

A MISTAKE
or
NABOKOV'S SECRET TRIP TO THE USSR
A play by
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Translated from the Russian by the author

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CHARACTERS

NABOKOV

SHISHKOV His double

VÉRA-TAMARA His wife and sweetheart

BERG-BREG

VLAD

} Secret agents

SLAV

MARTHA-MARFINKA A nurse and floor attendant

SETTING

A clinic in Montreux, Switzerland and various locations in Russia.

TIME

July 2, 1977

ACT ONE

1. GODSPEED!

Montreux, Switzerland. July 2, 1977. A hospital room with the drawn curtains reminding a Chinese shadow theater. MARTHA is moving around, changing water for the dark crimson dahlias in eternal repose, sorting out drugs on a bedside table, straightening in passing the starched white bed sheet covering the immobile NABOKOV. At the dying man's feet his wife VÉRA keeps vigil while SHISHKOV snoozes in an arm chair in the corner. The nurse takes the tray with the untouched breakfast.

VÉRA: What's the date?

MARTHA: July the second.

VÉRA: July the second. Nineteen seventy-seven. I must remember that.

MARTHA: Not a peck.

VÉRA: You can go, Martha. I'll keep him company.

MARTHA: Shall I open the window?

VÉRA: You will let in the night moths.

MARTHA: (*Aside*) What night moths? It's broad daylight!

(*She leaves with a shrug. Pause.*)

NABOKOV: Edelweiss . . .

SHISHKOV: (*Starting in his arm chair*) Huh? What?

NABOKOV: Irrevocable, unrealizable, inevitable.

VÉRA: He is delirious.

NABOKOV: A triple formula of existence. Am I dead?

VÉRA: You are at the hospital in Montreux. The doctors say that you are going to recover in . . .

NABOKOV: Death is but a question of style, a musical resolution. Can we have a brighter palette?

VÉRA: Your doctor . . .

NABOKOV: Excuse me, my dear. The doctor is not a foremost authority on art. Shishkov?

SHISHKOV: Yes?

NABOKOV: Here is a commission for you: a ghastly precipice, a dazzling sunny abyss, the much-too-slow fir trees chasing the wood down the slope . . . and all the way down, the meadows and a bright spot of the hotel.

SHISHKOV: You want me to do a big picture?

NABOKOV: I want you to open the window.

(After having made eye contact with Véra, Shishkov does as told. All of a sudden the hospital room is pervaded by an Alpine summer.)

NABOKOV: There. Life did make one last attempt to prove to me that it was real.

(Makes an effort to prop himself up on elbow)

VÉRA: Are you out of your mind? You are not allowed to move!

NABOKOV: Vasiliy Andreyevich? *(Shishkov rushes to his side to help him)* I had a strange dream: I am visiting a museum in what I think is France, it is a warm day, people wear next to nothing, then I step out and find myself in mid-winter, shivering in the snow, under a dull lamppost . . . in Russia.

SHISHKOV: It was not a dream. *(He watches out for a potential fall)* You are echoing my story.

NABOKOV: *(A touch of irony)* Your story?

SHISHKOV: Well, our story if you insist.

NABOKOV: Why do you always have to snatch the laurels?

SHISHKOV: I forgot, my part is a scapegoat.

VÉRA: Couldn't you two pick up a better time for quarrel? *(To Nabokov)* You started a second life as Shishkov, so live up to it. *(To Shishkov)* And you! He gave you a decent bio, why don't you leave it at that! -- I'm sick and tired of saying it time and again: you are one person. One! *(Her confidence slipping)* I think.

NABOKOV: *(Lost in thought)* An eternal comeback.

SHISHKOV: Better yet, a reverse perspective.

NABOKOV: Is it too much to ask that you stop advising me in literary matters?

SHISHKOV: I am speaking as a painter here.

(Véra throws up her hands in desperation)

NABOKOV: Remember Vyra? The slime-covered river that could pass for a brocade length . . . the swallows as they snipped the colored air with their black scissors . . . the white manor house on a grassy hummock . . . You've got the tickets? *(Shishkov nods sheepishly)*

VÉRA: Tickets? *(She is searching for an answer in their eyes)*

NABOKOV: Maybe you should stay after all.

SHISHKOV: Forget it!

NABOKOV: If only to put Véra's mind at rest.

SHISHKOV: So why don't you lie still and quiet as a door mouse!

VÉRA: Break! It's insane: not one issue over which you would agree with yourself!

Now what's the big hush?

(They both look away, two bad boys)

SHISHKOV: *(Mutters)* A cardiogram *(He takes to his heels)*

VÉRA: What's going on, Volodya?

NABOKOV: Didn't I tell you? Vasiliy Andreyevich and I are taking a little walk to Russia.

VÉRA: Did you say Russia?

NABOKOV: (*Declaims dramatically*)

You will say to your country men: Now!

By the break of dawn I shall be off.

VÉRA: This must be your worse joke in our half-century of life together.

NABOKOV: Véra, we'll be back in a jiffy. One foot here, the other foot there.

VÉRA: Which one is taking you «there»? The one that went to sleep?

NABOKOV: (*Wiggling his toes*) It woke up, see? Véra. To and fro.

VÉRA: Tell Dr. Berg.

NABOKOV: Dr. Berg is thrilled by the idea. (*He makes futile attempts to rise*) I may need some help to catapult.

VÉRA: (*Ignoring his plea*) When Dr. Berg finds you sitting up he will give us both a sound whipping.

NABOKOV: One good reason to get on my feet. You don't want to disappoint him, a nice man like that! (*Inadvertently pushes some lever setting the bed in motion. Véra watches in dismay as he shuffles for his slippers.*)

VÉRA: Who said it: As some were fighting for the phantom of the past and some for the phantom of the future, he had made off with Russia behind their backs and hid it in his study?

NABOKOV: Those who consider a coup d'état an agony never shuffled after their slippers.

VÉRA: He also called it a crusade for the kitchen pot generally mistaken for Russia.

NABOKOV: Your slip-up: you're too faithful to the text, which is only a variable. (*Already on his feet trying to solve a problem*)

VÉRA: Some plot against the good old Soviets?

NABOKOV: Shishkov has forged our passports -- you'll see them at the Hermitage some day! *(He takes off one slipper to reveal his foreign passport tucked under the slip-sole)* «Shishkov, Vasilii Andreyevich.» That's me . . . or rather him . . . never mind. «Born in St. Petersburg . . .»

VÉRA: I could have guessed as much.

NABOKOV: «. . . Florida.» Now isn't it a beauty!

VÉRA: *(As if anticipating)* The prison known as «Cresty».

NABOKOV: Stamps . . . water-marks . . .

VÉRA: Ten years.

NABOKOV: If Shishkov isn't awarded the Lenin Prize . . .

VÉRA: Possibly fifteen.

NABOKOV: Do you know what it takes to be a secret agent in the Soviet Union? One must be blind like Milton, deaf like Beethoven, and a blockhead to boot. *(The problem is solved: a curtain rod in hand, Nabokov fishes out from under the bed an overstuffed suitcase)*

VÉRA: So you're not kidding?

NABOKOV: Looks like it had a big breakfast.

VÉRA: This for one day?

NABOKOV: *(Rummaging in the suitcase)* Over there, one year counts as two. I mean, one day. Now where did I put it? *(Suddenly aware that he is scratching his head)* Did you know why the Russians scratch the back of their heads? Allegedly it stimulates the blood into circulating among the brain cells. So where is that . . . ?

VÉRA: A parka in July?

NABOKOV: For sale. Suppose they steal our billfolds with all our credit cards? It's happened before.

VÉRA: You're not looking at me.

NABOKOV: Could be in Shishkov's. (*The same manipulations to retrieve and inspect a second suitcase*)

VÉRA: Now I can fully appreciate Vasechka's generosity. Relieving me of the night vigils.

NABOKOV: There! (*He unfolds the May 1 issue of Pravda*) The military parade on the Red Square. On the mausoleum you can see our planet's top ten long-livers. We are witnessing an attempt to set a world record in synchronized salutation. The attempt has failed. Two have reached only their chins; for the rest it proved a total fiasco. Why? The system of blocks has misfired. I did a sketch of this smart machine, concealed from the public view, naturally . . . see? . . . belt drive, crank arm . . . a stroke of genius. Even so, it has misfired!

VÉRA: I must be missing something. If you find Soviet Russia so fascinating, why didn't you stay there?

NABOKOV: Remember I introduced you to Robertson?

VÉRA: An Orientalist, so?

NABOKOV: Ask him some day why he didn't stay in Babylon.

VÉRA: Well Babylon doesn't exist anymore!

(*With a dreamy smile Nabokov folds the newspaper and puts it back in the suitcase.*

Enter DR. BERG shadowed by SHISHKOV.)

BERG: Well. We are making some progress, so it seems.

VÉRA: Doctor, how do you like this madness?

BERG: Are you talking about a trip to the land of victorious socialism?

VÉRA: I beg your pardon?

BERG: Cruiser «Aurora's» volley, terrorist Kaplan's gunfire -- the sublime emotion is what we're looking for! (*He gives her a wink behind the patient's back, she frowns*

failing to see his point) USSR -- a flying continent! One-sixth of mainland resisting the law of gravity! I'm speaking here as an old member of Comintern. (*His miming has reached its apex*) I pronounce a magic formula -- «the bright hereafter» -- and we arrive there at full speed on the agit-train of imagination! What do you say, Herr Nabokov?

NABOKOV: I will follow you to hell.

BERG: (*To Véra*) We are in the Soviet Union! No need to cross the borders! I'm speaking here as a doctor.

VÉRA: But they are going to the Soviet Union!

BERG: (*With a velvety-psychiatric smile*) Of course. And we are not going to stand in their way, are we? (*To Nabokov*) I have something for you. Tada! (*He opens his gown. His torso is wrapped in a map. He sings.*) «There's no other country in the wide world/Where you breathe, a free and happy man . . .» (*Spreads out the map on the bed carefully*) This is how I smuggled it out in thirty-seven. An operational map of Leningrad! Underground communications, bomb shelters. (*Pointing finger*) Your family nest.

NABOKOV: Are you saying it was safe from danger?

SHISHKOV. At least now we have nothing to fear. The papers are as good as gold. There is a touch of Gogol about the whole thing.

NABOKOV: You may be croaking ill wind.

BERG: Well, ladies and gentlemen. Why don't we sit down, according to the old Russian custom. (*Berg and Shishkov sit down while Nabokov and Véra remain standing*)

VÉRA: You are not coming back.

NABOKOV: Come on. We're going to take Moscow by storm!

VÉRA: You can't imagine how enormous Russia will seem to me when you disappear into it.

NABOKOV: How can I vanish into a country which has ceased to exist?

VÉRA: Tell me . . . are you taking this trip to find her?

NABOKOV: Her?

VÉRA: I hate to disappoint you, but you are going to find a plain old woman.

NABOKOV: This is mudslinging!

VÉRA: Are you referring to me or to her?

NABOKOV: Véra, one foot here, the other foot there.

VÉRA: Spinning yarns is all you're good for.

NABOKOV: You call it yarn spinning, helping reality find its perfect form?

VÉRA: Does that mean that you are staying?

NABOKOV: I am staying.

VÉRA: Then why don't we sit down before a journey, to keep up the old Russian custom.

(They do. A brief silence.)

SHISHKOV: Véra, I promise, we'll be back in . . .

VÉRA: *(Standing up abruptly)* All right then. Godspeed!

2. MOVE OUT, CLOTHES AND ALL!

A room at the National Hotel in Moscow. A stack of newspapers NABOKOV is looking through. SHISHKOV is examining the wallpaper. The radio blares Soviet pop music.

NABOKOV: The Festival of political songs. Want to hear who came first? «Quiet flows . . .»

(Radio overlaps)

RADIO: Quiet flows the Moscow River,
a dressmaker slumbers, and so does the Politbureau,
the ruby stars are shining on the Kremlin towers,
and a black baby sleeps peacefully
rocked in the kind Jewish arms.¹

(Shishkov kicks off his shoes and mounting the bed puts his ear to the wall)

SHISHKOV: You are an entomologist, for Chrissake! One expects you to know about these things!

NABOKOV: What's the name of our floor attendant, did you say? Marfinka? Five minutes of hanky-panky, a week's supply of newspapers! Does she allow you to reach all the way down to her fridge yet?

SHISHKOV: *(Sitting)* I could eat a hog.

NABOKOV: To allow a man all the way down to her fridge, what could be more intimate?

SHISHKOV: I hate your jokes! I knew we would hit rock bottom, but this! An emergency landing in Moscow, with a stomach virus to boot, those thugs at the airport!

NABOKOV: «And the fumes of homeland oh so sweet and balmy . . .»

SHISHKOV: Why did they have to steal both our billfolds? As if one was not enough!

NABOKOV: Yeah, well . . .

SHISHKOV: Thanks. Must be the first thing you ever agreed upon.

NABOKOV: Except the order was for two billfolds.

SHISHKOV: Beg pardon?

¹ © 1997 «Old Tune About It» by the Time Machine.

NABOKOV: They have a service at the Sheremetevo Airport -- THIEVES ON CALL. While you were waiting for our luggage I made the arrangements. Which should be cost-free, in my humble opinion.

SHISHKOV: You paid . . . to see us robbed?

NABOKOV: The experiment must be pure.

SHISHKOV: The experiment . . . ?

NABOKOV: Didn't you say yourself, «There is almost a touch of Gogol to the whole thing»? You sounded so enthusiastic it would have been a shame to let you down.

SHISHKOV: I see.

NABOKOV: A government inspector from St. Petersburg and his faithful valet.

Made a stop at a local inn. Not a penny to their names. You know how it goes.

(Shishkov is glaring at him. A frivolous knock on the door. MARFINKA enters, a shopping bag in hand.)

MARFINKA: No tweety-tweet from my birds of passage? *(Unloading canned food)*

Hey, what would you do without Marfinka! *(Reading the label)* Fat -- 30%,

carbohydrate -- 17%, iron . . . iron? No newspapers for me, I get upset over them.

You tell me, why can't people live decently in your much-praised America? It brings tears to my eyes. You must have lived here in the past?

SHISHKOV: What makes you think so?

MARFINKA: Well, where did you learn to speak such good Russian?

SHISHKOV: We, um . . .

NABOKOV: Listen, can one locate a person through a classified ad in these parts?

MARFINKA: It's not easy, as long as he is running around. If he is dead, sure.

NABOKOV: Let us say, a shadow of the past.

MARFINKA: That should be handled by the you-know-who.

NABOKOV: Hunh.

MARFINKA: We have representatives right here. Shall I call them?

SHISHKOV: No no, don't!

MARFINKA: You'll become buddies in no time!

SHISHKOV: Thank you. He meant it as a joke.

MARFINKA: Are you stepbrothers or something?

NABOKOV: (*Snorts*) Brothers!

SHISHKOV: (*Quickly*) Won't you sit down with us, Marfa Platonovna?

MARFINKA: I shouldn't keep them waiting. That man from East Germany . . . and another from «the island of freedom». You tell me if you have an itch. It's such a small thing, and it's such a relief to a man.

NABOKOV: What do you say, Vasiliy Andreyevich? In lieu of the Impressionists? Meanwhile I shall attend to some business.

SHISHKOV: I know your business.

NABOKOV: You must trust your fellow man.

(*Marfinka is at the door, ready to leave*)

SHISHKOV: Wait, how about a can opener?

MARFINKA: You are a bad boy! (*Waves her finger at him and she is gone. Shishkov turns a can helplessly in his hands.*)

NABOKOV: «*Déjeuner sur l'herbe*». The unknown Manet.

SHISHKOV: If I starve to death it's going to be on your conscience.

NABOKOV: When they learn who we are you can count on a five-star funeral.

SHISHKOV: (*Suspiciously*) Five-star?

NABOKOV: Gun salute, a niche in the Kremlin wall – one for two.

SHISHKOV: My choice, a country graveyard on the Geneva Lake.

NABOKOV: Vasiliy Andreyevich, your patriotism is well established.

SHISHKOV: And why am I off to the American embassy? (*Resolutely packing suitcases*) What are you sitting for? Come on. They'll find a way to ship us off. In the cargo hold, if necessary.

NABOKOV: Yes, go home. I will follow in a day or two.

SHISHKOV: Really? Tell me another. You'll find Tamara and that will be the last anyone will see of you.

NABOKOV: You stick like a burr!

SHISHKOV: I want to see her just as much as you do. You can spare me the smirk. But I'm not risking my neck, okay? That was not part of the deal!

NABOKOV: What's there to fear?

SHISHKOV: Forged papers, for one.

NABOKOV: I take all the responsibility. Just stay out of my way for now . . .

SHISHKOV: . . . and then it's going to be too late?

NABOKOV: This is embarrassing: one's alter ego being sharper than oneself! I hope this doesn't upset you but sometimes I feel like bumping you off.

SHISHKOV: Forget it. (*Takes both suitcases*) Are you coming?

NABOKOV: Now that's--!

SHISHKOV: I have your passport.

(*He opens the door and finds himself face to face with VLAD and SLAV, both wearing Russian shirts embroidered with cheerful cocks. They are beaming at him.*)

VLAD: Isn't that something! Just as we are passing by we overhear our native speech!

SLAV: Those are much too heavy for you. (*He relieves the dumbfounded Shishkov of his suitcases and carries them back into the room*)

VLAD: Can I use your phone? (*Dials*) Room 705: appetizers, house specialty and refreshments, naturally. (*Puts phone down*) Shall we make introductions? Vladislav.

SLAV: Same here.

VLAD: Vlad and Slav, to make it simple.

SHISHKOV: Shishkov, Vasiliy Andreyevich. And this is . . .

NABOKOV: Shishkov, Vasiliy Andreyevich.

VLAD: We'll need a drink to figure that one out.

SLAV: (*Sings*) «America the beautiful, from sea to shining sea!»

NABOKOV: Close enough.

VLAD: You here for long?

SHISHKOV: As you can see. (*Points to the suitcases*) We are long overdue.

SLAV: (*To Vlad*) Just like the other guy! (*To Shishkov*) Word for word: «I have overstayed in your parts.» And from the hotel he goes straight to the Butyrki prison.

SHISHKOV: What could he possibly have done?

SLAV: You know.

VLAD: Don't believe a word.

(*A gentle knock on the door. BREG, in a formal livery, rolls in a cart sporting gilded pots and Champagne in a silver pail. Shishkov eyes him squarely.*)

VLAD: Ah, here is our «Tsarist train»! Let's see. Who paid us a visit? Her Royal Majesty! (*He pops cork, pours the wine into glasses*) Well, my Andreyeviches? To fate?

BREG: *Fata regunt homines.*

SLAV: («*Translates*») There's special providence in the fall of a sparrow's turd, Horatio. (*Counts out money to Breg who thanks him and leaves*)

VLAD: Gentlemen, please. The firm takes care of everything. (*They help themselves*)

SHISHKOV: A prosperous firm?

SLAV: The Big House.

SHISHKOV: Never heard of it.

VLAD: That hurts, Vasiliy Andreyevich.

SHISHKOV: Honest to God.

SLAV: We have branches world over, if you must know. Our dossiers on individuals -- the address bureau would kill for them.

NABOKOV: Is that right?

VLAD: You need to find someone?

NABOKOV: Maybe.

VLAD: Slav, you tell him.

SLAV: No problem.

SHISHKOV: No no, we cannot stay. Thank you but . . . Vasiliy Andreyevich, why don't you say something for a change? Look, we were robbed at the airport.

VLAD: On order?

SHISHKOV: *(Taken by surprise)* Yes. *(Turns to Nabokov, a silent question in his eyes)*

NABOKOV: Those guys had a mustache.

SLAV: Golden mustache!

SHISHKOV: *(Somewhat puzzled)* Also there are bedbugs here.

VLAD: You don't say!

SHISHKOV: You don't believe me? I heard this characteristic noise with my own ears.

VLAD: *(Relieved)* Those are «bugs»!

SHISHKOV: Bugs?

SLAV: *(Cheerfully)* «Bugs». *(Uses his hands to show a spying device)*

SHISHKOV: *(To Nabokov)* Did you hear that? *(To Vlad)* See, there is no way we can stay here!

VLAD: Then why not use our place? Even Slav is agreeable. A hunting lodge in nature's lap. Cloud, castle, lake.

(Shishkov gives Nabokov a glance -- Vlad has just cited the title of one of Nabokov's short stories)

NABOKOV: The firm takes care of everything?

VLAD: That's right. Well, give us the name of your fair lady.

NABOKOV: How did you know it was a woman?

VLAD: It was a wild guess. You gave it away. *(The agents laugh contagiously)*

NABOKOV: Ahem. *(Produces an envelope)* Her address. *(Vlad looks briefly, hands it over to Slav)* As of 1918.

SLAV: *(Studies the handwriting)* Hesitations, second thoughts. A suitcase girl -- either she's just arrived or is about to leave. Also worth mentioning is her myopic gaze.

NABOKOV: Not a bad start.

SLAV: Let's say we've just arranged your rendezvous under the clock. *(Slips the envelope in his pocket)*

VLAD: *(Standing up)* We'll make good friends! May I? Our corporate pin. *(He affixes one on each man's lapel. To Slav.)* Car ready?

SLAV: Waiting outside.

VLAD: *(To Shishkov)* The best service in town! Well, twin comrades, as they say here: Move out, clothes and all!

SLAV: Bedbugs! *(Snorts. Agents leave.)*

SHISHKOV: Some pair!

NABOKOV: You can say that again.

SHISHKOV: We're packed and ready to go. So there, Mr. Nabo. . . (*Bites his tongue remembering the «bugs»*) Mr. Shishkov. The other day fate knocked your funny bone, now she's apologizing.

NABOKOV: You accept her apology? That's the way. No reason to bear the fool a grudge! Wait, it doesn't look right. (*Affixes the pin a notch higher*) There. Now the Big House can claim you as its own!

3. A DELICATE ASSIGNMENT

Cloud, castle, lake. A hunting lodge. Now and then its walls shudder on account of the daisy-clipping airplanes. It is either gray morning or early twilight. On a crimson table-cloth we see the leftovers from yesterday's feast. SHISHKOV grabs bits and pieces, throwing glances at a half-open door through which one can hear muttering.

NABOKOV'S VOICE: Thank you, my land, for your most precious, for the pure and ta-ta gift of yours . . .

(MARFINKA enters from the bedroom, a shawl spread over her night gown. She presses herself against Shishkov's back, producing a cluck of an unsatisfied hen. Shishkov tackles her soundlessly.)

NABOKOV'S VOICE: «Happy»? «Sleepless»? «Feathered»? . . . for the pure and feathered gift of yours.

SHISHKOV: (*Wheezes*) This is the place, great!

MARFINKA: So you like it there better?

SHISHKOV: Quiet, you!

MARFINKA: I think my rooster is ready . . .

(Attracted by the voices, enter NABOKOV muttering the blossoming lines. Marfinka casts flirtatious looks his way.)

NABOKOV: Thank you, my land; for your remotest
Most cruel mist my thanks are due.

(He stops in front of Marfinka)

MARFINKA: Aren't you a late sleeper, Vasiliy Andreyevich!

NABOKOV: *(Embarrassed)* I'm sorry. *(Looks away)*

MARFINKA: Couldn't part with Tamara, even in your dreams?

NABOKOV: *(Furious)* So you've blabbered it out!

SHISHKOV: Only the name, big deal . . .

MARFINKA: He dinned her into my ears. «The loss of my love meant for me the loss of my country!» He lies like a gas-meter. Quotes her letters by heart! Not that there is much to quote. *(With sarcasm)* «Mon Dieu, where has it gone, all that distant, bright, endearing!» *(Shishkov does not look Nabokov in the eye)* Two old fools. You belong with your good wives and here you are chasing young moths! *(She flounces her way back to the bedroom)*

NABOKOV: How did this common moth find her way into our exclusive collection?

SHISHKOV: You're asking me?

NABOKOV: Oh yes. She flew in, just to touch base, accompanied by the two gentlemen.

SHISHKOV: And before taking their leave they chloroformed her and put her in my bed.

NABOKOV: Poor thing, you.

SHISHKOV: Don't. No need to pluck a crow with me.

NABOKOV: I might pluck you, for Tamara's sake.

SHISHKOV: Speaking of someone else (*Nods in Marfinka's direction*), she's not that simple. Her husband is a big shot. I don't know my way in Soviet matters but he appears to have clout.

NABOKOV: So you've been playing the role of a small-time Mata Hari.

SHISHKOV: Since you are busy with the divine inventory, someone must solder the kettle.

NABOKOV: Is that what they call it now?

(MARFINKA re-enters, in a Russian sarafan, her hair done up in a plait)

MARFINKA: Leave men alone for a minute, they'll come up with some kind of filth.

SHISHKOV: I was talking about making tea. Unless you want something stronger.

MARFINKA: What if I do. *(Sitting at the table, she produces two big glasses, for herself and Shishkov, from her deep pockets. Nabokov is muttering again.)*

NABOKOV: By you possessed, by you unnoticed, unto myself I speak of you!

MARFINKA: Does he suffer from these seizures often?

SHISHKOV: *(Coughs to save it)* I was going to say. *(A toast)* The difference between dreaming of a reordered world and dreaming of reordering it oneself as one sees fit is a profound and fatal one. It's too late to address my words to the «Kremlin dreamer», I am afraid, but perhaps your husband will still hear me.

(They drink up. Nabokov takes a voluminous book from the shelf.)

MARFINKA: The Kremlin dreamer . . . He hunted in these parts, fancy that! It happened on one of those still evenings in July when you can hear the doleful cry of an unmilmed cow in a distant meadow. Suddenly, a fox, red as the setting sun! As he brought the shotgun to his shoulder, she froze and looked at him. He couldn't bring himself to pull the trigger, she was so beautiful.

NABOKOV: Pity that Russia was homely.

MARFINKA: Phooey!

NABOKOV: (*Showing the book*) Will Das Kapital do? The author has a certain propensity for obscure poetry, lame music, and lopsided art.

(*Airplane buzzing makes the air shudder, flutters the curtains*)

MARFINKA: (*Looking out*) Lordy! It's been ages!

VOICE: (*Offstage*) Where do they dispense such beautiful braids, Marfa Platonovna?

MARFINKA: (*Melting away*) Don't you start!

(*VLAD comes in, dressed as a General*)

VLAD: Good morning, gentlemen!

NABOKOV: Congratulations! You advance by the day.

VLAD: You are too modest yourself. As if we don't know. (*Winks at Shishkov, singing a popular tune*) «Painters, dip your brushes in a jar of water . . .»

NABOKOV: Any news?

VLAD: Are you talking about our special subject?

MARFINKA: This ardent young man-- (*A gesture toward Nabokov*) planned to join Denikin's army to retake his lady from the Reds! (*To Shishkov who has paled*) Did I say something wrong?

NABOKOV: Is she alive? Speak up!

VLAD: She is, she is. In forty-two she was evacuated to Kamyshlov. Worked as a school teacher there. Had children, two of them; as for the husband, we don't know. Then her tracks disappear.

MARFINKA: Disappear my foot! (*To Nabokov*) They'll track her down if she flew to the moon . . . (*To Vlad*) . . . with proper incentive, of course.

NABOKOV: I understand. (*Gets his check book*) How much?

VLAD: Are you offering money? To an officer?

NABOKOV: I'm sorry. That was very stupid of me. (*Puts his check book away*) Tell me -- as an officer -- you really don't know her whereabouts?

VLAD: Take it easy, Vasily . . .

SHISHKOV: Andreyevich.

VLAD: Uh oh, I had one drop too much the other night. Everything is under control, Vasily Andreyevich. As a poem has it, «the firemen are searching, as are the militia.»

NABOKOV: Are they going to search for a while? (*Suddenly Marfinka begins to laugh, she is joined by Vlad*) What's so funny? (*Now they really crack, gagging and pointing fingers*) I see: they are going to search for a long while.

VLAD: Well this will depend on you, my dear fellow.

NABOKOV: Are you expecting of me . . . certain services?

VLAD: Our firm does business with writers of great distinction.

SHISHKOV: If I can . . .

VLAD: We hobnob with Aragon!

SHISHKOV: . . . if I can paint, say, a theater curtain for you . . .

VLAD: (*To Marfinka*) What do you say? A curtain . . . with a seagull on it! (*To Nabokov*) And you? A poem, for starters! Dedicated to some revolutionary date!

NABOKOV: Four-letter words only?

VLAD: Your loving heart will be your guide. Think it over, take your time. There is no rush.

SHISHKOV: What do you mean no rush! Our return flight is today! Véra is going to lose her mind!

VLAD: Véra?

SHISHKOV: That's my . . . his . . . the wife.

VLAD: Véra, right. And here it's Tamara. One for you both also?

SHISHKOV: You got me wrong.

VLAD: I hope so.

SHISHKOV: It's a metaphor.

VLAD: Ah, that makes sense. We do conjure «metaphors» of our own here, for the V.I.P.'s, don't we, Marfa Platonovna?

MARFINKA: (*Sulking*) No dances for you, not anymore.

VLAD: For heaven's sake, why?

MARFINKA: (*To Shishkov*) He dances waltz to the count of two, always stepping on me feet!

NABOKOV: (*To Vlad*) Did you make it all up -- about Kamyshlov?

MARFINKA: (*Of Vlad*) He blushed, look!

VLAD: Not all. There was a school teacher . . . named Tamara, I think. Those were the days! As you took your own sweet time opening the second front and breaking a lance in the émigré papers, we bled to death. So there. Time to make up your mind, gentlemen: Which side do you take, masters of culture? (*Makes for the door, then turns back*) Like I said, I had one drop too much. I came here for a reason! There. (*Puts it down on the table*) An Order of the Great Compatriot, 1st Degree. I kept it for myself.

NABOKOV: Is that a bribe?

VLAD: There is no such Russian word.

NABOKOV: For breaking a lance in the émigré papers?

VLAD: In the Soviet papers. An advance, so to speak.

NABOKOV: Thanks but no thanks.

MARFINKA: Your loss. These are genuine jewels.

VLAD: (*Takes it back reluctantly*) There will be other occasions. The October Revolution?

SHISHKOV: (*Impulsively*) Our flight!

VLAD: I have to watch my step with you.

NABOKOV: You are a heavy-weight yourself, it seems.

VLAD: There is no comparison! (*Pouring out vodka*) We are scribblers. Check-ups, profiles. And look at you!

MARFINKA: (*A toast*) «Where even a spy cannot find his way, our iron bird will do the trick!»

(*Shishkov chokes over his drink. Nabokov will not touch his.*)

VLAD: Oh boy. Where else can I disburden my mind! Well, back to the humdrum. (*He clicks his heels together and leaves*)

SHISHKOV: (*His voice cracking*) Did you understand what «firm» he was talking about?!

NABOKOV: Don't panic, Vasiliy Andreyevich.

(*An airplane has taken off*)

SHISHKOV: We must make an escape at all costs!

NABOKOV: Just how exactly? Try to hitch a lift on a forest glade by waving at the passing airplanes?

MARFINKA: Will you take me to Florida, pumpkin?

SHISHKOV: Never call me pumpkin! -- *Jesus Christ*. What did you haul your hemorrhoid all the way to these boondocks for?!

NABOKOV: A dig at me?

SHISHKOV: It was a rhetorical «you» implying first person!

NABOKOV: There again: First is your middle name!

SHISHKOV: When we are invited «over there» I'll come second, I promise.

MARFINKA: Gentlemen . . .

(*The door bursts open. We see SLAV clad as a Soviet bureaucrat, except for a backpack.*)

MARFINKA: Ah. You gave me a fright!

SLAV: You lucky rascal, Vasiliy Andreyevich. What did he tell you?

NABOKOV: That after '42 her tracks disappear.

SLAV: Aha! . . . Over the lips, over the gums, look out lady, here it comes! (*He is glancing sideways at a glass of vodka*) Anyways, you owe me one. A greenback, if you don't mind. As a souvenir. (*Nabokov has only small change. Shishkov gives Slav a bill which he checks for counterfeit.*) One must know the enemy face to face. (*Pockets the bill*) So a gap after '42, eh? Yeah well. My capacities can hardly measure up to Vlad's . . .

MARFINKA: (*To Nabokov*) Slav doesn't wear his straps but I'd say a Major, at the very least.

SLAV: (*Pumping the tongue-tied Shishkov's hand*) . . . it's David's against Goliath's, but I'm not your run-of-the mill either! (*To Nabokov*) Not a word to the General, or he'll smoke me in his pipe. Well. I'm going through our files and what do you know, your Tamara jumps right out at me off the page! Grand skirt, high heels, and hairdo à la Bridget Bardot. She worked in a top-secret place, don't ask me names, but if you ask me whether she was popular with men I will give you a straight answer: yes she was.

NABOKOV: Are you done?

SLAV: What do you mean am I done?

NABOKOV: Are you done playing the goat?

SHISHKOV: Come! (*Pulling him away*)

SLAV: Here I am pouring my heart out for you . . .

NABOKOV: She is locked up -- in your «firm's» torture-chambers.

SLAV: You give me the creeps!

NABOKOV: You keep her in detention so you can blackmail us.

(*Shishkov is gesticulating wildly, trying to avert disaster*)

SLAV: And just where you may have got by such information?

NABOKOV: I have no information. No money either, as you can see. But I will raise it! How much do you want?

SLAV: Curse that tongue of yours! (*Under his breath*) We're not allowed even souvenirs from foreigners. (*Mulls it over*) Well maybe . . . a little favor?

NABOKOV: (*Stiffens*) A poem dedicated to some revolutionary date?

SLAV: I'd call that inspiration! No I'm talking this backpack. Think you might take care of it for me . . . overnight?

SHISHKOV: (*Wary*) The backpack?

SLAV: A token of friendship. (*Nabokov shrugs indifferently, Slav drops it down*)

And I'll see what I can do for you. You better believe it!

MARFINKA: Well then? To Bridget Bardot!

SLAV: She doesn't stand a chance! (*Downs his vodka with a grunt*)

MARFINKA: Do we have the rye -- to sniff it down with?

SLAV: I have something better. (*Gets from backpack a package of white dust, makes a «line» on the back of his palm. He sniffs coke -- one nostril, the other.*)

MARFINKA: Can I try it?

SLAV: What do you take me for, Marfa Platonovna? (*Shares it. To Shishkov.*) You with us?

SHISHKOV: (*To Nabokov*) Pinch me, please! (*Nabokov pinches his meaty side, Shishkov utters a cry*)

SLAV: Our customs seized a mule. A Lenin scholarship holder. The innocent Soviet people he could have victimized!

(*The two of them inhale and breathe out together: «Yeah»*)

SLAV: Did I tell you my heritage? Funny as it may seem, my grandfather Edelweiss was a Swiss. He died from a stroke, holding in the palm of his hand his gold watch,

SHISHKOV: The whole thing is crazy, don't you think? Why is it so dark? And now my watch has stopped! It feels like night. *(The backpack has caught his eye)*
Now what do we do with that!

NABOKOV: Take it out on the front porch. The red fox spared by Ilyich is sure to pick up the scent.

MARFINKA: Vasiliy Andreyevich, don't take it to heart. Who's going to show up in this back country in the middle of night?

SHISHKOV: Think so?

MARFINKA: We shall hide it real good.

NABOKOV: *(At the window)* The fire flies

4. ALL THE STATIONS ARE ON THE AIR!

VLAD and SLAV, in secret agent uniforms, burst into the hunting lodge. Without hesitation MARFINKA sits on the backpack and spreads out her sarafan. While SHISHKOV is badly scared, NABOKOV looks as if he was expecting the night guests.

VLAD: All sit! Don't move!

SLAV: It's a search.

(He spreads his arms as though he has nothing to do with it. They obey orders. The agents turn the place upside down. At some point Slav stops before Marfinka.)

MARFINKA: I am sitting!

(The search continues. There is a thud. Shishkov, who is sitting at the table, recoils. The agents, coming over, yank the table-cloth off. We see a sarcophagus. Its lid opens from within to discover BREG, a spitting image of the 1830s head of secret police Count Benkendorf. He sits up and gives everybody a bland look.)

BREG: *C'est affreux, n'est-ce pas?* See for yourselves: I do a funny trick and people take fright. *(To Shishkov)* You are atremble, my dear penman.

SHISHKOV: Art. . . artist.

BREG: I'm confused myself! *(Checks with his calendar)* Sure enough, it's a magnetic day. *(To Nabokov)* Do you believe in magnetic days?

NABOKOV: I knew a man in Berlin by the name of Winestock. Well he believed in Soviet agents dispatched from «over there» -- and how eloquent was that «over there» -- to shadow some poor little émigré man. It is my impression that he would less rather let a spy slip away than to miss the chance to hint to the spy that he, Winestock, had found him out.

BREG: Our imaginary fears, yes! Right on target. Auch, my body feels numb. *(The agents help him out, close the lid, and cover the sarcophagus with the table-cloth once again)* Now who is responsible for that smash-up? *(The agents promptly begin to put things in order)* Good to see you, my dear. *(Kisses Marfinka's hand)* A tea-cosy, that's what you are! Mum as fish, aren't you all?

SHISHKOV: So you've been eavesdropping all along?

BREG: Vasiliy Andreyevich, don't hit a man when he is down. It couldn't be sadder: I am Russian, but scrape me and you discover Winestock!

MARFINKA: Oh please!

BREG: You too, my precious one! We are all dreaming secret agents, aren't we! We spring from our own shadow! The West has opened our eyes for us finally, and we are here to humbly acknowledge it. *(His face assumes an expression of concern. To Nabokov.)* Humor me if you must, but one does harbor, occasionally, suspicions that are not totally unfounded. Take Slav. He promised you his assistance? Don't believe a word of it! *(Vehement protestations from Slav)* And what about Vlad? You didn't accept that order with diamonds from him -- good for you, he and the other scoundrel

would be writing a police report now. (*Nodding his head in their direction*) Look at them. They've lost their tongues, the old boys.

SHISHKOV: Are you saying that you took cover so you could . . .

BREG: It's a risk, I know, but did I have an option? It's my job. I don't have any secrets from you: I'm the head of Secret Police. Gentlemen, you got yourselves into the soup. They'll eat you alive. Already sniffed out, the blood hounds, that your papers are no good.

SHISHKOV: What!

BREG: It's okay, you did a professional job. How could you retouch the pictures so well? Two different faces, almost! Do you care to share your expertise with our comrades?

SHISHKOV: Um . . .

BREG: Great. We pay in hard currency. And mind you, it's a female collective. (*To agents*) If you touch one hair on their heads I'll restore your plurality to a singularity!

NABOKOV: What about Tamara?

BREG: Excuse me?

NABOKOV: What have you made of her? She is in your hands, I know.

BREG: (*To agents*) There's your Mister Know-All. He cracks it just like that. See if you can learn from him! (*To Nabokov*) Touché. I give up. She is in our hands, yes. And we take very good care of her.

NABOKOV: I want you to let her go.

BREG: But of course.

NABOKOV: Abroad.

BREG: Naturally.

NABOKOV: Today!

BREG: You said it.

NABOKOV: (*Wilts*) What is it that I must do?

VLAD: Nothing. Shift accents, here and there . . .

NABOKOV: Accents? . . .

SLAV: (*Good-humoredly*) Sócrátes. Desdémona.

BREG: . . . as you describe Soviet rule. Call it retouching. Do yourself - and your books -- a good turn.

NABOKOV: In other words, change the sign for the opposite one?

BREG: For the positive one!

NABOKOV: Or else . . .

(*Vlad gives a vivid demonstration how they wring a hen's neck*)

BREG: If I were you, I wouldn't be too picky.

NABOKOV: Suppose I do what you ask of me. What guarantees can you give me that she will be set free?

VLAD: He demands guarantees!

SLAV: I'm stunned: a man distrusts his kind.

MARFINKA: (*To Nabokov*) How can you? Here is a knight without fear and beyond reproach!

NABOKOV: Who has doubled the secret police force, if I have my figures right?

SHISHKOV: (*Scragged whisper*) Don't.

BREG: I'll do anything in my power to see the Leviathan, who has been washed ashore, breathe his last. Which is why you are here, correct? (*Shishkov is staring at Nabokov who is silent*) I'm entirely with you. Believe me, it is not easy having to keep giving the nuts a screw when in your heart of hearts you are a dissident!

MARFINKA: (*To Nabokov, filling him in*) He is a bisexual!

BREG: (*Glances at his watch*) All right then. Perhaps this is going to convince you!
(*A male voice booms from the loudspeakers*)

BROADCASTER: All the stations are on the air! Effective of July 2, 1977, the Secret Police is abolished. Former agents are assigned to duty as ballroom dance instructors complete with white carnations in their buttonholes and white gloves. *(We hear a mazurka. Vlad and Slav, sporting white carnations, get the white kid gloves from their pockets. Marfinka claps her hands.)*

MARFINKA: How pretty! *(To Nabokov)* Now what, Mr. Mudslinger?

SHISHKOV: Really.

(The former agents ask Marfirnka for a dance but she remembers that she is sitting on the backpack)

MARFINKA: Excuse me but I don't--

BERG: You are not going to deny me this little pleasure? *(Helps her up. Oppressive pause. Breg takes out a big stone from the backpack.)* How about that! He is carrying stones around like some stevedore. But then look at his bearing! *(To Slav)* Don't forget your knapsack. -- So it goes, gentlemen. A mysterious thing, this branching structure of life. What do you say, Vasiliy Andreyevich? *(Nabokov, suddenly spent, slumps in a chair)*

NABOKOV: I am not going to see her, am I?

BERG: Life hinges upon the tip of a pen. Which reminds me. *(Like a conjurer he produces a sheet of paper from one sleeve, a gold pen from the other)* A sign of mutual trust. *(Nabokov casually signs the blank sheet)* We'll do some fine damage, you and I!

SHISHKOV *(In despair)* Our plane!

BERG: *(Puts the sheet away)* Tut tut tut. Give us a smile. Good boy. Why hurry, why hurry, cried old Mr. Murry. There is yet a lot to be seen. Am I right, pussy willow? *(Pats Marfinka's backside)* I should leave you alone. Enjoy it!

(Exits. Marfinka dances with her cavaliers. Nabokov sits, his shoulders sagging. Shishkov stands in a kind of stupor.)

SHISHKOV: Am I dreaming? No, I would have awoken when you pinched me.

(Checks his side) Here it is, the bruise. But what if it is not my dream? Huh? Whose dream is it then?

NABOKOV: Never show surprise. They live here by a wise maxim, haven't you heard? Life is, even when it isn't.

(The dancers wave at him, he waves back blindly)

5. WAITING LIST

Dusk has fallen. The guests are gone. NABOKOV and SHISHKOV are sitting at the ruined table.

SHISHKOV: *(Pause)* It feels like an eternity.

(Through the front door MARFINKA enters slightly-tightly, flushed from dancing and wooing)

MARFINKA: When was the last time I did it outdoors? . . . It's heaven, after rain! I should take you out for mushroom hunting. When I was pregnant -- false pregnancy, you know -- I could faint from the smell of honey agaruses. You fry a panful, with sliced onions and potatoes -- mmmm -- Come, Vasiliy Andreyevich.

SHISHKOV: Not now.

MARFINKA: Yes, now. *(Pulls him by the sleeve)* One for the road.

SHISHKOV: Go ahead. I'll be right with you.

MARFINKA: Cluck cluck cluck. *(Retreats to the bedroom)*

NABOKOV: I recall your last passion. She would emit, during the sexual storm, the same shrill, infantile peep. Isn't it a waste of effort, crossing the border only to pass from one embrace to another almost identical one?

SHISHKOV: Wrong target. I only complete what your fantasy triggered. Speaking of which, I'd be much obliged if you'd let me in on your high-flown plans once in a while.

NABOKOV: Such as?

SHISHKOV: What was that bunk talk about the reason for our coming here? Some Leviathan breathing his last?

NABOKOV: I think he meant the USSR.

SHISHKOV: Hogwash! -- Now wait a second. -- He really thinks that you came here to--

NABOKOV: And you doubt it?

SHISHKOV: You came here to change the regime?

NABOKOV: I cannot change myself, can I?

SHISHKOV: You think it's funny.

NABOKOV: Look: this whole thing about Tamara is doomed so long as «they» are around. You can't breathe the same air. Speak the same language. Share the same bloody acre. It's either exodus for the entire people, a stampede from the infested land to save your living soul, or . . . I don't know. You saw them. It's a three-headed dragon. You cut off one head, it grows a new one.

SHISHKOV: Where is my magic sword!

NABOKOV: You can sneer all you want. At least, unlike yourself, I've tried to do something for a change.

SHISHKOV: Do something?! Open your eyes! Don't you see where your whims and megrims have landed us?

NABOKOV: Precisely where they were meant to. I sought «their» acquaintance. I did! I wouldn't admit it to myself lest you would talk me out of it at the last minute. How can you fail to see it -- if «they» won't bring us to Tamara, nobody else will! It's our chance. Even if we are losing so far there is still hope.

SHISHKOV: You're a lunatic.

NABOKOV: What's the date?

SHISHKOV: Second of July. Why?

NABOKOV: Just a thought: either the monolith cracks or

SHISHKOV: Even if it does, our unfortunate compatriots are not going to acknowledge it -- they will be crushed by the debris.

NABOKOV: Quite possible.

SHISHKOV: And you have entered your name -- our names! -- in that death-roll. Or maybe they got a «waiting list» of sorts? A special list for the kamikaze?

NABOKOV: *Panikos* – a sudden, acute fear induced by god Pan.

SHISHKOV: (*Meditatively*) One can hear the sound of an ax being sharpened in the distance.

NABOKOV: What pleases me most is the wayside murmur of this or that hidden theme. Incidentally: what is more reliable, the hook over the window or the lake over there?

SHISHKOV: You are losing your mind at the speed of light. Why do as a dilettante what has long since been assigned to professionals?

NABOKOV: You have failed to see the beauty of it. By killing myself I would kill «them», as they are totally inside me, fattened on the intensity of my hatred. Along with «them» I would kill the world they had created, all the vulgarity of that world, which keeps growing within me, ousting, to the last sun-bathed landscape, to the last memory of childhood, all the treasures I had collected. Us, rather -- Tamara and I.

SHISHKOV: Don't you realize at all that this blunder is going to be our last one?

NABOKOV: More and more blunders, Vasiliy Andreyevich! Let life choose the most spectacular one.

(Shishkov leaves without another word. Nabokov reaches for a stack of cards which serves him as paper. Writes, crosses out. He is at an impasse. Irrked, he is biting the tail end of his fountain pen. Mumbles. Writes a few more sentences, crosses them out. Desperation, then . . .)

NABOKOV: God, it couldn't be simpler!

(We see a woman's silhouette in the dark corner -- it is TAMARA. She addresses Nabokov without stepping out into the pool of light.)

TAMARA: I am not so sure.

NABOKOV: You?!

TAMARA: You can not rewrite the past -- much less our past.

NABOKOV: Tamara, I have an idea: it's going to be a fine travesty which they will take at face value.

TAMARA: It is commonly known as censorship.

NABOKOV: I must save you whatever the price!

TAMARA: Whatever?

NABOKOV: Don't be subtle over a word.

TAMARA: I thought it was your profession.

NABOKOV: I don't see any other way to make them compromise.

TAMARA: If you'll excuse me, dear, you seem to be minding someone else's business.

NABOKOV: How so?

TAMARA: Leave politics to politicians. You will find trump cards of your own.

NABOKOV: They will destroy you while I am looking for my cards!

TAMARA: No.

NABOKOV: No?

TAMARA: How can they destroy someone they never owned in the first place?

NABOKOV: You're saying . . . so you are not behind bars? You are free? Where are you? *(Suddenly realizes that he is addressing a void, for the shadow has vanished. He puts his pen down.)* But of course: they were bluffing! How could I have fallen for it? Well, gentlemen. I think I'm ready now. Shall we proceed with our game?

(There is mounting thunder. Seconds later, the lodge is shaking to its foundation. From the bedroom, as he slips into a bathrobe, hurriedly emerges SHISHKOV, his glance darting about nervously.)

SHISHKOV: What's that?

(He is being followed by MARFINKA who is yawning and stretching)

MARFINKA: Strategic aviation.

SHISHKOV: Bunkum!

NABOKOV: Nifty bunkum.

(The hunting lodge crumbles like a house of cards discovering BREG, with a double-barreled gun, wearing a hunting suit and a hat with a pheasant feather, and his huntsmen, VLAD and SLAV, their ferocious dogs straining against the leash)

BREG: Mister Nabokov?

NABOKOV: At your service.

BREG: You are under arrest for remaining illegally on the territory of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and for actions undertaken to subvert the laws of this country. *(Fires his gun into the air, the dogs bark hysterically)*

NABOKOV: Why, this could solve my problem. Funny it didn't enter my head.

BREG: What are you mumbling about?

NABOKOV: Words of gratitude. Thank you for rendering me a service.

BREG: Not at all. Well, now that you mention it . . . your letter sent to Pravda was a roaring success.

NABOKOV: My letter to Pravda!?!

BREG: Well yes. *(To Vlad, effacing himself, as it were)* Did I miss something? I thought we had an agreement: «mutual trust.»

VLAD: Absolutely. I am your witness.

BREG: *(To Nabokov)* See? My text, your signature. Done to a «T».

VLAD: No chance you could wriggle out of it!

SLAV: Take it easy, it's your style at its best: «Now that I have seen Red Russia with my own eyes I can safely say that its beauty will leave no one indifferent.» Class act!

BREG: And this is just a beginning. We'll kick some asses, you and I!

NABOKOV: Our own, no doubt.

BREG: *(With a smile)* With your permission, I will stick around for a while.

NABOKOV: Don't be so sure. *(Produces a gun and shoots him point-blank. Breg crumples to the ground. Nabokov throws his gun away and turns to the agents.)* I meant to give you a more substantial ground for my arrest.

(He extends his arms so they can handcuff him. Instead, Vlad picks up the gun and points it at Nabokov's forehead.)

SHISHKOV: Oh my God. *(Covers his face with his elbow. A thundering gunshot goes off. Nabokov emerges unscathed. Shishkov, unsure that he is still alive, discretely peers out.)* Was I shot to death?

(Breg rises, brushing off his trousers)

BREG: And you call that a proper English upbringing? Bang-bang at the drop of a hat? What if we hadn't replaced your gun?

NABOKOV: Who are you?

BREG: Your Muse.

NABOKOV: I don't want to upset you but I am not writing another line.

BREG: Aren't we collaborating at this moment?

NABOKOV: Farce is not my genre.

BREG: Are you sure?

(A sign to his huntsmen. Slav gives the leash over to Vlad, takes off his neckerchief and blindfolds Nabokov. He is spinning him to a cheerful chant:)

CHORUS: We shall beat 'im, we shall slash 'im so he plays the lead with passion!

(Given a shove in the back, Nabokov makes a few tentative steps, his arms stretched in front of him. Slow fadeout, as we hear whistles and catcalls.)

END OF ACT ONE

ACT TWO

6. SEPARATION

Blindfolded NABOKOV, multiplied in the false mirrors, is groping his way in a festively-illuminated labyrinth. MEN in doglike masks and jester outfit, who play blind Tom, are shoving him back and forth. Frisky music. Here and there placards in mirrorlike inversion blaze up. At some point a TICKLISH MAN gets caught. He giggles wildly. Nabokov removes the blindfold to find himself in a prison cell.

NABOKOV: How original! Aren't you tired of play-acting? I know who you are.

BREG: *(Gagging with laughter)* Yes? Yes?

NABOKOV: Dr. Berg?

BREG: Still cold!

NABOKOV: Gerb?

BREG: *(Merrily)* Tada! *(His mask off)* I am Breg, see? A nice fellow indeed!

Well, well. *(Tours the cell like a boss, flops on the army-style made-up cot)* Mine is by the window! Unless you have a problem with it. *(Nabokov shrugs)* What brought you here, Vladimir Vladimirovich?

NABOKOV: You'll burst laughing.

BREG: Yeah, I'm your merry fellow. Well?

NABOKOV: I put myself in resonance with the Soviet Power with the intention of blasting it from within.

BREG: *(Giggles)* That's a good one. *(Becoming serious)* You are kidding, right?

Uh oh. *(Jumps to his feet)* You screwed up big. Did they whisper the verdict in your ear?

NABOKOV: I couldn't make out a thing.

BREG: I see. (*Gravely*) I hate to upset you but . . . You'd better sit down.

NABOKOV: I get the idea.

BREG: That's the way it is here: they announce the death sentence in a whisper to spare other people's feelings.

NABOKOV: So -- when?

BREG: Well that they wouldn't tell you till the last minute. Again, it's only human. O dear! Tell you the truth, I envy you. My «case» -- if you can call it that! A scrawny file. You, you'll be the star of the day! Television, press. Fluttering, huh?

NABOKOV: Pardon?

BREG: Your little heart?

NABOKOV: I would much prefer certainty.

BREG: You? The Grand Master of circumlocution?

NABOKOV: You sound as if you are familiar with my work.

BREG: And what do you think I am here for? (*In response to distrustful look, a tense whisper*)

«I will not bend, I will not cease
Loathing the filth, brutality and boredom
Of silent servitude! No, no, I shout--!»

NABOKOV: (*Makes a wry face*) Enough! I see your point.

BREG: Wake me up in the middle of the night and I will recite it all, forward and backward. Good Lord -- to be a fate-mate of someone whose books have changed our epoch!

NABOKOV: I am afraid the influence of my books on my epoch is as negligible as the influence of my epoch on my books.

BREG: Bravo! (*Sitting down next to him, urgent whisper*) I think I should prefer the rope, since I know authoritatively and irrevocably that it shall be the ax. Ah, had I but lived your life . . . to start it off with a blinding flash of lightning and end in a

thunderclap! . . . And yet, to know that I am in this terrible, striped world through a fatal error . . . Do you understand? I have the feeling of . . . of . . .

NABOKOV: . . . of boiling and rising milk which is about to overflow.

BREG: Aren't you a poet! -- Huh?

(The latter refers to the clanking door. VLAD and SLAV, in tatters, bring in the food. Breg brightens up.)

BREG: Okie-dokie. What's the latest treat?

SLAV: Homemade salted mushrooms. Pontiff fish-soup -- the little devil goes well with a rasstegai. [Open-topped pasty]

VLAD: . . . sabayon . . .

SLAV: Excellent sabayon! The fruit. They really fatten one up here -- like a sacrificial lamb! *(Vlad goes into a coughing fit to cover his comrade's faux pas)*

BREG: *Ein, zwei, drei!* *(He is juggling apples)*

VLAD: *(To Nabokov)* You must not neglect to sample our French rolls. Mind you, we have our own bakery.

SLAV: Look at you! *(Ties a napkin around Breg's neck)*

BREG: *Merci.* *(The guards exit. Breg takes out cutlery wrapped in a table napkin.)*

Now isn't that something! *(Brings to light a cute little hammer)* They hit it on the nail: today is my saint's day. *(Eats heartily)* I'm talking Marfinka. *(Checks the reaction)*

NABOKOV: Marfa Platonovna is your wife?

BREG: Surprise, surprise. You know why she married me? I could write my name upside-down!

NABOKOV: What talent!

BREG: (*Brightens up*) And not just my name either! Friends' and folks' as well!
Yeah . . . You saw Marfinka. A kind creature. She's a gal that can't say no. Mmm, sturgeon! You hardly touched anything.

NABOKOV: I'm not hungry.

BREG: The food is delicious. The way they treat us on death row is beyond reproach. Hey, what's that thing on your neck -- right here -- yes. (*Comes over*) Ah, it was only a shadow. But you seem uncomfortable when you move your head. Did you catch a chill?

NABOKOV: Stop it.

BREG: Wait. My hands are clean. (*Feels his cervical vertebrae*) Looks like you're okay. Now what did he say about that French roll again? You are not particular, are you? (*Takes his French roll*) Oh my. (*Impressed by its weight, he breaks the roll in two to find inside a miniature chisel*) Hocus-pocus. Boy 'n' girl. (*He has a hammer in one hand, a chisel in the other*) A prison set!

(*Clank of the latchkey. Breg is quick to hide the evidence. Enter SLAV, his hair slicked down, reciting Hamlet's «To be or not to be» soliloquy. He cuts it off in mid-sentence and bows modestly as Breg gives him a hand.*)

SLAV: (*To Nabokov*) Didn't you translate it into Russian? I figured it out: translation, for you, is an illegal entry, as it were. A voyage of the passport-free soul. (*Clicking heels*) Prison master. We keep our finger on the pulse, so to speak. It's quite homey in your cell. A new table-cloth. Family pictures.

BREG: They are mine!

SLAV: Nice, very nice. (*Stops by the table*) So what's on the menu? (*Without so much as a by-your-leave he is sticking his fingers in this and that, tasting the food*) Maybe we should switch places -- what do you say, gentlemen? Gotcha. No one in his right mind will give up this quiet Eden for our crazy life! Today they spit

pomegranate seeds at one another in the Council of Elders. We may outdo American democracy in no time.

BREG: See what *I* can show you! (*Fanning out a deck of cards*) Think of a card.

(*Looks away*)

SLAV: Done. (*Breg, acting funny, puts his finger to his forehead, then quickly collects the cards, gives the deck a jaunty crackle and throws out the three of clubs*)

Amazing! (*To Nabokov*) I come to you from Mount Olympus. A latter-day Hermes.

(*He breaks sealing-wax on an envelope and produces paper after paper*) The Act of

Grace! . . . Tomorrow's election for the office of President of the University secret

ballot . . . Not to mention the bonuses . . . a motorcar, literary awards, a snap

publication of your complete works . . . (*Passes on the sheets*)

NABOKOV: And this, I presume, is my speech?

SLAV: I wrote it myself. It's good, see for yourself!

(*Nabokov puts the papers back in the envelope which he then tears to pieces*)

BREG: Vladimir Vladi. . . ! That was a rash decision.

SLAV: Aren't we sullen and short-tempered, and that little vein on our neck is throbbing, and our eyes are dull . . . Now, *pour la digestion*, allow me to offer you a cigarette.

NABOKOV: You speak French?

SLAV: In this country every barber speaks foreign languages. Here children pen graffiti in English, in case you haven't noticed.

NABOKOV: You are ravishingly vulgar.

SLAV: We do our best. At last, someone who can appreciate it! (*He makes for the door, then suddenly collapses on the floor. Breg rushes to his side.*)

BREG: Prison master! Are you all right? (*Calling the guard*) Somebody! Help!

SLAV: The heart. It's nothing. A few seconds spent on the floor in a supine position and I'm as good as new. (*Jumps to his feet*)

BREG: Fancy that!

SLAV: (*To Nabokov*) There is something about your books -- I can't wade through them for the life of me! They irritate me as would a harsh light.

(*VLAD, armed to the teeth, shows in SHISHKOV*)

VLAD: You have five minutes. Talebearers guarantee full confidentiality.

(*Takes his post at the door. Slav's eyes wander from Nabokov to his guest.*)

SLAV: Look at these two pees in a pod! This is how we like it: All for one and one for all!

BREG: He took me for someone named Berg a while ago.

SLAV: God created man in his own image. (*To Shishkov*) Look what he did, the little devil! (*Shows him the torn envelope*) See if you can clean up his mess. (*Exits*)

SHISHKOV: Good to see you.

NABOKOV: You too, Vasiliy Andreyevich.

(*They both feel uncomfortable in the presence of strangers*)

BREG: Don't mind me. When I eat my crumb I am deaf and dumb. (*He is scrubbing the dish with exaggerated diligence*)

SHISHKOV: Actually I thought that . . .

NABOKOV: . . . it would be much worse here? Not at all. The mirrors -- as in a dance studio. And the food beats that at the hotel.

SHISHKOV: I shall-- (*He stumbles*) I shall defend you in court.

NABOKOV: I couldn't dream up a better lawyer.

SHISHKOV: Foul blow. You know very well that I promised Véra to . . .

NABOKOV: No need to sail under false colors. It's not me who you are saving.

SHISHKOV: Yeah, well, am I to apologize for saving myself?

NABOKOV: I am quite happy with my plight.

SHISHKOV: Well I am not! Call it cheesy but I want to live! I want to return to our philistine Switzerland and end my days sketching edelweisses on the Alpine slope.

NABOKOV: Given this separation, reaching an agreement may prove a daunting task.

BREG: *(To Vlad)* I wonder, if they decapitate one, will his counterpart's head roll as well?

SHISHKOV: Why did you tear up the amnesty act? You've reached your goal, haven't you? The changes are under way! Even the composition of the air is different, and so are the people. Yesterday's taboos fall like skittles. Look at this! *(Solemnly pointing at a newspaper)* «Nabokov's Homecoming: Invitation to a Discussion.»

NABOKOV: And you expect me to swallow the bait?

SHISHKOV: The President of the USSR . . .

NABOKOV: Another tyrannosaurus.

SHISHKOV: The President of the USSR has announced his resignation . . . after the new constitution is adopted.

NABOKOV: Do you have any faith at all in what you are saying?

SHISHKOV: I simply refuse to believe that a man, pretty much removed from Russian political problems and more of a foreign cut, could prove capable of . . . what shall I call it . . .

BREG: *(Obligingly)* Stupidity?

SHISHKOV: . . . of a heroic deed.

NABOKOV: You're wrong there. There is nothing about me of the civic hero who dies for his people. I die only for myself, for the sake of my own world, which is now distorted and violated within me and outside me.

(Shishkov is waiting for the sequel but instead Nabokov ties a napkin around his neck and attends to his food)

SHISHKOV: I shall defend myself, then.

NABOKOV: No I shall defend you, Vasilij Andreyevich. I shall defend your right to be one of a kind. The artist perceives the difference where the vulgar sees only resemblance.

SHISHKOV: My stars! To be bound with you for life! *(Exits followed by Vlad)*

BREG: Tell you what: you should try Marfinka's blancmange some day. *(Leaves the table)* All righty, time for a little exercise. *(Takes the hammer and the chisel)* I hope I'm no bother?

(Nabokov shrugs lightly. Breg begins to chip away at the wall.)

7. A REHEARSAL OF NOSTALGIA

NABOKOV is lying on the bed, his hands under his head, staring at the ceiling. Before the mirror, BREG, in a quilted robe, his wet hair secured by a hair-net, lather hanging off his jowls like off a bulldog, is scraping his stubble with a dull razor.

BREG: Or maybe I should undo the bed ahead of time? She can drop in for a sec, do it head over heels, then wham! bam! she's gone! One hell of a lay!

NABOKOV: Huh?

BREG: I'm talking about Marfinka. Anybody coming to your field-day? You mentioned names in your sleep.

NABOKOV: Did I?

BREG: Isabella, Nina, Margarita . . .

NABOKOV: I like to repeat aloud some feminine names, still cold and untenanted, and try to guess which of these names would suddenly come alive.

BREG: Under the circumstances, the authorities won't object. Last wish -- they can't touch it.

NABOKOV: I don't know if she is still alive.

BREG: 'course she's alive. For you, anyway.

NABOKOV: Swear to God you never met her.

BREG: How could I have possibly met her? Only you know the distinguishing characteristics. If she had any.

NABOKOV: (*Tarries*) Velvety face. Myopic gaze. Tender lips, which grew chapped and swollen at sub-zero temperatures and, it seemed, faded around the edges, the feverish pink overflowing

(*The air moves, the shadows fall back from the invisible source of light, bringing forth a youthful creature -- TAMARA. She bears a fleeting likeness to Nabokov's wife.*)

TAMARA: I thought you'd never call me again.

NABOKOV: You haven't aged?

TAMARA: I stay the way you remember me.

NABOKOV: And I'm an old man. Look at my hands.

TAMARA: A sun-burnt hand, callused from the happy labor of tennis. You came to claim your «toys»?

NABOKOV: It was as though the whole world had conspired against us. Our tutor who pointed at us his dreadful telescope in the park with its autumn azure and rustling alleys

TAMARA: Haven't you scraped all that was left out of Russia using your mighty claws?

NABOKOV: . . . the city museums where they denied us shelter when the red sun hung low in the frozen blue-gray sky.

TAMARA: A sense of homelessness . . . a murky preface to later, more rigorous roaming.

NABOKOV: A torturous rehearsal of nostalgia.

BREG: (*Can't help it*) A porch, moon's torch, and he, and she. I believe I haven't introduced myself. Breg. My first and middle name we can safely omit.

TAMARA: Tamara.

BREG: Isn't that romantic? The thing which made the whole business of exile worth cultivating: this boudoir.

TAMARA: There must be a way out!

BREG: Judge for yourself: I prescribed the patient a getaway but he blatantly refused.

TAMARA: Volodya!

BREG: The performance, mind you, is scheduled for July 2. The tickets are sold out. They have treated the scaffold with vitriol solution for the occasion.

TAMARA: Can you do it for me?

NABOKOV: Take part in a farce?

TAMARA: I don't care what you call it.

NABOKOV: There's a rule we learned in the good old days, remember? The square root of I is I.

TAMARA: I am a failure in math, especially when my master is a headless horseman.

NABOKOV: (*To Breg*) You can lay hands on my future but even God Almighty cannot embezzle my past. (*To Tamara*) I'll do it, my love, if you promise that I will see you again.

TAMARA: But it's impossible.

NABOKOV: Not here. Outside these walls.

TAMARA: They're coming! Goodbye!

NABOKOV: I shall set you free.

TAMARA: Don't! Stop them!!!

(Blinded by the floodlights reminding one of a prison camp searchlights, she backs up, shrinks, is gone. Meanwhile Breg is busy setting up light for the next scene.)

BREG: 3, 5 and 11! All on the cot! Is it max? Now I want a «moonlit path» -- a cabaret defile, door to bed -- yeah yeah yeah! *(To Nabokov)* Your mouth watering yet? *(To the lighting engineer)* The sun beam caresses the flesh . . . tender, make it tender! Okay. I'm standing by the window, the door opens . . . enter . . .

(Down the «moonlit path», flaunting her dancing walk, comes MARFINKA, dressed as an extravagant whore. She approaches Breg and does a bump and grind while the FAMILY, their faces masked, are crowding in the door with their folding chairs, quibbling over the best sight lines.)

BREG: A goddess! A nymph! *(To Nabokov)* Isn't she something?

MARFINKA: Did my kitten miss me?

BREG: A minx, aren't you!

MARFINKA: The restraints they've imposed! At each check-point they make you strip to the buff and they grope you from head to toe!

BREG: Taking precautions -- what do you expect.

MARFINKA: I hope you boys take no liberties here.

BREG: Such thoughts in my innocent wife's little head!

MARFINKA: *(Pushing him toward the bed)* It's the company I keep!

(Two masked MEN muster up courage to sit beside the bed)

BREG: Who the heck are these guys?

MARFINKA: Don't you recognize them? That one, with the golden mustache, is your brother-in-law Rodya . . . or is it Roman? I always mix them up. And this is Grampa!

(Enter GRAMPA paddling an orthopedic bicycle)

BREG: That is Grampa?

MARFINKA: Ignore them. We don't do it quick, you'll have only yourself to blame.

(The lighting engineer swamps the lovers with light. Marfinka, who has straddled Breg, freezes, her head thrown back.)

NABOKOV: We were thirty years old -- if you combine our ages, that is. I charged my bicycle headlamp with magical lumps of carbide and entered the darkness. The pale ray, a tremulous ghost, would weave across the muddy shoulder and strike the road again. Beyond the bridge a jasmine-trimmed footpath took a steep rise. I had to dismount and push my bicycle up the hill under the ever-heavier rain. Straight ahead the white glossy columns of my uncle's house revealed themselves. I would put out my light and grope my way up the slippery steps. There, in the corner of that arched shelter, Tamara would be waiting.

(Marfinka emits a libidinous moan. Her family jump to their feet in the same breath like spectators at a triumphal production. They remove their masks, along with fake mustaches and shaggy caps of hair, and throw them up in the air. We see familiar faces: VLAD and SLAV as the twin Brothers-in-law, SHISHKOV as Grampa.)

SHISHKOV: So vivid! So juicy! *(Kisses Marfinka)*

SLAV: Me want to kissy too!

VLAD: An autograph, please. *(Breg signs his button-on cuff)*

SHISHKOV: *(To Nabokov)* Hey, what's the scowl for! It's only a game!

(Breg, a crepe arm band on his sleeve, crosses to Nabokov)

BREG: Here is a menu of last wishes. You may choose one and only one! *(Reads out loud)* Now then: a glass of wine, or a brief trip to the toilet, or a cursory inspection of the prison collection of French postcards, or . . . what's this . . .

composing an address to the director expressing gratitude for his considerate . . . (To Slav) You scoundrel! You have added this yourself, haven't you?

SLAV: (Nodding at Vlad) It's him . . . I know the regulations!

BREG: An official document! Why, this is a personal insult . . . when I am so scrupulous in regard to the laws!

SLAV: We shall erase it with a razor blade -- leave no trace!

BREG: No sir! Enough! The bitter cup has been drained! I simply refuse -- do it yourselves, chop, butcher, wreck my instrument!

VLAD: We beseech you, be calm, maestro.

SLAV: Won't everyone's darling put aside that wrathful expression and favor us with the smile--!

BREG: That'll do, smooth talkers. All right, I forgive you. But we still have to decide about that damned last wish. (To Nabokov) Well, what have you selected? Come on, come on. I want to get it over with, and the squeamish don't have to look.

NABOKOV: I am with you: I want to end it without delay.

SHISHKOV: What about a trial?! There must be a trial! And the prosecution hasn't made its closing arguments either!

BREG: We understand your concern but your fears, believe me, are completely unfounded. The Soviet Union has never yet been implicated in any hanky-panky. It is unfortunate but . . . as the Romans said, *lex non scripta*. Thusly I announce a private discussion open!

VLAD: It's a crying shame! The party of the Average Man will insist that the government be dissolved! We are not putting up with the persecution of dissent in this country . . .

SLAV: Mr. Nabokov was arrested for his own safety.

VLAD: . . . not to mention the inhuman conditions for the political prisoners!

SLAV: Let me remind you that you used it to lodge your wife's visiting relatives on a regular basis.

VLAD: By the book! A ten day detention!

BREG: I must ask the deputies to stick to the agenda.

VLAD: First and foremost: the convicted will be made to don the red top hat--

SLAV: White!

VLAD: Before the ritual, the executioner kisses his . . .

SLAV: Hand!

VLAD: . . . his slipper and helps him remove his shirt.

SLAV: Even back in the times of the Inquisition -- Inquisition, that's right! -- there had been more respect for human dignity. A free man can freely mount the scaffold, take off his shirt, . . .

VLAD: . . . cut off his own head.

(Slav and Vlad exchange loud slaps in the face, then hug each other)

NABOKOV: Are you saying that I'll be made to don two top hats at once?

VLAD: And what is your color of choice?

SLAV: Here's a charade: Jack Ketch told the hen that he too can «hatch it». Boy, you got yourself in a pretty mess.

(Locked in an embrace, Vlad and Slav exit. Before leaving, Marfinka blows Nabokov a kiss.)

SHISHKOV: You must keep your promise to Tamara! *(He is gone)*

(There are only the two of them in the cell again)

BREG: Vladimir Vladimirovich, the tunnel is ready. *(Nabokov persists silently)*

Look. They'll hunt you down. They'll put you to death. The world will see the real face of the tyranny. It's a win-win situation!

NABOKOV: They may not put me to death.

BREG: Don't be a child! What do you mean they may not put you to death? 'course they will! You can take my word for it.

NABOKOV: What do you want me to do?

BREG: You know. *(He goes to the door to listen -- all is quiet. He gets two sacks from under the mattress and gives one to his cell mate. He walks him to the cunningly-camouflaged manhole, shows him how to get in the sack.)* There you go. Now you are ready for your getaway.

NABOKOV: You can't get far in a sack.

BREG: You took the words right out of my mouth!

(With clumsy baby-steps, they disappear to the wail of a prison siren)

8. THE TRIAL

The cell is lavishly decorated. It is a circus atmosphere. VLAD, SLAV and MARFINKA, having formed a little circle, are clinking glasses of Champagne. NABOKOV, BREG and SHISHKOV are playing poker.

MARFINKA: It would be one thing if he were running away from abuse and humiliation, but to run away from applause, from his biggest fans! *(To Nabokov)* Shame on you, Vladimir Vladimirovich!

VLAD: Only in fairy-tales do people escape prison.

NABOKOV: Is it written in stone? Death penalty?

BREG: It's in the cards. What will be will be. Let's go it blind, gentlemen! *(Stakes)* You pass, Vasiliy Andreyevich?

SHISHKOV: It's not a fixed deck, is it? *(Stakes)* Say, you must be short with death.

BREG: Black nausea -- nothingness -- unquote . . . it's a lurid affair, I'm telling you.

NABOKOV: One can be afraid of the pain, but to be afraid of the black velvety sleep, of the even darkness, so much more comprehensible than life's motley insomnia? . . .
. (*Stakes*)

VLAD: The closer you get to heaven the chillier it becomes.

MARFINKA: So you hitch your wagon to paradise? (*Sings*) «He is fair like an angel of heaven; like a demon, he is wicked and sly!»

SLAV: Beautiful voice. You could butter your bread over with these modulations.

VLAD: And what about the promised speech from our prosecutor?

SLAV: He wanted to suppress it!

BREG: Oh well. With all modesty, I have reason to believe that I have taken my place in our guest's heart. (*To Shishkov*) Two cards. -- As for me, I know him more intimately than his wife does . . . I even promised him, as a token of male friendship, the very same tattoo. (*Pulls up his shirt to reveal a mermaid twined round his nipple. To Nabokov.*) You understand, in the interest of investigation I couldn't disclose my persona for quite some time but you must not bear me grudge for this innocent deceit.

NABOKOV: Just don't tell me you have three aces.

BREG: (*Shows his cards*) Three aces, gentlemen! Call it fate! (*Rakes the money and gets up ceremoniously*) Mister Nabokov, I am happy to announce that, as an executor of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics . . .

SLAV: Russia.

BREG: Oops. . . . of Russia, I promise to fulfill my duty without fail. (*He opens a black velvet-lined violin case to show a wide-bladed ax with a handle of light-colored wood. Applause. Breg sits down.*)

VLAD: Our own Breg's inspired words will leave no one indifferent. However, before the renowned maestro performs his «Ax Symphony» we must compose the score, so to speak.

MARFINKA: The accused has written it himself! (*She quotes, waving a notebook*)

«But how you would have wished, my heart,

That thus it all had really been:

Russia, the stars, the night of execution

And full of racemosas the ravine!»

Take notice: the year, 1927: the tenth anniversary of our glorious revolution.

SLAV: He stretched it one mile too far.

VLAD: A fixed idea, Freud calls it . . .

NABOKOV: Hold it, hold it!

SHISHKOV: I want you to spare my client the perverse insinuations of that Viennese Quack.

BREG: (*Edgy*) Gentlemen, really! You assured me! Day after day -- V. V. is my witness -- I perfected my blow -- I sharpened my eye . . . I . . .

VLAD: *Lex non scripta*. Your own words.

BREG: But what about the Article 58-1? «Putting oneself in resonance with the Soviet Power with the intention of blasting it from within»?!

VLAD: So far all that got blasted was the hunting lodge and even that collapsed on account of the nearby air base.

(*Prosecution has come to a standstill*)

BREG: Why are you silent, Vladimir Vladimirovich? Who has a greater stake in this matter, after all?

NABOKOV: Since when is it a problem to condemn a man in this country? Simply leak the information that my poetic signature was a little black chess knight drawn in ink and that it is a covert Yid-Masonic sign.

VLAD: You forget that we live in a law-abiding state. As for the undercover Yids, much less the Masons, we now advance them to the positions of importance.

SLAV: That's right!

SHISHKOV: Your Honors. V.V., to use the venerable executor's parlance, must be acquitted. It is what the rotten West, not to mention your own intelligentsia, are expecting of you. His condemnation may prove a serious political mistake . . .

VLAD: And we are going to make it.

SLAV: You bet your arse!

BREG: (*Perks up*) Yes! A great mistake worthy of a great country!

SLAV: Marfa Platonovna, will you write that down? (*She enters the aphorism in a pad*)

BREG: Say, Vladimir Vladimirovich. Why don't we play a game of chess? A little bird told me that you are very good.

SLAV: There is a chessboard in their coat of arms.

NABOKOV: I only play for stakes.

BREG: Is that so?

NABOKOV: I win, the execution is a go.

SHISHKOV: (*Bending down to Nabokov*) You don't make rules here!

BREG: What do I do, comrades? I can't possibly lose the game, but to lose a client like this . . . we shall never be forgiven by posterity!

SLAV: Sounds like a stale-mate to me.

MARFINKA: Tell you what, lollipop. Beat him first then think up something.

VLAD: Teach your grandmother to suck egg.

BREG: (*To Nabokov*) Hey, why don't we play for a box on the ear?

NABOKOV: As you wish. (*Turns away with an expression of indifference*)

BREG: Well look at this bullhead! Okay, have it your way. (*Clears the chess-board table*)

SHISHKOV: I am washing my hands of this.

NABOKOV: *(To Breg)* In writing.

BREG: What faith in the Word! *(At Breg's gesture they bring pen and ink. Nabokov sits across from him. Breg, looking preoccupied, is working at it, letting us hear the wording.)* «. . . for the crimes of particular gravity . . . and considering the interests . . . the court has ruled . . . by decapitation.»

NABOKOV: *(Takes the document to make sure everything is correct)* All right. Sign it.

BREG: Upside-down?

NABOKOV: I don't care.

BREG: *(Wretchedly)* And you have the white?

(Catching Nabokov off-guard as he turns the chess-board around, Breg signs upside-down. Nabokov puts the paper aside without a second glance.)

NABOKOV: You can assume that you have already won the color.

(They adjust their men and begin the match, moving quickly. Behind their backs the onlookers fall into factions.)

BREG: Avant! Good players don't take a long time to think. I caught just a glimpse of your damsel -- a juicy little piece, what a neck . . . Hey, wait a minute. That was an oversight, let me play it over. I am a great aficionado of women, and the way they love me, the snakes, you simply wouldn't believe it. Marfinka, stop your little ears. Recently I had a . . . Why can't my pawn take it? All right, I retreat. Recently I had sexual intercourse with an extraordinarily healthy and splendid . . . Now how did it stand before? No, before that! Yeah, that's it. Um, where was I? Yes, a red rose between her teeth, black net stockings up to here, and not-a-stitch besides -- that's really something, that's the supreme . . . and all you are left with, instead of the raptures of love, is dank stone, rusty iron, and still ahead a sharply whetted . . . Now this I overlooked. What do you say to this? The game is mine, anyway -- you make

one mistake after another. Here's the thing: the pleasure of love is achieved by means of the most beautiful and wholesome of all known physical exercises. You are not listening, Marfinka, now are you? I said «achieved» but perhaps «extracted» would be even more apt, inasmuch as we are dealing precisely with a systematic extraction of pleasure buried in the very bowels of the belabored creature. What do you mean check-mate? You must be cheating -- if you don't mind my saying so: this piece stood here, or maybe here. Oi oi! (*As though accidentally, he knocks over several men, and, unable to restrain himself, he mixes up the remainder*) Let us play another game, chess is not your strong point.

NABOKOV: (*Folds the paper and puts it in his pocket*) We'll clink eggs someday, you and I, and we'll see whose will crack.

BREG: You, always with your poisonous pun at beck and call! So you have the best of it. I don't come off the loser myself. *Jedem sein.* (*Spreads his arms sadly*) It's off to chop-chop now.

(*Vlad and Slav give the condemned a handshake and pat him on the back before leaving*)

SHISHKOV: What an ass. (*Puts his useless speech back in his briefcase*) You did all in your power to realize your fantasy and lose your head.

NABOKOV: Shall I unlock my secret? I have discovered a tear in the fabric of the world through which you can slip away. It is not unlike that watercolor above our bed, with the path that disappeared into the enchanted woods, where we, little boys, escaped from the grown-ups.

SHISHKOV: Véra was right -- you are not coming back! If only I had listened!

NABOKOV: Don't you think there is titillating pleasure in observing how, from a humdrum moment in one's life, there grows forth a marvelous rosy event that in reality had failed to flower?

(Shishkov leaves without another word. Breg throws himself at Nabokov who tries in vain to unclasp the man's loving arms.)

BREG: It's going to be our hour of triumph -- yours and mine. Let me kiss you. No no, I insist. Well, what can I do for you? How about representing Adam's Fall by means of five matches?

9. CHOP-CHOP

The Scaffold is swimming in paper flowers. SHISHKOV and MARFINKA take seats on a stone border. One can hear the buzz of a crowd. Up in the blue sky floats a blimp with a streamer -- «The wizard of pen». A wind orchestra is playing military marches. At the foot of the Scaffold, NABOKOV and BREG are rehearsing the upcoming ceremony.

MARFINKA: I was less nervous on my wedding night, you know.

SHISHKOV: Didn't you say yourself it's a sham execution!

MARFINKA: Phooey. Chop off a cabbage-head, big deal. But give me a performance that will make ten thousand gasp in unison! That's hot!

SHISHKOV: I guess they didn't take the trouble to tell the condemned that the execution was not going to be real?

MARFINKA: Hush. We are a nuisance.

(On the arena two JUGGLERS in the executioner's red hoods are giving a show. Down below Nabokov is changing into tails as he listens to the instructions.)

BREG: . . . and after your wedding bands have been shuffled on a tray you will slip them on each other's ring-finger. Remember what's next?

NABOKOV: A chapter from John about a marriage in Cana of Galilee, followed by «I am giving God's woman Thanata to the groom» and «I am giving God's man

Vladimir to the bride», then you walk us three times round the lectern . . . I mean the block.

BREG: You left one thing out! «What God hath brought together let no man put asunder . . .» You dress like this?! (*Suddenly it is discovered that the immaculately dressed Nabokov is wearing home slippers*) You put me in dire straights!

(*He runs off. The jugglers are in the middle of their next number.*)

MARFINKA: You've been appointed to count, remember?

SHISHKOV: For goodness' sake . . . I can't . . .

MARFINKA: And count loudly so they can hear you up in your Montreux!

(*Returns Breg, doubled under the weight of a huge trunk and losing a collection of footgear along the way -- the worn-out ballet slippers, men's and women's shoes, jack-boots, some blood-stained arctics, and even a pair of half boots with screwed on skates. Nabokov tries various of them on, barraged by the last-minute instructions*)

BREG: They bring out a platter of «bread and salt», you bow from the waist. We drink a *bruderschaft* and kiss on the lips, none of your French games. All by the protocol: silently and with dignity. Oh yes! Don't knock the pail down. When you put your neck in that groove you'll find the pail right under, so you better keep your nob still if you don't want to mess up my trajectory. I calculated it to a hairbreadth. (*Their number done, the jugglers take off their hoods. We discover VLAD and SLAV. They take their bows and join the two spectators on the stone border. Flourish. Breg crosses himself.*)

BREG: Well. God help us.

(*At the steps they are joined by the DEATH and the three of them -- groom, bride and minister -- mount the Scaffold. The ceremony proceeds smoothly, at first.*)

BREG: Do you agree, Thanata, to take man of God Vladimir as your husband?

DEATH: I do.

BREG: Do you agree, Vladimir, to take woman of God Thanata as your wife?

NABOKOV: Tamara.

BREG: Have you forgotten your bride's name, my son?

NABOKOV: (*To the Death*) Thank you for coming. Our love's settled and lodged so deep, not even draft-horses with iron muscles could haul it out of the morass.

VLAD: What kind of an ad-libbing is that?

MARFINKA: Shush . . . this is «it»!

DEATH: Forgive me. They said, if I agree to do the part, your life will be saved.

NABOKOV: And, by the same token, their lives.

DEATH: A kind of death with a happy ending.

NABOKOV: Quite a genre!

DEATH: Volodya, dear, you can't beat them at this game.

NABOKOV: And in the nineteen eighteen -- remember? We were too absorbed in each other to pay much attention to the Revolution.

DEATH: It's been a long time since you've been here. In this country they play by special rules.

NABOKOV: I counted on you for this very reason.

DEATH: I can't . . . let someone else . . .

NABOKOV: You know something? Never once since you died have you appeared in my dreams. Perhaps the authorities intercepted you . . . No one, except you, will tell me the truth.

BREG: (*A threat*) You gave your written oath to keep silent!

DEATH: The sentence . . .

BREG: Take her into custody!

SLAV: But she is . . . you know.

BREG: No matter!

(The agents clank handcuffs as they make a few tentative steps toward the Death)

DEATH: The sentence cannot be carried into effect . . . he signed it . . .

(Nabokov unfolds the paper. The agents stop in confusion.)

NABOKOV: For Pushkin? That makes sense. Who has always been the scapegoat for us? Pushkin, if not the Jews. *(To Breg)* Well done, but you must do it over.

(Spreads out the paper on the block, hands Breg his golden pen. Giving his comrades-in-arms a helpless look, Breg signs again.) We are not done yet with our ceremony, are we?

(Taking the wedding bands from the tray, the newlyweds slip them on each other's ring-finger. Nabokov pulls away the veil -- we see VÉRA. Shishkov jumps to his feet.)

NABOKOV: Good. Now I feel you are safe. You can go now. *(She lingers)* What are you waiting for?

SHISHKOV: Véra!

(She descends the steps and leaves the scene without looking back)

NABOKOV: Are you ready? *(Breg is tongue-tied and can only nod his head. To the invisible orchestra.)* Mister Conductor, the musicians, like everybody else, want to satisfy their natural curiosity! *(After a moment of discord, the instruments fall silent)* What a relief. I beg your pardon but all the wind trunks and anacondas cast a damp over me. At the moment, my instrument of choice is the percussion. *(Comes down to the block)* Maestro, you've got it out yet?

BREG: Let me help you with your shirt.

NABOKOV: *(Brushing him off, disrobes)* The July sun pulls the alley's fishnet stocking over the arm . . . no time to write it down, alas. *(Gets down on his knees)* My childhood's classical posture: I am standing on my knees -- on the floor, over a toy, over the void. *(Lies down on the block)* What you saw once cannot recede into

chaos and thus my happiness will remain -- in a moist reflection of a street lamp, in the

smiles of a dancing couple, in everything with which God so generously surrounds human loneliness . . . Count back from ten, Vasiliy Andreyevich.

(Shishkov, looking away, begins the count-down. «Ten, nine, eight . . .» The executioner raises his ax. The spectators perk. «. . . two, one . . .» The ax falls with a dull thud. Light dims in Nabokov's eyes, as it dims in the world of his creation.)

10. N IS FOR NYMPHS

The Swiss clinic in Montreux. The room is dark. We see NABOKOV'S silhouette in the window frame. MARTHA is soundlessly moving about the room, assigning the objects other places, as if trying to breathe a new life into them. VÉRA is sitting by the bed side. Under a white shroud of a bed sheet, an outline of an immobile body -- SHISHKOV'S. Deadly silence.

MARTHA: Shall I open the window?

VÉRA: Yes, of course.

MARTHA: Dr. Berg said . . . you can stay a bit longer.

VÉRA: Thank you.

(The shadow moves aside. Martha opens the window -- out there lies low the moist summer twilight with its rustling leaves and a shimmering of midges about the lamppost's crown.)

MARTHA: It's going to rain.

VÉRA: What's the date?

MARTHA: *(Surprised)* Second of July.

VÉRA: Oh yes, I already asked you.

MARTHA: Can I do something for you?

VÉRA: Martha, we'd like to spend some time alone if you don't mind.

MARTHA: Yes, Ma'am.

(She exits with a used towel. Véra is studying the changed features as she straightens the bed sheet. When Nabokov begins to speak it is clear that as a live person he no longer exists, as far as she is concerned. It is clear we are listening in on her internal dialogue with the now-defunct Nabokov-Shishkov.)

NABOKOV: Did I ever tell you how my grandfather died?

VÉRA: Which one?

NABOKOV: Dmitri Nikolayevich Nabokov, the Minister of Justice.

VÉRA: I don't recall.

NABOKOV: In the end his mind became clouded but he clung to the belief that as long as he remained in the Mediterranean region everything would be all right. Doctors took the opposite view and thought he might live longer in Northern Russia. He would lapse for ever-increasing periods into an unconscious state. During one such lapse he was transferred to St. Petersburg. My mother re-arranged his bedroom so it resembled the one he had in Nice. Similar pieces of furniture were found, the flowers were rushed from the South, and a bit of house wall that could be just glimpsed from the window was painted a brilliant white, so every time he reverted to a state of comparative lucidity he found himself safe on the illusory Riviera. And there he peacefully died, oblivious to the naked Russian birch trees outside the house.

VÉRA: Homecoming. You called it a wonderful rehearsal in place of a show which stood no chance. It sometimes seemed to me then that you were unhappy, but now I know that that pain was one of the colors of happiness.

(Nabokov is waving his arms awkwardly)

NABOKOV: A moth has flown in.

VÉRA: *(Remembering the ending)*

The doves on the roof-beams. The innyard.

The rusty sign «Russia», on a staff.

(Nabokov is studying a moth perched on a curtain)

NABOKOV: It is a rather large Nymph. No man clutches at his life as tenaciously as this small, spotty creature clings to a curtain with its furry feet. *(His hand wanders to his neck)* Did you see this?

VÉRA: Did I see what?

NABOKOV: A scar. A clotted purple scar across the neck.

VÉRA: It's only a shadow.

NABOKOV: A shadow -- yes. What a night! *(Looking out)* N is for nymphs!

(After a second thought, Véra draws the bed sheet up to the man's chin)

VÉRA: What do I do with your personal letters? I'd like to keep them, but then they might fall into the wrong hands.

NABOKOV: By all means, burn love letters. The past makes noble fuel.

(Véra sits lost in thought, then she gets up and crosses to the window. Seeing the sleeping moth, she disengages it from the curtain with an expert move so as not to harm its wings and sends it back into the warm darkness. She is standing for a long while, almost brushing shoulders with Nabokov, taking in the scents of the summer rain.)

CURTAIN