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A CROSSING AT THE RIVER KALMIUS

A play by Volodymyr Serdiuk

Edited by John Freedman

CHARACTERS:

Two men in uniform, one a Ukrainian Soldier the other a Marine Captain

Two men in white togas

Two persons – a Doctor and a Nurse

(All may be the same two Actors dressed in different costumes.)

SETTINGS:

The stage is empty and dark.

Lights are dim. Only the Main Characters are readily visible.

We see nothing behind the actors, nor before them.

SCENE ONE

SOLDIER (*Shouts into the darkness*): Ahoy, there! Captain! There, in the ferry!

CAPTAIN: Hey.

SOLDIER: Sailor to sailor!

CAPTAIN: I see you clearly.

SOLDIER: What place is that?

CAPTAIN: Planet Earth.

SOLDIER: Inside or outside?

CAPTAIN: Upside down.

SOLDIER: As it always was during that damned War.

CAPTAIN: Don't be startled by Wars. They happen often.

SOLDIER: Your wisdom is too familiar to me.

CAPTAIN: Some things will never change.

SOLDIER: Will you take me north?

CAPTAIN: Do you have a coin, man?

SOLDIER: Yes, pressed between my jaws.

CAPTAIN: All right. Then why not?

SOLDIER: I used to be a sailor, too.

CAPTAIN: Really?

SOLDIER: Yes. Somewhere far from here – near the Arctic Circle.

CAPTAIN: I'll witness, it's cold enough there.

SOLDIER: One can imagine!

CAPTAIN: And it's dark.

SOLDIER: So what? I got used to these conditions while sailing there.

CAPTAIN: You people are very funny, always telling me big stories.

SOLDIER: Tell that to the sailors.

CAPTAIN: You're a newcomer, I suppose. A foreigner, I see?

SOLDIER: I am that.

CAPTAIN: A refugee?

SOLDIER: A soldier.

CAPTAIN: For the sake of Hercules, what brought you here?

PAUSE.

SCENE TWO.

(Lights out. When lights return we see both men equally in white togas. Charon holds an oar in his hand.)

SOLDIER: I am not from these parts.

CHARON: I see. What is the aim of your visit?

SOLDIER: My daughter's wedding here in Amsterdam.

CHARON: Do you believe you are in Amsterdam?

SOLDIER: Where else, in the name of God?

CHARON: Quite nice to hear that. What is the groom's name?

SOLDIER: Niels.

CHARON: You mean the one in the folk tale who encountered Gooey the Giant?

SOLDIER: Another one, even wiser, I think.

CHARON: How is life there in general? Are prices high? What about the currency rate exchange?

SOLDIER: Do you think I know?

CHARON: They say it's hard to amass capital in these days of instability.

SOLDIER: No. It's vice versa – everything I see there is rather cheap.

CHARON: How could that be?

SOLDIER: Ministers, government people, salaries, cities, buildings, people's lives – all blown sky-high, ruined and scattered on the wind for half price. Practically for nothing.

CHARON: What country did you leave?

SOLDIER: Ukraine.

CHARON: A rich land, I have heard.

SOLDIER: War finished that.

CHARON: War against whom? There are many tribes living in Europe.

SOLDIER: Russians.

CHARON: Do they come so far?

SOLDIER: Our neighbors are our curse.

CHARON: Shit happens. Did you fight?

SOLDIER: Still fighting now.

CHARON: Is this so hard?

SOLDIER: They outnumber us by too many.

CHARON: Were you good there? In War, I mean.

SOLDIER: Oh, yes, I cut many of them up there.

CHARON: What happened to you this time?

SOLDIER: There was an unexpected flash of light. It was as if I were flying. And now I am here.

CHARON: Do you feel pain?

SOLDIER: Not at all. I feel great joy. I killed my enemies.

CHARON: Not all of them yet.

SOLDIER: I know. My brothers continue and are close to finishing the job.

CHARON: Was it hard to fight the intruders there?

SOLDIER: Yes, it was hard standing up to them. War itself is hard.

CHARON: Are you able to go on rest and recuperation from the front lines?

SOLDIER: There are rotations, yes. When they draw you back from the front lines. But not for long.

CHARON: Then they put you back in the trenches again without proper rest?

SOLDIER: Shit happens, you know. You'll never be happy. No matter what happens. One of my brothers came to Bukovina for a seven-day vacation from the front line. And what do you think? He's now organizing a funeral for his wife's cousin who was shot by the Russians at that same front line back there, near Donetsk City.

CHARON: What a sad coincidence.

SOLDIER: These are not coincidences. War follows us whenever we go.

CHARON: My condolences. So, it may happen in the future that your brother will have to bury you during his short home leave.

SOLDIER: Why would he bury me? I must first be killed before I am buried!

CHARON: And?

SOLDIER: Obviously, I'm still alive!

CHARON: It's just a guess.

SOLDIER: Please, never guess in wartime! Just go out and fight! Who told you he would be burying me! That's damned nonsense!

CHARON: Please accept my apologies, my man! The tongue contains no bones, as you know.

SOLDIER: I have nothing against you personally. It's just that I'm against being killed and taking on rigor mortis!

(Both laugh)

CHARON: You're talkative. I like to talk.

SOLDIER: Like every sailor.

CHARON: Right.

SOLDIER: What about the other passengers?

CHARON: They're motionless. They don't talk a lot.

SOLDIER: I am glad. At last, you have met a polyglot.

CHARON: That happens sometimes. Not often.

SOLDIER: Still, was there anyone among them like me?

CHARON: Even worse. One was here for three days. I called him Tusitala, the Teller of Tales.

SOLDIER: I know his books! I know his name! Robert Louis Stevenson!

CHARON: What does the word "books" means?

SOLDIER: A stack of printed pages.

CHARON: I see. A mountain of pride.

SOLDIER: He was a masterful writer though.

CHARON: As were his conversations when he was here.

SOLDIER: So, you decide who goes, and who stays?

CHARON: Not quite. I can only stop them. Nothing more.

SOLDIER: Still, it's a big deal. You did not do well by me today. But I feel you are a good man.

CHARON: Like every man.

SOLDIER: Not on the average.

CHARON: We all have families and children – among them we behave.

SOLDIER: Agreed. Our duties tells us to be brave.

CHARON: Yes... However, what duties?

SOLDIER: Yours, for example – to carry men and baggage.

CHARON: Baggage, not so much. Mostly men. They come here like children. With their toys in hand, and dressed so strangely.

SOLDIER: Did you notice that too? They are naked as if going to take a bath or something.

CHARON: Yes, I'm used to seeing them this way. I never ask for explanations.

SOLDIER: That doesn't concern me. You are speaking to me. Explain it.

CHARON: You are a sailor. You all are talkative.

SOLDIER: Oh, yes!

CHARON: How long do your journeys usually last? Where were you headed?

SOLDIER: For a half a year, or even nine months and a half. Mainly to the North. Where the fish are.

CHARON: It depends on the winds...

SOLDIER: We can sail against the wind.

CHARON: Come now! You must be kidding. How can a sail work against its nature? When your sail catches the wind, your vessel will move only in that direction.

SOLDIER: We use machines to move.

CHARON: Machines to sail? Your words are obscure.

SOLDIER: Machines moved us to the brink of our limitations.

CHARON: I knew there was nothing good in those inventions.

SOLDIER: Yes, not always. Atomic bombs are pure evil.

CHARON: What bombs? What are they like?

SOLDIER: Like a Greek conflagration, you know. Just multiplied by the millions.

CHARON: Are you a mathematician? You speak of digits.

SOLDIER: No. I cannot even multiply. I use my digital telephone to count.

CHARON: A telephone is for listening!

SOLDIER: Oh well, nowadays “telephone” is just a word for another device.

CHARON: Okay. So, how many of you were on board when sailing?

SOLDIER: There were twenty of us.

CHARON: Come now! Who moved the machines then? Don’t say it was steam? That is awkward!

SOLDIER: Our fuel is called diesel. And there’s another word: solar.

CHARON: Finally. So, the sun still exists.

SOLDIER: Oh yes. And it’s a heavy one in the south of Ukraine.

CHARON: Speak slowly now. Are people using solar energy now?

SOLDIER: For quite a long time.

CHARON: Explain this so that I understand – the sun beats on us. That is all the sun does. How one can use that energy?

SOLDIER: I don’t know. For you to understand it – imagine the sun heating a table, for example...

CHARON: Okay.

SOLDIER: This part is warm.

CHARON: Okay.

SOLDIER: That part is cold.

CHARON: Of course.

SOLDIER: The difference in the temperature between the parts increases.

CHARON: So it is.

SOLDIER: The contrast between them produces energy.

CHARON: You can retain that?

SOLDIER: In storage.

CHARON: And then what?

SOLDIER: When you need it, you free it, and it moves the gears in motors that move ships.

CHARON: Sheeps?

SOLDIER: No. Sheeps are moved by politicians. Sea vessels are moved by machines that drive propellers.

CHARON: No sails?

SOLDIER: No sails.

CHARON: No oars?

SOLDIER: They still exist for sports.

CHARON: What a relief – they still exist. It’s nice to hear you have such sophisticated means there.

SOLDIER: They also kill us...

CHARON: Evidently, since you are here. But, thanks to them you lived an easy life before.

SOLDIER: To some extent.

CHARON: To this very extent right here. To these very Dire Straits.

(Both laugh.)

CHARON: I will tell you something – in this darkness and with things such a mess, I may not take aboard some souls. I may refuse.

SOLDIER: How does your manager react to that?

CHARON: There are many, and they often forget their own commands and commandments. Still, I do not like their decision to put me here in darkness.

SOLDIER: I know how you feel. There, in the south of Ukraine, the ground is like stone and they constantly order us to dig in our trucks. And you know what? The next day we leave that place and sleep in the trucks while moving.

CHARON: Does that make you angry?

SOLDIER: No. But why did they make dig trenches before marching on?

CHARON: No logic.

SOLDIER: None at all.

CHARON: That’s the way Wars go. So. Go away now.

SOLDIER: Why? I thought we had a deal?

CHARON: About what?

SOLDIER: About helping me cross the river.

CHARON: Not even my own foot ever touched the opposite bank of that river.

SOLDIER: So... I must return to survive another ordeal again, something that I already experienced?

CHARON: Don’t you worry. There will be no suffering in the end.

SOLDIER: Are you sure?

CHARON: The ancient Greeks knew this well.

SOLDIER: Our elders warned us of great pain.

CHARON: No, I tell you. The last moments of every death are ecstatic.

SOLDIER: What the hell? That’s nonsense!

CHARON: Pain will lift your spirit before your soul shall fly.

SOLDIER: How is that?

CHARON: You will feel the joy of expecting happiness.

SOLDIER: Are you lying to me?

CHARON: My decision is that I shall not let you disappear there in the darkness.

SOLDIER: But I must!

CHARON: Who told you that? I am in charge here. Go, now. Return to where you belong.

SOLDIER: Shall we meet again? I like our talks.

CHARON: As do I. We shall meet some day.

SOLDIER: And for now?

CHARON: Now you are free. Forget the fairytales you heard about me.

SOLDIER: What else can you say?

CHARON: Try twice as hard in everything you do there. Try your very best.

SOLDIER: Will we win?

CHARON: You will win.

SCENE THREE

On stage - a hospital operation room. Bright light. Blood. Dirt. An unexpected loud cry.

DOCTOR: Here he is. Here he is. Alive. May you live a long life, soldier.

(Nurse catches Doctor from behind, stopping him from falling. Helps him sit on chair.)

NURSE: Thank you, doctor. You have done the impossible. You have accomplished an impossible operation.

DOCTOR: I did my best. I am tired.

NURSE: Why did he cry out so hard? He was under deep anesthesia.

DOCTOR: The brain functions even under anesthesia. We do not know what places his soul visited as he crossed over to the other side. We do not know what circles of hell he passed through on his journey back here.

NURSE: They who return, often say they felt better there.

DOCTOR: Well, this world is far from ideal, am I not right?

NURSE: Oh, yes, you are right.

DOCTOR: Probably, because of that, he felt better being there.

NURSE: As if he were finally at home.

DOCTOR: All are but visitors who inhabit this world.

DOCTOR (*mumbling*): What an old jackass that Charon is. He's joking again... it's not the first time... I hope it won't be the last.

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