel rather odd coaxing you along, monsieur Podsekalnikov. After all, you are an aesthete yourself. You are a romantic, aren't you?

SCENE NINE

(Enter Mariya holding a basin with water, some soap and a scrub brush)

CLEOPATRA. You've got to vacate the premises anyway, monsieur Podsekalnikov. They've come to mop the floor.

MARIYA. I'm not mopping the floor, I'm washing my hair.

CLEOPATRA. I wasn't talking to you, dearie. Who is this vulgar woman?

SEMION. That's... that's...

(Mariya passes into the next room)

My cook, Cleopatra Maximovna.

SCENE TEN

(Enter Serafima with a broom and dust pan)

SERAFIMA. Where are you going? The samovar is boiling. Perhaps the lady would like some tea?

SEMION. Listen, sweetie. Why don't you just tidy up the place? The lady and I are going out for coffee. This is, uh, the cook's mother, Cleopatra Maximovna. Come on, let's go. (Exit Semyon and Cleopatra)

SCENE ELEVEN

(Mariya and Serafima)

SERAFIMA. Thank God, Masha, it all blew over. You don't have to worry about Senya anymore.

MARIYA. I can't help but worry. Even as I stand here taking my bath, I'm beside myself. I'm all nerves.

SERAFIMA. Who cares about your nerves when there's a good twelve rubles of broken dishes lying around here? Now that's something to worry about. And what beautiful crystal it was, too. Here, under the table. Under the bed. Lordy, Lordy. (She crawls under the bed and begins sweeping up the broken glass)

SCENE TWELVE

(Enter Yegor. He looks around and sees no one. Hearing Mariya's gurgling and the sounds of splashing water, he sneaks up to the door on tiptoe and peeks through the crack in the door. Serafima crawls out from under the bed)

SERAFIMA. What kind of pornography are you up to, young man? There's a woman in there washing her hair, or maybe even something worse, and there you go trying to sneak a peek.

YEGOR. But, Serafima Ilinishna, I am peeking at her from a Marxist point of view, and from that point of view nothing is pornographic.

SERAFIMA. You mean things look differently from that point of view?

YEGOR. Not only differently, but entirely the opposite. I've tested it myself many times. You go walking down the, you know, the boulevard, and some dame is walking straight at you. Well, naturally, all dames have all
kinds of curves and shapes. The beauty of it is unbearable and all you can
do is squint your eyes and suck in your belly. That's when you've got to
catch yourself and think: "I," Serafima Ilinishna, "will look at her from a
Marxist point of view..." And then you do it. And what do you think
happens, Serafima Ilinishna? That dame loses everything just like that. In
the blink of an eye she becomes such a horse face I can't even describe it.
These days I don't envy anything. I look at everything from a Marxist point
of view. If you want me to, Serafima Ilinishna, I can look at you like that,
too.

SERAFIMA. Hallowed saints preserve us!
YEGOR. I'll do it anyway.
SERAFIMA. Help!

SCENE THIRTEEN

(Serafima, Yegor and Mariya)

MARIYA. What's the matter?
SERAFIMA. Yegor's point of view.
MARIYA. What do you mean, mama? What point of view?
YEGOR. Believe it or not, Mariya Lukyanovna, a Marxist point of view.
MARIYA. Are you here on business or pleasure, Yegorushka?
YEGOR. I have come about a comma, Mariya Lukyanovna.
MARIYA. A comma? What do you mean?
YEGOR. Mariya Lukyanovna, I've become a writer and I wrote a compo­
sition for the newspaper. Only I don't know where to put the commas.
SERAFIMA. Congratulations! When's the wedding?
YEGOR. What wedding, Mariya Lukyanovna?
MARIYA. You're just in time. Quick, comrade Kalabushkin. This is Yegor.
Please, have a talk with him.
ALEXANDER. Why certainly. What can I do for you, Yegor Timofeyevich?
YEGOR. Well, this, comrade Kalabushkin: "00...spends every evening in
absentia sitting in a restaurant like a horny buck." Where do you think the
comma goes?
ALEXANDER. Before "sitting."
YEGOR. Before "sitting." Merci. I'm off to the newspaper. (Exits at a run)

SCENE FIFTEEN

(Mariya, Serafima, Alexander and Margarita)

MARIYA. What have you done? You just eradicated a man's illiteracy. But
you know what you really destroyed? Your own head, Alexander
THE SUICIDE — ACT II

Petrovich. Don’t you realize who that horny buck is?
ALEXANDER. No. Who?
MARIYA. None other than you.
ALEXANDER. Me?
MARIYTA. Don’t try to wriggle out of this one. Who was the slut you were with this time?
ALEXANDER. It was probably you, Margarita Ivanovna.
SERAFIMA. Yes, you, it was you.
MARIYA. That’s right. He wrote about you and the shooting gallery, Margarita Ivanovna.
ALEXANDER. After him! Bring him back! And tell him I’ll open the shooting gallery. After him, after him, or we’ll never catch him! (Mariya and Serafima rush out)

SCENE SIXTEEN

(Alexander and Margarita)

ALEXANDER. What are you going to do?
MARGARITA. Everything will be all right. Don’t worry, I won’t let you down. Come on, let’s go reminisce about your late departed.

(They exit to Alexander’s room)

SCENE SEVENTEEN

(Enter Nikifor Arsentyevich Pugachyov, a butcher)
PUGACHYOV. How about that. No one here.

SCENE EIGHTEEN

(Enter Viktor, a writer)
VIKTOR. Is that you, citizen Podsekalnikov?
PUGACHYOV. No. I’m waiting for him myself.
VIKTOR. I see. Um-hm.

SCENE NINETEEN

(Enter Father Yelpidy, a priest)
YELPIDY. Pardon me. Is that you Podsekalnikov?
VIKTOR. No, not I.
YELPIDY. Then it must be you.
PUGACHYOV. Me neither.
herself in the name of the intelligentsia. I just recently spoke with him about it in person.

ALEXANDER. That is impertinence, Aristarkh Dominikovich. You were supposed to have done all your business through me, like all the other clients.

ARISTARKH. Find your clients another corpse. They can wait.

ALEXANDER. No, you wait.

ARISTARKH. The Russian intelligentsia is in no position to wait any longer.

PUGACHYOV. Comrades, how much longer do you think our commerce can wait?

VIKTOR. What about exalted art?

YELPIDY. And what about our religion?

RAISA. What about love? Love these days is silent. When men make love they don’t say anything at all. They just breathe heavily. I know what I’m talking about. They only breathe heavily. I beg you to think about what that means, comrades.

ARISTARKH. No, dear comrades, better to think about our intelligentsia. These days our intelligentsia is nothing but a white slave in the harem of the proletariat.

PUGACHYOV. Well, in that case, these days commerce is a black slave in the harem of the proletariat.

VIKTOR. Well, in that case, art these days is a red slave in the harem of the proletariat.

PUGACHYOV. Why do you keep talking about art, art, art? These days commerce is also an art.

VIKTOR. And why do you keep talking about commerce, commerce, commerce? These days art is also commerce. I mean, writers are forced to live a musical life. We sit confined within the borders of our state at our own personal desks and do nothing but compose fanfares. Fanfares for visiting dignitaries, fanfares for the bosses. I want to be a Tolstoy, not a drummer.

ARISTARKH. We merely want someone to listen to us a bit. To take us seriously, dear comrades.

YELPIDY. We must capture the imagination of the youth.

ARISTARKH. But how?

VIKTOR. How? With ideas.

ARISTARKH. But think how it used to be done. It used to be that people had an idea they wanted to die for. These days the people who want to die don’t have any ideas, and the people who have ideas don’t want to die. That is something we must struggle against. Now more than ever we need dead ideologists.

YELPIDY. Let this dead man be grist for our mill.

PUGACHYOV. You mean to say ours.
ARISTARKH. Put it off 'til tomorrow, Semyon Semyonovich. YELPIDY. We'll arrange a farewell party for you. PUGACHYOV. We'll throw you a banquet, Semyon Semyonovich. VIKTOR. We shall honor you, citizen Podsekalnikov. ARISTARKH. Does tomorrow at ten suit you? SEMYON. Tomorrow at ten? ARISTARKH. The banquet. SEMYON. Ah, the banquet... Yes, that's fine. ARISTARKH. So, here's the arrangement: The farewell party starts at ten, and at twelve sharp you set off on your journey. SEMYON. Journey? Where to? ARISTARKH. I can't say. Nowhere... the unknown. We'll have to wait and see. SEMYON. But, dear comrades, I don't know how to get there. ARISTARKH. We'll come pick you up, Semyon Semyonovich. 'Til tomorrow, then. (All leave except Semyon)

**SCENE TWENTY-FOUR**

SEMYON. (Alone) So it's tomorrow I go. I've got to collect my things. My cigarette case... I'll give that to my brother in, uh, Yelets. My, uh, coat... the light one... I'll give that to my brother, too. And my striped pants... no, I'd better keep my pants for the banquet. Striped pants look good at banquets.

**SCENE TWENTY-FIVE**

(Serafima and Mariya)

MARIYA. Whoo! We're all out of breath. We barely caught Yegor Timofeyevich. SEMYON. Iron my pants and patch the hole. I'll be wearing them tomorrow, Serafima Ilinishna. SERAFIMA. Why wear out your good ones? Where are you going, Semyon Semyonovich? SEMYON. To, uh, I, uh, found an... occupation. MARIYA. Senya! That's marvellous! When? SEMYON. Tomorrow at noon sharp. MARIYA. Finally! What kind of a position is it? Temporary? SEMYON. No, I would guess more or less permanent. MARIYA. Mama, set up the iron. We'll iron and patch his pants right now.

(Emily and Serafima run out with the pants)

**SCENE TWENTY-SIX**

SEemy. (Alone) Tomorrow at noon sharp. If it happens at noon sharp, where will I be at half past twelve? Or even at five past? Where? Who can answer that question for me? Who?

**SCENE TWENTY-SEVEN**

(Enter an old woman and a young boy. The boy is carrying a small chest and a bundle)

OLD WOMAN. Can he sit here a moment? SEMYON. Who?

OLD WOMAN. Anisya's nephew came to visit her. But Anisya's door is locked. If he could sit here a minute, I'll go run find his aunt. He won't bother you, Semyon Semyonovich. He's a quiet little thing. From the provinces. SEMYON. Sure, leave him with me.

(The old woman leaves. The boy sits down)

**SCENE TWENTY-EIGHT**

(SEMony and the boy. A pause)

SEMYON. What do you think, young man? Only for God's sake, don't interrupt me. Just think about it for a minute first. Imagine that tomorrow at noon you take a revolver in your hand. For God's sake don't interrupt me. All right. Let's say you pick it up... and you put the barrel in your mouth. Wait a minute, you put the barrel in your mouth. All right, let's say you put it in your mouth. Like this. There, you've put it in your mouth. And the instant you put it in your mouth a second passes. Now, let's approach this second philosophically. What is a second? Tick-tock. Yeah. Tick-tock. And between the tick and the tock there's a wall. That's right, a wall. That is, the barrel of the revolver. You see what I'm driving at? So here's the barrel of the gun. Here's tick. Here's tock. And tick, young man, is everything you ever knew, while tock, young man, is already nothing. Nothing. You understand me? Why? Because here you've got the trigger. Now, let's approach a trigger philosophically. You approach it, and now you're at it. You squeeze it. Wham! Bang! And wham, that's still tick, but bang, well, that's already tock. Now, I understand everything that concerns tick and wham, but I understand absolutely nothing about tock and bang. Tick—
and I'm still here with myself, my wife, my mother-in-law, the sun, the air and the water—I understand all of that. But tock—and now I've got no wife... although I can understand having no wife... and I've got no mother-in-law... although I have no trouble whatsoever imagining no mother-in-law... but me without me, that's entirely beyond me. How can I be without me? Do you understand? Me. Me personally. Podsekalnikov. A human-being. Now, let's approach a human being philosophically. Darwin proved to us in the language of pure mathematics that a human being is a cage. For God's sake, don't interrupt me. A man is a cage. And in this cage there languishes a soul. That I understand. But you shoot, and you break open the cage, and the soul comes flying out of it. It flies out. It flies around. Well, of course, it flies around crying, "Hosanna! Hosanna!" And, of course, God calls it to Him. And God asks, "Whose soul are you?" "Podsekalnikov's." "Did you suffer?" "I suffered." "Well, go on then and dance." And the soul begins to sing and dance. (Sings) "Be there glory to mighty God, peace on earth, and good will among men." I understand all that. But what if the cage is empty? What if there is no soul? What then? What do you do then? What do you think? Is there life after death or not? (Shakes the Boy) I'm asking you, is there or not? Answer me. Answer.

(SCENE TWENTY-NINE)

Old Woman. Thank you Semyon Semyonovich. I found the key. Poor boy here's a deaf-mute, you know. Can't say a thing. Thank you, thank you.

(They leave)

Semyon. So then it's tomorrow at noon.

END OF ACT II

ACT III

(An outdoor restaurant, "The Red Beau-Monde," in a summer garden. At table are Alexander, Aristarkh, Pugachyov, Viktor, Father Yelpidy, Stepan Vasilyevich Peresvetov, Margarita, Cleopatra, Raisa, Zinka Padespan and Grunya. There is a Gypsy choir on a platform beside the shooting gallery. The Gypsies sing a toast to Podsekalnikov's health. Semyon is draped with streamers and covered with confetti)

SCENE ONE

Gypsies. (Sings)

Our dear Semyon Semyonovich
Has come to visit us.
Senya, Senya, Senya,
Senya, Senya, Senya.
Senya, Senya, drink it all up.
Senya, Senya, drink it all up.

(A gypsy woman gives Semyon a glass of wine on the back of her guitar. All applaud)

Drink it all up, drink it all up, drink it all up, drink it all up.

(Semyon drinks the wine, then smashes down the glass. The guests applaud)

Pugachyov. There's a real hussar for you! A real daredevil! Now that's the way to do it!

Margarita. That's what I love you for, Semyon Semyonovich. Kostya! Kostka! Damn it!

(A waiter comes running)

Mark down ninety kopecks for the glass. Drink! Drink! What's the matter, Semyon Semyonovich?

Semyon. What time is it, huh?

Margarita. It's a long time 'til noon, Semyon Semyonovich.

Semyon. A long time?

Margarita. A long time, Semyon Semyonovich. Don't think, drink,
Semyon Semyonovich.

YELPIDY. (Leans toward Grunya) Pushkin once went to the bathhouse...

GRUNYA. Don't you dare tell any Pushkin stories. I don't like pornography.

SEMYON. Waiter!

SECOND WAITER. Yes, sir?

SEMYON. What time is it, huh?

SECOND WAITER. It should soon be noon, Semyon Semyonovich.

SEMYON. Soon?

SECOND WAITER. Soon, Semyon Semyonovich.

YELPIDY. (Leans toward Raisa) Pushkin once went to the bathhouse...

(Raisa begins to whinny like a horse)

RAISA. (Whinnying) Oh, you naughty man! I can't stand it! I can picture it all so clearly! And then?...

YELPIDY. So, Pushkin came to the bathhouse...

ARISTARKH. Respected guests! We have gathered to bid farewell to Semyon Semyonovich as he departs, if I can express it so, for a better world.

To a world from which no one returns.

STEPAN VASILYEVICH. Ah, he must be going abroad.

PUGACHYOV. No, a bit farther, Stepan Vasilyevich.

STEPAN VASILYEVICH. I bid you a pleasant journey.

ARISTARKH. Stop interrupting me, citizen.

VOICES. Quiet! Quiet!

(A deathly silence falls)

YELPIDY. So then Pushkin takes off his pants...

(Raisa starts to whinny)

VOICES. Quiet! Quiet! (All fall deathly silent)

YELPIDY. So, Pushkin starts taking off his underwear.

VOICES. Quiet! Quiet!

RAISA. (Whinnying) I can imagine it all so clearly... And then?...

ARISTARKH. Dearly beloved Semyon Semyonovich. You have chosen a splendid and righteous path. Go your way with confidence and conviction, that others may follow you.

RAISA. (Whinnying) And the bathhouse attendant, what did she do?

ARISTARKH. Many rebellious, excitable, and youthful heads shall be turned toward the path you blaze. And many fathers shall weep over them, many mothers shall wail beside their graves, and finally the great motherland shall shudder, and the great gates of the Kremlin shall swing open wide and our leaders will come out to meet us. Our leading leader shall extend a hand to the merchant, the merchant shall extend a hand to the laborer, the laborer shall extend a hand to the factory worker, the factory worker shall extend a hand to the peasant, the peasant shall extend a hand to the landowner, the landowner shall extend a hand to his estate, his estate shall extend... ah! who wouldn't be satisfied on an estate that extends so far and wide?

YELPIDY. So Pushkin goes for her... you know, it rhymes with "mass."

ARISTARKH. Fame and glory to you, beloved Semyon Semyonovich. Hurrah!

ALL. Hur-rr-rah.

SEMYON. Dear guests.

VOICES. Shhhh....

ALEXANDER. May we have silence and attention.

(A deathly silence falls)

You now may speak, Semyon Semyonovich.

SEMYON. What time is it, huh?

MARGARITA. Don't think, drink, Semyon Semyonovich.

PUGACHYOV. I'm not much of a critic, Aristarkh Dominikovich, I'm a butcher. But I've got to say, Aristarkh Dominikovich, that you spoke marvelously. I think it would be a wonderful thing, Aristarkh Dominikovich, for our government to extend a hand.

ARISTARKH. I think it would be even more wonderful if our government would turn up its toes and fall flat on its...

PUGACHYOV. Let's be satisfied with a hand, for the time being, Aristarkh Dominikovich.

STEPAN VASILYEVICH. I hope you'll pardon me. I wasn't aware that you are shooting yourself at noon today. Allow me to toast your health.

SEMYON. What time is it now?

MARGARITA. Don't think, drink, Semyon Semyonovich.

ZINKA PASESPAN. Gentlemen, show a little style. Let's liven things up.

YELPIDY. I suggest that we shout "hurrah!"

VIKTOR. Everyone!

ALL. Hur-rr-rah.

ALEXANDER. Waiters! Champagne!

PUGACHYOV. Music! For ten rubles sing us something about the soul.

GYPSIES.

Mama, mama, life is so tedious,
Oh, darling mine, life is so sad.

YELPIDY. There we go!
ALEXANDER. Pick it up!
VIKTOR. Move it! Move it!
YELPIDY. You know, there's something in that.
PUGACHYOV. My dear friends, I am truly touched.
ARISTARKH. I didn't weep when my own mother passed away! My own poor mother, dear comrades. But now... But now... (Weeps)
RAISA. I just saw it all so clearly—dictatorship, the republic, the revolution... Won't somebody tell me, who needs it all?

VIKTOR. What do you mean, who? Is that the way to ask such a question? I can't imagine myself without the Soviet republic. I agree with almost everything that is happening in it. I only want just a tiny bit more. Wrapped in a fur coat, flying across the steppes in a wide-runner sledge, beneath the tinkling of bells in the bright morning light with my grey beaver hat cocked back on my head and surrounded by Gypsies, with my beloved dog clutched in my arms, I want to count out the versts of my unfortunate homeland. I want the guitar strings to burst, the coachman to weep in his homespun mittens, I want to plunge into a snowdrift and pray, to swear an oath, to blaspheme, to repent, and then to down in a gulp an icy mug of beer, I want to whistle, to sigh at the whole of the universe and to fly... And I want to do it our way, the Russian way, so that my soul is ripped out and cast to the devil, so that the earth reels beneath my sledge's runners like a child's spinning top, so that my horses fly over the earth like birds on the wing. O, horses, my horses, what horses! And my troika is no longer a troika, but Russia herself, and she races onward, inspired by God. Russia, where are you racing to? Give me your answer.

SCENE TWO

(Enter Yegor)
YEGOR. Straight to the police, mark my word.
VIKTOR. What do you mean, the police? What for?
YEGOR. Because you can't drive like that. You can drive only as fast as the law provides, no faster than fifty versts per hour.
VIKTOR. But that was a metaphor, inspiration.
YEGOR. Let me offer you some advice. Have your inspirations within the bounds of the law. So tell, me, is the shooting gallery open or not?
ALEXANDER. We've been waiting for you, Yegor Timofeyevich. We'd almost given up on your coming.
MARGARITA. Have a little nip, Yegor Timofeyevich.

YEGOR. I don't drink.
ALEXANDER. Why don't you drink, Yegor Timofeyevich?
YEGOR. I'm afraid of getting used to it.
ALEXANDER. What's there to fear? Here, try some.
YEGOR. No, I'm afraid to.
ALEXANDER. What are you afraid of, Yegor Timofeyevich?
YEGOR. What do you mean, what? It might happen that no sooner do you get used to it, than—wham!—socialism comes along, and there's no wine under socialism. Then what are you going to do when you want to get your hands on a drink?
MARGARITA. Just one little glass, one little glass. For the ladies.
YEGOR. By the way, there will be no ladies under socialism, either.
PUGACHYOV. What nonsense! Humans can't live without ladies.
YEGOR. And by the way, there won't be any humans under socialism, either.
VIKTOR. What do you mean? What will there be, then?
YEGOR. Masses, masses, and masses. An enormous mass of masses.
ALEXANDER. So then, drink to the masses.
YEGOR. Well, I can't refuse the masses.
PUGACHYOV. Pour the drinks.
YELPIDY. Make 'em strong.
ALEXANDER. Down the hatch.

GYPSIES. (Sing)
Our dear friend Yegor Timofeyevich
Has come to visit us.
Georgie, Georgie, Georgie,
Georgie, Georgie, Georgie,
Georgie, Georgie, drink it up,
Georgie, drink it up.

ALEXANDER. So, how is it?
YEGOR. Not bad. I love it when people sing songs about me, although nowadays people usually go in for all kinds of nonsense.
VIKTOR. Who for instance?
YEGOR. Take you for instance. You're a writer, what do you write about?
VIKTOR. About everything.
YEGOR. There's one for you. About everything, Tolstoy wrote about everything, too. That doesn't interest us. I'm a courier and I want to read about couriers. You understand that?
VIKTOR. But I've written about foundry workers.
YEGOR. Well then let the foundry workers read you. But foundry workers don't interest couriers. I repeat, I'm a courier and I want to read about couriers. Understand? What do you think about that?

SEMION. Yegor, what do you think, is there life after death or not?

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1 A Russian measurement of distance roughly equivalent to two-thirds of a mile.
THE MAJOR PLAYS OF NIKOLAI ERDMAN

YEGOR. At present, there may be, but there won't be under socialism. I can guarantee that.

MARGARITA. Where are you going? Come here, have a seat.

CLEOPATRA. Make my acquaintance. Cleopatra Maximovna.

RAISA. (To her neighbor at the table) Oleg Leonidovich told me straight out, "I can't get your splendid stomach out of my head."

ALEXANDER. To the health of the masses, Yegor Timofeyevich!

YEGOR. I can't refuse. I always stand ready to serve.

MARGARITA. Don't eat, Semyon Semyonovich, drink.

YELPIDY. Let's drink to the ladies.

ZINKA PADESPAN. Merci, good father.

CLEOPATRA. You haven't seen life, Yegor Timofeyevich. There's a whole other beautiful, miraculous life. With linens, fine furniture, furs, cosmetics. Admit it, Yegor Timofeyevich, haven't you ever been tempted to see the sights of, say, Paris?

YEGOR. I admit it's true, Cleopatra Maximovna. I even began saving up my money.

CLEOPATRA. For the trip you mean.

YEGOR. For a tower, Cleopatra Maximovna.

CLEOPATRA. What do you mean? Yegor Timofeyevich?

YEGOR. What do you mean? Imagine that I've already built a tower. And the instant I have a desire to take a peek at Paris, I simply climb up in my tower and take a good, long look, Cleopatra Maximovna. From a Marxist point of view.

CLEOPATRA. And?

YEGOR. Well, and who would want to live in such a Paris?

CLEOPATRA. Why's that?

YEGOR. You will never understand me, Cleopatra Maximovna. You're a woman of a different class.

ARISTARKH. Pardon me, but what other class? If I may inquire, Yegor Timofeyevich, who do you think made the revolution?

YEGOR. The revolution? Me. That is, us.

ARISTARKH. You oversimplify, Yegor Timofeyevich. Allow me to illustrate my point with a little allegory.

YEGOR. I can't refuse. I always stand ready to serve.

ARISTARKH. An allegory, so to speak, from the menagerie of domestic animal life.

ALL. Yes! Yes!

MARGARITA. Don't listen, Semyon Semyonovich, drink.

ARISTARKH. Once upon a time, some duck eggs were placed beneath a good-hearted chicken. She sat on those eggs for years on end. For years she warmed them with her warm body, and finally they hatched. The ducks pecked their way out of the eggs and, tumbling one another in excitement, they crawled out from under the chicken. Then they grabbed her by the neck and dragged her to the river. "But I am your mother," cried the chicken. "I sat on you for years. What are you doing?" "Swim!" cried the ducks. Do you understand the allegory?

VOICES. Somehow, uh, not quite.

ARISTARKH. Who do you think this chicken is? It's our intelligentsia. And who were these eggs? These eggs are the proletariat. The intelligentsia sat on the proletariat for years on end. It sat, and sat, and sat, and finally sat itself out. The proletariat pecked its way out, grabbed the intelligentsia, and dragged it to the river. "I am your mother," cried the intelligentsia. "I sat on you for years. What are you doing?" "Swim!" cried the ducks. 'I can't swim!" Then fly!" "But a chicken is no bird!," cried the intelligentsia. Then just sit there." And that's just what the intelligentsia has done ever since—under lock and key. Take my brother-in-law, for instance. He's been in prison five years. Now do you get the allegory?

ZINKA PADESPAN. What's there to understand? He probably made off with government money.

ARISTARKH. The money was a minor detail. But tell me, why did we hatch those eggs? If we had known then what we know now, we could have used those eggs for... What would you have used them for, citizen Podsekalnikov?

SEMYON. Egg-nog.

ARISTARKH. You're a genius, Semyon Semyonovich. Those are golden words.

GRUNYA. Why the long face, citizen Podsekalnikov?

SEMYON. Tell me, dear comrades, can you understand the most important thing? And if you can, then tell me, dear comrades, is there life after death or not?

ALEXANDER. You'd better ask the priest about that one. That's his specialty.

YELPIDY. How would you like me to answer, according to religion or according to conscience?

SEMYON. Is there a difference?

YELPIDY. E-nor-mous. Or, I can even give you an answer according to science.

SEMYON. Just tell me the truth, Father.

YELPIDY. Religion says yes, science says no, and conscience says no one has the foggiest notion.

SEMYON. No one? Then there's not even any point in asking?

YELPIDY. What's the problem, you silly man? You'll find out yourself in half an hour.
SEMYON. A half an hour? You mean it's eleven thirty? How? Eleven thirty?

MARGARITA. Don't think, Semyon Semyonovich, drink.

SEMYON. Is it really eleven thirty? Eleven thir... Sing the service, dear comrades. Sing, my beloveds. Sing, you bastards.

(The Gypsies bellow out a song)

I'll suffer for everyone. I'll suffer for everyone.

GYPSIES. Sing it again! Sing it again!

SEMYON. There's where life begins, comrades. Life begins thirty minutes before death.

YEGOR. To the health of the masses!

GYPSIES. Sing it again! Sing it again!

SEMYON. The masses! Listen to Semyon Podsekalnikov! Right now I am dying. And who is to blame? The leaders are to blame, dear comrades. Go straight up to any leader and ask him, "What have you done for Podsekalnikov?" He won't give you an answer, comrades, because he doesn't even know that there is a Podsekalnikov in the Soviet Republic. But there is a Podsekalnikov, dear comrades. And I am him. You can't see me from there, comrades. But you just wait. I'll rise to such grandiose proportions that you'll be able to see me from anywhere in the land.

If I can't get what's owed me in life, I'll get it in death. I'll die, and when I'm dead and buried I'll begin to speak. I'll speak bravely and openly for everyone. I'll tell them that I am dying for... for... that I am dying for... for...

SEMYON. "Because the cleansing frenzy of the revolution has touched us all!" Exclamation point. Underlined.

CLEOPATRA. This miserable, dull life disgusts me. I long for dissonance, Yegor Timofeyevich.

YEGOR. Waiter!

ARISTARKH. We'll settle everything right now, Semyon Semyonovich. Margarita Ivanovna, bring us a table and chair.

MARGARITA. Kostya! A table!

(The waiters carry in a table and chair. On the table is a pen, paper, a vase with flowers, a bottle of champagne, and a work light with a green lamp shade)

ARISTARKH. Be so kind as to read this, citizen Podsekalnikov.

SEMYON. What is it?

ARISTARKH. It's all written right here.

SEMYON. "Why I can't go on living!" That's it, that's it. I've wanted to know this for a long time.

ARISTARKH. Just sit down and copy it out.

(SEmyon takes a seat at the table)

We won't bother you, Semyon Semyonovich. Be so kind, maestro, a quiet waltz.

(Music)

SEMYON. (Copying) "Why I can't go on living!" Exclamation point. And then, "Humans and Communists, gaze into the eyes of history." Oh, how it's written here, huh? "Gaze into the eyes of history." Marvelous. Beautiful.

PUGACHYOV. Respected friends. I love beauty so much it's terrifying. Beauty, my respected friends...

ZINKA PADESPAN. Nikifor, you're going to vomit. I assure you.

PUGACHYOV. Who, me? Be my guest. As much as you like.

SEMYON. (Reads) "Because the cleansing frenzy of the revolution has touched us all!" Exclamation point. Underlined. (Copies)

CLEOPATRA. This miserable, dull life disgusts me. I long for dissonance, Yegor Timofeyevich.

YEGOR. Waiter!

KOSTYA. Yes, sir?

YEGOR. Dissonances. And bring two of 'em. One for me and one for the lady.

KOSTYA. Right away, sir.

SEMYON. (Reads) "Don't forget that the intelligentsia is the salt of the earth, and should it pass into oblivion, you will have nothing left to season the porridge you've cooked up." Got it: "Don't forget..." (Copies)

VIKTOR. The worm has emerged, Aristarkh Dominikovich.

ARISTARKH. What are you talking about?

VIKTOR. Yesterday I told you about Fedya Petunin. A marvelous type, a positive type, but the worm is already gnawing him, Aristarkh Dominikovich.

RAISA. They tell me you've been abroad.

VIKTOR. I've been to the working neighborhoods of France.

RAISA. Tell me, what size breasts are the Parisian women wearing this year in France, small or large?

VIKTOR. Each according to her own means.

CLEOPATRA. That's just as I would have expected. Ah, Paris... And here? Even a woman of means has to stay as she is.

SEMYON. "The intelligentsia needs its freedom."

PUGACHYOV. I need a bath! I need a bath! Margarita Ivanovna, I need a bath!

MARGARITA. What for?

PUGACHYOV. I want to go for a swim with a couple of these floozies.

SEMYON. Exclamation point. That, comrades, is what I'm dying for. Signature.
(Pugachyov begins to weep)

ZINKA PADESPAN. What's the matter, Nikifor Arsentyevich?
PUGACHYOV. I feel sick. I'm sick with nostalgia for my homeland.

ARISTARKH. What homeland? Where are you from?
PUGACHYOV. Russia, my dear comrades.

SEMYON. Beloved citizens, do you realize...?

VOICES. What's he up to now?

SEMYON. Wait a minute. Do you realize what I can do? Do you realize what I can do? I don't have to fear anyone, comrades. No one at all. Whatever I want to do, I can do it. I'm going to die anyway. I'm dying anyway. Do you see? Whatever I want to do, I can do. My God! I can do anything. My God! I fear no one. For the first time in my life I fear no one. If I want to, I can go to any meeting—note that I say any meeting, comrades—and I can stick my tongue out at the chairman. You think I can't? I can, dear comrades. That's the whole point, that I can do anything. Fearing no one. There are 140 million people in the Soviet Union, comrades, and each million is afraid of someone, but not me. I fear no one. No one. I'm going to die anyway. I'm dying anyway. Hold me down or I might start dancing.

SEMYON. Shush!

(Picks up the receiver)

ARISTARKH. For God's sake!

CLEOPATRA. No, don't, Semyon Semyonovich.

YELPIDY. What are you doing?

MARGARITA. Help!

SEMYON. Shush! (Picks up the receiver) All are silent when a giant speaks with a giant. Give me the Kremlin. That's all right, sweetheart, no need to fear. Just give me the Kremlin. Who is this? The Kremlin? Podsekalnikov speaking. Pod-se-kal-ni-kov. An individual. An in-di-vi-du-al. Give me somebody there. I don't care, give me the biggest one you've got. He's not there? Well, then tell him for me that I read Marx and I didn't like him. Shut up! Don't interrupt me. And then you can tell him, that they can all go to...

ARISTARKH. What happened?

SEMYON. They hung...

VIKTOR. What?

YELPIDY. Who did they hang?

SEMYON. The receiver. They hung up the receiver. I scared them. They were frightened of me. Do you see that? Do you grasp the situation? The Kremlin was afraid of me. What am I, comrades? It's frightening even to analyze it. Just think about it. From my earliest childhood I wanted to be a genius, but my parents were against it. What have I lived for? For what? To be a statistic. Life mine, how many years have you made a fool of me? How many years have you humiliated me? But today my hour has come. Life, I demand satisfaction.

(The clock chimes twelve. Deathly silence)

MARGARITA. You'd best be off, Semyon Semyonovich.

SEMYON. What, already? Isn't your clock a bit fast, Margarita Ivanovna?

MARGARITA. No, we're synchronized with the post office, Semyon Semyonovich.

(Pause)

ALEXANDER. Well, let's all sit a moment for good luck.

(All sit. Pause)

SEMYON. Well, farewell, comrades. (Goes toward the exit. Returns, takes the bottle of champagne and slips it into his pocket) Forgive me... I'll just take this for courage. (Goes toward exit)

KOSTYA. Come visit us again, Semyon Semyonovich.

SEMYON. No, next time it's your turn to come see me. (Leaves)

END OF ACT III
ACT IV

(A room in Podsekalnikov's apartment)

SCENE ONE

(Serafima is mixing up some egg nog)

SERAFIMA. (Sings)

The storm howled,
The rain poured,
In the darkness, lightning flashed.
And the thunder thundered endlessly,
And in the darkness raged a storm.

SERAFIMA and MARIYA. (From the other room)

And the thunder thundered endlessly,
And in the darkness raged a storm.

SERAFIMA. (Sings) "Sleep ye little ones..."

MARIYA. (From the other room) Mama? Mama?

SERAFIMA. What do you want, Masha?

SCENE TWO

(Mariya holds a kerosene lamp, out of which are protruding curling tongs)

MARIYA. What do you think Senya would like better, big or small curls?
SERAFIMA. Who knows, Masha?
MARIYA. But what should I do?
SERAFIMA. I think what you should do, Masha, is to make small ones in front and big ones in back. That way you can't miss. (Sings) "Sleep ye little ones..."
MARIYA. He'll probably be back soon, Mama. You'd better start beating faster.
SERAFIMA. I'm working as fast as I can. I've already whipped up two measly yolks into a whole glass-full.
MARIYA. What a fanatic he is for egg-nog.
SERAFIMA. Well, he can indulge his sweet tooth, now. (Sings) "Sleep ye young heroes, comrades in the storm..."

MARIYA. What do you think, mama, will he get the job or not?

SERAFIMA. How can you even ask? Of course he will.
MARIYA. If they tell him there's no work, it'll be the end of him.
SERAFIMA. How could there be no work in Russia? We've got more work than all mankind can handle. Just take a look around you.
MARIYA. Then, how come everybody doesn't have a job?
SERAFIMA. It's all a matter of connections.
MARIYA. How's that?

SERAFIMA. Because there's so much to be done in Russia that there aren't enough connections to go around. For example, let's say there's a job somewhere, but nobody has the right connections to get it. In that case, Masha, the job stays vacant. But if Senya's got connections, then you can bet he'll find work.
MARIYA. Do you really think we'll start a new life?
SERAFIMA. How can you doubt it?

(Sings) "In the morning my voice shall ring out,
Calling out to glory and death."

BOTH. "In the morning my voice shall ring out,
Calling out to glory and death."

MARIYA. Whose letter is this?
SERAFIMA. Oh, just throw it away. It's probably something old.
MARIYA. No, it isn't. It's sealed and addressed to you.
SERAFIMA. Well then, read it to me, Masha.
MARIYA. What? (Reads) "Respected Serafima Ilinishna. By the time you read this letter, I shall no longer be among the living. Please break the news to Masha gently."

SERAFIMA. Merciful heavens!
MARIYA. Wait a minute. (Reads) "Send my light coat and cigarette case to my brother in Yelets. Signed, Semyon." How can this be? What does it mean? Oh, Lord! (Falls on the bed weeping)

SERAFIMA. Masha! Masha! Don't weep, for God's sake, don't weep.

SCENE THREE

(The door flies open. Enter Aristarkh, Father Yelpidy, Alexander, a hatmaker, a seamstress and Margarita)

YELPIDY. Weep, widow Podsekalnikov, weep. Embrace your children and
raise your voice in lament, "Where is your father? Your father is no more. Your father is no more and shall never be again."
ALEXANDER. He never was.
YELPIDY. What?
ALEXANDER. There was no father, I tell you.
YELPIDY. Oh? There's a good one for you. Oh well, nothing he can do about it now. He missed his chance. So, he wasn't a father. Weep, widow Podsekalnikov, weep.
ARISTARKH. Let's leave that 'til later, shall we, father? Allow me to speak.
Dear Mariya Lukyanovna, allow me to address you with a small request in the name of the Russian intelligentsia. Your husband has perished, but his corpse is full of life. He lives in our midst as a social truth. Let us support his new life together. I relinquish the floor. And now, Henrietta Stepanovna, attend to your duties, if you will.
HATMAKER. Fardon me, madame. Does madame desire a straw hat or a panama? Or perhaps she would prefer a felt hat. This would certainly be elegant head wear for a funeral.
MARIYA. I don't want anything... what for?... Oh my God...
MARGARITA. Now, now, Mariya Lukyanovna, don't be like that. The funeral will be quite stylish. Why should you look worse than everyone else?
SERAFIMA. How is it going to be stylish, Margarita Ivanovna? We have nothing to bury him with.
ALEXANDER. Don't you worry about that, Serafima Ilinishna. These people are providing an unlimited expense account for everything from the burial to the sewing of your mourning attire.
SEAMSTRESS. Shall we begin with the measurements, madame?
MARIYA. Comrades... I can't... please leave me alone...
ARISTARKH. There's no need for widow's tears. Your husband died a hero.
MARIYA. Would it be possible to have flared pleats?
ARISTARKH. Honor and glory to the widow Podsekalnikov! Honor and glory to the wife of the dear departed!
SERAFIMA. Where is he, by the way?
ARISTARKH. You'll have to ask the police about that. We shall be leaving you now, Mariya Lukyanovna, but we'll be right back. We shall not abandon you in your hour of misfortune. I didn't weep when my own mother passed away, my own poor mother, Mariya Lukyanovna, but now... now... Allow me to kiss you in the name of all those present. (Kisses her)
ALEXANDER. Allow me, too.
THE SUICIDE — ACT IV

your dress?
MARIA. Today at three. At the dressmaker's. Here's her card.
SERAFIMA. "La boutique de Madame Sofie." Expensive, I bet.
MARIA. Not cheap, that's for sure. You could tell by the way she kept
flitting about.
SERAFIMA. You'd better take off that hat before you ruin it, Masha.
MARIA. So what if I ruin it? I don't care about anything anymore, mama.
How can I go on? What do I need with my cursed life if I've never known
complete happiness even once? First I had Senya, but I had no hat. Now I've
got a hat, but I've got no Senya. Dear Lord, why can't you give us
everything at once?

(A knock at the door)
SERAFIMA. Who is it?

SCENE FIVE

(Two suspicious figures carry Semyon's lifeless body into the room)
MARIA. Marna! Dear Lord!
SERAFIMA. Saints preserve us! Over here! Put him over here!
MARIA. Senya, darling. Senya, what have you done?
FIRST MAN. Nothing you can do about it now. Fate's little joke.
SECOND MAN. Yeah, we showed up about 15 seconds too late.
SERAFIMA. You mean you saw it happen?
SECOND MAN. Every bit of it.
FIRST MAN. True, we didn't think much about it at first, but then he says,
"Take me home, will you?" And you wouldn't believe it. We walked a few
steps away, he disappeared behind a tree, stood there a minute, and then­
boom! —he hit the deck like a rock off a table. We came running, of course,
but it was too late by then. By the time we got there he was dead to the
world.
SECOND MAN. You might say he was one with the spirits.

(Mariya weeps)

FIRST MAN. You think she's going to save you, Semyon, but now you are dead.
SEMYON. Dead? Who's dead? I'm dead? Oh Lord, hold me!
MARIA. and SERAFIMA. Help!
SEMYON. Hold me, hold me down! I'm flying, I'm flying! Hosanna! Hosanna!
MARIA. Senya! Senya!
SERAFIMA. Semyon Semyonovich!
SEMYON. Whose voice is that?
MARIA. It's me, Mariya.
SEMYON. Mariya? What Mariya? The Mariya who begat God's word? The
Mother of God herself? Mother of God, it's not my fault.
MARIA. What's the matter with you Senya? It's me, Mariya.
SEMYON. Mariya? I'm sorry, I didn't recognize you. Allow me to introduce
myself, I am the soul of Podsekalnikov.
MARIA. He's gone off his rocker, mama.
SERAFIMA. Where have you been, Semyon Semyonovich? What have you
done?
SEMYON. I suffered.
SERAFIMA. What do you mean, you suffered?
SEMYON. Holy Father, please believe me. I have every right to enter the
heavenly gates. Holy Father, ask me to, and I'll sing and dance for you.
(Sings) "Glory be to God on high, peace on earth..."
SERAFIMA. What's the matter with you? Snap out of it.
SEMYON. Heavenly Father...
SERAFIMA. I am not your father, Semyon Semyonovich. I am your mother­
in-law.
SEMYON. What?
SERAFIMA. Your mother-in-law, Semyon Semyonovich.
SEMYON. My mother-in-law? Well, what do you know. So when did you
kick the bucket, Serafima Ilinishna?
MARIA. He's delirious. He probably wounded himself somewhere. (Leans
over him) Senya, darling, did you... Ahhh!
SERAFIMA. What's the matter?
MARIA. Take a whiff.
SERAFIMA. Holy...! Whew...! Where did you tie one on this time, Semyon
Semyonovich?
SEMYON. Holy cherub! Most glorious seraph! Tell me, where does one go
to join the other angels?
MARIA. There he goes, he's at it again.
THE SUICIDE — ACT IV

SERAfIMA. Give me a jug. Douse him with water, Masha. Go on, be quick about it. Douse him.

SEMYON. Where am I? Oh, my God... Which world is this? The next one or this?

SERAfIMA. This one, this one.

MARIA. What are you up to, you bum? First you leave a note that you've gone off to shoot yourself, and then you go and get drunk instead. You son of a bitch. You nearly drove me out of my mind. Here I am, a poor weak thing, weeping and carrying on.

SEMYON. Wait a minute.

MARIA. No, you wait a minute. Here I am, a poor weak thing, weeping and carrying on. Here I am, the inconsolable widow, and you, you aren't even dead, you're just drunk. What are you trying to do, send me to my grave? What's the matter with you? Speak up when you're spoken to!

SEMYON. Wait a minute.

MARIA. Well?

SEMYON. What time is it?

MARIA. What time is it, he asks. It's two o'clock.

SEMYON. Two o'clock. How did that happen? Oh my God! At noon, Masha, at noon, I was supposed to... Wait a minute. When did I come here?

SERAfIMA. You didn't come, Semyon Semeyonovich, you were brought.

SEMYON. Who brought me?

SERAfIMA. Two rather obnoxious characters.

SEMYON. Two men... yeah... now I remember... or at least something... they sat down and we all... that's right, we emptied the bottle.

MARIA. You bum. Guzzling straight from the bottle.

SEMYON. I did it for courage, Masha. For courage, Masha, I drank and I drank and I drank. And when it came to the last bottle I went behind this tree, and I thought—I'll drink off this last one and then I can do it. You know what? I drank up the last bottle, but I still couldn't do it.

MARIA. You buffoon. What is it you want?

SEMYON. Has anybody been here yet?

SERAfIMA. I'll say. Quite a sophisticated bunch.

SEMYON. What did they do?

SERAfIMA. They talked pretty words and expressed their sympathy.

MARIA. They gave us an expense account to bury you. "Your husband," they said, "has died a hero."

SERAfIMA. How will we ever face them now?

MARIA. They're going to want all their money back.

SERAfIMA. They're probably sewing her mourning dress as we speak. And what a dressmaker—Madame Sofie. That'll cost you a pretty penny, Semyon Semeyonovich.

MARIA. If we're lucky, maybe they haven't started yet. Come on, mama,

THE MAJOR PLAYS OF NIKOLAI ERDMAN

let's go see Sofie right now.

SEMYON. Wait a minute. All isn't lost yet. I can still shoot myself.

MARIA. Knock it off, Semyon. Let's go see Sofie, mama.

SEMYON. I'll shoot myself. You'll see. I'll shoot myself.

SERAfIMA. Shoot yourself—don't make me laugh, Semyon Semeyonovich. You'd be better off boiling up some tea.

(Marya and Serafima rush out)

SCENE SEVEN

(SEmyon alone)

SEMYON. They didn't believe me. They didn't believe me. Even Masha didn't believe me. All right. You'll regret this one but good, Masha. Where is it? Here it is. (Takes out the pistol) I've got to do this instantly, without thinking, right in the heart. Instantaneous death. (Holds the pistol to his chest) Instantaneous death. Or, maybe not. Better yet in the mouth. In the mouth it's more instantaneous. (Sticks the pistol in his mouth. Takes it out) I'll count to three. (Puts it in his mouth) Ah... ooo... (Takes it out) Or, maybe not. Better to count to a thousand. (Puts it in his mouth) Ah... ooo... eee... oh... ai... i... e... e... a... a... a... (Takes it out) No, if you're going to count, you've got to do it in the heart. (Holds the pistol to his chest again) One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine... Only a coward counts to a thousand. You've got to do it instantly, decisively... I'll count to a hundred, and—wham! No, better yet to fifteen. That's it. (Holds the pistol to his chest again) One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen... Or maybe it would be better not to count at all, and to do it in the mouth. (Sticks the pistol in his mouth. Takes it out) But if you do it in the mouth, where does the bullet go? Right here, into your head. What a waste of a head. I mean, your face is on your head, comrades. Better to do it in the heart. But first you've got to feel around to find out where it beats the hardest. Here. It's beating here. And it's beating over here. And here, too! My God, what a big heart. It beats everywhere you touch. It's beating so hard it's going to burst! My God, if I die of a heart attack, I'll never be able to shoot myself. I can't die, I can't die. I've got to live, live, live, so that I can live to shoot myself. I'll never make it. I'm getting faint. I'll just catch my breath. For just a moment. Beat, damn you. Beat like hell. (The pistol drops out of his hand, he falls) Too late. I'm dying. Lord what have you done?
THE SUICIDE — ACT IV

SCENE EIGHT

(Two boys with enormous wreaths wrapped in paper)

FIRST BOY. Does the deceased live here?
SEMION. Who?
FIRST BOY. I said, does the deceased live here or not?
SEMION. Who are you? Where are you from?
SECOND BOY. We’re from “Eternity.”
SEMION. What do you mean, from eternity?
SECOND BOY. The “Eternity” funeral parlor. Take these, please. (Sets down the wreaths)
SEMION. What’s this?
(SEMION reads what is written on the ribbons) “Sleep peacefully, Semyon Podsekalnikov. You are a hero.” (Reads at the other end) “Admirers of your death.” (Reads another) “To my unforgettable Senya, son-in-law and martyr to the cause. Your terribly grieving mother-in-law.”
FIRST BOY. Are these for you?
SEMION. Yes, for me... that is, for us.
FIRST BOY. Sign here, please. (Hands him the receipt book) No, over here.
SEMION. (Reads) “For the receipt of six funeral wreaths.” (Signs)
BOTH BOYS. Good day. (They leave)

SCENE NINE

(SEMION straightens the ribbon on a wreath. The writing is in French)

SEMION. (Reads) “Pour mon Simon.” What? Pour what where? This isn’t for me. (Runs to the door) Boys, wait! (Pause) Oh well. (Reads another wreath) “Don’t tell me he’s dead. He’s alive! Your Raisa.” Oh my God! She figured it out. The bitch figured it out. Where’s my pistol? Now I’ll do it. (Rises the pistol) You say he’s alive? All right. Just look at the life he’s living. Just you look. (Holds the pistol to his temple) Sleep peacefully, Semyon Semyonovich. You’re a hero. You’re a hero. You’re a hero, Podsekalnikov. Sleep. (Drops his hand) I may be a hero, but I can’t fall asleep. No way I can sleep, comrades. I’m probably too tired. Exhausted. I’ll just sit a bit and rest. That’s it. I’ll sit down with the paper and rest. And then I can go about my business, rested and invigorated. (Sits down. Picks up the paper and reads) “Hot Spots around the World.” Hot spots around the world. What a bunch of hot air all that is when compared with the problems of a single human being. (Turns the paper over. Reads) “Chronicle of Events.” “An eighteen year-old boy drank acid...” Now there’s an international hot spot for you. (Reads) “An unidentified citizen was run over by a trolley car at the corner of Semyonovsky Street and Drum Lane. The unknown man’s body was sent to the morgue at the Filatov Hospital.” Now there’s a lucky man if I ever heard of one! One minute he’s walking along thinking about nothing at all, and then—pow!—he’s gone. But me... I keep thinking and thinking and I can’t do a damn thing. Probably because I keep thinking about it. Yeah, that’s it. Now I’ve got it. You’ve simply got to get hold of yourself, put everything aside, forget everything, empty your mind entirely, get in the right mood, and then go at it like a run-away trolley car. That’s it. Just imagine that everything is beautiful, wonderful, marvelous, and then you’re going along as if you’re not thinking a thing, and then maybe you even start to sing a little something. Yeah, that’s it, you start singing some sort of song. (Begins to sing) “Mama kisses us in swaddling/ And others kiss us, too. /But when we’re grown the girls kiss us /And that isn’t all they do.” Damn! Can you hear that trombone wailing? I think the trolley car is picking up speed. (Brings his outstretched hand holding the pistol closer to his head) What a charming sound... ( Stops his hand) What a charming... I can’t do this. Damn, that sounds great. I can’t do this. Listen to that... Damn... Dammit all! I can’t do this!
VOICE BEHIND THE DOOR. Come on, pull! Pull harder!

SCENE TEN

(Three men carry in a coffin)

FIRST MAN. Pull it over there. Over there! Where the hell are you going? Put it on the table.

(They put the coffin on the table)

There. Done.
SEMION. Thank you very much gentlemen.
FIRST MAN. So where is he?
SEMION. Where’s who?
FIRST MAN. Podsekalnikov. The one who croaked.
SEMION. Right here.
FIRST MAN. Where?
SEMION. That is, not here... He’s not here yet, but he’ll be here soon. He’s expected any minute now.
FIRST MAN. You must feel bad for the guy.
SEMION. Comrades, I can’t even begin to tell you!
FIRST MAN. Yeah, I always feel bad for dead people, too. Some change for our trouble?
SEMYON. Of course, of course.
FIRST MAN. Well, good luck.

(The three men leave)

SCENE ELEVEN
(SEmyon stands dead still for several moments, then he goes to the coffin. He walks around it, peers inside, puffs up the pillow, and arranges the wreaths around it. He takes the pistol from his pocket and places it to his temple. He drops his hand. Goes to the mirror, hangs a black ribbon across it. Pause)

SEMYON. For some reason scientists haven't figured out a way yet for a man to shoot himself without feeling it. For example, why can't you shoot yourself under chloroform? And they call themselves the benefactors of mankind. They're sons of bitches, that's what they are. Lord Almighty! Oh, thou who dost give life! Give me the strength to kill myself. Can't you see that I can't do it myself? Can't you see?

SCENE TWELVE
(Mariya and Serafima enter the room at a run)

MARIYA. They're coming!
SEMYON. Who's coming?
MARIYA. Everybody's coming!

(Mariya and Serafima run out of the room)

SCENE THIRTEEN
(Semyon races around the room. A noisy crowd can be heard approaching)

SEMYON. My God! My God!

(Noise grows louder and nearer)

My God! (He leaps on the table) My God! (Jumps into the coffin)

(The noise grows closer)
THE SUICIDE — ACT IV

(Yegor leads Mariya and Serafima into the next room)

SCENE FIFTEEN

GRUNYA. What is wrong with those women?
MARGARITA. Listen to her. She's really gone over the edge.
MARIYA'S VOICE. (From the next room) He's alive! He's alive!
RAISA. Listen to her suffer, the poor woman.
ALEXANDER. It's always like that at first, and then you get sick of it. I know,
I just buried a wife myself. I couldn't sleep for nights on end. If you don't
believe me, just ask Margarita Ivanovna.
MARGARITA. Alexander!
MARIYA'S VOICE. Senya! Senya! Wake up!
GRUNYA. Just listen to her carrying on.
ZINKA PADESPAN. Let's go take a look. This must be something to see.

(All the women run to the next room)

SCENE SIXTEEN

(Aristarkh, Alexander, Father Yelpidy, Pugachyov, Viktor)

ALEXANDER. Now! May I pose a rather indecent question. When do you
all plan to pay up?
PUGACHYOY. Pay up for what?
ALEXANDER. What do you mean, for what? For the corpse. The
merchandise is delivered and I want cash on the barrel. The arithmetic is
simple.
ARISTARKH. All you ever talk about is money, comrade Kalabushkin. Don't
ideas mean anything to you?
ALEXANDER. A good idea is one that feeds you, Aristarkh Dominikovich.
ARISTARKH. Around here, the only idea that feeds is one that turns into a
slogan. Let's turn this idea into a slogan and it'll feed you, comrade
Kalabushkin.
VIKTOR. The battle for ideas is a battle for bread.
ALEXANDER. I'd rather have less ideas and more bread. Let's clear up our
accounts, comrades.
ARISTARKH. Allow me to note, please, that you haven't fulfilled all your
promises yet.
ALEXANDER. How's that?
ARISTARKH. Have you had copies made of the suicide note?
ALEXANDER. The typist is at work as we speak, Aristarkh Dominikovich.

ARISTARKH. Then, begin spreading the word. The shot has been fired, let it
be heard by thousands.
YELPIDY. You're counting on a large response, are you?
ARISTARKH. I am, I am, Father Yelpidy, although I'm also a bit concerned.
I must admit freely, dear comrades, that our specimen is hardly
extraordinary. If in his place, for example, some significant social figure
had shot himself—say a writer like Gorky or some commissar—that would
have been better, dear comrades.
SEMYON. (In the coffin) I think that's a great idea.
VIKTOR. That's just where you're wrong. We don't need a corpse as such.
What is much more important is the way we serve the corpse up. The secret
is in how you present it, Aristarkh Dominikovich. Just yesterday I was
chatting with Fedya Petunin. How, you may ask? I drew him my own
personal portrait of Podsekalnikov. And my portrait made Fedya Petunin
fall in love with him. And now that the real Podsekalnikov is dead, what
can Petunin possibly say about my creation? Absolutely nothing, except
that it's the spitting image of the original, Aristarkh Dominikovich. Death
in itself means nothing. Death is not infectious, but the reasons for death
are, and we are free to dream up any reasons we choose.
ARISTARKH. We've got to get people whispering, comrades. That is the
main thing.
YELPIDY. We'll lay him out in the chapel for two or three days and arrange
for a fitting farewell.
ARISTARKH. Excellent idea. (To Alexander) Go get us some torchbearers.

(Exit Alexander)

SCENE SEVENTEEN

(Father Yelpidy, Aristarkh, Pugachyov, Viktor, the Deacon, and members of the
choir)

YELPIDY. Shall we begin?
DEACON. Please do, Father Yelpidy. Start the prayers.
PUGACHYOY. It looks like we're beginning.

SCENE EIGHTEEN

(The same plus Yegor, Mariya, Serafima, Grunya, Zinka Padespan, and Raisa)

YELPIDY. God is omnipotent, now and forever.
CHOIR. Amen.
THE SUICIDE — ACT IV

MARIYA. What are you doing? How can you read the last rites over a living man? What are you doing?
DEACON. Let us all pray together.
MARIYA. What are you doing? Let go of me.
CHOIR. Lord, have mercy.
SERAFAIMA. Help!
DEACON. Lord, we pray thee for the souls of the dear departed.
CHOIR. Lord, have mercy.

SCENE NINETEEN

(Several women and men peek in the door. Among them is the deaf-mute)

MARGARITA. You want to watch, too? Come in. Join us, comrades.

(All enter. The deaf-mute stands next to the coffin, lights a candle)

DEACON. Lord, we pray thee absolve the sins of thy humble servant, our dear, departed Simeon.
MARIYA. What are you doing?
CHOIR. Lord, have mercy.
MARIYA. Police!
DEACON. May the memory of the Lord's humble servant, Simeon, rest in eternal peace.
MARIYA. Police!
DEACON. The windows! Shut the windows. Quiet in here. Blessed are they who are remembered.
CHOIR. Lord, have mercy.
DEACON. Absolve him his sins...
ARISTARKH. Listen, father. Can't you speed it up a bit? The word of God is holy, Father Yelpidy, but taking into account the present company, I think we can cut out the non-essential stuff.
YELPIDY. That we can do, Aristarkh Dominikovich. (Goes to the choir, whispers)
CHOIR. Lord, have mercy.
MARIYA. He’s alive!
SERAFAIMA. Wake him up, comrades!
DEACON. Lord, grant that we be free of sorrows, anger, or need.
CHOIR. Lord, have mercy.
MARIYA. Why doesn’t he wake up, mama?
YELPIDY. (Running the words together) For thou art the resurrection and the life of thy servant Simeon. Christ our Lord, we praise thee, thy Father and the Holy Ghost who art everlasting and everlasting shall be.

VOICES. What happened? Another one! (All rush to him)

SCENE TWENTY

(Enter Alexander and the torchbearers)

ARISTARKH. Carry him out. Get him out of here quick.

(The torchbearers lift the coffin, and carry it away. The Choir sings)

MARIYA. (Having come to) He’s dead. He’s dead.

(Yelpidy rushes to her. Terrified, he tries to make her understand what he has seen by gesturing with his arms and hands. He takes out his handkerchief and wipes his eyes)

You sorry for him, too? Are you crying? I am so sad, I simply don’t know what to do.

(She embraces the deaf-mute)

(The Choir sings)

END OF ACT IV
ACT V

(A freshly-dug grave and mounds of dirt in a cemetery)

SCENE ONE

(Alexander, Aristarkh, Viktor)

ALEXANDER. Just look at it from over here, comrades. How do you like that?
ARISTARKH. I would say the location is quite nice.
ALEXANDER. As if you'd chosen it for yourself, Aristarkh Dominikovich.
ARISTARKH. By the way, I keep meaning to ask you. Have all the invitations been sent?
ALEXANDER. Every last one.
VIKTOR. No, not every one.
ARISTARKH. Why not?
VIKTOR. We completely forgot about Fedya Petunin. He should have got one, too.
ARISTARKH. Why didn't you give him one?
VIKTOR. Unfortunately, I haven't seen him for two days. I've been too busy, Aristarkh Dominikovich.
ARISTARKH. Well, that's not so important.
VIKTOR. What do you think is important?
ARISTARKH. Most important is for the public to catch wind of it.

SCENE TWO

(Two old women pass by the grave)

FIRST. What an old fool I am.
SECOND. What's the matter?
FIRST. Look here, another new grave. How could I have missed that?
SECOND. I saw it this morning. I was on my way to church and I saw it then.
FIRST. Well, who is it?
SECOND. One of our parish. Serafima Ilinishna's son-in-law, Podsekalnikov.
FIRST. How could I have missed that?
SECOND. He lay in the chapel two days. I went to see him yesterday with

Pankratyevna.
FIRST. You mean Pankratyevna saw him too?
SECOND. We both stood there and wept and wept.
FIRST. How could I have missed that? What happened to him?
SECOND. He did himself in, himself.
FIRST. How terrible. How could I have missed that? So, what did he do himself in for?
SECOND. What for? That's obvious.
FIRST. True, that's true. Oh, my, my. Dear, dear, dear.

(Two old women leave)

ARISTARKH. Did you see that? The public has finally caught wind of it. Come on, let's go.

(Alexander and Aristarkh leave)

SCENE THREE

(Two more old women pass by)

FIRST. Our cemetery is awfully depressing these days. It gives you the chills. It's not like the old days when people knew how to liven up a burial and all the corpses were interesting people.
SECOND. Nowadays corpses are no different from firewood. They just burn them and shovel them up in a jar.
FIRST. They burn them because they don't think about the future. And when the time comes for resurrection, there's nothing left to resurrect. My, my, my. But it's too late then.
SECOND. We'll have a good laugh on them then, won't we Pankratyevna?

(They leave)

SCENE FOUR

(Cleopatra rushes in, pulling Oleg Leonidovich by the arm)

CLEOPATRA. There.
OLEG. What?
CLEOPATRA. Here.
OLEG. Where?
CLEOPATRA. They're going to bury him here.
OLEG. Who are they going to bury?
CLEOPATRA. Oleg, I confess, I am a murderer. A murderer, Oleg. Oleg, embrace me, I am afraid.
OLEG. Now, now, Cleopatra Maximovna. Calm down.
CLEOPATRA. Oleg, you're not like the others. You're special. You won't judge me, will you? Oleg, I killed him.
OLEG. Who?
CLEOPATRA. Podsekalnikov. Oleg, he wanted my body. He wanted all of me, but I told him, "No!" And then he took his life because of me. Oleg, I am a murderer! I am afraid, Oleg. Take me home with you.
OLEG. I think you'd better go home alone, Cleopatra Maximovna.
CLEOPATRA. Oleg, I confess. My mother was a Gypsy. And her body simply drove men out of their minds. Ever since I was fifteen years old I've been her spitting image. I remember one time in Tiflis I went to buy some shoes and—would you believe it?—the salesman was so aroused by my beauty that he lost all control of himself. He bit my foot so hard I had to go to the hospital. Ever since then I have hated men. And then a foreigner fell in love with me. He wanted to deck me from head to foot in foreign clothes, but I told him, "No!" And then a communist fell head over heels in love with me. My God, how he worshipped me. He used to sit me on his knee and say, "Capochka, I'll give you the whole world. Let's go live in a village near Yalta." But I said, "No!" So he cursed me and resigned from the Communist Party. And then a pilot was seized by the desire to possess me. But I laughed in his face. He flew up over the city and cried up there in the sky until finally he crashed and killed himself. And now there's Podsekalnikov. Women fell before him like flies. Raisa was so consumed by passion that she started chewing glasses. She waited for him outside his door, but he wanted only me. He wanted my body, he wanted all of me, but I said, "No!" And then suddenly—poof!—he was gone. Since then I've begun hating my body. It frightens me. I can't remain in it. Oleg, take me home with you!
OLEG. Look, Cleopatra Maximovna, the fact of the matter is...
YELPIDY. (Off stage) Give unto him everlasting life!
CLEOPATRA. Oh my God, it's him. I feel sick. Hold me Oleg. Tighter. Tighter. Oleg, I'm getting weak. It's more than I can bear. Oleg, I don't have the strength to resist. I'm going to break loose at the burial. Oleg, you can't let me go. Tighter, hold me tighter. Let me go. Let me go. Oh, all right, I'll go.
OLEG. Where?
CLEOPATRA. With you to your house.
CHOIR. (Off stage) Eternal memory.
OLEG. Look, Cleopatra Maximovna. Only don't misunderstand what I'm trying to say. It's just that today is a little... well, inconvenient. You see...
THE SUICIDE — ACT V

Timofeyevich: "There's something rotten in the state of Denmark."

YEGOR. Who said so?

VIKTOR. Marcellus.

YEGOR. Why didn't you say so before, you idiot? (He runs to the mounds of dirt next to the grave) Make way for the orator. (Climbs up on a mound of dirt) Citizens, allow me to share with you some joyous news. It has just come to our attention, thanks to comrade Marcellus, that the state of Denmark is rotting. I congratulate you. However, I can't say that this is unexpected. The rotten capitalist system has merely shown its true colors. Who's that tugging on me?

VIKTOR. What are you talking about? I gave you a lead, see? And then you were supposed to make a smooth transition and say something about the corpse.

YEGOR. Don't harass the orator. All right, here we go. And so, comrades, there's something rotten in Denmark, but right here among us, one of our own has passed away. But, shake it off, comrades, and let's all march forward in lock step with the corpse. And anyway, as I was saying about Denmark, comrades... Who's tugging on me again? Denmark is the...

(Aristarkh, Alexander and Viktor pull Yegor down from the mound of dirt)

VOICES. What happened? What's the problem?

ALEXANDER. Dear friends. The previous comrade suddenly took ill and can't go on. The wound is too fresh. The loss is too heavy. Tears of sorrow have welled in his throat.

MARIYA. Why go on living? Can anyone tell me that, citizens?

MARGARITA. Shh. Later, later, Mariya Lukyanovna. Don't interrupt the writer.

VIKTOR.

Drink as you will, curse as you might,
He paid for us the ultimate price.
His life, in sum, resembled love.
And ours is a pack of low lies.

Oh, what a joy! Oh, what sweet splendor,
To lie in the grass and roll in the snow.
But, wherever I look, I see nothing but graves,
Nothing but graves, wherever I go.

Death is the answer for those without hope.
It shines as a light from the heavens.
But how many thousands have strayed from that path,
Cowards, scoundrels and heathens?

RAISA. Quite nicely spoken.

YEGOR. Hey, comrades! I want to say something, too. Let me up there.

ALEXANDER. What do you want now? Grab him!

YEGOR. Keep your hands off me. (Mounts the mound of dirt) Now I will recite to you a poem about death, with a call to the masses for action. Mariya Lukyanovna, look over here and keep your eye on my hand. As soon as I wave my hand, you say, "who?" Got that? "Who?" All right. Here we go. My own personal poem about death, with a call to the masses for action.

VOICES IN THE CROWD. Shh. Shh.

YEGOR.

When once he lived, yes, lived among us,
And worked in a government office,
He was the best that anyone ever talked of...

(Aristarkh, Alexander and Viktor pull Yegor down from the mound of dirt)

VOICES. Shh. Shh.

YEGOR.

When once he lived, yes, lived among us,
And worked in a government office,
He was the best that anyone ever talked of...

(Mario Lukyanovna raises her hand and says, "who?")

YEGOR. (Through tears) Who?

MARIYA. (Through tears) Who?

RAISA. Quite nicely spoken.

YEGOR. Keep your hands off me. (Mounts the mound of dirt) Now I will recite to you a poem about death, with a call to the masses for action. Mariya Lukyanovna, look over here and keep your eye on my hand. As soon as I wave my hand, you say, "who?" Got that? "Who?" All right. Here we go. My own personal poem about death, with a call to the masses for action.

VOICES IN THE CROWD. Shh. Shh.

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And worked in a government office,
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(Mario Lukyanovna raises her hand and says, "who?")

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MARIYA. (Through tears) Who?

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VOICES IN THE CROWD. Shh. Shh.

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When once he lived, yes, lived among us,
And worked in a government office,
He was the best that anyone ever talked of...

(Mario Lukyanovna raises her hand and says, "who?")

YEGOR. (Through tears) Who?

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VOICES IN THE CROWD. Shh. Shh.

YEGOR.

When once he lived, yes, lived among us,
And worked in a government office,
She must be mad!

CLEOPATRA. I come not to part with you, but to greet you.

VOICE IN THE CROWD. That's it. She's flipped her lid.

CLEOPATRA. It was for me that you took your life, and now I know what I must do.

VOICE IN THE CROWD. She sounds normal to me.

MARIYA. Excuse me, mademoiselle. Perhaps you've made a mistake. This was my husband.

CLEOPATRA. What do you know? He wanted my body. He wanted all of me. But I said, "No."

RAISA. She's lying. I'm the one who said, "No."

CLEOPATRA. He never even asked you.

RAISA. I suppose he asked you?

CLEOPATRA. He wanted my body.

RAISA. What's so interesting about your body?

ARISTARKH. Calm down. Calm down, comrades. This is not a personal tragedy, Raisa Filippovna. It is an alarm for society. Remember? Surrounded by mistrust and hostility, the Russian intelligentsia...

VIKTOR. Oh, knock it off. The corpse played the tuba. He was an artist. He burned, he wanted...

CLEOPATRA. He wanted my body.

RAISA. What's so interesting about your body?

ARISTARKH. It was the liverwurst, Aristarkh Dominikovich.

PUGACHYOV. Meat, comrades. He wanted meat. Dear comrades, I am a butcher. But in our day and age, I am deprived of the right to do business. I haven't the strength. I have sworn. I have cursed. I even showed them all my ledgers. But no one has faith in the individual anymore, comrades. That's why people are shooting themselves.

YELPIDY. People have faith. They just don't have anywhere to practice their faith. All of the churches have been shut down.

PUGACHYOV. Who cares about churches when all of the stores have been shut down.

ARISTARKH. That's not why people shoot themselves. I was an intimate of the deceased. Ask his loved ones why he shot himself.

SERAFIMA. It was the liverwurst, Aristarkh Dominikovich.

PUGACHYOV. Liverwurst, exactly. Dear comrades, I am a butcher...

RAISA. That is base jealousy, Oleg Leonidovich. He shot himself for me.

CLEOPATRA. My body, my body...

YELPIDY. Religion...

PUGACHYOV. Meat...

ARISTARKH. Comrades...

PUGACHYOV. Liverwurst...

VIKTOR. Ideals...

ARISTARKH. The intelligentsia...

MARIYA. Senya! Senya!
SEMYON. What is society? Nothing but a conveyor belt of slogans. I'm not talking about a conveyor belt. I'm talking about a living human being. You keep using words: "commonweal," "personal." When they tell a man that war has been declared, what do you think the first thing is that comes into his head? Do you think this guy asks who the war is with? What it's being fought for? What ideals are being defended? No way. The first thing the poor guy asks is, "I wonder if they're drafting my age group?" And this guy is absolutely right.

ARISTARKH. What you are saying is that there are no heroes.

SEMYON. This world is big enough to hold anything, comrades. There are even women with beards. But I'm not talking about what might be. I'm talking about what is. And on this earth there is only one person who lives and fears death more than anything else in the world.

ALEXANDER. But you're the one who wanted to commit suicide.

ARISTARKH. You told us so yourself.

SEMYON. You're right. I did. Because the idea of suicide gave me something to live for. It brightened up my miserable, inhuman life, Aristarkh Dominikovich. Just think about it, comrades. Once upon a time there lived a man. And suddenly this man was made sub-human. Why? Do you really think I abandoned the human race? Do you really think I tried to avoid the October Revolution? I didn't leave my house once for the whole month of October. I have witnesses. I stand before you now as a man who was demoted to a cog. I have a word or two I'd like to say to this revolution. What more do you want of me? I gave you everything I had. I extended my hand to the revolution, my right hand. And you know what? Now my right hand votes against me. But what did the revolution give me? Nothing. And what about others? Look out on any street corner and you'll see what the revolution brought them. Why are you picking on me, comrades? When our government hangs out signs saying, "For everyone, for everyone," I don't pay any attention anymore. Because I know that means that everyone gets something except me. I'm not asking for much. You can have all your construction, your achievements, world conflagrations and conquests. All I want, comrades, is a peaceful little life and decent pay.

YELPIDY. What are you standing there staring for, Serafima Ilinishna? You're his mother-in-law. Make him shut up.

ALEXANDER. Stop him, comrades.

ARISTARKH. He's a counterrevolutionary.

SEMYON. God perish the thought. Do you really think we're doing something against the revolution? We haven't done a thing since the day it started. All we do is visit one another and talk about how hard life is. Because life is easier when we can say life is hard. For God's sake, don't deprive us of our last means of survival. Let us say that life is hard. Let us say it in a whisper, "Life is hard." Comrades, I implore you on behalf of millions of people: Give us the right to whisper. You'll be so busy constructing a new life that you'll never even hear us. I guarantee it. We'll live out our entire lives in a whisper.

PUGACHYOV: What's that supposed to mean? There's a rather strange turn of events, friends. I've held my silence long enough, good people. And now I'm going to have my say. You scum! You snake! You dug us a grave with your own hands and now you think you're going to live? Well, watch this then. I may kill myself doing it, but I'll have you shot, you thief. I'll have you shot.

RAISA. Shoot him!

VOICES. That's right!

SEMYON. Masha! Sweet Masha! Serafima Ilinishna! What are they saying? How can they? Forgive me. Why would you? Have mercy! What am I guilty of? I'll give you back everything you spent on me. I'll give it all back. Down to the last kopeck, you'll see. I'll sell my chest of drawers. If I have to, comrades, I'll quit eating. I'll make Mariya go to work for you and I'll send my mother-in-law into the mines. If you want me to, I'll go begging on the streets for you. Only let me live. (Gets down on his knees)

ARISTARKH. How utterly disgusting! Ugh!

SEMYON. (Leaping up) Who said, "ugh"? Whoever you are, step over here right now. (Takes out his pistol) Here's my pistol. Be my guest. Go on. Be my guest.

ARISTARKH. Quit playing games, Semyon Semyonovich. Put away your gun. Put away your gun, I tell you.

SEMYON. You don't have the guts. So what are you accusing me of, then? What crime did I commit? I just live my life. I live and I bother no one, comrades. I never harmed a soul. My whole life, I never hurt a flea. Let any man I've ever killed accuse me of it to my face.

(A funeral march)

SCENE SEVEN

(Enter Viktor at a run)

VIKTOR. Fedya Petunin shot himself. (Pause) And he left a suicide note.

ARISTARKH. What does it say?

VIKTOR. "Podsekalnikov is right. Life is not worth living."

(Funeral march)

THE END