



Ukrainian Drama TRANSLATIONS

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Auswärtiges Amt



Volodymyr Serdiuk

VALENTYN PETROVYCH

(One-Act Play)

Characters:

SOLDIER – of any gender, any age.

OLD MAN – adult male/female.

Scenography:

The scene is dark. Only the garbage can under the streetlamp is clearly visible with bright letters CELTIC on it. *(Good place for sponsors` logos.)*

SCENE ONE

Soldier with a plastic bag approaches the garbage can. Looks into the tank.

THE STORY OF RESPECT

SOLDIER: Well, why they are so inconsistent?

OLD MAN: They are consistent.

SOLDIER: Who are you?

OLD MAN: I am just an old man:

SOLDIER: I am not asking you do you know their sequence. I ask you who you are.

OLD MAN: I am homeless.

SOLDIER: How is that?

OLD MAN: Without a designated place of residence.

SOLDIER: Man...

OLD MAN: What?

SOLDIER: The first word should be Man.

OLD MAN: Well, a homeless person is such a person.

SOLDIER: I feel disrespectful in your words.

OLD MAN: To whom?

SOLDIER: Firstly, your disrespect for yourself. Who calls you that?

OLD MAN: Local cleaners.

SOLDIER: Who else?

OLD MAN: District police.

SOLDIER: That is where those legs grow from.

OLD MAN: Whence?

SOLDIER: From the callous attitude of the district police towards you.

OLD MAN: Is it otherwise?

SOLDIER: In the places where I come from, respect for the individual always comes first.

OLD MAN: Well, you know, there are different personalities – not every one of them deserves respect...

SOLDIER: One evening a snake crawled into our trench.

OLD MAN: Wow.

SOLDIER: We squatted. Explosions rumbled upstairs. We did not move, because an enemy drone corrector was hanging over us. We pretended to be a pile of stones. Maybe it looked like that from there above. We were in dirty camouflage, covered with mud and dust. The drone operator mocked us, trying to cause panic between us provoking us try to escape – and unmask ourselves. That is why we did not move. We got used to the images of pebbles so much that we even forgot how to jump up and run. Stones do not run. Stones have no legs to run away.

OLD MAN: What about the snake?

SOLDIER: What kind of snake?

OLD MAN: The one that crawled into your trench.

SOLDIER: She looked at us, realized that we were gray stones, and hid under us.

OLD MAN: Under someone specific?

SOLDIER: We lay there rolling. It was impossible to figure out where someone's arm or leg was. The snake crawled under us.

OLD MAN: That is, under the stones?

SOLDIER: That is, under the stones.

OLD MAN: What is the point of the story?

SOLDIER: Regards.

OLD MAN: To whom?

SOLDIER: To all living things.

OLD MAN: Creatures?

SOLDIER: Including creatures.

OLD MAN: How is it?

SOLDIER: The snake hid under us. We were shelter for her. She hid from destruction.

OLD MAN: I got it.

SOLDIER: She was running away from what was happening upstairs. She fled from death, from the Russian army artillery fire.

OLD MAN: Well.

SOLDIER: Well - she stayed with us.

OLD MAN: Even when the bombing stopped?

SOLDIER: Stayed forever. She slept with us, ate with us. She behaved like a domestic cat.

OLD MAN: Only it was a snake.

SOLDIER: Only it was a snake. When she managed to hunt mice, she first showed them to us. We reassured her: good, good, that is your prey, no need to share it with us - eat yourself.

OLD MAN: Then what is this story about?

SOLDIER: About mutual respect and self-esteem.

OLD MAN: What do I have to do with it?

SOLDIER: You do not respect yourself enough if you agree to the derogatory name of your personality.

OLD MAN: I do not understand.

SOLDIER: Well, «homeless».

OLD MAN: Is it necessary?

SOLDIER: If you accept this, you need to be homeless.

OLD MAN: I understood – you are making fun of me!

SOLDIER: The snake felt everything without even understanding, while person must explain the obvious facts to another person.

OLD MAN: No. Do not explain. Do not. You do not need to explain.

(Pause)

SOLDIER *(to himself)*: If at least there was something red here – a piece of cloth or some red paper.

OLD MAN: No, today there is no such things here.

(Soldier moves the garbage can aside. Behind it, on a fishing chair, sits an aged man.)

(Pause.)

SOLDIER: Who, the hell are you?

OLD MAN: I am the man sitting here. You spoke to me.

SOLDIER: Check Point or what?

OLD MAN: Yes no. That is my own service.

SOLDIER: Do you hunt for valuables here?

OLD MAN: What are the valuables?

SOLDIER: Paper, cardboard, glass.

OLD MAN: No, I am not a scavenger.

SOLDIER: Then who you are?

OLD MAN: Just an old man. A retired man, precisely. I still also want to participate in the current events. Nevertheless.

SOLDIER: In life?

OLD MAN: Well, as long as I am alive, then in life, ok. I agree with you, my supplier.

SOLDIER: I am not your supplier. I used to be an engineer.

OLD MAN: Now you are a soldier.

SOLDIER: How do you know? I am wearing a tracksuit, and the fact that I am trimmed bald is the style everyone is getting a haircut now. As another fashion. Like that.

OLD MAN: Because you went out in high boots.

SOLDIER: O! Exactly. I did not even notice this.

OLD MAN: It is good that you did not notice this – so you are a Warrior.

SOLDIER: Yes. One on my vacation. What do the other men put on instead of their shoes when they take out the garbage?

OLD MAN: They go out in slippers.

SOLDIER: Maybe some have their boots on. Tourists, hunters there.

OLD MAN: They would not lace up their shoes usually.

SOLDIER: That is it. Noticing this feature, you made a conclusion that I am a warrior.

OLD MAN: More than that, a skilled warrior.

SOLDIER: Why are you drawing such conclusions?

OLD MAN: Because every time you run out of the room, you are ready for an unexpected development of events.

SOLDIER: Which events I wonder?

OLD MAN: Bombing, urgent departure. Lining up on anxiety, after all.

SOLDIER: It is necessary for me. You seem to be some local Sherlock Holmes.

OLD MAN: Just professional attention to details.

SOLDIER: You are Fisherman then.

OLD MAN: Why did you decide so?

SOLDIER: First, because you are sitting on a fishing chair. Second, fishers are patient and observant – they constantly look at the water, even though nothing happens there.

OLD MAN: I am an artist. I sit on my chair for I am in my “plein airs” here.

SOLDIER: What are those “plein airs”? You kind a breathing the air?

OLD MAN: This is the name of the process of drawing outside when you depict a landscape, for example.

SOLDIER: Then I am also an artist.

OLD MAN: Really?

SOLDIER: Uh, I have seen enough of those landscapes there in front lines. In fact, my entire service consists of monitoring the state of the landscapes.

OLD MAN: You were making landscapes sketching.

SOLDIER: Not only. Vary slagheaps. Yes, steppe horizons can tell a lot as an enemy approaches.

OLD MAN: I know. The horizon is most difficult to observe at sunrise, and as it sets.

SOLDIER: Then the horizon blurs...

OLD MAN: The British SAS units used this method, during the Second World War. At that time, they painted their cars in Africa pink.

SOLDIER: That is another disguise! Pink Panther?

OLD MAN: You may laugh, surely. While in the military, they call this color Pink Panther.

SOLDIER: Cool. What else did you notice in me?

OLD MAN: That you have a bottle of alcohol in your breast pocket.

SOLDIER: Wow! Are you an alcoholic?

OLD MAN: Not exactly. I have already left the major leagues of this sport. Nevertheless, old people, they say, can drink thirty-six grams a day. Alcohol is milk for the old men they say.

SOLDIER: It turns out that you are a poet,

OLD MAN: No. Not me. It looks like Nizami said so.

SOLDIER: Or Khayyam.

OLD MAN: Khayyam probably. Someone authoritative. As for Nizami, I am not sure, but Khayyam, they say, knew this matter.

SOLDIER: What matter do you mean?

OLD MAN: The Art of Drinking.

SOLDIER: What about my bottle I usually suck off its neck. I would not give it to you, because it is not hygienic, they say.

OLD MAN: I propose you to unscrew the tire and pour the liquor there. This will be enough for me. I drink strictly 36 grams a day and it benefits me.

SOLDIER: Does the cap contain 36 grams?

OLD MAN: Twelve. I do not drink the entire daily norm at a time. Three times a day for twelve – and that is enough for me.

SOLDIER: You persuaded me. I am not greedy.

(Soldier pours alcohol into the bottle cap. The old man drinks.)

OLD MAN: How do you like our current society after returning from the front?

SOLDIER: I am here only on a short vacation.

OLD MAN: Sorry, I did not know. Do you recognize people?

SOLDIER: After arriving back here, I am starting to love dogs more and more...

OLD MAN: Is everything really so bad?

SOLDIER: The people's faces are now angry.

OLD MAN: Maybe they are tense, or focused? Now there are enough problems for everyone...

SOLDIER: I see, you focused – I am tense. While the other people are mostly angry, arrogant. They have lost their sense of proportion. I yield to all of them, and nobody pays attention. They fly, they hurry seeing anyone.

OLD MAN: There at the frontline, too, everyone rushes forward, are not they?

SOLDIER: There they want to fight, but they do not run into a battle without reason mindlessly. No one is in a hurry. If you run forward without your friends, you probably will grab your bullet first. Brazen war punishes. I am alive because there I bow to bullets, I do not relax to do this.

OLD MAN: When civilians do not notice you, be silent and smile. This way you will break their stereotype, and they may begin to notice you.

SOLDIER: Why will they notice me?

OLD MAN: Because if you are silent and smile, it means dangerous. They will slow down in front of you.

SOLDIER: Must I turn on the psycho? I do not want to waste energy on that. I am on vacation – so I have to rest.

OLD MAN: Why then are you hanging around here in darkness?

SOLDIER: My wife for some reason does not like to go to throw garbage when it is dark. I have to endure it myself.

OLD MAN: That is right – women should not touch garbage, see the murder, bury dead...

SOLDIER: It seems that death itself is not a problem. Problems only surround and accompany the death...

OLD MAN: Have you not heard where St. Valentine buried here nearby?

SOLDIER: No.

OLD MAN: In Stryi Town, near the City of Lviv. Here in Ukraine.

SOLDIER: Tell me about this, and we count we talked.

(Pause)

OLD MAN: Yes, this is still a good conversation.

SOLDIER: There are much heavier for sure.

OLD MAN: The hardest thing for me is to communicate with scientists. Speaking with them, you say something, they listen and make a postulate out of your statement first, and later than they literally prove to you the fallacy of this postulate. I already, and so-and-so, restrain myself, trying not to make them nervous, but they are still nervous.

SOLDIER: Maybe they like it having that way. Could the process itself is planned to catch you on the hook?

OLD MAN: It seems that this is how their scientific brain works. Yet, you are not a scientist, are not you?

SOLDIER: Oh no, God had mercy on me.

OLD MAN: Although, the communication also sometimes needed. At least with someone, but so that it is not mandatory.

SOLDIER: Do not you receive emails?

OLD MAN: For some reason they do not write to me.

SOLDIER: Then write yourself a letter to yourself.

OLD MAN: Is it communication? One-way traffic you have in result.

SOLDIER: Left hand.

OLD MAN: My sergeant taught me to change my hand when I was a Soldier.

SOLDIER: Oh well, them, with their communication! You will go online to have fun, and there are only about cosmic tragedies and the near end of the world.

OLD MAN: Do not you see the signs that the end is near around you?

SOLDIER: Here, where there is no war, no, I do not see no devastation. The street lamps shine, people are sitting at the tables in cafés. Parents walking with children, driving on their lacquered cars. Here, it seems, people do not think about war, which is their end or the end of the whole world.

OLD MAN: Only those who have not seen the previous end of the world can think that the end of the world will not come.

SOLDIER: I have already seen the end of the world in different poses in different positions.

OLD MAN: As so as I.

SOLDIER: How does it concerns you?

OLD MAN: This is not the first war, you know.

SOLDIER: For me this is the first war. I have that experience for the first time in my life.

OLD MAN: That is why war makes such a powerful impression on you.

SOLDIER: How many wars have you seen?

OLD MAN: There were four large ones. The little ones – without an account.

SOLDIER: Did small wars end quickly? Like in seven-days?

OLD MAN: Yes. Sometimes small wars lasted for months, often one season, until it rained or it became freezing.

SOLDIER: Then what?

OLD MAN: Those wars not recorded in our military IDs. We loaded tractors and guns on the platforms tiding brooms to the tailgate and those brooms dragged behind us, covering the track...

SOLDIER: Why did you do this?

OLD MAN: It is an old man tradition to cover your mark so that the war does not find you. For war do not follow you to your house, to the country where you live.

SOLDIER: Cool. When I returned, I only washed my hands.

OLD MAN: Because you will return to war again.

SOLDIER: Yes. I rest here, but do not relax.

(Pause)

OLD MAN: This world is amazing.

SOLDIER: Yes, exactly. In war, generally all is broken and distorted. Some men die instantly, not even realizing that they are at war – others walk out without a single scratch and suddenly, they die, already having vast military experience. Enemy scouts crawl into someone's trench at «zero point» and cut him with a knife. With a knife – without shots. The same time somewhere in the rear, an enemy missile hits the headquarters, killing hundreds of people at once, although it seemed to them that they were all in the rear, and the air defense was working around them. How is that possible?

OLD MAN: Each of us heard or saw different warnings, but did not attach importance to them. Something we felt before trouble happen, someone warned us about something to happen long before the disaster.

SOLDIER: Listen! I have to live half my life, with the only purpose to be able to understand the wisdom of the words of my Grandmother, which she told me in my early age so that I would not cry, “God has his own plans for each of us...”

OLD MAN: ... While we will not be able to understand the wisdom of those plans.

SOLDIER: Each of our days may be the last.

OLD MAN: To miss the last your day is pointless.

SOLDIER: How is it? Because it is too late?

OLD MAN: Why don't you start missing the first day right away, think about it?

SOLDIER: Because the first day is always funny.

OLD MAN: Yet the consequences of none of them remain unknown to us.

SOLDIER: Behold man you have already bent! Then how can I live on with this knowledge now?

OLD MAN: That is okay. When you will go on living more next you will get used to this understanding.

(Pause)

SCENE TWO.

The same. Ibid.

THE STORY ABOUT THE DUTIES OF A MAN

OLD MAN: Women should be amused with something other than candy in red wrappers.

SOLDIER: What else?

OLD MAN: We must fulfill their dreams.

SOLDIER: Wow! Who am I to you, a wizard?

OLD MAN: I am not a wizard also, but I managed to realize my wife's dream.

SOLDIER: How is it?

OLD MAN: She was an artist, and dreamed of visiting Rembrandt's house, in Amsterdam.

SOLDIER: Well, so you went there.

OLD MAN: This was not that easy those days. During our lives under the Soviets, we existed as if in prison: no one could just go anywhere. My wife had a dream and I supported her.

SOLDIER: What else?

OLD MAN: One night when we went to bed, she said, «I want so much to go to Rembrandt's workshop and touch his brushes», and I answered, «We will definitely go there» - and she fell asleep happy.

SOLDIER: It looks like you were cheating her, or played with words.

OLD MAN: Then it seemed so to me too. It was even a shame to say this, knowing that no KGB would let us go to the Netherlands, firstly. We had no money for such a trip, secondly. Nevertheless, I said so, and she believed me. The years came when we already had the Internet, I went to the website of the Rembrandt Museum in Amsterdam to see the cost of one ticket for entry, and realized with horror that it costs more than my monthly salary. While we need to buy two tickets.

SOLDIER: How much did you earn then?

OLD MAN: A dollar per month.

SOLDIER: Not too much.

OLD MAN: Terribly little. Then, later, I started earning five dollars a month, then twenty and a hundred. Only then, we were able to go to visit Amsterdam.

SOLDIER: As tourists?

OLD MAN: No. Our daughter already lived there, in Amsterdam. She issued us an official invitation, and we received visas here at the Embassy of the Netherlands.

SOLDIER: Then you went to the museum?

OLD MAN: We went.

SOLDIER: What happened next?

OLD MAN: The tickets were still too expensive for us – seventeen fifty each. For two of us – thirty-five Euros. We took a chance, still.

SOLDIER: Well, what is the fulfillment of a dream is it? Save up money for yourself, and go anywhere.

OLD MAN: That is not the point. A man must behave like a man at a critical moment – without this, a woman's dream will not come true.

SOLDIER: Do you want to say, you, right like that you are a hero.

OLD MAN: Apparently not. Nevertheless, there is something heroic in me. Just like in you.

SOLDIER: This is sexism.

OLD MAN: Moreover, I will tell you, even on the verge of hooliganism.

SOLDIER: Come on. Come on.

OLD MAN: Rembrandt's house has many floors, from basement to attic, and somewhere there, on the third or fourth floor, there is Rembrandt's art workshop. We went there. There my wife received exciting impressions, «Ah-ah, what a light! Ah-ah, his own collection» We entered the Rembrandt's place of work in the corner where the easel stands opposite the window

covered with sheets surrounded by ropes - you can see all, but you cannot come to touch the brushes.

SOLDIER: The dream is gone.

OLD MAN: No. I removed one rope from the hook, ordered my wife to go closer to the easel, and hung the barrier again so that other tourists would not disturb the peace of the museum. No one said a word to us. The air seemed to thicken, and I felt that a decisive moment had come that I should not miss – I had to fulfill my wife's dream. I stood on the other side, behind the ropes, while my wife studied Rembrandt's tools. «Can I touch his brushes» she asked me. «You can» I replied. «Can I sit on his chair in front of the easel? I want to see how he primed his canvas» asked my wife. «Sit down» I allowed her. «Oh, levkas» she said, «I can do that too. Can you take a picture of me in front of Rembrandt's easel» she asked «I can» I replied, and took a picture of her.

SOLDIER: So what?

OLD MAN: That was all. We got out of there. I knew my wife was quietly grateful to me. Do you understand this?

SOLDIER: No.

OLD MAN: She could have come there without me. She could come to the museum herself. She would never have been able to dare to go behind the ropes, without me. Her own upbringing would have prevented her, because she had it – classical – too cultured.

SOLDIER: Are you a bully?

OLD MAN: I was a determined man.

SOLDIER: When?

OLD MAN: When it was necessary.

SOLDIER: What about now?

OLD MAN: I may tell you what about now. I am trying to explain to you that you, like every man, have your male potential. You know that. Before meeting me, you did not understand that you should use that particular potential of yours to realize a woman's dream. Just like that.

SOLDIER: Is that it?

OLD MAN: That is it.

SOLDIER: Is your woman happy now?

OLD MAN: She has already died, unfortunately. As I can recollect there were moments of happiness in her life that I gave her. What I told you about was just one of those moments.

SOLDIER: Then explain me now what should I do with this knowledge?

OLD MAN: Make your wife's dreams come true.

SOLDIER: Clear. Although, Rembrandt was only fifty-seventh in the ranking of Dutch artists of his time. Did you know that?

OLD MAN: No, I did not know that, and I do not even think about it.

SOLDIER: Why?

OLD MAN: Because you, in the ranks of your army unit, also do not stand first.

SOLDIER: No. I do not stand first.

OLD MAN: There is nothing offensive about it?

SOLDIER: There is nothing offensive about it. Because we are all soldiers of the same unit with a common task.

OLD MAN: Likely, the artists are all Artists - the first, and the fifty-seventh.

SOLDIER: Nice. Pay attention - we do not remember the name of the first artist then, while almost everyone knows the name of the fifty-seventh – Rembrandt!

OLD MAN: You got it!

(Both laugh)

SCENE THREE.

The same. In the same place where they were.

THE PROBLEM WITH THE GIFT OF SOLDIERS

SOLDIER: So, should I return to it without a gift at all? Clarify. Sure, we have already talked a lot here, but this main question torments me, still: How to give your beloved SOMETHING when you yourself do not like to give anything to anyone?

OLD MAN: Someone can always give something to somebody.

SOLDIER: What will I give her? RGD-5 hand grenade?

OLD MAN: No. Neither RGT-27S, nor RGT-27C2 – you cannot even show to your loved ones. By the way, you did not bring them home from there. Right?

SOLDIER: Sure, not. I am just bitterly joking. Among own possessions nobody should not keep such shit.

(Pause)

OLD MAN: Put it clear, do you like to receive gifts, for example?

SOLDIER: Did someone ever give me something?

OLD MAN: Then it is clear: this is a problem of previous upbringing, or a story of family poverty.

SOLDIER: Yes, something like that. My dad did not give us anything and my mother did not argue. Everyone managed somehow.

OLD MAN: Even when parents returned from the fair, did they not bring anything interesting to their children?

SOLDIER: Food. It was all food. We rejoiced, but food is not a gift, right?

OLD MAN: You are not the first, man. My generation also once experienced poverty.

SOLDIER: It is a pity such circumstances evidently continue to strike every next generation.

OLD MAN: Of course, food is not a gift when compared with all that is advertised on television as symbols of the holiday. Yet, food can also be a gift.

SOLDIER: Yes. Teach me here.

OLD MAN: Food for the holiday as a gift to a young wife, in difficult times called “Men's Cake.”

SOLDIER: Oops. You would not surprise her with a man's cake, would you?

OLD MAN: Leave it. I am too old to talk about pink things.

SOLDIER: Therefore, has anyone established such a tradition?

OLD MAN: Then someone has to break it.

SOLDIER: How?

OLD MAN: Be silent and write my words down.

SOLDIER: I will remember.

OLD MAN: Be careful, I will not repeat twice. Yes, and I share my secret with you reluctantly. This is mine, intimate.

SOLDIER: List. I will remember. I happened to give my men degrees of geographical longitude and latitude of the target, even with a hole in my head, and with my forehead scalped.

OLD MAN: Did they destroy the target finally?

SOLDIER: For the beginning, I impressed the field surgeon when I began to clean up the operating table, shouting aloud the numbers of adjustment of the gunfire.

OLD MAN: The surgeon has already washed his hands that is why he cannot hold you. Was there at least somebody among the nurses smart enough to call to your detachment naming the enemies position?

SOLDIER: Aha...

OLD MAN: As I presume, it is easier to reach them hammering the railway rail.

SOLDIER: Hold your horses. There stood two of ours nearby, who rammed me «dead» to the base. They immediately whined and reported to the company.

OLD MAN: Thank God!

SOLDIER: Glory to the Ukrainian Armed Forces!

OLD MAN: So. Back to our sheep. You take a bowler. You wash it.

SOLDIER: It started – wash your hands, you had to say that first!

OLD MAN: Thanks. Here I flew. Cover the cauldron with cabbage leaves. Pour a handful of any cereal. You cut the carrots and spread them evenly on top of the cereals. Then pour a handful of other cereals (there will always be remnants of cereals at home to which your «hands do not reach»), cut half a beet, or all, as it is a small one, and cover it on top...

SOLDIER: Wait. What if I put there pasta instead of cereals?

OLD MAN: Pasta can be laid out only once, and then on top.

SOLDIER: What about everything else?

OLD MAN: Everything else, rice, buckwheat, chop, millet, oats, pearl barley, literally everything lay in layers, shifting them with vegetable layers, also any. You can even lay out one layer with onions.

SOLDIER: Then next?

OLD MAN: You fill the laid layers on top with water, so that there is water somewhere as thick as a finger above the last layer. The last layer should be some kind of cereal, well, what – you will find it by yourself.

SOLDIER: Realized.

OLD MAN: Then cook it over medium heat, about twenty minutes, maybe more, under a tire. The process is over when the water from above disappears. No need to mix.

SOLDIER: What if all that burn from beneath?

OLD MAN: We put the cabbage on the bottom. Cabbage will not allow burning.

SOLDIER: This water evaporated the grains on top boiled soft, and what is next?

OLD MAN: You call your beloved to the table. Then you carefully turn the contents of the pot onto a wooden board, or other large plate. You put a piece of butter on top, and wait until it melts, soaking in the dish from top. You cut the dish with a large knife from top to bottom so that the layers preserved, as they cut a cake.

SOLDIER: Then?

OLD MAN: Then you are a hero of the holiday! Women will forgive you everything! Even my mother-in-law loved me for this cake and protected me from my wife's attacks, if necessary.

SOLDIER: Have you been so tough too?

OLD MAN: It happened.

SOLDIER: Thank you. I will definitely try to make this. That is not flowers. I understand this.

OLD MAN: Colorful colors will rage on the table the way flowers do.

(Pause)

SOLDIER: Ok...

OLD MAN: You do not want to write it down. Are you sure?

SOLDIER: Thanks for the recipe.

OLD MAN: This is not a recipe – it is the technology of love.

SOLDIER: I am an engineer - you are a technologist. We found each other.

OLD MAN: We found each other in the middle of the world of solid khaki color.

SOLDIER: Where explosions tear bodies apart, there is rather the shitty color.

(Pause)

SCENE FOUR.

The same. In the same place where they were.

THE GOOD WISHES OF THE SOLDIERS

SOLDIER: So what do you wish for me before returning to the branch of hell on earth, old man?

OLD MAN: Be soft to the last.

SOLDIER: To be soft there where the cry breaks? You hear I spoke to you in verses. Am I crazy?

OLD MAN: Softness is also strength. It is impossible to break the soft.

SOLDIER: Trampled. Wipe it off the surface with tanks – and you will not find a trace...

OLD MAN: Then pretend to be Japanese.

SOLDIER: How is it? Our war is for the national liberation. We are defending our Ukrainian country from Russian military conquest – from the total destruction of the Ukrainian population on this territory. Even Japanese reportedly killed by Russians. Means those who defended Ukraine.

OLD MAN: «We are the roots of grass» is the Japanese concept of survival. When the grass is mowed, trampled and burned, grass roots will remain in the soil, which will revive and revive the country again.

SOLDIER: Dig yourself deep in the ground. We do this there in the front lines. From there we kill them. Our task is to survive and win.

OLD MAN: Thank you for your service. The brave will rule the world.

SOLDIER: Courage is not enough – you still need prudence and determination.

OLD MAN: You need to be self-confident and convinced of your own rightness.

SOLDIER: How is it?

OLD MAN: Are you convinced that you are Ukrainian?

SOLDIER: Yes.

OLD MAN: Are you convinced that Ukraine will withstand the strength of a feral horde?

SOLDIER: Yes.

OLD MAN: This is half the battle won.

SOLDIER: What is the second half?

OLD MAN: Save your body, under any circumstances. As a weapon. As property that does not belong to you, but which you been entrusted to manage for the public good.

SOLDIER: Oh-oh-oh! You also write verses.

OLD MAN: Did not the Zampolite of your detachment tell you that?

SOLDIER: We are not communists. We do not have Zampolites anymore.

OLD MAN: There are some other officer responsible for training warriors.

SOLDIER: They drowned in bureaucracy. All officers now mostly write plans and report on their implementation.

OLD MAN: Is a priest coming to you?

SOLDIER: Those who not advanced in military? Rarely when. Talking to him heart-to-heart does not work. There are lot of people in the unit, who lot more talkative than I am. I am silent, and it seems to the priest that I am all right. The tongues ask questions, priest answers them, thinking that they are the ones who need confession.

OLD MAN: What would you say in confession?

SOLDIER: I?

OLD MAN: You.

SOLDIER: From what miracle reason, why should I talk to someone? It is more useful for me to have a nap.

OLD MAN: To confess is not to speak.

SOLDIER: What then?

OLD MAN: It is something else.

SOLDIER: Something.

OLD MAN: Does something still excite you?

SOLDIER: I am afraid of death.

OLD MAN: Do not be afraid. You will not perish.

SOLDIER: Gorgeous said. Thanks.

OLD MAN: Come back healthy.

SOLDIER: If I die what should I do?

OLD MAN: Then nothing. We need to do it now. While you arrive here and been offered something you cannot refuse - do not refuse.

(Pause)

SOLDIER: How will she raise a child without me?

OLD MAN: With joy.

SOLDIER: Really?

OLD MAN: Even then, you will be for her the child she will give birth to you.

SOLDIER: Then she will be my mother?

OLD MAN: Yes. Therefore, start honoring her now.

SOLDIER: Some kind of nonsense.

OLD MAN: It only seems so if you listen and do not try to understand. Try to understand this course of affairs. Not today, perhaps not immediately, but accept and agree with such a plan.

SOLDIER: A plan that was not my?

OLD MAN: Try to agree that someone composed this plan for you. After all, we were not born by our own desire. Not of our own accord. You have long been part of this wonderful plan.

SOLDIER: Are you talking about life?

OLD MAN: Yes. The life is eternal. The fact that we perish will not stop life. We should agree with this. Do not rebel. You will feel relieved.

SOLDIER: From what?

OLD MAN: From understanding the processes.

SOLDIER: Will another reality begin?

OLD MAN: Why will it start? Maybe it already exists and you will just go there.

(Pause)

SOLDIER: You must be surprised that I am not cursing you sending you to go away now after such offers.

OLD MAN: Not really.

SOLDIER: Behold man. I am listening to you, talking as if with normal person...

OLD MAN: Because what?

SOLDIER: Because that night I had a dream that I had run to some other girl, to my university. I walked down the corridors from floor to floor, went to my auditorium, where people I know are normal. I ask where such a person is. They say she has already gone to the dormitory. Then I suddenly tell them, «I do not know how to get out of here.» Then they showed me the way.

(Pause)

SOLDIER *(continues)*: They led me through some unfamiliar corridors. I was surprised. Noticing that I am surprised they say, “A lot of this has recently been rebuilt here while you were gone - so it is no wonder you got lost. Now we will reach the final stop of the tram, and you will immediately find your way around and recollect where you are.”

OLD MAN: Did you recognize the place where the final stop of the tram was in that dream?

SOLDIER: Yes. There are yellow walls outside. The tram station is the same as it was before.

OLD MAN: That is, such as it is now.

SOLDIER: So. The station is the same as it is now. Only above it, and below it, some pedestrian crossings and new tracks added. They say, «Then wait now the fourteenth number tram will arrive. Do you remember it runs all the way to campus from here» «I remember» I say...

OLD MAN: So what?

SOLDIER: After they are already gone. Then they come back and say, «Just do not be surprised and remember that the station is now called differently» «How» They repeated, and I remembered, immediately and forever: «P. W. Botha»

OLD MAN: What happened next?

SOLDIER: Nothing happens then. I felt so calm staying there.

OLD MAN: Means in that reality, you were like at home.

SOLDIER: Funny. Still what does it mean: «P. W. Botha»?

OLD MAN: Perhaps something, or someone that is worth both yours and their memory? It is worth it, somewhere out there, in an unfamiliar reality, to call a tram stop that way. Maybe the square in front of it and the street that starts from that stop have the same name...

(Pause)

SOLDIER: Has something similar ever happened to you?

OLD MAN: Well, not so literally. Still I was witnessing strange things too.

SOLDIER: What was it?

OLD MAN: Once one of my women admitted that she practices palmistry.

SOLDIER: So what?

OLD MAN: I let her to look at my palm. She looked closely, and a surprised expression appeared on her face. «I do not know what it is», said my good fortune-teller, looking at my

palm. What exactly?»? I asked. «Your line of life is interrupted here». She pointed her finger at some spot in my palm. «So here I die? When» «Yes, it turns out already». She said sheepishly. «Maybe that is the wrong line»? Asked I «But here it is the only». Answered she «And what happens next»? «And then it appears again, and shows that you will live a long time more». «Oh well»? «You are happy - your line does not end, but goes beyond the edge of your palm. Only I do not know when this break in your life will come and end, because I do not know how to calculate this.” What I knew. In that break of the line fit my first two wars, in which I died respectively. I knew that then. I knew the periods when I died. I was sure I am not able to live long. Now I doubt it. Because then there were several more such breaks. While now here I am this one, which has been going on since 2014 and has intensified since February 24, 2022. When it is over, then again the normal course of things will resume, and continue unhindered on my own long life. That fortune-teller, for some reason, also was sure that I would be rich. I hope I will live long enough to see my wealth as well. Well, what was not yet - is still bound to happen? It looks logical for me.

SOLDIER: Who would you like to be now if you did not die?

OLD MAN: Who I am.

SOLDIER: Who are you?

OLD MAN: I am a writer.

SOLDIER: The writer must write.

OLD MAN: I write.

SOLDIER: What are you writing now?

(Pause)

SCENE FIVE.

The same. In the same place where they were.

THE STORY ABOUT QUESTIONS WORTH ANSWERING

OLD MAN: Are you really want to know what I am writing now?

SOLDIER: Not really.

OLD MAN: Then I will give you another piece of advice.

SOLDIER: Do I really need it?

OLD MAN: As far as I understand, you need it extremely.

SOLDIER: Then, give me your advice.

OLD MAN: Never ask something you are not interested in.

SOLDIER: Why? It is as if I am showing out of politeness.

OLD MAN: Such questions show people only your indifference.

SOLDIER: What questions?

OLD MAN: The general questions.

SOLDIER: It turns out that the question: «What are you writing now» is common?

OLD MAN: Imagine that you are sitting next to a girl, and no one bothers you.

SOLDIER: Imagine.

OLD MAN: Then you ask what her breast size is...

SOLDIER: Yes?

OLD MAN: Will she answer you?

SOLDIER: I think not. She will get up, and silently walk away.

OLD MAN: Exactly. Do you know why?

SOLDIER: Because I am a fool.

OLD MAN: No.

SOLDIER: What else?

OLD MAN: She will be offended.

SOLDIER: Clearly – will she be offended, but why?

OLD MAN: Because you did not ask her about what really interests you.

SOLDIER: Then what really interests me?

OLD MAN: Something else.

SOLDIER: Other?

OLD MAN: Quite another.

SOLDIER: Does she have it?

OLD MAN: She has it, but something completely different.

SOLDIER: That other?

OLD MAN: Yes – that is different.

SOLDIER: Her mind probably?

OLD MAN: Finally! You are making progress, man!

SOLDIER: It is true. I feel it. What conclusion do you draw about me from this?

OLD MAN: That you are smart but inexperienced.

SOLDIER: Where is the way out?

OLD MAN: Gain experience, but do not grind your tongue.

SOLDIER: Class. I like this school. I would learn from it.

OLD MAN: You will meet your teacher, and learn.

SOLDIER: Realized. I need to meet the teacher. Who is he?

OLD MAN: It could be anyone – the Academy, Jesus, the Buddha...

SOLDIER: While your name is Valentine?

OLD MAN: Valentine.

SOLDIER: Cool. The one with hearts and gifts wrapped in pink paper?

OLD MAN: Yes. It is just dark here this moment, that is why pink seems gray.

SOLDIER: Valentine. What is your middle name?

OLD MAN: Petrovych.

SOLDIER: So. Peter is your dad.

OLD MAN: Yes.

SOLDIER: Cool. Just imagine whom you can meet here in Kyiv, Troyeshchyna District.

OLD MAN: Do not even say it at all!

(Both laugh)

OLD MAN: All lives are similar, but not the same.

SOLDIER: At first, we do not want to know anyone, later we cry that no one knows us.

OLD MAN: When you continue to sell poetry, Poetry has to sell you someday.

SOLDIER: When passions subside, the brain begins to work.

(The air raid siren sounds)

SOLDIER: What do you like to wish today, from Kyiv, all free people who have not yet experienced Russian missile strikes and tank attacks if they heard you?

OLD MAN: If they want to hear what we understood, having been resisting the Russian invaders for ten years.

SOLDIER: Yes, they already wanted to. What do you say to them?

OLD MAN: “Maintain the Desire to Think”.

SOLDIER: I see. You are definitely not a Zampolite.

OLD MAN: No. Not Zampolite, for sure.

SOLDIER: Ok. For the first time I will believe.

OLD MAN: What would you wish to the people of the Free World?

SOLDIER: “Fiercely above all - defend your Freedom”.

(Pause)

OLD MAN: Ask three questions to see if I am really Valentine or not.

SOLDIER: Ok. I will ask.

OLD MAN: Then ask.

SOLDIER: Well, here is it: Why is Valentine's Day so important?

OLD MAN *(responds from the shadows with some mechanical voice)*: you need St. Valentine's Day to show your admiration for women. Congratulating a woman on this day, you make her feel special and loved. Next question?

SOLDIER: Wait. Give me another second to formulate my question.

OLD MAN: Oh well! You are not a wagon brake!

SOLDIER: No, I am not a brake. Anyway, wait.

OLD MAN: Ok.

SOLDIER: Ok. What is the most relevant gift a modern man can give to the woman he loves?

OLD MAN *(responds with the same artificial voice with metallic notes)*: The most special gift guy can give a girl on Valentine is either a romantic gift, or something practical, like a new phone or a beautiful watch.

SOLDIER: Yes, let it be! What would St. Valentine himself wish modern people if he lived now?

OLD MAN (*in mechanical voice*): Dear modern people of the twenty-first century, may you be in Love and Happiness every day!

SOLDIER: Something your voice sounds somehow artificial. Is it you talking to me through a hearing aid?

OLD MAN: What is strange to you about my tone?

SOLDIER: It sounds like you are reading ready-made answers.

OLD MAN: So what?

SOLDIER: It sounds as if you knew my questions and prepared your answers.

OLD MAN: Perhaps. I am older. You know that.

SOLDIER: No, that is not the point. I hear you talk as if some other dude is answering me and not you.

OLD MAN: That is because I wrote your questions to artificial intelligence. It answered, and I just read its answers.

SOLDIER: It cannot be!

OLD MAN: Still it is. Here, look at my phone.

(Soldier peeks into the Old Man's phone.)

SOLDIER: You! Man from the trash! I do not even know what to tell you!

OLD MAN: Say, "Pack you, Valentine Petrovych".

SOLDIER: I cannot run into you like that.

OLD MAN: Why not?

SOLDIER: Like, I already respect you.

OLD MAN: Forget about me, and return to your beloved.

SOLDIER: How can I return even without a gift?

OLD MAN: Come back. Although without a gift.

SOLDIER: What would I tell her?

OLD MAN: I love you.

(Pause)

SOLDIER: I cannot utter a word.

OLD MAN: Why?

SOLDIER: Because I love you, Saint Valentine.

OLD MAN: Go home.

SOLDIER: Sit here until I get back and bring you a piece of that interesting festive men's cake.

OLD MAN: Well. I will wait. Why do not you go?

SOLDIER: I am still meticulous.

OLD MAN: Over what?

SOLDIER: What if we start with this.

OLD MAN: What beginning do you mean?

SOLDIER: I am talking about the beginning of our relationship with her!

OLD MAN: It could also be a good start to the next good play.

(The light goes out, then lights up again)

(Soldier returns to the stage)

SOLDIER: Hey old man! I forgot to ask you how everything salts.

(Soldier sees an empty chair)

SOLDIER (*continues*): There is no one here. Did I really talk so eagerly with the chair?

(*Pause*)

SOLDIER (*continues*): My post-traumatic syndrome. My doctor told me: everyone has it in their own way. Different hangups and kinks will happen to you. We need to control ourselves more carefully. Then life will go on for a long time. Like a holiday.

CURTAIN

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