

L(ove) or H(ate)?

A lyrical comedy

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translated into English by *Anna Halas*

Characters:

Actor - *aka* Taras (Shevchenko)

Actress - *aka* Maria (Vilinska or Marko Vovchok)

SCENE 1

Actor steps onto the stage, immerses himself in the character, and repeats the lines.

ACTOR (*to the audience*). Listen, I'm so embarrassed... You've come, and here I am, someone who doesn't even know how to play Shevchenko.

Honestly!

It seems so simple – you put on a coat, glue on a moustache, pull a hat over your head to look like a portrait from a literary reading, and you're Taras! But you want to see a real person in this formidable portrait.

And so do I.

You want to see a man who was capable of love.

And I want to! But...

I can't do it.

I can't understand how to live as a serf, what life is like after serfdom, what life is like after twelve years of imprisonment. And how it feels to die at forty-seven.

Is there anyone here who is forty-seven? Raise your hand. Are you ready to die? Maybe he wasn't ready either.

So how do you play Taras Shevchenko?

Actor puts on a hat, looks around, frightened, and shrugs.

ACTOR. Guys, we're all screwed!

Actor takes off his hat, sighs.

ACTOR. We're all screwed. You laugh, but this is what he felt every minute of his life. He was in pain! I have a problem with that. I don't feel pain... Maybe I'm insensitive...

I can be indignant! Our team played bad football, and I wrote a post about it on Facebook. But this is not pain. It's not despair. It's a feeling that can be called 'uneasy'.

And he... Taras Shevchenko was looking up at the sky, and somewhere he saw the copper basin that has already cast a shadow over our beautiful country...

Actor puts on a hat.

ACTOR. Guys, we're all screwed!

Actor takes off his hat, and sighs.

ACTOR. And since he was an artist, he could accurately calculate the prospect of his fall. Sometimes you just need to look at the sky to save yourself. And we're standing there, looking up at the sky, but we don't see anything.

Actor raises his head, looks at the sky.

ACTOR. "The sky is unwashed, and the waves are asleep"... Why don't we, no, let me speak for myself, why don't I see any objective danger? Why can't I put two and two together? Why don't I have my own opinion? And also why don't I believe in love anymore?

Actor is silent for a long time.

ACTOR.

You may ask why I agreed to play Shevchenko when I don't understand him at all. Here I have a complex answer. First, I want to see, hear, believe again... And second, there is that woman... When I found out that she was approved for the role of Maria, I... immediately wanted to be Taras Shevchenko.

Selfishly, but frankly. At least for this, I can be respected.

She's unusual, young, sincere, naive, but in a good way. I also like her. You may think that it would be easier to meet at a party than going through these nine rounds of auditions...

But I don't want anything clear and pragmatic, something that can be between a man and a woman. A modern man and woman.

Now it's so easy: you register somewhere, like her, invite her, and then just as easily forgot her.

And I want to experience love without experiencing it. Because the last thing I want to do to be disappointed again.

Hmm, that's strange.

I was talking to you like this and I found out that I have something that hurts. So I'm not just anxious. It means that I am alive after all.

Why am I telling you all this?

To confess: you will not see Shevchenko today. I am frank, and at least for that you can respect me. But don't leave. Stay with me for a little while. I don't know what will happen... I will be able to be a real Shevchenko who loved.

Something falls under the scene. Actress enters the stage.

ACTRESS. I'm sorry, I didn't realize you were already here. I arrived early because I wanted to review the text. *(she lends a hand)* I'm... *(Actress's real name)*.

ACTOR. I'm... *(Actor's real name)*.

ACTRESS. I know who you are. Alright, I won't interfere.

ACTOR. No, please stay. We can go over the text together.

ACTRESS. Great.

Actress sits down, but Actor continues to look at her. After a moment, Actress gets up.

ACTRESS. Shall we start? I've memorized everything; I don't need the script.

ACTOR. Okay, let's run through it without the script.

ACTRESS. Great.

Actress exits and then re-enters, looking at Actor. Actor remains silent.

ACTRESS. I'm sorry, but the first line is yours.

Actor gazes intently at Actress.

ACTOR. It's so weird, you know?

ACTRESS. What's weird? I don't... There are other lines in the text. Just a moment..

Actress checks the text.

ACTOR. These are only my reflections, not the Shevchenko's text.

ACTRESS. Oh, I see.

ACTOR. I just wanted to share my thoughts.

ACTRESS. Of course. Can you repeat that?

ACTOR. I said it's weird.

ACTRESS. What exactly is weird?

ACTOR. All of it. Our meeting. We met for the first time and read the text about Taras and Maria's first meeting.

ACTRESS. Really? I hadn't thought about it.

ACTOR. It just dawned on me.

ACTRESS. You always prepare so carefully for all your roles...

ACTOR. Well, not always...

ACTRESS. It's an honor for me to act together with you. You're my role model.

ACTOR. Like Shevchenko.

ACTRESS. What?

ACTOR. It's nothing. We're alike... No one liked him, and no one likes me... Just ignore it! Look up at the sky. What do you see?

ACTRESS (*raises her eyes*). The ceiling.

ACTOR. Do you see that copper basin up there?

ACTRESS. No.

ACTOR. But it's there. Do you get it?

ACTRESS. No, let's go over the text again... Your first line: "Maria? Is that you?"

ACTOR. Got it, I remember.

Actress exits the stage and then returns. Actor looks at her.

ACTOR. I also wanted to ask you - what made you decide to take on this role?

ACTRESS. Well... it's a historical film, and the way they're shooting it is pretty awesome. The director said we just have to act on stage like in a theater, and the crew will film with several cameras at once. By the way, where are they?

Actor silently points.

ACTRESS. Well, the character of Maria is quite fascinating. A writer, translator, and a woman of destiny... Since childhood, I've dreamed of everyone falling in love with me. And now, I have this role.

ACTOR. Is it truly important to be loved by everyone?

ACTRESS. That's quite lovely. And you - what made you say yes?

ACTOR. A historical luminary, iconic personality, epitome of Ukrainian heritage, relentless advocate for freedom...

ACTRESS. What about the personal motive?

ACTOR. Personal? I'm just hoping to be everyone's favourite.

They laugh.

ACTRESS. What's the true reason?

ACTOR. Well, I said yes to this role because...

Film director's voice behind the scene: "Is everyone ready? Quiet on set. Scene one. The first encounter between Shevchenko and Vovchok."

Actor and Actress take their positions.

SCENE 2. SHEVCHENKO-VOVCHOK. THE FIRST MEETING

Maria enters the room. Shevchenko is busy writing something.

TARAS. Maria? Is that you?

MARIA. It's me... Are you really you?

TARAS. I don't even know. Sometimes I think I'm not myself anymore. I've lost myself somewhere, and there's a terrible mirage in the world named Taras Shevchenko—everyone respects me, but no one loves me. As you wrote in your book: "Why are you, dear, upset? Oh, I'm bored." That's me.

MARIA. Everybody love you.

TARAS. I really don't know.

MARIA. Yes, they all do. And I love you too.

TARAS. You? Your writing is incredible! After the Aral Sea, I never had dreams. But then I read your stories - and I had a dream... It's so strange and prophetic.

MARIA. "And that dream, so oddly peculiar. I had a dream..." What was it about?

TARAS. "Each night, I dream of roads, trees, people, rivers, animals, houses..." ... No, I won't discuss it. It's not real. And I don't feel like talking much. I'm more interested in listening to you. Tell me about our Ukrainian life.

MARIA. "It's so tough living day by day in this world"...

They laugh.

TARAS. "Is the girl making fun of me, an orphan?"

They laugh.

MARIA. No, I'm not! But... I don't know what to say in front of such an outstanding poet. You can see for yourself, I'm just quoting.

TARAS. I'm quoting too... Or perhaps, I seek refuge within these lines, for... Still, what prompts your curiosity in this matter... I've absorbed every piece Panteleimon Kulish sent me. I've been carried to such heights that words fail me. The writing is exquisite, almost as though it came from a woman's hand.....

MARIA. Obviously not a woman. The piece was authored by Marko Vovchok. It's simpler for men to accept that a monkey penned the work rather than a woman.

TARAS. But that's not what I intended...

MARIA. I'm not referring to you. It's about... others.

TARAS. You have an extraordinary character, unlike anyone else! There was something otherworldly in your words. They felt familiar, yet mysterious... I want to get to know you better. Let me draw you. There's something captivating about you.

Taras takes out the paint, sets it up, and gestures towards the chair. Maria sits down.

TARAS. It's a pleasure for me. In the Aral Sea, I only painted the desert and still found happiness. But here, I have a living person - and such a marvelous one.

MARIA. But it looks like you only sketch notable people.

TARAS. Not only notable ones. I also paint my own portraits. And those of my loved ones...

MARIA. However, I'm not you...

TARAS. Not me, but in some aspects, we're still similar.

MARIA. Do you feel fear as well?

TARAS. Fear of what?

MARIA. Life. Love. Destiny.

Maria takes a seat opposite. Taras gazes at her intently, for a prolonged moment.

TARAS. There's no destiny. Just the sands. "Everything ebbs, everything fades - without end. Both fool and sage, ignorant of their finality." That's my belief. But you've likely read it before.

MARIA. I have. But allow me to speak of the present. Our encounter - it feels like fate.

TARAS. And what traits does it exhibit?

MARIA. Who knows... Only a fortune-teller. Should we give it a shot? Let's uncover the mystery... Give me the page from the book, and I'll reveal what lies within. If you're in the mood, you can venture a guess from "Kobzar".

TARAS. No one has ever foretold my fortune using "Kobzar".

MARIA. At least this will be a fresh experience with me. You're so important; you've already had everything you could...

TARAS. It all took place, but everything went wrong.

Maria picks up a small book from the table.

TARAS. Wait, I know all the pages by heart. Page 25 – "The Bewitched", page 30 – "The Wind is Violent", page 33 – "Water Flows into the Blue Sea... I can't write any more poems, so I open and read the ones I already have. Over and over again...

MARIA. Why don't you write new ones?

TARAS. Nothing worries me. Or rather, it didn't. But three days ago, I read your stories, and I felt better. Better about the country, about people, about myself. I thought that if there is a writer who understands people so well, then maybe not everything is lost for us.

MARIA. Maybe not.

TARAS. There is such freshness in this. This is life. I know perfectly well that these are not just lyrics. You are fully revealed in them. Stripped bare. Completely honest.

Taras retrieves a small book from his boot and hands it to Maria.

TARAS. There's a new one. On the last page. Read it.

MARIA. You said you don't write anymore.

TARAS. Read it.

MARIA (*reads*).

I stood beyond the Ural Mountains' reach,
Wandering, imploring the Almighty's grace,
To safeguard our truth from oblivion's clutch,
To ensure our word endured, held its place;
And He responded, sending forth to me,
You, a humble prophet, tender and true,
A rebuke to the cruel, the starved, the free,

My guiding light, my dawn anew.
My youthful strength, my fervent flame,
Illuminate, incite, ignite,
Breathe life into this battered frame,
This yearning heart, this soul contrite.
And I shall live, my thoughts unchained,
From coffin's grasp, liberated, unfettered,
Claiming your wisdom, O fate ordained,
Our prophet, our destiny, forever tethered.

Maria hands the notebook to Taras.

MARIA. I'm at a loss for words...

TARAS. You don't have to say a thing. What about the fortune-telling?

MARIA. Since you know your book by heart, why don't we try some magic with mine?

TARAS. Let's give it a shot with yours.

MARIA. Tell me the page.

TARAS. 375.

MARIA. Paragraph?

TARAS. The second-to-last one from the bottom.

MARIA. You sure about that?

TARAS. Not entirely.

MARIA. It's nice. (*reads*) It's quite lovely to swim in a big river on a warm summer night!

The wind is starting to pick up from all sides.

MARIA (*reads*). The stars shine above you and beneath your feet, while the moon floats above and below. Here are the shores, you think, observing the dark silhouettes. There must be a pine tree over there, for its resinous scent now fills the air, and perhaps many flowers, as a warm wind has scattered a whole bouquet, freshly gathered and sprinkled with summer dew, in your direction.

With each remark, the wind gains strength.

As Taras and Maria struggle against the wind, unable to withstand its force, they tumble onto the canvas, leaving behind handprints smeared with paint.

Voice from behind the scene: "Hold it! What's happening? Natasha, what happened with the wind? Let's redo that scene first! Get ready in five minutes."

SCENE 3

Actor and Actress exchange a glance.

ACTOR. It's quite strange...

ACTRESS. It's always been like this for me - something will break here, something will fall there. It's just my luck. And now my hands are covered in paint.

Actor points to the canvas, where an abstract drawing is taking shape. Actor and Actress gaze at it in contemplation.

ACTRESS. What does it remind you of?

ACTOR. A masterpiece indeed. Now, we just need to give it a name.

ACTRESS. The First Encounter?

ACTOR. The first Encounter. The canvas took shape inspired by the work of a famous poet and poetess.

Both silently look around.

ACTRESS. The canvas lacks conceptuality. It would have more depth if we made it a ritual to create one each time we meet.

ACTOR. I doubt it'll happen again.

ACTRESS. Why's that?

ACTOR. Because Natasha will probably get rid of it and won't permit another one.

Voice from behind the scenes: "Action! Let's begin. Scene one: The First Encounter. And... action!"

Actor takes a seat on a chair as Actress enters, setting the stage for the first scene.

ACTOR. We filmed that initial fragment, the first encounter. She left, and I... I simply couldn't bring myself to leave.

I agreed to spend the night here, fixated on the first painting, a moment we'll never replicate.

Taras Shevchenko once remarked that slavery could never bring happiness, and knowing this, I willingly become a captive of the past, solely because it binds us together.

After that first encounter, Shevchenko undoubtedly fell for Maria. I'm certain of it. She's young, genuine, and gifted. Shevchenko convinced his friends to purchase a gold bracelet for her, presenting it as a tribute to her brilliance in Ukrainian literature.

Or perhaps as a token of affection to a woman?

Could such a gift be akin to an engagement ring? It's like a ring, just more substantial. And if it's more substantial, does that make it more significant?

That's why I remained here.

Because I yearned to prolong that marvelous moment when you believe everything lies ahead.

Maybe he felt the same way.

So I spent the night here, immersed in dreams inspired by her stories.

Actor shuts his eyes, and Actress reads to him, brimming with enthusiasm.

ACTRESS. One night, I had a dream: I stood amidst green rye, the stalks reaching above my waist; wheat sprouted around me, and the poppies were crimson. Above, two full moons loomed in the sky. One gleamed brightly, and the other shone even more brilliantly, both sailing toward me. The radiant moon cautioned me of the other's approach, then descended into my embrace, while the second vanished behind a cloud.

A full moon emerges in the sky.

SCENE 4

Actor wakes up, glances at his watch, and rushes to get ready for filming.

Actress enters.

ACTRESS. Good morning. I heard a rumor that you spent the night here. Is this part of your total immersion method?

ACTOR. You could say that.

Voice-over: "Three minutes to get ready".

Actor steps aside, takes out a bracelet, and hands it to Actress. Actress examines it closely.

ACTRESS. Is this the same bracelet Shevchenko gave to Maria? It's gorgeous. Is it real gold?

ACTOR. No, it isn't...

ACTRESS. It isn't? And how did she manage to sell it later, if it isn't?

ACTOR. Yes, it's golden. But it's not the one Taras gave to her.

ACTRESS. A copy? Well, that makes sense. No one would risk the original for filming.

ACTOR. It's not a copy, and it's not for filming. It's for you. A gift. There's an engraving on it.

Actress turns the bracelet over and reads the inscription.

ACTRESS. L or H? Can you make out what it says?

ACTOR. Didn't you guess? This line's straight from the script. Sometimes, one letter can alter everything, right?

ACTRESS (*uncertain*). Perhaps...

ACTOR. By selecting a letter, you're shaping the future.

ACTRESS (*pretends to understand*). Yes! Whether it's L or H, it's like... It's in the script, you're right. 'm feeling a bit nervous; we have an important scene today.

Voice-over: "Two minutes to get ready".

ACTOR. Exactly. But today's conflict is clear. I'm concerned about tomorrow's scene, and since we're already working on this project together, I could offer some assistance.

ACTRESS. It would be my pleasure!

ACTOR. Perfect. How about we meet after we wrap up filming?

ACTRESS. Meet after filming?

ACTOR. Yes, I was thinking we could go somewhere together - maybe a café or restaurant? Or we could just stay here?

ACTRESS. Here?

ACTOR. Yes, that sounds like a plan. I'll show you my total immersion method, and then we can rehearse the scene.

Voice-over: "One minute to get ready".

ACTRESS. Today? I'm not entirely sure. I had plans for today.

ACTOR. Certainly.

ACTRESS. But it's crucial for me: both for my career and my role. I'll send a text.

ACTOR. If you have other engagements, then...

ACTRESS. Nothing out of the ordinary, my husband and I planned to go home together, but I'll inform him...

ACTOR. Husband, together, heading home... Oh dear...

ACTRESS. I'll send a text and stick around for the preparations.

Actress types a text while Actor is backstage.

Voice behind the scenes: "Ready? Let's begin: five, four, three, two, one. Action!"

Actress looks around briefly before quickly following Actor.

SCENE 5

Taras enters the stage, Maria hurries after him.

MARIA. Taras Hryhorovych, you left in a hurry, and I didn't have the opportunity to thank you for the gift (*the bracelet*). It's truly delightful!

Taras sidesteps Maria, avoiding eye contact.

TARAS. This comes from the entire Ukrainian community. Thank you for your talent, Maria Oleksandrivna.

MARIA. During our first meeting, I feared you wouldn't regard me seriously...

TARAS. How could I not? You are my entire soul... You wrote about me... Only me! I thought then, I had finally found a kindred spirit.

MARIA. A kindred spirit. Your review was so heartfelt...

TARAS. It's rightfully yours. (*points to the bracelet*) Wear it, let it bring you happiness.

MARIA. Thank you. Are you upset with me? You left the room so hastily...

TARAS. But I can't bear public discussions.

MARIA. You're quite the orator! Ivan Sergeevich is genuinely impressed by your talent and zest for life. He's asked me to arrange an introduction.

TARAS. Ivan Sergeevich? Tell Turgenev that if he wants to get to know me better, he should start by reading "Kobzar".

MARIA. It's tough. He didn't deserve such treatment.

TARAS. And you're being overly kind to him.

MARIA. Am I...?

TARAS. Overly kind for a married woman.

MARIA. Opanas Vasyliovych and I are no longer...

TARAS. Are you separated?

MARIA. Everything is more complex than you can imagine.

TARAS. Do you still have feelings for your husband?

MARIA. Everything is more complex than you can imagine.

TARAS. If love still burns within you, then fight on! Fight and prevail, as one of our classical poets proclaimed. Am I labeled as a classical poet? And what about your friend, Ivan Sergeevich... Does he also see me in that light?

MARIA. It's an honorary title. You are esteemed.

TARAS. Everyone pays me respect, yet no one truly hears me. Is Turgenev your... friend?

MARIA. Ivan Sergeevich greatly values my prose and translations.

TARAS. Recognizing genius is a minor gesture. And I value you. (*sighs*) Please, have a seat, Maria Oleksandrivna. I promised to sketch you... You appear joyful.

Maria sits down on a chair.

MARIA. Do you reckon I'm happy?

TARAS. Your eyes are sparkling.

MARIA. And yours as well. Are you happy too? I've been told you're constantly sad, but when I gaze into your gray eyes, they're so gentle and bright towards me. I can't picture you suffering. There's so much love in your heart.

TARAS. I glanced at you, and something stirred in my heart... Yet you appear more engrossed in the theme of "parents and children" than in my Kateryna's fate. (*sighs*) Fall in love, you dark-browed maidens, but not with the Muscovites...

MARIA. Why do you dislike Turgenev?

TARAS. Dislike him? You're mistaken... Could you please sit still? I can't focus otherwise.

MARIA. Hold on... In the poem about me... Did you write: "You are my destiny?"...

TARAS. I didn't write that line.

MARIA. You did.

TARAS. Being a poet, I have a good memory for my own poetry.

MARIA. Our mutual acquaintance mentioned that you described me as a sublimely beautiful creature. Do you have feelings for me?

TARAS. My love for you is akin to that of a father.

MARIA. Is there nothing beyond that?

TARAS. I... I'm engaged. I have a fiancée. I'm sorry.

MARIA. I didn't realize... And who is she?

TARAS. Luceria Polusmak, a former serf from the vicinity, is her name. I hope to find tranquility with her.

MARIA. When's the wedding? Just say the word, I'll be there.

TARAS. We haven't decided on a date yet. Could you sit quietly, please? I need to focus.

Maria gets up.

MARIA. I'd better get going. I need to pack up. I'm heading to France today.

TARAS. With Ivan Sergeevich?

MARIA. He appears to be getting ready to go as well...

TARAS. Have a safe journey.

Maria gets up.

TARAS. Wait!

Maria stops.

TARAS. Share another fortune with me. Page 29, right in the middle.

Maria takes the book.

MARIA (*reads*). Once upon a time, Tymosh and Khyma lived together. They grew up like siblings. The elders remarked, "Let them love each other; maybe the Lord will unite them, and we'll arrange the match!" But it didn't happen that way. When Khyma met Tymosh, the Cossack told her the truth: "We won't be together! I've found someone else: Olena Bondarivna."

TARAS. Go on.

MARIA. Khyma was deeply offended. The following day, she ventured to the old witch's house in the wild forest. There, the witch taught her how to enact harm upon her enemies. Upon returning to Olena and her companions, Khyma extended her arms in the center of the room and declared: "You, young one, take flight like a bird, and take all your sisters with you!"

With these enchanting words, the girls flew out of the window. Despite their efforts, the villagers searched in vain for the missing girls.

TARAS. Go on!

MARIA. A year went by. Tymosh wed Khyma, yet his happiness remained elusive. One day, the Cossack sat in the garden when he heard a chirping sound. He glanced at the chicks, noticing one bird that stood out from the rest. For some reason, he felt a fondness for this particular chirp.

Suddenly, the chirping was interrupted by the cawing of a black crow. Without hesitation, Tymosh lunged forward, scattering the chicks and seizing the best one. Startled, he grabbed his gun and aimed at the black crow. But it wasn't a crow; it was Khyma, his beloved wife. Underneath her blackened blood, his left hand trembled, while his right hand held his first love, Olena, who lay lifeless. Clad in her wedding party attire, Olena lay before his eyes, beautiful as a flower!

*The wind intensified, forcing Taras and Maria to struggle to maintain their grip on the canvas.
With a mighty gust, the canvas tore in half from top to bottom.*

Voice from behind the scenes: "Stop! Cut!"

SCENE 6

Actor sits on a chair, trying on Shevchenko's mustache.

ACTOR. Well, what kind of people are we – people! I spoke his words and felt helpless. I wanted to jump up and shout...

Actor gets up.

ACTOR. Dear Maria, I am not engaged. Luceria left me for a hairdresser named Yakovlev. I love you!

Why didn't he tell the truth...?

It's not me, it's not you who will ever know.

Relying on the testimony of others is futile.

There was a writer who left behind memories of Shevchenko. And if you hadn't come today, you would have believed his authoritative opinion. Let me read it to you. Listen.

ACTOR (*reads*). "We arrived at the artist's studio. Finally, Taras Hryhorovych appeared and was the first to greet Ms. Markovych: he was sincerely attached to her and deeply valued her talent.

Broad-shouldered and stocky, Shevchenko was the epitome of a Cossack. His head was pointed, almost fox-like; his high, wrinkled forehead; wide "duck" nose; thick mustache covering his lips; small gray eyes with a gloomy and incredulous look; a hoarse voice; and a baggy figure..

These words were written by Ivan Sergeevich.

Now, the question:

How would you feel?

You show up at a meeting, and the woman you fancy is there with someone else. To top it off, this man will later author a memoir that casts you as a baggy Cossack.

She read it and thought of you as a baggy Cossack!

Do you see what I mean?

No, now I understand precisely how to portray Shevchenko: with sincerity, sensitivity, and above all - frankness!

We have much in common with him.

If I had met him, he would have commented, "That's his luck."

That's my luck.

And what about you?

Are you happy? Perhaps you share the same luck?

Perhaps we share it - luck?

All-embracing?

But please don't give in to despair.

Let the pain linger, but let it also bring healing."

Actress enters.

ACTRESS. Good morning, loner! I bet you haven't heard a thing?

ACTOR. I'm attuned to the universe's message of love. Are you referring to something else?

ACTRESS. I'm referring to the project.

ACTOR. Ah, of course. Any updates?

ACTRESS. Yes, some updates. Haven't they informed you?

ACTOR. Perhaps they tried calling. Ten missed calls from the director, three from the producer, and one from an unknown number.

ACTRESS. This is my number.

ACTOR. I'll make sure to save it.

ACTRESS. I'm uncertain how to put this delicately... I came because it's better for me to do it than a producer. I understand the importance of this project to you. Your immersion in the role is evident...

ACTOR. Not always.

ACTRESS. Please, just be silent. It's already difficult for me without your input!

ACTOR. Fine.

ACTRESS. I will speak exactly as it is.

ACTOR. Fine.

ACTRESS. They've shut down the project.

ACTOR. Is this some sort of a joke?

ACTRESS. No.

ACTOR. I'm not... What?

ACTRESS. They conducted a focus group, screened the footage, and... The feedback was unfavorable; nobody found it engaging enough to watch... So...

ACTOR. Shut down?

ACTRESS. Yes.

ACTOR. And they intended to inform me by phone?

ACTRESS. Yes. But since you didn't answer the phone, I decided to... come in person.

ACTOR. Why you?

ACTRESS. Because... you're a good person and talented. And also because...

ACTOR. It's not possible.

ACTRESS. I understand.

ACTOR. No. You don't. We must see our story through to the end!

Actor gets up, prepares.

ACTRESS. Wait a minute, the project has been wrapped up!

ACTOR. I get it, yes.

ACTRESS. In half an hour, the prop man will be here, and everything, from tech to services, will be cleared out.

ACTOR. That gives us thirty minutes.

ACTRESS. The cameras aren't working, and there's no light... None of this makes any sense!

ACTOR (*stops*). It does make sense. Let's see the story through to the end, feel their pain and devastation, and amidst it all – a glimmer of love. Just a single drop.

ACTRESS. I'm not sure... The acting group mentioned a casting call for a mayonnaise commercial. Do you want to go with me?

ACTOR. I really don't want to! But I'll go, naturally.

ACTRESS. Alright, fine.

ACTOR. Let's just run through the scene first. It'll be quick. Please.

ACTRESS. Alright, fine.

Actress leaves.

ACTOR (*to the audience*). Does your phone have a camera? Record this moment, you'll never see a film like this again. Just as a keepsake. And please, don't go. Stay. It's important.

SCENE 7

Actor sits down on a chair, coughs, Actress enters.

MARIA. Taras Hryhorovych, are you feeling unwell?

TARAS. Maria, what a pleasant surprise. I'm perfectly fine now.

MARIA. Perhaps some water?

TARAS. No, it's all because of the sands of the Aral Sea. It's been years since I returned, but I still can't shake off this desert within me.

MARIA. Perhaps you need some more rest.

TARAS. I do.

MARIA. If only you could come abroad! There, you could accomplish so much work and take a bit of rest...

TARAS. Count on it, I'll come. There's work to be done, but I'll make sure to rest too...

MARIA. Things are going well abroad. I landed a job writing stories and fairy tales in French. They're being published in the Parisian magazine "Education and Entertainment".

TARAS. Do you write them in Ukrainian?

MARIA. I do.

TARAS. Would you like to read them to me?

MARIA. Taras Hryhorovych, I've come to convince you to move to Paris.

TARAS. I assumed you were here to pick up your portrait. Take a seat, I'll grab the paint.

Maria sits down.

TARAS. I'm glad you've come. Life is so uncertain now - I don't even know what tomorrow holds. Will I see you again or not?

MARIA. Of course, you will. That's a certainty!

Taras takes the paint in his hand, glances at Maria, then sets the paint aside.

TARAS. I can't. I wish I could, but I can't seem to understand you. You're incomprehensible to me.

MARIA. That's unfortunate. I had hoped to see myself through your perspective.

TARAS. Then you'll have to journey to the Aral Sea desert.

MARIA. Why?

TARAS. Because in the desert, I witnessed mirages. You resemble one, so surreal and beyond this earth.

MARIA. I'm very much of this earth. My thoughts and dreams are grounded in reality.

TARAS. What are your dreams? Perhaps I can capture them in a drawing?

MARIA. I have numerous dreams.

TARAS. Tell me.

MARIA. My dreams are numerous, yet they all revolve around freedom.

TARAS. And mine are about freedom as well.

MARIA. I get it. That's why I sense such a deep connection between us. Our thoughts align, our feelings resonate, and the same worries weigh on us.

TARAS. We're still in pain, and we express it through our writing. Then, as we read, tears fall... we cry, we cry...

Maria hugs Taras.

MARIA. I don't know what to do.

TARAS. Continue writing, my dear Maria Oleksandrivna. Advocate for freedom, for a life unrestrained, because true happiness eludes those enslaved.

MARIA. Don't let me go.

TARAS. I won't.

MARIA. The way you're holding me feels like a farewell, like you're saying goodbye for good.

TARAS. No, it's not farewell! We'll meet again soon! But for now, stand here in front of the canvas.

Maria stands before the canvas as Taras sketches the shadow of her silhouette.

TARAS. It's you. I've titled it: "Mirage of the Aral Sea Desert".

MARIA. You called me your destiny in the verse you dedicated to me, didn't you?

Taras takes out a book and opens it.

TARAS *(reads).*

Upon the plains by Urals' grace, I roamed and prayed,

That our truth endure, our word forever stay;

And I beseeched. The Almighty sent forth

You, a gentle prophet,

A reproach to the cruel,

To those who starve. Oh, my light!

My holy dawn!

My youthful strength!

Shine upon me, blaze,

And revive my bruised heart—
Poor heart, laid bare,
Hungry. Yet I'll survive,
And my thoughts shall be set free,
From the tomb, I'll resurrect.
And I'll restore my free thought... Oh destiny!
Oh our prophet! My beloved **child**!
I'll entitle this verse to you.

Taras presents the book to Maria, who embraces it against her heart.

MARIA. Lot corrected to **child**.

TARAS. Chronic ailments plague me: my liver and heart are both ensnared in illness.

MARIA. Lot corrected to **child**.

TARAS. I already had everything.

MARIA. Lot corrected to **child**. Choosing a word chooses fate.

TARAS. I chose her for both of us.

Taras approaches the canvas, paints.

MARIA (*to the audience*). This meeting was the last. I received the news of Shevchenko's death while abroad. "My God! There is no Shevchenko ... my soul hurts, it hurts and it will never stop... It hurts and it will never stop..."

TARAS. It hurts and will never stop. This is my punishment.

MARIA. It hurts.

TARAS. For the fact that in life I loved.

Voice behind the scenes: "Why are there strangers on set? We're clearing everything up, getting ready for the shooting of a new entertainment show. Get ready in five minutes."

SCENE 8

Actor and Actress stand just outside the playground.

ACTOR (*to the viewer*). If anyone was recording, please turn off your devices. Send me a reminder by e-mail, if possible. (*To Actress*) Thank you!

ACTRESS. And I thank you.

ACTOR. Are we headed to a mayonnaise audition?

ACTRESS. No, it's too late for that.

ACTOR. What a pity.

ACTRESS. It's alright. Finishing this story was a pleasure. May I give you a hug?

Actor opens his arms; Actress hugs him.

ACTRESS. Thank you for everything, including the bracelet, and for... oh, by the way, you never told me why you agreed to play Shevchenko?

ACTOR. Didn't I?

ACTRESS. I guess you didn't.

ACTOR. I... don't even remember. Really! But you're wearing a bracelet, right?

ACTRESS. Okay, spill it. What do those letters mean? Because I might've acted like I got it, but honestly... L, like "Lot", and H, like "Child", isn't that it?

ACTOR. Or L, like "Love", and H, like "Hate". Love or hate? Choosing a word is like choosing your destiny.

ACTRESS. I'll go with L.

ACTOR. I'll go with L too. Because I'm all about love.

ACTRESS. I'm all about love too.

ACTOR. You love him... It's clear. So what if our love isn't mutual?

Actor coughs, Actress turns anxiously.

ACTOR. The sands of the Aral Sea, this desert inside me just won't go away.

ACTRESS. I'm feeling the same. There's this strange mix of awe and sadness after that scene... Like we haven't quite grasped everything.

ACTOR. Perhaps we should give it another shot. Shall we read it again?

ACTRESS. What do you mean? The script?

ACTOR. Yeah. We're missing the mayonnaise anyway.

ACTRESS. But why?

ACTOR. To understand it better. And then we'll craft our conceptual masterpiece. Oh, and I smudged the paint, by the way.

Actor retrieves paint from his pocket.

ACTRESS. Alright.

ACTOR. Perhaps I'll finally grasp how to portray Shevchenko.

ACTRESS. Let's explore intimacy without truly feeling its depths.

ACTOR. How do you know...?

ACTRESS. Sorry, I couldn't help but overhear.

ACTOR. What exactly did you overhear?

ACTRESS. All of it. And I know you're here because of me.

ACTOR. And what do you...?

ACTRESS. I haven't made up my mind yet.

ACTOR. What about your husband?

ACTRESS. I invented him. So, are we ready to begin?

Actress leaves quickly. Actor laughs.

ACTOR. Alright, everyone, get set, cameras rolling! *(to the audience)* Can we capture another scene? Thanks! Let's depict the first encounter between Shevchenko and Vovchok.

Actor adjusts his mustache as Actress enters.

TARAS. Maria? Is that you?

MARIA. It's me... And it's really you?

TARAS. I'm not even sure anymore. Sometimes I feel like I've lost myself. There's this dreadful reality in the world called Taras Shevchenko - everyone respects him, but no one truly loves. Like you wrote in your book: "What's wrong, my dear, feeling annoyed? Oh, just a bit bored." It's like you're describing me.

MARIA. Everyone loves you.

TARAS. I'm not sure.

MARIA. They do! And I do too.

THE END

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