

VERA

A drama in six parts

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Dramatis personae

VERA

60 years old, Jewish actress and singer, star of the cabaret “Sztuka” (“Art”) in the Warsaw Ghetto, whose career and life after the war were destroyed by accusations of collaboration with the Nazis. A pretty woman of intelligence and wit, unknown whether she is insane.

SHE

25 years old, journalist making her debut, fascinated with the singer and her tragic history. Trying to interest the media in the subject of Vera, she becomes entangled in a bitter romance with her French mentor, and experiences her own hell of rejection, misunderstanding, and posturing. [Reveals her name to be Aleksandra (“Ola”), but referred to as “SHE” or “HER” with capital letters for the purpose of the script.]

WOMAN’S VOICE

Voiceover that is heard briefly during a videotaped interview with Vera.

Setting

The action takes place in Paris in the 1990s.

I - 1.

Loud, somber music – Verdi’s Requiem in the most dynamic section of the “Deus Irae.” A light is burning in the staircase of an old Parisian building. SHE is standing in front of Vera’s door. SHE rings several times, knocks more and more boldly. The music cuts off violently.

SHE

Madame Vera, it’s me! We spoke over the telephone. Just an hour ago. I wanted to talk with you. I know that you don’t like journalists, but I am not a journalist. And I have greetings for you – from Warsaw,

(short pause)

from a friend.

(SHE listens, but silence reigns in the apartment.)

Please open the door. We had an appointment. I’ve really been counting on this meeting.

(Silence)

You don’t even know how much.

(Presses herself to the door. Nothing. Are they both holding their breath? The light goes out. When she tries to turn it on again, her phone rings inside her bag. Everything almost falls out at her feet before she grabs her phone.)

Yes. Of course. She doesn’t want to let me in. She’s there. Definitely. But please. I heard music. She practically never leaves the house any more. What? Ach – old bitch, I understand.

(SHE rings the bell again.)

Madame Vera. I know what they did to you.

(SHE sits in front of the door and takes an apple from her bag. The light goes out)

I - 2.

Clink of the locks. Door opens the length of the chain. In the dim light Vera’s face appears.

VERA

The old bitch still has pretty good hearing... and a couple of questions, for the young... lady.

(SHE stands up quickly, choking on her apple.)

SHE

I’m sorry. I... haven’t eaten anything all day.

VERA

Who sent you?

SHE

No one. I already told you over the phone.

VERA

Come on. They definitely sent you. Them. You don’t know who? The ones who are trailing me step-by-step, as a “Gestapo whore,” as they say. Do you know them?

SHE

I... simply...I’ve read a lot about you. I’ve listened to all your recordings, at least... the ones in the radio archive.

VERA

Ohhhh, so you're just curious about what this singing monster from the Ghetto looks like, right? Who's paying you?

SHE

No one. I came to Paris at my own expense. I work in radio, in the documentary department. And that's why I thought I would come to record your testimony, of what you had to go through...in life.

VERA

Oh, ho, ho. Polish Radio Warsaw. I used to be their star. "The Divine Vera," "vamp of the stage with the angelic voice," and all that sweet talk. But later, whoa, fire and brimstone poured down on my head, and if they could have, they would have tarred and feathered me as well. That's how they treated me after the war. It's all I remember. But they still watch every penny. So then, you must have a rich boyfriend?

SHE

No.

VERA

It's nothing to be ashamed of. We've all got to pay the bills, for caviar and oysters.

SHE

No.

VERA

What, no?

SHE

I don't like caviar or oysters.

VERA

Oh, so proud. Are you Jewish?

SHE

Polish. But also Jewish, by my mother.

VERA

That's just like me. Blood of my blood. But now I'm not really Jewish any more. Don't you look at me like that, missy - I didn't just lose my mind. I had a transfusion and they pumped the blood of some goy into my veins. So what kind of Jew am I? Did you know that?

SHE

No.

VERA

But do you think they know? That maybe they would leave me alone? What? Would they?

(For a long time SHE searches for an answer. The door starts to close. Vera holds it open for another moment.)

VERA

They don't. But you would like to enter my soul through my rectum, dear lady. My darkest soul. That's it. With pencils, with tape recorders, and even with your dirty boots. And Madame, you believe that I would agree to that. Because you desire, you want, or at least you intend. You have no conscience, you scribblers, no understanding that I am angry that the life I had was destroyed by people like you.

(SHE recoils from the door, shocked by Vera's outburst.)

SHE

We had an appointment...

VERA

But you, you Polish women, have some kind of inborn audacity of reaching your goals, even pursuing corpses.

(SHE puts the apple back in her bag and starts to leave. Vera changes her tone.)

Well, so what – real stars can be capricious. Even I know that I will regret it. Come tomorrow at the same time. For now I am fighting with my own demons, alone. I don't need you for that. And I'm listening to music. It's the Verdi Requiem. It's also someone else who was crucified.

(The door closes. SHE stands for a moment in the darkness. Then she is illuminated by her cell phone. SHE dials a number.)

SHE

Are you rich, Marcel? Maybe you will be. We will be. I've got her. But not until tomorrow.

(hangs up)

Today I have you.

II

II -1.

Gap in the door no larger than before. Vera sizes HER up carefully.

VERA

You got something to write with?

SHE

Yes.

VERA

Good. Tape recorder?

SHE

Yes, I have one.

VERA

Take mine. This one doesn't look serious.

(Tries to push an old Grundig reel-to-reel through the gap in the door. SHE doesn't manage, and angrily gives up.)

Here's where to turn it on. At least it can be guaranteed to record something ...

(A shabby stool appears in the the gap, and Vera looks suspiciously.)

VERA

But, my child, what could you know about the Ghetto? Or about me? Nothing. A big, hairy nothing.

SHE

Because...I'd like...All the more...

VERA

Hey, there. No "because" or "all the more." I'll inform you that I know rather too much, about both the Ghetto and about human baseness. I've already lived my years. When they ask me how many, you know, what should I tell them? That I'm as old as anyone. Or I call out a sharp bid, "one hundred fifty!" Somehow that causes their curiosity to disappear. But maybe it hasn't

disappeared from you, my good lady, because I can still see some sparkle in your eyes. Say what you have to say. Ask.

SHE

How old are you, Madame Vera?

VERA

Today? A hundred forty. See, I gave you ten extra. As a promotion. A hundred and forty. You're definitely thirty, no?

SHE

Almost.

VERA

Then maybe we can meet in the middle of the road.

(SHE coughs. Pulls back the stool with her hand.)

Maybe, maybe not. Because you writers, you are like the plague. You kiss up and kiss up, and later you write nonsense, like some kind of traitor or ultimate fool. "Famous Warsaw Ghetto nightengale lashes out at the world." Is that the best you can do? And you, what, are you also going to babble about the "nightingale of the Ghetto"?

SHE

That perhaps, wasn't about you.

VERA

Perhaps? But about whom?

SHE

About Marysia Ajzensztadt.

(Stool drops to the floor.)

VERA

I see that you've scratched the surface and remembered a few things. But she had as much in common with a nightengale as I do with a giraffe. And who even heard of her back then? The Ghetto was hell. Crowds. Chaos. Screaming. 400,000 people together, on just a few streets. To get through, you needed sharp elbows and strong legs. As for a career in the Ghetto - don't believe it. I hardly heard anything about this or any other Marysia.

SHE

Maybe she also performed in the Cafe Sztuka.

VERA

The Sztuka was me, and only me. Vera Gran. The Great Vera. Whoever wasn't known before didn't exist. I'm telling you. I was a star before the war that continued to shine afterward. Sometimes I think it was unnecessary, but that's how it was.

(Shoves the stool into the corridor.)

So, good. Sit down and let's cut to the chase.

SHE

Here?

VERA

Here.

(Before sitting down, she blocks the switch with a coin.)

VERA

I could tell you a story to warm up. How's that?

SHE

Certainly.

VERA

Listen to this. My mother, who has been the most important person in my life to this day, hated my voice. She was ashamed to have given birth to a girl who had the voice of man. That was until she found out I was a contralto with perfect pitch.

SHE

Do you have perfect pitch?

VERA

Well what do you think? That a star only knows how to shine and smell pretty? We lived on Elektoralna Street, Mama and three daughters in a tiny room, but just outside there was a telephone. So, when my mother called from work, for instance, to ask me to go to the neighbors to do a manicure instead of spending hours in the rubbish singing songs for my friends, I responded out of spite with this masculine voice, and she was taken in by it. Period. Stop! That's for you. Let's see if it recorded.

SHE

Oh, for sure.

VERA

For sure, it sounds poor. So be it.

(A fragment plays - "she hated my voice")

Definitely poor. It sounds scratchy as hell. And does one say in Polish, "it hates of my voice," or just "it hates my voice."

SHE

It didn't record badly at all.

VERA

Because it's my voice that's so scratchy, not that contraption. Everything is screechy. You think that I don't get out of the house - from the apartment so often, because I've gone mad, or I'm afraid that someone on the street will recognize me and call me names. It's a cosmic error, and maybe even a comic error.

SHE

I don't think so at all.

VERA

Why deceive yourself? Life passes, beauty passes. I have no desire to frighten people with my ugly mug or the rest of me. You either. That's why I've been keeping you out in the corridor.

SHE

Maybe sometime you will change your mind?

VERA

Who knows.

SHE

Will I be the first to find out?

VERA

Oh, certainly. Probably. Perhaps.

SHE

When?

VERA

Don't try to be so clever, missy. No time soon. And only under certain conditions.

SHE

And could you tell me, what conditions?

VERA

Mine, certainly. Because it's either on my conditions or silence. Capisce?

SHE

Have I done something wrong to you, Madame Vera?

VERA

You want to be offended, go ahead, be offended, but first give me back my stool.

(Vera straightens herself on the stool and pretends to tinker with the tape recorder.)

VERA

But, you know... Only men recognize me occasionally. Some hopeless old men sometimes say to me "Madame Vera? The Vera? Lord, how I was in love with you." Sometimes, when I've been in a good mood, I've answered, "Oy, you should have told me. I would have given myself to you." Is it recording?

SHE

(SHE checks)

Yes.

VERA

Good. But quickly now, just one more question, and I disappear.

SHE

But...

(Preferring not to struggle.)

How did you...

VERA

(Interrupts.)

Hello, hello! This should be my question. Who said it's yours? And it goes like this: Where, my good lady, was the cabaret where I appeared before the war? If you don't know, we're done. Quietly, with civility, as befits two quite refined ladies. Simply - goodbye. Do you know?

SHE

"Cafe Vogue", on Złota Street.

VERA

What address ?

SHE

Seven.

VERA

Right, very good.

(Fiddles with the locks.)

And who was the biggest scoundrel in the history of the world?

SHE

Hitler?

VERA

Judas. Judas and his followers. Hitler was the archvillain, but he didn't betray anyone. But this

one...the worst swine is the one who destroys his own kind. I had many like that around me. We can skip their names. So long. Are you recording this?

SHE

I'm recording.

VERA

Then stop now. Because now Vera shall disappear. It's my bladder calling, not me. You wouldn't want to argue with an old woman's bladder.

(Vera becomes upset.)

Can you wait?

SHE

Of course.

(Door shuts with all locks.)

SHE

But... Madame Vera. Will you come back?

VERA

And what, I'm supposed to sit on the toilet forever?

(SHE remains alone. As if in a panic, she makes several uncertain movements, pulling her phone from her bag, dialing a number, but quickly hanging up.)

SHE

Why don't you answer? Asshole.

(SHE checks HER watch, moves toward the stairs, but turns around. Reads through the messages on her cellphone. Turns on the Dictaphone. HER voice plays, "Call your mother. Vera: career, song titles. Most important: recording at the Spielberg foundation. She must have it." Dials a number. After a moment, speaks in a mock-defensive tone.)

SHE

It's me, your one and only daughter. I'm calling from Paris – for real – on the Seine. A little dirty, but nothing in comparison to the Vistula. Yes. I still don't know much. But tomorrow, maybe I'll go to the country for a week, with a guy if you must know. I know you're glad. You're always glad when I'm with someone, but somehow I don't feel it. Marcel. Not "Frenchie" – he's French. A Frenchman of French extraction, if that is of interest to you. But if it's not him, I don't think I'll be able to work anything out. And how are you doing, mommy?

(SHE cuts off the conversation, because she hears Vera inside the apartment, records into the Dictaphone secretly):

"Remember about the Spielberg tapes. And about a certain Frenchie."

(Vera returns. Again the ritual of opening the door)

VERA

And what would you – woman with the tape recorder and the manners of a bookkeeper – really like to ask me?

SHE

(Pretending to look at her notes.)

Do you prefer to be compared to Greta Garbo or Marlene Dietrich?

VERA

Definitely not with that Marysia Nightengale or any other Kugelschwanz. But, but, what kinds of intelligent questions are those...? Oh, you! Making fun of an old lady, perhaps? So be it. You don't look like the idiot, you must be taking me for. With interviews, it's good if the second one isn't as stupid as the first. Or vice versa. Or something like that.

(Vera unlatches the chain, and appears in the door with a second stool in her hand and sits down next to HER.)

VERA

Start again.

SHE

Is it true that you appeared in the Cafe Vogue as late as September 1, 1939, just after the outbreak of the war?

VERA

It's the God's honest truth. I was twenty-three years old, glassy eyed, and I only knew how to sing. The rest of us were all consoling ourselves that the beginning of the war was not the end of life. We would beat the Germans, because we had allies in the West. I performed there for another week. There were, it is true, air raids by day and general confusion, but the audience still came.

SHE

What did you sing then?

VERA

Certainly, all the usual tunes...

SHE

"Three Letters"?

VERA

Of course.

SHE

"I wait in loneliness"?

VERA

I wait, always in loneliness, I wait.

SHE

"Dark is the night"?

VERA

Oh, yes, particularly in the city we had blackout hours after curfew.

SHE

"Tango notturno"?

VERA

Yes, certainly. What is your name, my child?

SHE

Ola.

VERA

Olga, beautiful.

SHE

Ola. From Aleksandra.

VERA

Ok, but for me you will be Olga.

SHE

"We Were Swept Up in the Dance"?

VERA

"The Dance Swept Us Away." Here I can't get my head around it. But what kind of singing

was that? People's eyes were sadder and sadder. And there were hardly any flowers.
(Footsteps on the stairs – heavy, loud, approaching from below. Vera pulls herself from the stool.)

VERA

It might be them. Get inside. Because it's clear why they are coming.

SHE

Who?

VERA

And there aren't enough scoundrels in the world who might be after us?

(Vera pulls HER into the apartment, but after a moment returns to her and gestures to take the stools.)

VERA

Hurry.

II – 2.

The interior of a cluttered room, in one corner a piano covered with a pile of books and newspapers. Television by the wall. Vague forms, because it is almost completely dark in the middle.

SHE

There's no light?

VERA

There is.

SHE

Can we turn it on?

VERA

Don't you dare. I am the light here. That will have to suffice. Stars were made to shine. But if we need it, I have this.

(VERA shows HER a massive flashlight).

My trusty little flashlight. Sit where you like, and speak quietly, because they are listening.

(They both listen to the footsteps as they stop for a moment at the door and continue further. SHE doesn't know whether to take it seriously. Vera, satisfied as if she had just rehearsed a small scene on stage, sinks into her armchair.)

VERA

That first day of the war, I also waited in the dark. For the rest of the family. In the apartment on 40 Hoza St. First Hela came, my eldest sister. Later mother arrived, panting. And finally Maryla came running. She threw a package tied with string on the table. Dozens of gold rings arranged on nice little posts. This was our entire treasure. Immediately the room lit up.

SHE

(HER cellphone lights up and starts beeping. SHE quickly turns it off.)

From all the gold?

VERA

24 karat, pure gold. I had never been poor up to that point, and then I saw all this. But, what to do with this treasure? We didn't know yet, that this was what we would use every day to buy bread, oil, onions, and to survive.

(The cellphone lights up again. Vera gives a look of warning. SHE tosses the phone into HER bag.)

SHE

I'm sorry. I'm listening. And then what?

VERA

Mother advised everyone to hold on to their things. Maryla and Hela wanted to hide it.

SHE

And Vera?

VERA

(Shines the flashlight into the window.)

And Vera thought of a hiding place. The brass curtain rods. It took about an hour until I packed everything in and screwed the decorative knobs back on. During this hour. The whole time I stood on a ladder waving a feather duster, with ostrich feathers.

(Vera reaches behind herself for a tattered feather duster. Gives the flashlight to HER.)

SHE

Just like that one?

VERA

Better – this very one. Shine the light for yourself and look. This is that very duster. It's taking its last gasp, but it will definitely outlive even me. Now shine it at me. Stupid, tres stupid, Vera!

(Pretends to slap herself.)

SHE

(Drops the flashlight after seeing this.)

What was that for?

VERA

Don't be afraid; I'm not crazy. Don't be afraid to shine the light. That's what it's for. Because... one afternoon the Germans attacked Hoża Street. Only mother was at home. They tossed her out screaming as she stood there. These were soldiers, pillagers. In the evening, with my heart jumping out of my chest, I snuck up to my place. Apocalypse. Everything turned upside down, couches and armchairs slashed, broken dishes. I was completely losing my mind. I packed whatever was left. Some shoes, photographs, sheet music. A fan, a few books. Even that horrid vase from Ćmielowa, oh – that one, over there. I fled with a full bag. Sweaty. Satisfied. Victorious. Because I'd outsmarted the Swabians!

SHE

And, not?

VERA

(Exhales heavily, as if she were experiencing it all again.)

Then as my sister's I realized – but the rings, where were they? I wanted to kill myself in shame, and above all to rush back there, unscrew the knobs, and pull out what was ours, what would have been enough for the whole war. I even fled, though my sisters hung on to me, so I wouldn't go, but it was too late. They were already standing there, already watching out, just waiting for the greedy little kike to come back.

(HER cellphone lights up in her bag. SHE looks at it for a second and, satisfied, turns it off completely.)

VERA

Why am I telling you this? So that you will know, before you ask those questions you vipers always ask about the Ghetto, that everything in life has its price. And for many things, you have to pay. But I only knew how to sing. Because I even lost those stupid rings. You always need something to fight with for yourself. Do you have anything?

SHE

I don't have any money, if that's what you're asking. No gold rings either.

VERA

Well, but you have your little tape recorder, and your telephone, and your pen. A head full of ideas, of how to lure this old lady into your trap. Stupid, you certainly are not. But for me, that's not quite enough. You need to make more of an effort. But not today. I've had enough, but you must certainly want to do something else now. I see that every minute that equipment of yours is going bonkers.

SHE

Meaning? What should I do?

VERA

We'll think of something.

(The flashlight rests for a moment on the piano, excavated from the half-darkness.)

You know, get a few things – a baguette, cheese, orange marmalade, and maybe even a little wine, not too strong, for an older lady.

SHE

Oh, yes, of course.

VERA

Ha, ha, ha! I was just kidding. That's just trivial. Speaking of jokes, you said something about some people sending their regards from Warsaw. From friends. I have no friends in Warsaw. Or anywhere else. What's up with that?

SHE

Actually, about my mother. She sends her regards. She loves your songs very much.

VERA

Is that how you weasel out of that one? Very bold of you.

SHE

She was in the Ghetto. She was five years old.

VERA

Tell me about it. Then she couldn't have known me.

SHE

Grandma let her hear your recordings – "Three Letters," "Tango Notturmo" – and my mother played them for me.

VERA

Oy, then you must prepare something special for Vera next time, if there is to be a next time. I'll whisper in your ear, so that no one will hear us.

(Vera whispers something into the girl's ear that moves HER)

SHE

No, Madame Vera, please.

VERA

Vera asks politely.

SHE

But truly, I can't do it.

VERA

Your choice. It's all or nothing. But now, run, run, because they are in the stairway again, but you can't let them grab you. Many people are counting on you. Your sisters are wringing their hands; mother, the esteemed Liba Grynberg is crying her eyes out. But if she has to, she will still scold you or even smack you for your stupidity. With rings or without, get your bag and flee. Go, go, or you won't make it home. Or on the last train.

SHE

I beg you, no. I won't manage.

VERA

We'll see.

SHE

I've never tried.

VERA

So what! And you want to make it in show business?

SHE

Me? Not at all.

VERA

No? But how your eyes sparkle. Well, they can serve you in some other line of work.

SHE

But that, I cannot do.

VERA

Okay. You know my conditions. Call when you are ready. Maybe you can bargain for something else in exchange.

(SHE is almost out the door)

SHE

Spielberg's tapes?

VERA

Maybe.

(SHE closes the door behind HER.)

But how did you come to know about them?

III

III -1.

On the television screen: in a striped armchair, Vera in eyeglasses, dark hair teased up. SHE is wearing a blue blouse and a black sweater. The real Vera is sitting on the bed. SHE is on a chair near Vera.

WOMAN'S VOICE.

(Voiceover)

"Please tell us your first and last name."

VERA

"My name is Vera Gran"

WOMAN'S VOICE

"Could you spell that?"

VERA

"G - R - A - N. 'N' as in 'Natalia'"

VERA

"Did you have some other name during the war or false papers?"

(Vera shakes her head no.)

WOMAN'S VOICE

"Your date of birth? "

VERA

"April 20, 1918."

WOMAN'S VOICE

"Place of birth? "

VERA

"Warsaw."

WOMAN'S VOICE

"Where is that? "

VERA

(Sharply, indignant.)

"Poland."

(The picture disappears, skews, instead of the recording of Vera an animated version of "Asterix and Obelix" appears.)

SHE

Oh, come on!

VERA

(Furious.)

Motherfucker! The maid must have erased it. I told you they are shysters and gonovim and idiots. Didn't I say so? I'm telling you now. That's why I got rid of them. So what the fuck did they record...

(Vera looks a little too long at the development of the action on the screen.)

Such cartoons they have here, but maybe that's better. You see who I had to deal with - that woman from the Spielberg Foundation who asked me where Warsaw was. Warsaw! And what would she have said about Lwów, about Cracow? Even more if I would have troubled her with, say, Druya, where - you probably don't even know - I spent the first winter of the war there. That she could have asked about, but Warsaw? Enough of this blabbering.

SHE

It's erased?

VERA

And you, for example, do you know where Druya is?

(SHE shakes HER head, writing something down).

VERA

No one knows where it is anymore. Near Braslav in Belarus, past Wilno.

(Vera plays with the remote control).

Maybe there's something later on the tape.

(Asterix and Obelix flicker as they watch in fast forward. Vera throws up her hands helplessly.)

SHE

That's all?

VERA

(Vera pulls out another videotape.)

Maybe this one. There were a couple of hours of recordings, two tapes.

SHE

That's it!

(The image of Vera in the armchair appears again. VERA adjusts her glasses and hair. A moment of silence, as if there were a break in a sequence of questions).

WOMAN'S VOICE

"When did you find yourself in the Ghetto?"

VERA

(Irritated.)

"I did not find myself in the Ghetto. I was locked in. Like thousands of people. In hunger, cold, and misery."

(Again, the image cuts off and returns, this time with a live-action version of the adventures of Asterix and Obelix. The fat Obelix is climbing up the face of the Egyptian Sphinx. Vera snorts, unclearly whether from laughter or anger.)

VERA

Here we go again. Paranoia. But look at this Obelix... what a fat round face. I used to see types like that.

(Remote control falls from Vera's hand, SHE picks it up.)

SHE

Those are all the tapes?

VERA

Any more would finish me off. You see what's going on here. Turn it off, or I'll really go nuts. Maybe you would like to see a bit of that one...Asterix. People have their preferences. No? Do you think that I did it myself?

SHE

(Struggling to conceal her anger.)

I was counting on those tapes.

VERA

Apparently they're ruined. But what are they to you?

SHE

Tapes are tapes.

VERA

Eeee...They're only tapes!

SHE

Priceless evidence.

VERA

But what's it to you? Are you going to court?

SHE

They can always be useful.

VERA

That stuff, you've heard all the same bullshit. Why do you need tapes, if you still have me, a star of international proportions? Write. That's what Aznavour called me. Charles. A God of song here. A Star or a Gestapo whore, as my countrymen say. Well, some of them. Anyway—the great Vera Gran, who was born in some unknown place called “Warsaw,” and who probably didn't ever use any other names.

(Sneering.)

“Madame Vera, but Wanda Czajkowska, and Weronika Gacka, and Tomaszowska, Jezierska... As if you would have survived without them later on Aryan papers?”

SHE

(Nervously winds the tape, forward, then back.)

Merde.

VERA

Am I supposed to ask the questions or you? Go ahead!

SHE

How would you have survived without Aryan papers?

VERA

I would have died miserably, my child, without each of these ladies. Certainly without Jezierska. These tapes you are dealing with are stupid, but I can tell you more interesting things. That's what I'll do. Do you want me to? To tell you?

SHE

(Turns off the television.)

I'm counting on it.

VERA

Because, if not, then don't...

SHE

Please.

VERA

Now it's “please”! But now, somehow, I don't want to anymore.

SHE

Madame Vera! I'm begging you.

VERA

“Please, I beg of you.” They're all so interested, and inquisitive. And then they ask, “Warsaw, where is that?” Because in fact they don't know. Somewhere in Siberia, surely, where white bears play balalaikas. So, what would you like to hear about, for example?

SHE

(Quickly)

For example, about Druya. Or about Jezierska.

VERA

Actually, this is one and the same story. Because I was Jezierska from Kazio. Write it down – Kazimierz Jezierski, doctor. When he was a medical student, he had already been coming to take care of mama. He knew who I was. Once or twice, he saw me on stage.

SHE

Was he in love with you?

VERA

Certainly. Handsome with chestnut hair, outgoing, cordial. I didn't fall for any men there, and I didn't even want to fall in love with him. In September of '39, he returned to Warsaw for me, from just over the Lithuanian border. I went with him, I don't know why. Which is to say, I do know why. Are you writing?

SHE

Yes, yes.

VERA

Through Druya, which we reached, I don't remember how, because I was unconscious the whole way, we were supposed to go to Latvia and Sweden, and bring the family. And it never occurred to me who he would be in my life, this Kazio. Do you know who?

SHE

A husband?

VERA

A husband – whatever – that too, but later. Above all a caretaker, defender, and in the end an endless source of guilt. Why aren't you writing this down?

SHE

I'm recording.

VERA

Write, I'll help you. You see what happens to these diabolical recordings. But if you write, it doesn't disappear.

SHE

Regret – why?

VERA

Because I never valued, remembered, how much he did for me. I'm a mean old lady, it's a fact. What?

SHE

Madame Vera...

VERA

I am, I am.

(With irony.)

Don't deny it with such passion... But only Kazio had the right to say that about me. Because I punished him for years – maybe for that night in Druya. My first night with a man. I was as lost as a babe in the woods in such a situation. I don't even remember the pain, but the humiliation... And maybe I didn't even take off my clothes, because it was freezing cold. But I'd only seen a naked man several months later. Thank you very much, but that's something I never needed to see. That terrible instrument in front – sheesh! Have you had – pardon, do you?

SHE

No, not necessarily.

VERA

You're not saying, perhaps, that you like that instrument of theirs?

SHE

Me? I'm not opposed to it.

VERA

Oho, ho. Now that is interesting.

SHE

Actually, I even like it.

VERA

And I'm supposed to admire this? Who's the lucky fellow, this Kazio of yours?

SHE

Marcel.

VERA

French?

SHE

Yes.

VERA

So that's why you have dark circles under your eyes today. From Marcel.

SHE

Dark circles?

(SHE tries to see. There is no mirror anywhere, so she looks into the glass of a framed photograph.)

They're constantly renovating the Louvre. They hammer even at night, and I have a room nearby.

VERA

Yes, of course. I even wondered, what kind of hammer is keeping you up at night. Oh, bite your tongue, Vera. Apologize to the nice lady for saying such stupid things. You realize, Ola, that old ladies can get terribly raunchy. Horrificulous, I know.

SHE

Really, I do have bags under my eyes. You are so perceptive!

VERA

On the contrary, it was just a joke – a little cruel, in fact. But I'm still that way. Why didn't you get in touch for a week. Was it some kind of strategy? To soften me up by letting me marinate for a few days?

SHE

I was... we were in the country.

VERA

With Marcel? Certainly. And I was with Kazio. That whole first winter of the war. He saw patients at the hospital; I was recovering from frost bite. But when I recovered, I rushed to Lwów.

SHE

Why did you go to Lwów? It was under Soviet control.

VERA

And what was it supposed to be at that time? Filth and tanks with stars in the streets, Bolsheviks either in rags or in clothes that looked like they came from a theater dressing room. Why? Why? You already know me a bit, this bitch obsessed with singing, so you already have the answer.

(Vera is silently wounded. SHE manages to write something down.)

Very well. So it is. I'll tell you. What – from there it would have been easier to escape to Romania or Budapest. That, and some variety theaters were starting up there, with Bodo, Ref-Ren, and in general everyone was there. So I started to perform, but the whole time, I wanted to get back to Warsaw, because everything was rotten.

SHE

What?

VERA

What do you mean, "what"? Everything. These announcers, agitators, informants. Censors deleting every piece of jewelry from my song, because it was gold... Russian officials in trenchcoats and caps in the audience. Didn't you have this up to your ears in Poland? For forty years. Mommy and daddy never told you about it?

SHE

They told us. The officials checked their trenchcoats and caps in the cloakroom like civilized people.

VERA

Stop being so nitpicky. I'm fed up with all this talk.

(Vera goes to the piano. Tosses off the pile of papers resting on the lid. VERA opens the piano and tries a high note.)

Chattering. And chattering. And chattering.

(SHE doesn't react, continuing to write in her notebook, glancing up periodically at a photograph. SHE turns on a flashlight.)

SHE

And who is that next to you?

VERA

That handsome gentleman? Brel. Jacques.

SHE

I know. I recognize him. Port Amsterdam.

VERA

Ne me quitte pas. Nice boy.

SHE

(hinting)

Aaaaand...??

VERA

There was no "aaaaand".

SHE

But?

VERA

No.

SHE

No?

VERA

Maybe a little, but him rather than me.

SHE

And then what?

VERA

Ne me quitte pas. How did you get to be so nosy all of a sudden? You're not afraid that Vera will throw you out anymore? Maybe that I'll sing "Don't leave me" for you?

(coughs)

Please, once I start croaking it out, you'll flee of your own accord, little Marcel! Are you afraid that he'd stop liking you?

SHE

You've never had such fears?

VERA

Fear, schmear, who cares? Look at how much of this crap I have around here. These powders, lipsticks, nail polishes. All the best brands.

SHE

I can't see them.

VERA

Oh, yes, I threw them into the trash a while back. You've got to do it. Memories as well. And people. Into the trash.

SHE

(Stands up, not knowing, whether she should get up and head for the door. Rubs her eyes.)

VERA

Sit down. And listen, now that you've decided to listen. Do you know what I remember most about Soviet Lwów?

(With a gesture, she puts off HER question.)

A sweater. I knitted Kazio a sweater. I must have loved him back then. I never gave him a present like that before or after. Nor to anyone else for that matter. Knit three to the left...

(Hesitates)

You look like you want to slap me, because I'm rambling.

(Tilts her head.)

Go ahead – swing.

SHE

Do you sing anymore?

VERA

Have you heard me? God forbid. My doctor even recommended it as a memory exercise, but thank you very much. I recorded what I had to record, whoever needs to know, knows, and that's enough.

SHE

You have an excellent memory.

VERA

You said it. When I want to, I remember. So I don't think that I don't remember. You know what I mean.

(Leans on the piano, as if to remind herself of one of her old poses.)

SHE

No, not so much.

VERA

About my conditions – our conditions for further co-op-o-ration. But you remember, you remember. I see it in your eyes. That's why you wanted to take off at the first opportunity.

SHE

I wouldn't have wanted to.

VERA

So now I'll shut up, and you won't find out anything else. For example, what did I use to knit this sweater. You want to hear?

SHE

Yes. Please.

VERA

In the market I bought a little thick wool, the remnants of a red shawl and a navy blue jacket. I unraveled them. And then, backstage, I knitted this sweater for Kazik. Do you even know how to knit?

SHE

Not so well.

VERA

Then you would not have survived. However, you look like the type who learns quickly. So I did this according to the rules of occupation. And I told my fortune, loop by loop. One red, two blue. Fear of what the future would bring and hope. Two loops to the right, and all will be well; two loops to the left, and it will be bad. Mother writes, all's well; snow in Warsaw, bad. Jews robbed, beaten, herded into Ghettos –blue, blue, blue. They love, hope, wait– red, red, red. And in the end, I couldn't stand it. There was no option but to choose, the hammer and sickle or the swastika.

SHE

But did you know what was happening in Warsaw?

VERA

Some letters got out, and you could make out between the lines what was happening. But no one wanted to believe it was all true.

(Vera bangs on the piano keyboard after each item that she and SHE list.)

Jews had to wear armbands with the Star of David!

SHE

They were not allowed to ride in a droshky!

VERA

Or on the tram!

SHE

To have a bank account!

VERA

Jews!

SHE

Automobiles!

VERA

Carrier pigeons!

SHE

And stamps with Hitler on them. Or furs!

VERA

That was later. They couldn't have dogs!

SHE

No admittance...! To a bakery!

VERA

To Royal Łazienki Park!

SHE

And Ujazdowski Park!

VERA

And the Saxon Gardens!

SHE

And Wolski Park!

VERA

They couldn't work!

SHE

Study!

VERA

Love!

SHE

Live!

VERA

They were allowed to have lice!

(Collapses again into the armchair.)

I used to think like you people now. It's completely impossible, some kind of stupid, petty bullshit! They couldn't invent it. It's a civilized nation. Poets, musicians, scholars. Humanists! You young people, are already believing in this again. Am I right?

SHE

Today, everything looks different.

VERA

You don't say? So I've got it. So when my mother wrote to me begging, that everyone in the Ghetto was asking about me, and that they were opening up cafes in the Ghetto, I decided to return. To Warsaw. To the Ghetto. And you see – stupid – I pushed myself right into the paws of the Krauts. And I could have become an All-Soviet superstar and pigged out on caviar and blini for the rest of my life.

SHE

Or wind up in Siberia.

VERA

That too. You know, you can erase that, because it will motivate some new creeps, or maybe one of the old ones will write in the papers that that well known Gestapo bitch dreamed of being a Bolshevik slut. Did you erase it?

SHE

(Stops recording, but starts it up again right away.)

Yes.

VERA

These Hitler-shits and stupid-Stalins still formed a mutual admiration society. It was still possible to cross the border. I prayed that they would not hold us back, that I wouldn't miss my Ghetto. And I didn't even care that they took almost everything from us.

SHE

And the sweater?

VERA

What sweater? Oh, that. The sweater too, because Kazio didn't wear it. He preferred some old fur waistcoat. Is there still such a word in Poland?

SHE

There is. Waistcoat. A very nice word.

VERA

It looks a bit suspicious to me. Like "waste," w-a-s-t-e, and coat. To hell with it. That German on the border took one look at me and stamped a star of David that took up a whole page in my fake passport. It was the first time I'd experienced something like that. I was stamped like goods for sale, or an animal for slaughter. It was almost like that night in Druya. In a hotel, in Cracow, I spent many hours on that star. I cried and tried to erase it, rub it out, scratch it off. That's not me; it's not my fate. I have nothing in common with a star. Not with that one.

SHE

Madame Vera. I'm so sorry.

VERA

You see what you've done to me?

SHE

I'm sorry. Maybe we should take a break.

VERA

(Waves her hand, "no.")

In the morning we went to Warsaw. I sold what I could. Kazio and I ate our last elegant dinner at "Mascotte" on Jasna Street, not far from the philharmonic. Liver and onions and torte "Fedora." And finally I stood before the gate to the Ghetto. The wall wasn't finished yet. They only let me in, because I had my ausweiss with the star and two hundred zloty for a bribe.

SHE

What? You had to pay to get into the Ghetto?

VERA

At that time, yes. If one didn't want to be interrogated – "and where did I come from, and who hid me, and where"? Maybe I could have survived outside the Ghetto, and maybe not. Because there are enough bastards of this and that sort, avengers of the Lord Jesus, roaming in the streets. But here, inside the walls, a Jew was a Jew was a Jew. And my mama was also there, sisters, everyone who was closest to me. And, period. Point. Konyets. And now your turn.
(VERA makes the gesture of an emcee, inviting a performer on stage.)

SHE

But I... need to... right now... the bathroom...

VERA

Yes, of course. Women always have their excuses. Go, go, just flush carefully.

III

III – 2.

SHE

(Gathers a few papers from the floor along the way. Peeps at them in the bathroom and reads into the dictaphone.)

"During the German occupation, from 1941 to August 1942 in the Warsaw Ghetto,

she maintained social relations with persons who were known Gestapo agents, thereby committing criminal acts in violation of Article 1 of the Rules of the Citizens' Court."

(SHE looks at another document.)

"Honorable Prosecutor Adolf Dqb: I respectfully request an investigation in connection with the charges of collaboration with the Germans made publicly against me."

VERA

Were you talking to me? No? I thought I heard your voice. And be careful pulling the chain or everything will fall and wreck your hairdo, such as it is.

SHE

"Slandorous action, unsupported by any evidence, has had the effects of the loss of gainful employment and civil death. In affirmation of my innocence, I attach..."

And such moments make life worth living. Marcel.

(Turns off dictaphone. After a moment records:)

You're mine.

(SHE runs the water and waits a moment longer. In the meanwhile, Vera fiddles with the VCR, checks for something, fast forwards.)

VERA

Come on already, and start.

III – 3.

SHE

(Gets settled again with Vera.)

I hardly have anything to tell. I studied Romance languages and I'm trying to get something here and there. I'd rather be here, because in Poland...

VERA

Hey, wait a minute, girl. Did I ask about all that? Am I even interested in you as an independent being?

SHE

Aren't you?

VERA

Not at all.

SHE

Don't you even want to know to whom you are confessing your secrets?

VERA

And now there's "secrets"! It's been all chit-chat up to now. That only needs an ounce of thought. I'm only so interested in the rest. So how much is that? As much as you've prepared – did you do it or did you just roll around in bed?

SHE

I don't know... what to say.

VERA

I see what's going on. You didn't do your assignment. I should throw you out once and for all. Is that what it is? Marcel probably wouldn't be happy.

(Taking advantage of Vera's quick inspection of the bathroom, she wants to lay the papers out on the piano. One folder remains in her hand.)

SHE

I can try.

VERA

Forget about it. You can try at home, not here.

(VERA slams the lid of the piano.)

But – let it be – my loss. This time I'll give you a break. Let's come back to it later. But for today, that's enough.

SHE

I understand, and I am very grateful.

VERA

You don't have to be. Because, honestly, I've had quite enough of you, and all of these confessions. And myself as well, especially myself. I'm not saying another word, or I'll burst into tears like an idiot. I'm going to sleep.

(Vera holds on to the edge of the bed. SHE secretly stuffs the papers into HER bag, then goes to Vera, helps her into the sheets and covers her with a quilt. Vera pretends to sleep, but as soon as SHE goes to the door, Vera opens her eyes and looks for the remote control to the television.)

VERA

I'll hold your feet to the fire some other time. Shut the door behind you.

(SHE is already in the doorway.)

VERA

Just remember, don't put their "instruments" in your mouth. First they're silly with joy, then they take us for granted.

SHE

(In the corridor.)

Marcel? Yes, certainly. I'm right nearby. I'll give her to you on a platter. Or maybe on a fork. We can sign a contract, for whatever you want. Yes. Yes. Maybe it's a bit too soon for video. Or ... maybe not.

(SHE makes some lascivious movements, as if imitating Vera at the piano.)

I'll tell you everything when we meet. What? Oh, come on... That's tough. That, I'm not telling you.

(Vera's room is illuminated by the television screen. Asterix and Obelix do their best to dismantle the Egyptian Sphinx.)

IV

IV – 1.

Vera opens the door. SHE comes in with some shopping. In the background "Dark is the Night" ["Ciemna dziś noc"] is playing, in Vera Gran's recording from the 1960s.

SHE

(Not paying attention to the recording.)

Ça va ?

(Vera doesn't respond, so SHE tries again.)

How do we feel today?

VERA

(Mocking.)

"How do we feel today?" What is this? Like I'm some senile old lady, or your patient, that you talk to me like that?

SHE

How do you feel, Madame Vera?

VERA

Me? Like in the old Jewish joke – "How do you feel Mr. Grossman? In one wor – "Good." In two words – "Not good."

SHE

(Listens to the music.)

That's beautiful.

VERA

About time you noticed.

SHE

I really mean it, Madame Vera.

VERA

Did you know that the words are by Julian Tuwim?

SHE

And it's so modern.

VERA

And you certainly know who Tuwim was, don't you, little girl?

SHE

(Angrily.)

The little girl went to school.

VERA

Just checking. But it's modern, because the recording isn't so old, from when I was last in Poland. I know what you young whippersnappers think about my songs. They are sentimental, banal, that that old-fashioned accent brings you to tears, but from laughter. You know what? We'll see what lasts from your era! Lord have mercy – after such hits and idols, after a few years.

SHE

I like them... your songs.

VERA

Ok, ok. What did you bring me?

SHE

A baguette, cheese, wine. Milk.

VERA

Khorosho. A baguette. Hard as a rock. You can break your teeth on it, and tomorrow it will be ready to toss. Buy the more delicate ones, with velvety crust that yields to the touch, and doesn't crack like, you can't imagine, a louse under your nail. I'm not exaggerating at all. Do

you think you can't choke on a crust of bread? You can.

SHE

You can dip it in the milk.

VERA

A baguette? And defile the national symbol? Do you want to get me thrown out of France, or at least to be no longer recognized as one of their own? It is true, that to this day, I have no citizenship, you know. Nansen Passport. Stateless. Have you heard of such an animal? I left Poland. In Israel they didn't want me. Here not so much either, but when they changed their minds, then Vera didn't want it anymore. What kind of cheese is this?

SHE

Yellow. The best they had.

VERA

Yellow? You're not in Warsaw, girl. You're in a country where there are a few hundred kinds of cheese, and one just doesn't say that kind of ...

SHE

Ementhaler. Swiss.

VERA

(Tries some more.)

Milk is milk. Wine is wine. Given that I don't even drink, and you'll certainly guzzle it all up.

SHE

Chardonnay.

VERA

Chardonnay! From New Zealand for sure, or some other Australian. It doesn't even have a cork. Wine with a screw top? Girl, please! Did you think you were coming to a brothel, and a cheap one at that?

(SHE wants to take the wine back, but Vera pushes away her hand.)

Leave it. You never know when it will come in handy. I'll show you that passport. I just need to find it. Just wait... You've definitely never seen anything like it.

SHE

(Hefts the wine in her hand and quickly unscrews the top.)

I've seen one.

(Takes a swig from the bottle.)

A few of my friends had that kind, and my first boyfriend. They were also chased out of Poland, in 1968.

VERA

First boyfriend? Really?

SHE

(Finds a cup and pours some wine.)

From kindergarten.

VERA

Maybe, that's it.

(Gives up her search.)

I only drink champagne. Always and everywhere. And only the best.

SHE

There too?

VERA

Where?

SHE

(Hesitating.)

In the Ghetto?

VERA

And yes – if you would like to know – even there. Do you think I am afraid of that word, and those stories? Not necessarily. Because that’s what it’s called – the Ghetto. GHETTO! But at first there was yet some kind of life there – wild, miserable, but largely normal. You had to eat, find a place to live, gather firewood, even – and I’m plumbing the depths here – even listen to music in the Cafe “Sztuka.” And if you could afford it, drink a glass of champagne.

SHE

“Sztuka” – which means “Art” – is a strange,

(corrects herself)

very original name for a café.

VERA

Why is that?

SHE

Rather bombastic. Maybe a bit too much...

VERA

(Offended, but still quiet)

Because it was not such an ordinary cafe, as you know. Musicians, poets...an oasis of the old elite, and so forth... Maybe we were all putting on a brave face. That it was as if we were making art there, but really we were entertaining the black market traders and smugglers, for a cutlet with cabbage and a glass of vodka.

SHE

Did peopld drink a lot then?

VERA

What kind of question is that? And how am I supposed to know? That swill never touched my lips.

SHE

But champagne?

VERA

Champagne isn’t swill, but maybe you are right. We just told ourselves, that we were giving people something more than tearful songs, and that we could help them endure. It was all a pathetic sham, a party at a morgue, they say. “The Happy Slave” went over rather well. Or “The Devil’s Mill.” Not some kind of “Art.” Certainly, you are clearly, absolutely right. Like all those wiseguys and all those bastards after the war who wanted to hang me for that. But in that case, why are you talking to me?

SHE

Madame Vera. I said nothing of the sort.

VERA

But that's what came out!

(Furious)

Bear this in mind – twenty meters from the cafe there were guards – two sweaty Germans and one Jewish policeman. Screaming, shooting, deals being made. Do you think we didn't see that? But "Sztuka" was still art. As noble as it could have been in that hell. That was me. Vera Gran. The great Vera. Guys and gals snuck in every night from the "Aryan" side, risking their lives, to hear me. Capisce?

SHE

(Uncertain, doesn't know if she should drink.)

VERA

(Mitigating her anger, gives HER a sign to pour her a glass.)

It wasn't a normal world, but as long as one had something to sell – junk, rags, leftover trinkets, somehow one lived. People still read newspapers, not yet using them to cover corpses in the street. For a long time, no one knew that they were already thinking about how to send us, the Jews, to the afterworld. Not "if," but – "how?" But later, it was only about survival, saving yourself. Did you say something?

SHE

I'm only listening.

VERA

Right. But who drank up my wine? Such sanctimonious expressions? And think what you may – what, in your opinion, should I have done? Challenge Hitler to a duel myself? Offer up my ass? Beg? Singing was all I knew. Understand?

SHE

(Casts a glance at the illuminated text screen of her phone, and is visibly affected.)

I understand only what I can understand.

VERA

Of course. It is good that you added that. Because, what can you grasp from that world? But how does it go in the old Russian joke – you've got to try. So try.

SHE

(Drinks some wine.)

Champagne...?

VERA

Later the guests sat with glasses of hot water, but at the beginning there was even Moët – nectar of the first class, I beg your pardon.

(Drinks to HER.)

On whose dime?

(Grimaces, but does not comment on the quality of the alcohol.)

Certainly not mine. But I did have to ask everyone who wanted to be nice to me, if he didn't happen to be Jack the Ripper. Yes? And you – why are you so gloomy today? Already, you don't like this gig at Madame Vera's?

SHE

I like it. Everything's ok. I'm sorry.

VERA

So why aren't you recording this? And you're not listening.

SHE

I'd like to make a few pictures first. May I?

VERA

You may not. And how could you? If you'd warned me, I could have been prepared. You haven't seen what this old broad can do with a face like this.

SHE

But really I'd like some more natural photos, the way you look right now.

VERA

Oy, you wish! Who would want to look at them?

SHE

Everything is useful for documentation.

VERA

(Suspiciously)

Documentation of what?

SHE

This story. The story of Vera Gran.

VERA

You're up to something... Ha, ha, ha. Do you want to make a film?

SHE

Who wouldn't want to? Someone will certainly make a film about you, about the great Vera Gran.

VERA

Maybe they will, but it definitely won't be a film about me. Me they can only despise. They want to cut off everything, erase me with the world's largest eraser. How could there have been a singer in the Ghetto? A monstrosity!

SHE

Well, how?

(Tones down her response.)

I mean, how were you dressed? What did the stage and the audience look like?

VERA

How? As usual. There were tables, chairs, faces, sometimes snouts. The stage was a bit tight, particularly with two pianos, because that's what I wanted as my accompaniment – two pianists, Goldfeder and Szpilman. It was sad to look at them in such an impoverished state. They were nice boys, as long as I was feeding them.

SHE

And you?

VERA

And me? What? I wore whatever I had at hand. Sometimes silk, sometimes an ordinary dress with a low neckline. I remember a scarlet dress off the shoulder. My God, how regal I looked in that.

SHE

Fur?

VERA

In winter, how could you go without fur? There was hardly any heating at that time. I had my seal jacket to throw over my arms. For as long as I could, because later we had to turn in all our furs. They probably went to the front, to Stalingrad or thereabouts...

SHE

Did you turn yours in?

VERA

Everyone had to. That meant, you know – some tried to sell them to Poles on the other side of the wall, but that was a risky business. Either side could have met their fate at the wall. And the prices! For a sealskin you could get maybe a hundred zloty at most. For a rabbit, thirty. A dollar was worth two hundred, so a fur cost less than one dollar. Can you imagine? That's what a few loaves of bread cost. But on the other hand, for one zloty one could eat a fair meal. Everything was totally crazy.

SHE

But did you have to wear an armband with a star?

VERA

Are you stupid or what? On stage, during a performance – never. Though, maybe once, there was a rumor that Auerswald, the Swabian Ghetto supervisor, was coming. But he never came, so I took off my armband.

SHE

Did others come?

VERA

Germans? No. To shoot, yes, but to a cafe? Maybe a few, dressed as civilians, but I doubt it. They had their own Nuremberg laws. They were afraid the Jewishness might rub off on them, to our good fortune. But by then if a Jew showed up on the street without an armband, he'd at least get it in the face. And maybe even lose his life, if fancy struck one of those Übermenschen with a rifle. You know what we're talking about, don't you? What kind of armbands those were...

SHE

On the right arm, white with a blue star.

VERA

Yeah, yeah, yeah, but it was an art unto itself, a completely new artistic genre. Armbands were made differently, according to a hierarchy of wealth. First pre-war wealth, and later just wealth of that time, in the Ghetto. There was silk, delicate, as a whispered echo of former elegance. Even the Star of David rests easier on them. I had that kind. I gave them to my mother and sister, but they didn't want to wear them.

SHE

Why?

VERA

They preferred canvas – not so conspicuous. It was less delusional, not having any association with fashion or ornament. It just had to be clean and pressed. There were even paper ones, as a sign of defeat.

SHE

Everyone wore them?

VERA

(Smiles ironically.)

No, definitely not. Only those who wanted to live. Or rather – what are you looking at? – definitely everyone. Though truthfully, there were some who didn't have to wear an armband. Gancwajch, for instance, a Jewish Gestapo officer, or rather a so called "Jewish Gestapo officer."

SHE

"So called"?

VERA

Concentrate, girl, and write clearly, so I won't be blamed later. So they won't say that Vera was just backbiting to you. If I'm backbiting, don't worry, but now I'm serious. There were no Jews in the Gestapo. They were called "Ghetto Police," true, but not all of them. But that Gancwajch was some kind of creature – one of a few – a runt with glasses, an ego shouting a mile around for recognition, very similar in appearance to this Asterix here.

SHE

(Looks surreptitiously to see if Vera isn't mocking her.)

VERA

Well, maybe just a little. He was the Germans' right hand man, their dog, and probably their executioner, too. They pretended to be patrons of the arts. That's how they showed off to each other.

SHE

Did they come to the cafe?

VERA

They showed up, demanded service, submission, often without paying. It was another reminder of who we were, prisoners in hell, pretending to be artists. Did you write it down? Did it record?

SHE

Yes, recording.

VERA

Pay attention! Write further and record that the Ghetto was a male domain. Miles of male power. Police, offices, administration. They decided about everything, my dear lady, about life itself. First it was about whether you would have anything to eat. You and your family. Whether they would give you an engagement or not. A better bread ration card or worse. And then whether to pull you off transport, or to send you to the gas, sooner or later. Did you write that down? Are you recording? Gut.

SHE

Don't you like men?

VERA

You know, not too much. Women, not so much either, if you want to know. But men even less. Because it's men who thought up the world, with the Lord God at the top. But war, Ghettos, concentration camps, who thought of that? But those guys at 13 Leszno St. were a different species – disgusting gnomes. They were always circling around Vera, as if their hands were all itching to grab my ass and drag me off to bed. Sometimes it feels that way. Do you get that feeling?

SHE

Maybe.

VERA

I can feel it. But they never dared to touch me or propose anything dirty. Maybe they were just afraid I'd slap their faces. That's what one of these cocksman got up his Dutch courage to purr into my ear. He was trashy, but no worse than the others. Am I right?

SHE

(The screen on her phone lights up.)

I was just wondering.

(She turns off the telephone after a moment.)

VERA

Listen, there was this joke going around, about women, girls, ladies, in the eyes of their male commentators. "Stefa is always with her guy in the Ghetto. – What a whore! Mannówna had five lovers at the same time – What a whore! But Gran doesn't even have one – And she's really a whore!"

SHE

What? No mercy!

VERA

Isn't it? These pianists of mine told me this, squealing with laughter. Really, it was a revelation. The joke wasn't just good; it was ass good. Chauvenist crap. Somehow I never found it funny. But I didn't know then how many times life would remind me of it.

SHE

(Writing, asks reflexively.)

How many?

VERA

(Mocking.)

Write "one hundred thirty two thousand." That is, always, whenever one of my admirers hit on me unsuccessfully. As for all those Gancwajchs, one night they all bled. It's not altogether clear who did it, but probably the Germans themselves. You know how it is when you don't know the limits?

SHE

Kind of... I'm trying.

VERA

Oh, sure you are. But with this so called "wine," be careful, because you know what's waiting for you – "Farewell from Madame Vera!" And that's final, hopping on one foot. And this stupid Asterix thought he could do anything. He organized a big banquet for his buddies at the Hotel Britannia on Nowolipie Street, for something like twenty-five thousand zloty. It was a fortune, oh, ho, ho. He must have pissed those Krauts right off, because a big thief doesn't like getting robbed by a little thief. Remember that a not too bad dinner, with two entrees, with meat, cost not more than two zloty then.

SHE

Then being when in this case?

VERA

It must have been the spring of '42, right before my last summer in the Ghetto. Parting with my mother and sisters... terrible moments.

(Sniffing, SHE rushes to give Vera a tissue.)

The worst in my life, not counting maybe...

(Taking a second tissue from HER.)

But why am I talking about these bastards? Do you know?

SHE

I can only imagine.

VERA

Meaning?

SHE

They operated near the "Sztuka"...

VERA

Don't be so smart. You know perfectly well what it's all about, or rather who. That policeman, Szymonowicz, caught me sometime earlier on the street. I was walking with my pianist, talking about the concert, even flirting a little, when there were beggars shouting nearby, and we heard shots from Dzika Street, and here this mug is chattering that he was just looking for me, so that I could sing at his apartment for guests from the Aryan side. Right away.

SHE

What kinds of guests? Poles?

VERA

Who knows? As far as I could tell, some business associates and drinking buddies. So I start saying something incoherent, like "how am I going to sing without accompaniment?" and then this guy blurts out that he'll play the accordion for me, and another one calls a rickshaw. And I went on trying to get out of it, and the pianist whispers that if I know what's good for me, I'll go along. And the other one asked how much I want, because he's offering five hundred.

SHE

Did you perform?

VERA

As if you don't know? Everyone knows. It was the last nail in my coffin. I went. How could I not go? Amid the stench of vodka and howling drunks I shrieked out some lopsided songs, and I got out of there. But that five hundred zloty went to the children, of that you can be sure. How can I swear to that? How do you swear to the most sacred thing?

SHE

On your mother's life.

VERA

Then I swear on my mother, Liba Grynberg's life, that my Jewish orphans had something to eat for a few days. Don't gawk. Yes, yes, Vera Gran, not only sang songs, and not only fought against the terrorism of scoundrels, but also maintained a shelter for children. She gave her own money and collected from others, from Blajman, from Fuks. She would have taken it from the devil himself, to give one day of life to those little ones.

SHE

Blajman and Fuks were your acquaintances?

VERA

Acquaintances or not, they were good people. Blajman had a bakery. Hundreds of people survived thanks to him. Until they were killed in Treblinka. He gave out bread, food ration

cards, assistance. When the Germans shot him, half the Ghetto cried. Don't imagine that it was so obvious. There, inside the walls, sympathy quickly disappeared. It had just run out. Do you understand?

SHE

I'm trying.

VERA

Why do you look so surprised? People didn't have the strength to fight for themselves, let alone for others, even for children. Bodies lay in the streets, often completely naked, or half-corpses, from whom someone would snatch the last hunk of bread. And these children begging... a nightmare. I was always rushing to a rehearsal, a concert, bringing mama something to eat. I held my head up high.

SHE

(Stops taking notes.)

How did you find time?

VERA

How, how? I had to find it. Because, once... after a concert, it was already dark, I went out into the streets, like some kind of donkey, and I stepped on a child and started crying, so I took this barely living boy to my home. That's how it started. Are you writing this down?

SHE

(Returns to her notes.)

I don't know.

VERA

Write. And mark in this spot that I didn't cry, because I can't anymore. I cried my allotment of tears long ago. Did you write it down?

SHE

Yes.

VERA

Then add that later my respected pursuers granted me nothing for this.

SHE

How is that?

VERA

They regarded it all as something I made up, as whitewash. But I have proof. 20 Nowolipie St. "Custody Bureau." That's what it was called. About a hundred kids were placed there. The papers got lost somewhere in the courts long ago, but I received a compact from my children as a souvenir, with an inscription, on which something is written along the lines of: "To our wonderful rescuer, Vera Gran" and so forth.

SHE

But, what else?

VERA

Exactly?

SHE

As exactly as you can. Such details...

VERA

...are the whole point. I know, I know, I know your methods. It continued something like: "The Street Children of the Custody Bureau of Security Service Region III, January 1942." That is the only trace. Can I show it to you?

SHE

Certainly.

VERA

It's around here somewhere, but I don't know where. You see what's happening to me. I'll look later. For now, enough of all this. Because I'm becoming completely unhinged, and you're going to have an unhinged old lady on your hands, and not

(with Russian accent)

zee former star of radio and stage.

Whew, I need a break, and then I can really deal with you. You're starting to look like you're fading.

SHE

Me? Why?

VERA

You should know why. I can only imagine. Maybe something's not right with Hansel and Gretel, or with Ola and Marcel?

SHE

Actually, I'm not quite sure where I stand. Are we together or not? And it's a bit hard for me.

VERA

Hey, my child. It's hard for me to keep up with you today. Because here I am, an old lady jabbering about these real nightmares, and we have a ways to go, and I'm supposed to cheer you up and convince you that the world is beautiful? Well, it isn't, but is that a reason to make such faces? Here no one cares about your affairs of the heart. Marcells are like that. They have a good time, and then they're done. Have I got it?

SHE

He's not like that. Maybe... about the others, I don't know.

VERA

Stop blubbering this minute. Enough. And stop drinking up this swill. You think I can't see it? Have a little of the baguette at least. Or rather not. Calm down first. I don't want to have you on my conscience. Can you imagine what such a baguette is capable of? Kazio told me once.

SHE

Really, Madame Vera, I'd like to ask once more, can I make a few pictures? You look so beautiful right now.

VERA

If you really want... well, why not?

(Poses in a joking way.)

Like this? This? Is this okay? Should I show some pussy? Today a star has to show some pussy... if she wants to be a star.

SHE

Maybe not today.

VERA

As you wish. Your loss. For now I've been laying it on thick, but later, when we drink this up, who knows? I was always shy, but now I don't have to be. Should we bite into this baguette? Just be careful. It might be my enemies' secret weapon.

SHE

The baguette?

VERA

Don't laugh. Just listen. Kazio, my Kazio, when we were hiding in Babice, rode every day on his bicycle to the hospital in Warsaw, where, you know, he was a surgeon. One time he didn't return, and it was getting to be curfew, and I was in hysterics, getting ready to go out and look for him or run away. And he arrived by morning.

SHE

Because?

VERA

Because for six hours he was operating on some chatterbox, and a crust of bread went down the wrong way and almost collapsed a lung.

SHE

Really?

VERA

See. You didn't know? Now you know. You have to watch out, especially with baguettes. And not just that. Because to this day, I don't know if he really was telling the truth about the operation, or if there was some woman who kept him in Warsaw. He definitely had some kind of slice on the side, my Kazio. Does yours?

SHE

I don't know. How would I know?

VERA

"I don't know, I don't know." You talk like a kid. If he's French, he has one. They fall in love like canaries. Better you should find out before you fall all the way. Or maybe you've already fallen.

SHE

Maybe... I should call him. May I step out into the hallway?

VERA

I understand, you want a secret alcove. Go into the bathroom. I won't be able to eavesdrop there, or spy on you.

(Dramatically turns her head in the other direction.)

SHE

(Goes into the bathroom and on the way switches the folder that Vera put on the piano for two others in her bag.)

I hope so.

IV – 2.

SHE

(Concealed in the bathroom, dials a phone number. Vera moves toward her, eavesdropping.)

It's me, it's me, it's me. Just business, don't worry. I'm learning more and more, and she's allowed me to photograph her. Who, who? Guess. Yes – her majesty is gleaming. But I feel a little awkward. These stories of yours... something isn't quite right. Well, maybe not entirely. What? BBC? Are they in? Fantastic. Aha. They would be, if...Well, first arrange it, and then you can brag. But with us, with which "us" do you think? Aha, maybe yes. Very much? How much? On your knees, oh, how nice. Watch out, because I'll believe you. Maybe. Maybe even more than "maybe." Good, but it's so easy, you won't get it. Wait...

VERA

(Stops eavesdropping. Returns to where she was, stops for a moment and reaches for HER notes, left on the table. Leafs through them quickly. Reads notes [French words in italics].)

Obsession – obsession. Thraison – betrayal. What, is she studying vocabulary?

SHE

(In the bathroom. Looks through the first folder)

Merde, just newspaper clippings, no, not at all about her, just cut up newspapers. But here...

(Opens the second folder. Blank pages fly out. SHE looks at them with disbelief.)

Crap. She's been playing me for a fool. I've got to do something with this, Marcel. See you tonight. I can forgive this and that. As for the rest, we'll see. Very well, and "I ask for forgiveness."

VERA

(Reads HER notes.)

Corde a sauter! Jump-rope.

(Closes up the notes.)

Ask him what he thinks of you in bed.

IV – 3.

VERA

(Quickly returns to the armchair.)

And what did he say?

SHE

I didn't get to ask him.

VERA

Yeah, right. You just don't ask those kinds of questions. Unnecessary. It's just a test question. And the answer must be as it is in the Bible – "Yes, yes. No, no." If he blows you off or doesn't ask in return, "and how was it for you, dear?" then leave him alone. Keep him where he has you. Or rather, by that certain part of the body that shall remain nameless. But in general, is everything okay?

SHE

No... maybe yes. Yes.

VERA

You two are up to something, and not just in bed. You're up to something in the matter of Vera. "Yes, yes? No, No?" Cross out the one that doesn't apply.

SHE

He's working out different things for me. In television here.

VERA

Oh, in television. I'll be on television! What a delight for a fallen star.

SHE

Everything's pointing in the right direction, but we still don't know for sure.

VERA

We know, we know. That it's not going to happen. Because I will never agree to any television broadcast. Maybe it would occur to you first to ask the old lady from the village of Babice...

SHE

I was just going to ask you...

VERA

Yes, of course ... And might it be known, why you are sneaking around, child, over here, and over there? Are you spying? Eavesdropping? But to ask about the Ghetto, and my career in the Poland and the Jewish courts. To sneak off with some folder with unimportant papers. Wouldn't it have been easier just to ask? I'd have given you whatever you need. Do you think I don't know how it works? Newspapers, television, mishmash. Put it all into one bowl and stir. As long as it doesn't stink, appeals to the masses, and brings in some dough.

(Tosses a folder with documents onto the table, and pulls one out.)

Here. Read it. Out loud. So that the people behind the walls don't have to strain their ears.

SHE

(Sits down with relief, reads.)

"The accused is charged of having inappropriate contact with representatives of the Jewish authorities in service to the Gestapo, for whom she performed at parties for Germans. For this she accepted money and gifts such as jewelry, food items, and furs."

VERA

And there, where it is circled.

SHE

"The abovementioned was given a sentence by the underground authorities, which was not executed, due to the impossibility of establishing her place of residence."

VERA

"Place of residence," ha, ha, ha. Bullshit, bullshit, bullshit. I was still on stage every night at the Café Sztuka. Continue.

SHE

"Stories about the accused directing an orphanage in the Ghetto are unlikely, where there were no resources, nor possibilities of establishing them without the knowledge of the authorities in the Judenrat."

VERA

I had no resources? I earned a hundred zloty a night just at the Cafe Sztuka, and there were yet other cafes and goodwill collections, and my famous phrase - "You know sir, that the children are hungry, and I am counting on your more than generous gesture?" - to this day there are some people who are still pursued by it. Do you know who dared to write that?

SHE

The signature is rather illegible.

VERA

Not so much the signature. It was the Jewish Polizei. The well-known one who pulled out one of my pianists at the Café Sztuka from the Umschlagplatz. After the war, somehow, no one was bothered by his past. He made a career as a lawyer and in sports. Interesting, isn't it? But someone else put those stories about the balls at Szymonowicz's place and service to the Germans into circulation. A certain T. I'd rather just call him that than draw any more attention to him.

SHE

T. or D.? A certain Durkow ?

VERA

Let it be Durkow. Or even Dumbshit. A real Doofus. In the Ghetto he was a Judenrat administrator and – can you imagine? – a censor. Even more stupid – his little Missus performed for the Gancwajchs and Krauts. She got a good five hundred zloty a show. And what? Do you know about it little lady?

SHE

This “little lady” doesn’t know a thing.

VERA

Exactly – nothing. After the war he also became some important director of something. All of them became directors of something, a few even at your own Polish Radio. Check for yourself, there’s something fishy there...

SHE

I wasn’t even born then. I’m only there on an internship.

VERA

Consider yourself lucky, because it would have been funny, if it hadn’t been so bloody. They were just picking on me. Bulls on the rampage.... If I didn’t want to give in to them, they’d start to get up my ass another way. They just decided to destroy Vera Gran, with slander, stupid rumors, that someone, sometime, found out something from someone else, and then they probably knew. Words, words, words...

SHE

What did they know?

VERA

I have it around here somewhere. After all... I’ll tell you myself. At all the trials, the same testimony appeared. That kind of picture. Now take notes, because I’m only going to tell you this once. I don’t have the strength to do it any more. Ready?

SHE

I’ve been writing the whole time.

VERA

So enough talking. Now pay attention. On a street in the Ghetto near the passage to the Aryan side, where the guards beat children caught smuggling onions and potatoes, in a droshky with German officers, there was a real idyll – a beautiful brunette sitting with a fur stretching all the way down to the ground, smiling from ear to ear. And that was supposed to have been me. Vera Gran. Have you got that down?

SHE

“Smiling from ear to ear. Vera Gran.” Verbatim.

VERA

No one was bothered by the fact that I had already left the Ghetto by that winter. This story chased after me all around the world. Mr. D and his entourage. He’ll take this idiocy to his grave.

SHE

Did you do something to him? Why did he want revenge?

VERA

Why, why? Perhaps I already said. Check your notes. There with the words starting with “D” ... Is it there?

SHE

Yes, it’s there.

VERA

For the sake of clarity, I'll repeat: He wanted revenge, because I didn't want to sleep with him. But there certainly must have been something else. I probably even know what.

SHE

The Missus?

VERA

Ahh, as if you knew. He was a figure in the Ghetto, our real boss. And he certainly dreamed that he could show off with me, Vera, and not his insipid wife, in front of his sleazy little friends.

SHE

Also a singer.

VERA

Of course. I see you've done your reading.

SHE

You already spoke about her, even today. But she is probably not guilty of anything.

VERA

But how would you know that? What, you've never known a woman's vindictiveness? Are you feeling sick?

SHE

No, why?

VERA

Because you're as pale as potato soup. Don't think that this topic isn't disgusting to me. It's disgusting. But you wanted to know, so now you know. Very well, God bless the little Missus, her hubby was the one driving the engine! It wasn't me. He was the one getting chummy with the Germans, but no one charged him for his real collusion. But I know about it. Maybe he wanted to strike a pre-emptive blow, and throw the first punch with this whole nasty little story. How many times did I hear this...

SHE

(Uncertain whether she is exaggerating.)

How many?

VERA

Oh, you're gonna get it. Do you want to know exactly. One hundred thirty-two thousand eight hundred forty-six... Okay, let's not exaggerate, but it's come up a few times. Like when some guy wanted to screw me and I wasn't interested...

SHE

Meaning?

VERA

You know that I don't like these topics. Men interest me only from the waist up. But very well. The captain on an Italian ship to Israel, a cop in Haifa, a few Parisian lawyers. As for the ones who were drooling from the first meeting...that pianist of mine...

(Pauses silently, as if to come to rest on this case.)

SHE

Which one? Because there were...two?

VERA

Which, which? The one with the twitch. Phew, they even used the same pomade. You ask too many questions. In the end, they all deserve each other. As long as they are wheedling and

conniving to drag you off to bed, you are the star in their firmament, and the ideal of their dreams. But if you refuse, then all of a sudden you turn into a Nazi bitch. That's how it is with them. But at the beginning there was that liar from the Ghetto.

SHE

Which one?

VERA

Which?! The one with the switch up his ass. Mr. D, I already told you a hundred times.

SHE

Better to be sure than to hit the wrong one.

VERA

He never made sure. He got whomever he wanted. Just like that, he made me out to be a monster. From a star to Gestapo whore. He invented everything, from beginning to end, from this, to the next thing, to the next. The street, the droshky, the woman's laugh with the German. Others only repeated this nonsense, but he directed them. And why? Does an ugly bug have a reason to hate the butterfly?

SHE

Theoretically, no.

VERA

Theoretically. I've thought about this many times. Only when anger ceased to pour out from my eyes. What was it? Why was he so hard bent on it, repeating this same nasty little tune through the years? Later it was like he was senile, "da-da, da-da, da-da, she did it, she did it, she did it." But it worked for him, and truly destroyed my life. My career...Do you think I should have just rolled over?

SHE

You shouldn't even joke like that.

VERA

But how am I supposed to know what is a joke? Maybe there were no stupid rumors, and my life wasn't wasted. But you are right - maybe I would vomit. In general, I never went for "bedroom work," all that male-female gymnastics. I was even stingy with Kazio. I don't even know where in the world my little Jerzy came from. Because I had a little boy, Jerzy...Jurek we called him.

SHE

In the Ghetto?

VERA

What, are you stupid? I already told you that I left the Ghetto, before the deportations.

SHE

You didn't say.

VERA

Then I'm saying now. Are you recording?

SHE

I'm recording.

VERA

I forgot that this is Polish Radio. I'm glad for that. So, one night Kazio called, or someone called for him. Nothing worked in those days, but sometimes the phone worked. So, then I got the news that there was for me - but only for me - a chance to get out of the Ghetto. This was a tragedy. It stopped me in my tracks. My mother, my sisters... I'm not going. They begged

me, and in the end they convinced me. For an hour we cried together. You could go through the court building to the Aryan side.

SHE

Just like that?

VERA

Like that, if you could pay the fee. And Kazio paid. I left August 2nd, 1942. I'll remember that date to the end of my life. Maybe that's why later some of those people tried to convince everyone, that the passage through the courthouse was already "burned" by then.

SHE

The courthouse? On Leszno Street?

VERA

There you go. Do you know that place?

SHE

My grandmother and mother also escaped that way.

VERA

You see! And Biała Street ran right there on the Aryan side. A lot of blackmailers operated there. They extorted protection money...vermin. But then the street was empty.

SHE

There was a droshky waiting for my Sarah and Halshka.

VERA

I never heard of such a luxury.

SHE

They took it straight on Szucha Street. To Gestapo Headquarters. Grandpa had to buy them out again ...

VERA

You must come from a rich family.

SHE

Past history, unfortunately.

VERA

See, see how much do we have in common? I was rich too, once.

SHE

But when you got out of the Ghetto, where did you hide?

VERA

With different people. Acquaintances, strangers. They risked a lot. Hiding a Jew meant a bullet in the head for the Jew and another for the one who hid him. As good as dead. An orderly German solution. But I landed with Kazio in Babice near Warsaw. And so I became "The Doctor's Wife." A sickly blonde – yes, yes, because I bleached my hair immediately – and ran around the house like a mouse, going to church and not speaking unnecessarily. I sat out the rest of the war there. Do you know where it is?

SHE

More or less. Past Jelonki?

VERA

Once, and only once, I wanted to go there, to see Jurek's grave again. Because I didn't manage to save him. I didn't produce any milk... well, a drama. I've never since been able to find his little grave. But it's still there. I buried him myself. He was so small....

SHE

I'm so sorry...

VERA

(Takes a swig of wine, more energetically than before.)

Enough. Like you're really sorry. What, do you think I can't see? After that phone call you look like you'll jump for joy. The rest, you're right. It happened, it passed, and what must, remains in my heart, and that's it. And you – did it work out? Obviously this canary tweedled something sweet?

SHE

That's right.

VERA

Did he apologize?

SHE

Yes.

VERA

Ahh, so we've got a reason to celebrate. Have you been to Caracas, in Venezuela?

SHE

No.

VERA

A pity. But I was there, I sang, and they were on their feet after every performance. As long as Mr. D's thugs couldn't get to me. But as for intrigues, there was one...

SHE

In Caracas?

VERA

But what did you think? There are scoundrels everywhere.

SHE

Or idiots.

VERA

Scoundrels. They threatened to cut off the concerts, these same people as always, for the same reason as always. But these Latinos...they know how to have a good time.

(Hums.)

"My city, Caracas, you're waiting for us." But now pour me just a little more. Just a tiny bit.

SHE

I don't know, is it okay?

VERA

You want to guzzle it all yourself? Nothing will happen to me. Away with the past, and death to sadness. Sheesh, nobody says that anymore...Wait, I've got something better.

(Reaches under the table)

Dereniówka – dogwood liqueur. Someone brought it for me from Poland.

SHE

(Sniffs it)

Strong.

(Pours a shot. Drinks cautiously)

VERA

I've had stronger in my life.

SHE

I don't think I have. Uhhh...

VERA

And do you know what dogwood is?

SHE

A bush, a shrub ?

VERA

It is, but that's like saying that roses are plants... This dogwood has beautiful fruit, and blood red stems, but only in winter. They grow on little Jurek's grave.

SHE

(Drinks up her glass)

In Babice?

VERA

(Finishes hers)

Exactly.

VERA

(Goes to the turntable and puts on a record)

Come here... Now here is something absolutely not modern, from my old repertoire – very, very old. From the stone age, at least. Do you like Hawai'i?

(SHE shrugs.)

Hawai'ian guitars?

SHE

I do, I like them.

VERA

Pay attention.

(First we hear the guitar play the melody of the prewar song, "Żebyś ty mnie zrozumiał" ("If you just understood me.")

Do you think I forgot? Today I won't let you get away with it...

(Vera starts to sway to the music, pulls HER to her, and whispers the lyrics into HER ear. They embrace, and start to sing together, jokingly, louder and louder.)

"I don't know that tears can move you today, for your heart is like steel,

I won't even say how wicked you are, or what sorrow I feel.

I feel great sorrow, you know very well. For you shattered my dreams.

Why did you tell those lies? Why did you wreck my life?

I'll speak the truth, if you like."

VERA

(Vera rushes HER along.)

Watch out – refrain!

"If you just understood me, then the world would be ours.

If you just understood me, but you have a stone heart.

If you only could know, that I'd give you my hand,

that I will always be yours, how the world would be grand." *

(They stumble and knock over the record player. SHE wants to pick it up and start it again, but Vera holds her back. Vera sings at first a capella, inventing new lyrics, and then SHE tries to help her by imitating the sound of the guitar.)

VERA

"If you just understood me, how much must I repeat?
If you just understood me, but what a schmuck you could be!
If you just understood me, but you're too much a fool...,
I would cry my eyes out, but every tear I would rue."

SHE

"... every tear I would rue."

VERA

"Everyone is a liar, as far as I can tell,
something, something, and something, didn't work out for us.
And if you ever come 'round, I'll whack you in the head like some kind of cow."

SHE

"Now here comes the fun."

VERA

"To the flames with love!"

SHE

"And madness!"

VERA

"And madness."

(They bow unevenly together.)

VERA

Oh, boy... yes.

(They both break out in a smile. Vera finishes with a coughing fit, but even so, is satisfied.)

(Vera Falls into bed.)

You pass, with a C for effort. Now go fly back to that little canary of yours, and remember what I warned you about. First of all his tweedle-deedle-doodle-day, whatever.

(Falls asleep)

Whatever... Call. You may find some little secret yet, or even a big one, that will make your eyes pop.

SHE

(Holding her breath, collects her things to leave.)

VERA

And the door – close up when you leave.

V

The darkness of the room is suddenly penetrated by a beam of light from a flashlight, pointed at HER, sitting on the armchair.

VERA

(Lying with the blanket over her head.)

What's with all this sneaking around?

SHE

Me? I haven't moved an inch. On the contrary.

VERA

But what are you doing here?

SHE

(Straightens herself in the armchair, equally exhausted, as after a night of poor sleep.)

Sitting.

VERA

I see, but where did you come from? Who let you in?

SHE

You don't remember?

VERA

What don't I remember? I remember. What I have to remember, I remember. Have you been sitting like that for a long time?

SHE

I don't know, myself.

VERA

That means it's been a long time. And for what?

SHE

I was a little worried about you.

VERA

You don't say. You wanted to spy on me! But you didn't find anything without a flashlight, did you? Ha, ha, ha. Because this little flashlight was lying right here under the quilt. Little Vera is more clever than you think. By the way, you could be a good investigator.

SHE

Finally, some kind of compliment.

VERA

So quiet and unassuming, not too intelligent, and you can pull anything out of anyone. Not like those boorish officers. Turn on a lamp, my child, because I'm going crazy from these flashlights. Not that one, it doesn't have a bulb, if you haven't noticed.

SHE

No, I hadn't noticed, because you're blinding me.

VERA

Like a true professional.

(SHE turns on a lamp.)

Finally. But you know, I volunteered to them, myself, to those light-in-the-eyes pros.

SHE

Meaning?

VERA

Meaning to our secret police in the People's Republic. Because I wanted to clear myself of the accusations and such like. The administration of Polish Radio advised me so stupidly. Or rather, he advised me, my ex...accompanist. I showed up there right after the Russians came

in. I rode in from Babice on a bicycle – can you imagine? – certain that my acquaintances would at least be happy to see me. But all I heard was, “What, you’re alive?!” Like they were speaking to someone brought back from the dead – “You’re alive? Alive?” – with such great disappointment in their voices. “You’re alive?” Do you know what I mean?

SHE

Maybe they were just surprised. Right after the war ...

VERA

They were in no way surprised. They were dis-ap-poin-ted. And then suddenly afraid, “What does this old hag want?”

SHE

Hag? You were hardly thirty years old at the time.

VERA

For them, a hag’s a hag. Because they, those same people we were slumming with not long ago in the Cafe Sztuka, then turned into important managers, full-fledged Communists, but they weren’t so sure about me. Suddenly some people started saying that I had given myself to the Germans.... They didn’t know who they were dealing with. They forgot who gave them work, who fed them! It ended up that without a document from the secret police, there was no work for me, no singing, nothing,

(coughs)

nothing, and nothing.

SHE

Madame Vera, take it easy. Maybe some water?

VERA

For now water. But who got me drunk yesterday. That was rather, not water.

SHE

Yesterday?

VERA

Yesterday or not, give me some, just not sparkling. I prefer tap water. Where do you live in Warsaw?

SHE

In Mokotów on Narbutt Street.

VERA

I lived there as well, but the secret police were on the Praga side of the river. Only on that side of the Vistula were there any complete buildings left. And they came scowling after me, and tossed me into a cell. But they only knew how to shout and shake their fists – “Gestapo whore, confess, who did you give it up for? Who were you screwing? We want names of agents, names, names!” I stopped talking to them. They were always drunk and probably didn’t make any connections. Who was I, and what did they expect to wring out of me?

SHE

(SHE gives Vera a cup of water)

Did they beat you?

VERA

They cursed; they spat; they threatened, but in the end they left me alone. One day I hear

(Rises in bed, listening.)

– sirens and some kind of screaming in the street. I thought to myself, that this is the end of the war. It was May 8th or 9th of ’45. Out there sirens of joy, and here I’m sitting in a cell in

despair. And you know what? Two weeks later they let me see the light of day. Maybe Kazio did something again, or maybe it had all been a mistake, because they were running around me in the cell, like they were stoned. Oh, just like, I can't imagine, you right now.

SHE

That's the second compliment today.

VERA

You see how I'm developing? Then, I was glad at first, but suddenly I was over it. They let me go, but what next? What would you do?

SHE

I would try to live somehow...

VERA

Exactly. So I tried, but all the time it was "stop!" "No" here, "no" there, and later even nechevo nyet. I could neither perform nor record. You know, I even signed up for a cutting and sewing course, just in case... I still tried to fight hard. Do you have any enemies?

SHE

I don't think so.

VERA

Too bad. You would know what I'm talking about and not be mumbling I don't know what.

SHE

Well, maybe I do now, Madame.

VERA

Hmmm. I had real ones. I did what I could. There was this prosecutor, Sawicki, the same one who charged Goering at Nuremberg. You've surely heard of him. Have you heard of him?

SHE

(Nods her head without knowing, but this is enough for Vera to realize.)

VERA

Oh, a great dignitary, he led me down the primrose path and had me write a denunciation of myself. It was a self-accusation. Practically like a witch in the middle ages. Because then the secret police had to take up my case. And then he snarled, and my legs buckled under me: "I'm warning you, that I will do everything I can to squeeze the truth out of you, and hang you, if need be." Nice, isn't it? Are you recording this?

SHE

I'm recording.

VERA

You know what I answered?

(Not waiting for HER answer.)

"There you go, you can hang me upside down, if I turn out to be guilty." That's how I snapped back at him. Can you believe it?

SHE

Of course.

(SHE gives a hard suspicious cough. Vera studies HER carefully)

VERA

You're nasty, you know. You don't believe it! But you see how it worked out – I didn't hang! Listen to what I did next. I filed a complaint against these secret police, that they didn't return any of my things – an antique pen, which was a real rarity at the time, pictures, and above all this compact from the Ghetto, from my children, this very one right here. Now even I don't believe it, that I had such nerve, not just you.

SHE

But Madame Vera, I believe, I believe. I just have to write it all down.

VERA

You're not telling me that you stopped recording. Because I'd kill you, and even hang you upside down for such a crime.

SHE

I'm recording, I'm recording. I'm taking notes to keep it all in order.

VERA

There was a full-blown scandal. Róžański himself brandished his claws at me, but can you imagine – they gave it all up. I demanded an apology so aggressively from that boorish investigator for calling me a “Gestapo whore,” that they threw me out the door. Thanks to that madness, I have that compact to this day with an inscription. Have you seen it?

SHE

I would like to, very much.

VERA

I'll show it to you – later. I'm getting a bit tired...

SHE

We can take a break.

VERA

You don't have to. Take these papers and read whatever you want for yourself – out loud. I like to torture myself a little sometimes.

SHE

Evening Express: “Vera Gran acquitted. January 18th, 1949.”

VERA

Hey, hey. There's still a long road to victory. Here, read this for yourself.

SHE

Warsaw Life, October '47: “What will citizen Vera Gran sing before the court?” Evening: “A star's velvet voice is silent.”

VERA

And here.

SHE

Evening, December '47: “Is Vera Gran a traitor?”

VERA

That gives you a little taste. But do you think they were interested in the answer to this question? When I won trial after trial, there was hardly a word, or at most some nasty suggestion, that they already knew the story. At the beginning I snapped back, as far as I could. What else could I have done, a fragile little thing?

(Blows her nose, sneezes.)

SHE

A tissue?

VERA

Finally you're talking about the matter at hand. Certainly.

(Wipes her nose.)

You know, I've never been so fragile, but I did lose a few pounds from nerves back then. And I could never beat them. Then they were afraid to record with me on the radio, I couldn't give

concerts, and I had almost nothing to live on. So I never forgave them. I went to the next court, and later to yet another one. Take this. Read. Out loud.

SHE

“Central Court of the Second District of the Union of Polish Performing Artists finds the behavior of citizen Vera Gran-Jeziarski during the period of German occupation to have been without fault. Łódź 15 October 1945.” Byline: Aleksander Zelwerowicz.

VERA

Might you happen to know who he was?

SHE

Speaking truthfully, not so much.

VERA

“Speaking truthfully”... Shit, you people don’t know anything. He was a great Polish actor! Remember it. A great actor! You are all the same. Nothing in your heads. Is that Marcel of yours the same way?

SHE

Hmmm. He graduated in philosophy at the Sorbonne.

VERA

Ahaa, an egghead? So maybe there’s a little something in that head of his, and he’s read a few books. But it’s probably not of much use to you, because you’re always whining...

SHE

Marcel is a television producer, and so obviously...

VERA

Lovely. I’m talking about sex, and this one is always about business. What, “obviously”?

SHE

He wants to do a program about you.

VERA

And he sent you as a spy? And why can’t he be troubled to come himself?

SHE

He tried. Many times. He called. He wrote.

VERA

Well, maybe. I can’t remember.

SHE

Sandy blond with glasses, speaks a little Polish ...

VERA

Uhmm – him? And you... ?

SHE

I am who I am. I have my own work.

VERA

And he is who he is?

SHE

Exactly.

VERA

Let’s establish, that I haven’t heard about all this, because I haven’t. Shall we keep going?

SHE

Please, go right ahead.

VERA

And within a month after what you read, I received a similar letter from the Criminal Court in Warsaw. Case closed? You wish! Tu penses. It was only a little breather. For a long time, I didn't get that people don't want the truth at all, but are more interested in a big scandal, and I couldn't satisfy those bastards.

SHE

But right here – "acquitted." This paper is from '49.

VERA

Exactly. But I'd had enough. I left Poland.

SHE

For Israel...

VERA

For Israel, because there was an opportunity. At last, I thought, this is where I belong in the world – a painful mistake. The accusations followed me. They stuck like you know what, and I was even attacked on the way there. The captain of the ship accused me of being in with the Gestapo, right after, he wanted to marry me. But later it was even worse ...

SHE

You didn't like it there?

VERA

Eh, enough of these questions. Whether I liked it or I didn't like it... Now you be intelligent, as befits the fiancée of a graduate of the Sorbonne. You would do better to ask me if I could sing in Israel.

SHE

Could you sing in Israel, Madame Vera?

VERA

Oy, don't ask. They came after me with full force, pickets, whistles, offensive flyers. It was Jews doing this to me – D. and company. And I met one of those secret police guys from Praga in Haifa. He had become a police officer at the port! And he tried to threaten me – when he recovered – because at first he was afraid when he recognized me, like a mouse that sees a viper ...

VERA

(motionless, listens for a moment.)

Can you hear it?

SHE

No.

VERA

They're shouting! They're getting closer.

SHE

I don't hear it...

VERA

Deaf as a stump! But don't worry, with me you won't die.

(Rolls out of bed, pulling the quilt with her. VERA is disheveled, but wearing an elegant dress.)

SHE

What's going on?

(Upon seeing the dress.)

Oh, Madame Vera...

VERA

Hurry, under the table. Take everything and get under the table. It's what I've always done. Thanks to that, I'm alive.

(They scramble under the table, surrounded by stacks of papers and cardboard boxes.)

SHE

But what? Wait a second...

VERA

My father taught me to do this. I barely remember him, because he left us when I was a child, but this I can recall. If something happened, or I didn't feel well – under the table! Get in.

Well, certainly, it wasn't this one. I had my favorite, in my father's room, and there everything fell back into place, and the world was normal again, peace over head, a hiding place like a dream.

SHE

A bunker?

VERA

As if you would know. Add a few old newspapers, and it's a bunker. Hurry. And sit quietly for a moment. Do you hear anything?

SHE

(Tries carefully to fit into Vera's hiding place.)

No.

VERA

You see. They escaped. Maybe even disappeared. It worked. But better we should wait a bit. Let everything calm down. You can record. Nothing will disturb us here.

SHE

(Pulls her equipment in, starts the dictaphone.)

Just the dust.

VERA

Oh, there, not a problem. Dust is my friend. You can live with it. You've got to. We know each other, and we've tolerated each other for so long...

(Laughs, coughing.)

Where did I leave off. Aha, that secret police man in Haifa. No, that creep isn't worth remembering. Kid, let's agree, that if I start to ramble or go off on a digression, start tapping your phone or what you wish, and in a wink, we'll come back to this world. Capisce?

SHE

Whatever the star wishes...

VERA

Don't be abusive, just tap. So, let's cross the secret police guy off the list, but not Sawicki, the prosecutor who promised to hang me. Years later when I flew to Poland on an official invitation, he greeted me at the airport. Do you know why I'm telling you about him? Because I like to show off? Vera's got her head in the clouds and thinks up all kinds of nonsense as she waits? Is that what you think? Honestly.

SHE

In a word? No.

VERA

And two words?

SHE

No, no.

VERA

Oh! She manages to get out of it somehow. Your luck, because I was starting to think we were going to fight.

SHE

Fight?

VERA

Why not? Are we any worse than guys? We can't scrape our mugs up for a good cause, for something important, for instance?

SHE

But for what?

VERA

For example, something like honor. I could. Or would you rather it be about a boyfriend?

SHE

I'd rather not fight about anything.

VERA

Oh, what a little lady! Better to read what's highlighted. I'll be the second voice, but keep the pace, or I'll die of boredom.

SHE

Here?

VERA

Let's go.

SHE

What did these people think of Vera Gran in the Ghetto?

VERA

Jerzy Jurandot?

SHE

No objection.

VERA

Gerard Gadejski?

SHE

Nothing bad.

VERA

Elżbieta Gadejska. Faster.

SHE

Impeccable.

VERA

Dawid Sznajer.

SHE

Gestapo agent.

VERA

Zygmunt Jankowski.

SHE

Beyond suspicion.

VERA

Czajka Stachowicz.

SHE

Wonderful.

VERA

Now here.

SHE

Did she seem to be with agents of the Gestapo?

VERA

Radwański.

SHE

Not that I ever saw.

VERA

Jeziński. This is Kazio.

SHE

I didn't hear of it.

VERA

Zalewski. Forte!

SHE

I didn't encounter it.

VERA

Szpilman.

SHE

No.

VERA

Sznajer.

SHE

That's what they said.

VERA

Fuks.

SHE

Categorically no.

WIERA

Here.

SHE

Did Vera Gran wear an armband in the Ghetto? Fortissimo !

VERA

Radwański ?

SHE

Yes.

VERA

Wajnkrainc.

SHE

Yes.

VERA

Sznajer.

SHE

No.

VERA

Finito! And so on and so forth. I have tons of these papers here. But enough. We'll go crazy. This was at the court of the Committee of Polish Jews, perhaps the most important in this case. Here is a subpoena for me. The paper is barely surviving. "Appearance mandatory." But here's the verdict. The court of this and that declares...

SHE

"Be it known that the charges against Vera Gran have not been proven, and that she is acquitted of said charges. January, 15, 1949." Amen?

VERA

Not at all. You'll never convince them.

SHE

Who was this Sznajer?

VERA

Some wicked glazier from Otwock – a nice man, but possessed by Mr. D. We didn't even know each other. He has yet to apologize to me.

SHE

Is he alive?

VERA

Did I say that he still walks the earth?

SHE

And these others?

VERA

I could bore you about each of them for hours – or amuse you. For example...don't grimace like that, it makes my teeth hurt.

SHE

I'm not grimacing at all.

VERA

They even tested my hair and striped dresses, because that "me" in the droshky was a brunette. And in other stories she was wearing such a dress. With stripes. Vera bleached her hair the first day after she left the Ghetto, and she didn't have any striped dress. The Russians say, "To lie like an eyewitness." Here there wasn't even that.

SHE

But a verdict is a verdict.

VERA

And so what? Nothing, my dear lady. You know that particularly Soviet logic. When there is no evidence, it's even worse for the accused. That means they either destroyed it or covered it up. Because that's how monstrous they were, and that's that.

SHE

So nothing changed?

VERA

Nothing. I screamed about the facts, but no one heard my screams. It was just as if they'd lumped all that nonsense into a pile and pressed it together, and nothing remained except the

stench of slander. So why try to prove anything? And so they all knew anyhow that Gran was a Nazi agent...

(Rummages through a pile of boxes.)

And she even always carried a Walther 7.62 caliber pistol with her, surely under her uniform fur. Precisely like this one.

(From among the papers Vera pulls out a scary looking pistol.)

SHE

Madame Vera...

VERA

(Waves the barrel around the room, then pointing it at herself)

Poof!

SHE

What ... are you doing?

VERA

What I always do. Sometimes I like to play with my little Walther. You don't like it?

SHE

Is it a fake?

VERA

What fake? It's a real Walther. Poof.

SHE

You're being silly.

VERA

Oh, ho! What an offense. And what did you think? Miserable creature. The same as everyone else.

SHE

(With relief.)

A fake. Not even a Walther.

VERA

(Looks down the barrel.)

No?

SHE

A copy of a Parabellum, which I can clearly see.

VERA

Oh, you. And how do you know such things?

SHE

I know. I have younger brothers.

(Vera regards HER carefully.)

Half-brothers.

VERA

Daddy got around?

SHE

He doesn't try to hide it.

VERA

Just like my mine. For years I thought, stupidly, that it was because of me that he went to other women. Maybe because I was rude. And I overcompensated, my whole life I

overcompensated. I felt responsible for my mother and sisters, for my sins. But he just wanted to screw around.

SHE

Maybe that's just how he was.

VERA

When pigs fly. He wanted to do it, and that's that. But I, I didn't manage. I didn't save them. Any of them. I only knew how to hide under the table. Mama and Hela ended up in Treblinka. And a year later my other sister wrote from Trawniki. Even today, I don't know where it is! Maybe I don't want to know. They were all murdered, and I'm alive. And I'm blabbing to you about I don't know what. What was your question?

SHE

It's not important anymore.

VERA

Certainly, it's not important. But let's not torture ourselves here now. That's not why I dragged you under this table.

SHE

But the pistol, is it an air gun,
(quickly corrects herself)
or is it a cap gun?

VERA

It doesn't shoot any caps. Water. It's a real water cannon.
(Shoots a stream of water.)

And what were you imagining? Tell me, tell me. Certainly that I'd reached the height of stupidity. If so, then maybe you also believe that I was going around the Ghetto with the Germans, or that I rode with them in a droshky and pointed out Jews to them on the other side... Smiling of course and dressed in furs. Do you? Particularly in the winter of '43.

SHE

I've tried for a long time not to believe in fairy tales.

VERA

There are fairy tales that you pay for with your own blood. Do you think that's just a figure of speech? Should I talk?

(Shoots a stream of water at HER.)

Because you are a little touchy today...

SHE

Talk. Definitely don't soak me with water.

VERA

Oh, please, so delicate. And this dust, and this water, disturbs the kind lady. Next there will be blood. For real. Because in London, after a concert, as I left – treacherous bitch that I am – they threw eggs at me, and I landed in the hospital – with a hemorrhage. Maybe I'd been pregnant, or something. Well, I wasn't then. Understand? And I had such a wonderful lover then, here in Paris. Then, soon after, I didn't have him either. Do you still understand?

SHE

Everything.

VERA

In Israel it was even worse. Little children passed out flyers before the concert about the evil bitch from the Ghetto. And then right after, they came up with the idea that people would

show up at my performances in striped concentration camp uniforms. It couldn't have been worse, but it could be. "The club will be demolished, and the performer will be beaten." That's what they wrote.

SHE

So, what did you do?

VERA

I beat my head against the wall for a few days. Then I went, like I usually did, to court. But of singing, there could be no question, neither in Israel, nor in Poland.

SHE

And did you stop performing? Perhaps not?

VERA

Not at all. I performed. And with success like I'd never had before. Wherever they could not reach me. I went to America, to England, here to Paris... There were posters all over the city with my portrait once. Have you seen it?

SHE

I've even seen it, in a photo. Incroyable!

VERA

(Glances at HER, suspiciously, but refrains from commenting.)

For a year I had an engagement with Chevalier's Alhambra Theater, where they had stars by the dozen. Brassens, Aznavour – with him I even had a recording. But he is almost the same kind of show-off and troublemaker that I am...so, I sang my songs, and I recorded some records. Enough. I won't keep beating a dead horse, as they say, and wait until people in striped uniforms come to tear out my heart. And I have no desire to be a singing old lady. A horror!

SHE

These court cases didn't produce anything?

VERA

Well – they produced something. Tons of bile. Completely unnecessary. For so many years they strung me along, postponing hearings, deluding me with fictitious settlements. A nightmare. And all of this, so as not to admit to their villainy. But the slander kept following me.

SHE

There was no way to talk to them, somehow?

VERA

Do you think I didn't try? The most important one, Mr. D., I was able to track down in Israel. I found out where he lived, and I went there. And I had the honor of talking with the door. I'm here. He's there. Between us a hunk of wood. He only shouted at me that he had no desire to chat, and then it was just his woman croaking at me – not the one from the Ghetto, another one.

SHE

But still, they let you in.

VERA

Not at all. Who wants to bother with a fascist slut. I crouched down to look through the keyhole, and I saw how they clawed at each other like two old birds. Through the keyhole, do you understand? Shriveled up vultures, or some kinds of chickens, or turkeys. In threadbare pajamas, torn blouses, tattered pants, until it shook me. And this is my nightmare? Phooey. I left, angry, that I'd let myself become so debased, and my life turned into a cabaret.

SHE

And in the court? Maybe you met there?

VERA

In the court, my dear, they never appeared in person. Never. It was as if they didn't exist. They had the best attorneys – may the devil ever so gently caress them – to make fools of themselves for them. Do you have any lawyers in your family?

SHE

No. But why?

VERA

Then you're in luck. Clever fools. They were extracting cash from Mr. D. for years. That's my only consolation. But as long as he wanted to... I thought later that maybe from the beginning it wasn't about me, but about his wife, that singer. That he was taking revenge against me for what she did in the Ghetto. Because she sang, for a lot of money, for those sleazy cops and the like. He couldn't accuse her, because he'd get it in the face himself as well, and so he found another victim...

SHE

That's a good explanation.

VERA

I thought so as well. But no one, you understand – no one wanted to hear that. The attorneys laughed at me, not to psychologize and just stick to the documents, and friends for the umpteenth time took me for a lunatic.

SHE

I can believe that conception. It can only be explained by psychology. Very well.

VERA

God bless you. At least you understand some of this. I can feel it in these old bones. A propos bones, shall we get out? Because I think my spine is about to crack.

SHE

Oh, yes, with pleasure.

VERA

Oh, no.

(Straightens herself with difficulty.)

I'm not fit for shelters any more. Whose idea was it? Not yours this time?

SHE

As long as we're on psychology, I have an interesting questionnaire here. A test. A few questions, a few answers. I'd like to ask, if you would...

VERA

Do you think that I'm a lunatic? Obsession?

SHE

Not at all.

VERA

Than what is this test for?

SHE

It's nothing terrible. But it will madly help my writing.

VERA

"Madly." A delightful word. It's ideal for me. But on the other hand, you see, the cat's out of the bag. You're unmasked...

SHE

But if you would, Madame Vera...

VERA

Quiet, something is happening again.

(Listens carefully.)

They've found Vera. We're fleeing, because they're coming for us.

(VERA doesn't move from her place.)

SHE

But I'd rather...

VERA

Wait. I'll tell you everything... Like a priest in the confessional.

SHE

To the bathroom.

VERA

I'll answer every question, even the stupidest ones.

SHE

(Resigned, wants to dive back under the table.)

VERA

But not here. They already know this bunker. Under the piano.

(They jump, twisting their legs with the cables under the piano.)

VERA

We'll be safe here. And shall we start to philosophize?

SHE

Just a bit. This is known as the "Proust questionnaire."

VERA

The one who was in search of lost time?

SHE

The very one. All the famous people play this game now.

VERA

So get it in gear, but be quick, while we have a moment of peace.

SHE

The main feature of your character?

VERA

Meanness.

SHE

The features that you seek in others...

VERA

That I sought! Love.

SHE

What do you value among your friends?

VERA

I have no friends.

SHE

My main fault.

VERA

Yours?

SHE

Or rather, yours.

VERA

I have no faults. But – hubris. And – intelligence.

SHE

What do I like in other people?

VERA

That they sit quietly instead of saying stupid things.

SHE

What do I hate?

VERA

People.

SHE

My favorite activity?

VERA

Eating.

SHE

What pleasure do I dream about?

VERA

None. Stop! The slanderers be damned.

SHE

What am I afraid of?

VERA

Other people. The little green ones.

SHE

What would be the greatest misfortune for you?

VERA

Ach, leave me alone. It's all happened already. If you would ask me, "Is Mr. S., for example, a. a trick, b. a dick, or c. a prick" I'd gladly answer. But enough of this balderdash.

SHE

Please. Just a little more. Words that I overuse ...

VERA

What? Ahhh... Star. Vera. Gran.

SHE

Who would I like to be, if I could be someone else?

VERA

Mr. D. So I could get him from the inside.

SHE

What do I hate the most?

VERA

Stupid questions.

SHE

A natural gift that I wish I possessed.

VERA

To fly. I'd like to fly. After years of crawling on the earth.

SHE

My present state of mind.

VERA

A flare of paranoia with elements of cha-cha. Is that ok?

SHE

Mistakes that I forgive.

VERA

Being boring, but only those who are useful to me.

SHE

My motto.

VERA

Never forgive anything.

SHE

How would I like to die?

VERA

Years ago.

SHE

And if you could live your life over again, what would you do differently?

VERA

Tricky question. You think I haven't thought about it? Oh, I've thought about it many times. And do you know what I'd tell you? I don't know.

(Tries to open the cover on the piano. The cover falls with a groan.)

Did you hear? They're coming for us again.

SHE

(Disappointed, continues writing)

I don't know.

VERA

Wait – I know. I would escape to the ends of the earth – from the war, the Ghetto, that whole bordello. Wherever. Well, maybe not to Caracas. But no, cross that out. I'm spouting nonsense. Is this a real test?

SHE

The most real.

VERA

Show me. This is just scribbles!

SHE

I can read it. And I have everything in my head.

VERA

You are probably kidding me. No one cares what Vera likes, what she hates. And may it stay that way.

SHE

I care.

VERA

What's it called, this thing? You said...

SHE

The Proust Questionnaire.

VERA

Ahaa. Marcel?

SHE

Yes.

VERA

Marcel, you say. I don't know if I can or want to continue hanging around with this little Marcel of yours. But tell me now, what are you really after. Because you didn't really come here to test some old woman, no matter how famous.

SHE

I... actually, wanted to meet you. And maybe help.

VERA

What do you mean?! And who asked for your help? Because it certainly wasn't me.

SHE

Marcel.

VERA

Yours or Proust?

SHE

Mine – not mine. Definitely not Proust.

VERA

She already denies it. I felt that something wasn't quite right with you two. But what does he have to do with me, this Marcel of yours?

SHE

He wants to produce a program. I already said, about you, about the Ghetto.

VERA

So, about the Ghetto, or about me?

SHE

About you in the Ghetto.

VERA

Does he know anything about it?

SHE

Yes. He... In his family, there is a story...

VERA

About me? I'm already afraid.

SHE

Perhaps... His mother or grandmother? Grandmother. She met you after the war in Ujazdowski Park, probably.

VERA

How nice. You know this park?

SHE

I spent half my childhood there.

VERA

I remember that by the entrance there was this funny scale, where you sat like in an armchair.

SHE

It's not there anymore.

VERA

Oh, that's too bad. I thought I might see it sometime. But what about this grandmother?

SHE

You were wearing her fur, from the Ghetto, they say.

VERA

(Gets up from the floor.)

Well, then, let's stand up, as a certain poet said, when he didn't know what to say.

(Stands up with difficulty, leaning on the piano.)

The case is getting serious. Vera Gran in someone else's fur? In the heirloom fur of your little Marcel? And in his family stories? Well, well, my dear lady. This, I didn't expect. But I thought I smelled a rat. And what? What happened then in Ujazdowski Park?

SHE

Probably there was a scene. I don't exactly know.

VERA

Ahaa, or they took this fur from me, people went running, and the police came? And I, in just my underwear of course, fled through the city? It gives me goosebumps just to think of it – look – from laughing.

SHE

Don't be angry, Madame Vera. I'm telling you this, because I'd rather...

VERA

I had a feeling that something was going on through the phone, when they called me from that television station of theirs. I have a nose for people. And luck.

SHE

I'm sorry, but I'd rather tell you this.

VERA

Yes? Then bring me some water. Because something's going to happen to me, and I don't know if it's just me. When might this have been?

SHE

I don't know exactly. After the war.

VERA

Eh. I'd rather not even talk.

(Watches HER pouring the water.)

Pour a lot. More. The best would be if you could pour enough that I would drown at once. My child. After the war, I didn't go running through parks, nor did I trade in furs. I left Poland, because there was not enough room for me there. C'est tout.

SHE

I wanted you to know this. Before...

VERA

But why should I know such stupidities? Ahaa. I understand. Little Marcel, this center of your universe, has thought up this theme for a broadcast? Yes? And he needs something to sell it. Old Gran isn't filling the auditorium anymore.

SHE

I don't think like that.

VERA

Because you are somehow, not of this era, if not to say – kind of a mess. Little girl, look around – at them, at your Marcells, they're right. You've got to dance in circles so they don't forget about you. Without pirouettes and feathers in your ass, you don't even exist. You don't have a chance! How else to arrange a reasonable amount of money for a program? But you know what – even I have my own ideas. We can still do it. Don't be afraid, I'll manage. We'll put on such a show, that the beloved public will sit with their jaws on the floor, and your Marcel will get an Oscar, or a Caesar, or some other Asterix, and you may by chance as well.

SHE

I'm not so sure. This is already a rather painful matter.

VERA

Oh, my dear. I've had to cope with worse bullshit than that. It's not even bullshit. It's tiny shit. You can flick it away with one word, or with your little finger. This one, oh! Or maybe even your little toe.

(Vera tries to show HER her little toe.)

You haven't really seen me in action yet. Vera is great, remember. I'll manage. And this television here, might do just fine with me. Which channel is it?

SHE

One.

VERA

Very good. Let the people people see the real Vera again, let them remember my case. I might even sing.

(Opens the piano and plays a few bouncy chords.)

"Lambeth Walk!"

But now I'll lie down, because if I don't I'll fall down.

(Vera slides into bed, gently but firmly pushing HER away, as SHE tries to help her.)

SHE

I'll explain to him, that it must have been a mistake. I already know a bit about you.

VERA

What do you know, child? Someone who hasn't lived through that, doesn't know anything. I've had my fill of mistakes in life. There was that Mann! Franciszka. Franka.

SHE

I know. Mann – Gran. Gran – Mann. They almost sound the same.

VERA

Exactly. I've heard it a few times.

SHE

So it was really about her all along? That they confused you with her in the Ghetto? The ones, for example, who didn't know you.

VERA

It could have been.

SHE

She was truly...

VERA

She was wonderful, young and stupid as only a dancer in her twenties can be. But I won't say a bad word about her. What, you don't have any more questions? Why?

SHE

In general, I don't know, what else can I ask?

VERA

And why is that? Did something happen? Whatever? Someone's going to lose it – or rather not. Someone wants to throw someone out the door? Somewhere out there. You're rambling like you're possessed, or is it me?

SHE

But Franka...

VERA

This Franka – Mann – Gran – in furs or without, went in the end to Auschwitz. Her German lover didn't defend her. That's what I thought once. Now I think, that he sent her there himself. A bored male, let him fry in hell.

SHE

She didn't survive?

VERA

She had already died on the loading ramp at Birkenau. When they fell out of the wagons, she threw herself – stupid little butterfly – on an SS man, with a shoe in her hand. And so they shot the butterfly, those monsters. I can't blame her for anything... Whew, I've been chattering like a drunkard in the well. Do they say that?

SHE

Not that I've heard. Like a drunk holding up a fence. That's how it goes.

VERA

You see, I'm losing my marbles from all these Prousts and Marceles. Hey, but I'm going to drop dead from all this talk. Then I won't manage to cast my own words into the face of the world. I have to be careful, and start to prepare. How do I look? Will it be today?

SHE

No, of course not. Everything has to be set up, slowly.

VERA

Slowly you say? That's not my style. Shall we call?

SHE

I don't know if he... First I should...

VERA

Let's call!

SHE

(Dials the number.)

Marcel. I have Madame Vera here.

VERA

My dear Mr. Furman. Under no condition will I speak on any recording without a contract, and it must be an attractive one, in several copies, just in case. I don't need to mention that you should provide a separate dressing room with a working bathroom. You certainly understand that stars have their demands. Color? A discreet violet. So long.

(Tosses the phone.)

SHE

Did he hang up?

VERA

I did him the honor... It just happened...

SHE

He was dumbfounded, I guess?

VERA

Completely.

(They both laugh. Vera raises her hand for a high five.)

SHE

I can only love you.

VERA

Oy, I don't know if I went to far with the violet. They'll think I've gone crazy. Violet is the color of lunatics. Well, I just can't be bothered about whatever nonsense.

SHE

Relax, I'll explain everything to him.

(Quietly)

At least as long as he's willing to listen.

VERA

I still don't know, if I don't explode first, and it would be for the last time.

SHE

Don't even speak of it.

VERA

You're afraid that you'll have me on your conscience, you and your Marcel. I'll haunt you both from hell, me and my Gestapo colleagues! Good Lord, I expected something like this to happen today. Because why did I dress like this? But you know, his voice is very sexy. Little Marcel. Definitely he's all sexy. And how is he in bed?

SHE

(Taps the phone, but Vera pretends not to notice.)

I also don't like to talk about that.

VERA

One can talk about anything, and one must. So how's that thing? That matter, you know?

SHE

Good.

VERA

In two words please?

SHE

Lately somewhat worse.

VERA

That was three. Not so good. I new it. I could feel it. You're looking seriously underfucked to me.

SHE

Madame Vera!

VERA

Well, what? I call it like I see it.

SHE

He says that sex is highly overrated.

VERA

Is that why you're suffering?

SHE

Pardon me?

VERA

I asked if you are suffering?

SHE

Why?

VERA

Well, you would know better than me. You won't admit it, but maybe something else is getting in the way of your game. I mean, not me, but some other woman?

SHE

What an accurate intuition...

VERA

Well, don't hold back.

SHE

Truly masterful!

VERA

I know. A wifey! For sure.

SHE

The wifey has nothing to do with it.

VERA

But there is one!?

SHE

There is always someone, just like you said.

VERA

Me? I don't recall. Why the long face? Let's not exaggerate. A love triangle is nothing. Banal. Boring. Were you born yesterday? But maybe... there's something else. Yes?

SHE

Yes.

VERA

A child?

SHE

A daughter.

VERA

Oh, Saint Hyacinth! You're screwed. He has a family, and you're the guilty party. And I thought that I was the only one spinning the revolving door to hell. Damn, I didn't mention anything about the fur.

SHE

There's still time. Maybe.

VERA

What else is there to do but talk. In general I don't like fur. Maybe when it's freezing, but where is it freezing anymore? Have you heard of global warming? And how much trouble there is with fur? You'll always be fighting the moths? By the way, remember – lemons! The best solution for moths is lemons. You have to cut them in quarters and put them in the cabinets, on the shelves, and in the drawers. Sour ones that spurt juice as yellow as the sand on the Swider River. Guaranteed to kill. Write it down and remember it. It may be the most important thing you learn from me. Write, "For moths, only lemons."

SHE

(Wants to tap her phone, but prefers to give up.)

I wrote it down.

(Phone rings. SHE doesn't pickup.)

VERA

Is that him calling? It's him! For sure!

SHE

It's not him.

VERA

So why don't you pickup.

(SHE looks over HER shoulder.)

"Mamutek." Your mother. You don't pick up a call from your mother?

SHE

I'd rather not just now...

VERA

But I, on the other hand, would rather do it now. Who is more important than your mother?

(Text message signal sounds.)

VERA

Read it.

SHE

(Reads.)

"Yes."

VERA

Yes, what?

SHE

I don't know. Actually...

(Another text comes. Vera wants to grab the phone.)

SHE

(Reads.)

"We went through the court in Leszno three days after V."

VERA

Yes! And?

(Takes advantage of HER pausing, to take the phone from her hand and reads...)

"So it's no confabulation." No – "confabulation"! Each word is a diamond! Another success, bravo. I am very impressed.

SHE

I just wanted to be sure.

VERA

Ahaa. Bolshoi spasibo. For moths – you already know what I say. And for writers of little faith, I also have my lemons. Somewhere around here, if I can still find it.

(Pulls a hammer from under a pillow. Puts it back, and finds a knife.)

Relax. It's not for you. It's nice that you're checking on me. That Vera doesn't "confabulate" like they say she does. That she's not making up this bit about Leszno. Again, bravo! I like you, too. And now I'll show you how it cuts.

SHE

Careful, Madame Vera.

VERA

(Cutting a lemon with a flourish.)

Because of what? Because the lady will cut her finger? I'm not afraid of such wounds. I'm not afraid of anything anymore. Facts, facts, those are my weapon. Not this knife. We'll see who cleans whose clock, and whose guts end up on the floor.

SHE

I'm begging you!

VERA

Exactly – you're begging! So much so that in the end, really, I don't believe you. I know what you're thinking, what you're concocting in that brain of yours. And why do you have such a sour expression?

SHE

It's definitely from the lemons.

(The phone rings again. SHE doesn't react.)

VERA

Now it's definitely him. Pick up. Nothing worse can happen to me.

SHE

I'd rather not.

VERA

But I'd rather do it. Maybe we can arrange my compensation, or at least my wardrobe.

SHE

At your own risk.

VERA

And how!

SHE

(Into the phone)

Yes. I can't really talk right now.

(Vera raises her hands in protest.)

How was that? You weren't supposed to call this number. And right, I'm not supposed to call that one, so Paula doesn't pick up by mistake. Well, yes. I'm picking on you, of course.

(Quickly hangs up).

VERA

Oops... The wifey even has a name. Paula. Lovely. But eventually it becomes this banal situation to the n-th degree.

SHE

That Paula isn't his wife at all, nor his daughter.

VERA

Aaaa and... or rather the triangle is more of a rectangle.

SHE

Is that better in your opinion? More modern?

VERA

But certainly! I retract my insult! This guy has no lack of fantasies. But you lack something completely different. Do you know what?

SHE

That, actually, I do know.

VERA

And you wanted to preach to me.

SHE

Definitely not.

VERA

Definitely so. I know what you're inventing about my biography. That she's a bitch, yeah?

SHE

I don't understand.

VERA

That's what you think of me.

SHE

No.

VERA

A bitch who used to sing on people's graves.

SHE

No.

VERA

(Pulls the knife in the direction of HER. Moves her legs from the bed.)

Take this from me before anyone gets hurt.

SHE

(Sets the knife on the table.)

Definitely not. I don't think that at all.

VERA

Well, come over here next to me. Closer. Sit! Would you sing? Tell me.

SHE

Me? I don't sing at all.

VERA

Don't be so smart with me. Now we're going to do a test with you. The Vera Questionnaire.

Would you sing? A few yards away from dying children, from beggars? Would you?

SHE

I don't know.

VERA

You know, tell me. I won't self destruct.

SHE

Non.

VERA

Louder.

SHE

No.

VERA

What, "no"?

SHE

No, I wouldn't sing.

VERA

But would you come to Vera's concert?

SHE

Certainly.

VERA

But in the Ghetto? At the Cafe Sztuka?

SHE

Probably not.

VERA

What is this "prollynot"?

SHE

No.

VERA

So get even with me, the one who sang. In her Gestapo rags. I'd love it, if you would put me in my place. Come on, go ahead!

SHE

Madame Vera, please.

VERA

Don't beg, just slap me!

(Stands up, straightens herself)

Pop the Swabian pig right in the teeth.

SHE

But I'd rather ... that you... not...

VERA

No? No. Than she will pop you.

(Strikes HER lightly.)

Keep going. Now you. Don't run away. Do something with this "no" of yours. Shout it out, a good proper yell.

SHE

No.

VERA

Don't be a girl. Be a man, like all the men in the world rolled into one. See how they crack down on those like us.

SHE

No.

(Stands up.)

VERA

No?

(Hits harder) More! Well? Do you forgive this Paula everything?

(Slaps HER again.)

Better?

SHE

(Gives Vera a slap.)

Better.

VERA

Yes! Finally! But it was too soft.

SHE

Enough.

VERA

Not enough. Blow off some steam.

SHE

No more...

VERA

But you have a good reason. For that "tweedle-dee."

SHE

Sorry Vera, it's...

VERA

Just don't apologize. I'm sick already of all the endless apologizing and thanking people just for being alive. It would be better to have died when everyone else was dying. You did what you had to. We both did. I deserved it. Do you want to help Vera? Really? You know what you should do?

(Sits, tired.)

Buy a real gun and shoot those people.

SHE

Who?

VERA

The ones who are staring at us, at the misfortunes of others, mine, and now yours too.

SHE

There's no one else here.

VERA

There's always someone. I can sense their gaze... And they think to themselves, I don't know what. Maybe some filth, or that Vera

(with a heavy Russian accent)

is out of her mind. Because of this second one I'm sure.

SHE

I don't see anyone.

VERA

So why were we sitting under the table? And under the piano? Just for kicks? Or no – with a real gun, it would have been too easy. Run with it. Let's see how you go. Maybe you would shoot someone. In my defense. Just be careful – aim at the guys... Or maybe you don't want to help me at all?

SHE

("Shoots" a few times in the direction of the door and the bed, but fortunately runs out of water)

"Perish and be gone, pale ghost."

VERA

Not in the bed, idiot. Give me that. Next they'll accuse me of incontinence. Do you really think that I see other people here, that anyone other than you can hear all this nonsense of mine and the cries of my soul? Don't exaggerate. But I wanted to show you something.

(Takes the "pistol" from HER hand.)

Because you can see for yourself... Vera with this little water pistol was shooting against those who pounded me with heavy artillery, with machine guns, with Panzerfausts. How can I win? How?

SHE

(Doesn't react, gathers her things, as if preparing to leave.)

VERA

Nothing? Did I offend you with "idiot"? You are easily offended. So now you're off to your own little swamp? Mama, papa, and baby...

SHE

And how do you know that it's true? This whole "tweedle-dum"?

VERA

Oh!

(With relief.) My dear lady! You dreamed it up?

SHE

A little.

VERA

Lucky for you, and for me as well, because it was starting to get a bit boring. How much?

(Notices HER mixing things up.)

As for the rest, I won't pry.

SHE

And do you always tell the truth?

VERA

What kind of question is that? Do you want to get smacked again?

SHE

(Lets the question go.)

Powder, nail polish, lipstick. The best brands. We don't have any.

VERA

But right here...

(Rummaging around, finds lipstick.)

...here it is. Try it, put it on. You'll finally look like a real human being.

(Hears the sound of police sirens.)

And what is that? Again you don't believe, if it's true? You don't hear anything?

SHE

I hear it now.

VERA

And?

SHE

It's the police or an ambulance.

VERA

Or a fire truck. Is something burning somewhere?

SHE

Maybe they'll rescue a cat from the roof.

VERA

You're right. It's not out of the question. The fire department. Squad after squad. People and cats. There's just no one to watch out for me.

SHE

So, what now?

VERA

With me, or with you?

SHE

The table or the piano?

VERA

Oh, shut up. I don't have the strength anymore. Enough of these games, because it was a game, if you can understand. Do you understand? Capisce? Varshtehen? It would be a good hook, no?

(Tries to hum, but without conviction.)

"I don't have the strength any more; enough of these games now, what for?" Masculine rhymes like they should be in a good hit song. Well, so the box office is closed. La comedia finita. As they say in polite company.

(Points to a folder with documents.)

You can take it, if you like.

SHE

May I?

VERA

They are only copies. Written out in my own hand, page by page, without any xerox-schmeerox. The originals I have here.

(Indicates her heart.)

And at my lawyer's.

(Moves toward the bed.)

But now push off for good, and arrange for me what you wish. But without exaggeration – one camera, one Marcel. Period.

SHE

Thank you.

(Loads the folder with the documents into her bag and moves toward the door.)

VERA

But...Maybe not quite "period." Almost period. Because there's one more thing...

(SHE, thinking it was about the lipstick, puts some on, a little blindly.)

VERA

Ola. Ola! My child. I have a request for you, as big as my heart... Sometime, would you look for Jurek's grave, in Babice, in the cemetery? It must be there somewhere. Tell him that I've always loved him...But...I can't remember his face any more, or my mother's.

SHE

(Moved.)

I'll tell him. I promise.

VERA

(Soberly.)

Yesterday at night someone called again – “You whore, we’ll finish you off!” and so forth. At the sound of the phone my head explodes, and I can’t sleep anymore. So take a break from the phone. Just come.

SHE

Okay.

VERA

And don’t use the doorbell anymore. Knock. First three times, then four. Only strangers ring the bell.

VI

(The room is lit by a few partially open shutters. An lemon and a knife on the table. VERA enters in an elegant black sleeveless dress.)

SHE

Greetings, Madame Vera.

VERA

Oh, how pretty today. I performed in a dress like that, also black. Come, come quickly. I have something important to tell you.

SHE

I also want to tell you something.

VERA

But me first. Listen. Just promise that you won’t faint. Or vomit. And if you start to, then just run to the toilet, and I’ll lift up the lid.

SHE

I promise.

VERA

And that you won’t tell anyone, even under torture. Swear.

SHE

Madame Vera...

VERA

Swear. On whatever is most holy to you. On the heart of Jesus?

SHE

On my mother’s life.

VERA

No – we won’t disturb anyone’s mother. Find something else...

SHE

May I...

VERA

And for the rest... better to be quiet and listen. Listen – one fine day, like maybe yesterday or the day before or the day before that, I went into the kitchen wanting to make something to eat for myself, but it seemed that water wasn’t draining in the sink.

SHE

(Takes her phone and starts to tap, but Vera pierces her with her gaze.)

VERA

This is important, damned important. You'll be convinced in a moment. I flew to the bathroom, and the toilet was overflowing. I tried to push it down, you know, with a brush. And suddenly there was some kind of movement, bubbling up, and I looked into the toilet bowl and I almost got it all right in the face.

SHE

What?

VERA

What "what"? Shit. Piles of shit from the whole building, filth, and tons of stinking slime. I pulled the chain, and I got a second helping.

SHE

Maybe some water, Madame Vera, I have a glass ...

VERA

Wait, wait. That's not the end. It's even worse, much worse. The bathroom started to flood. A whole rainbow of colors and forms: small, big, runny and hard, oy, I tell you, a whole cosmos of shit, a pageant of colors: brown, black, yellow, tobacco. Crap, even red.

SHE

(Looks around, frightened, but there are no signs of such a cataclysm.)

I...

VERA

Not you, but me! I'm standing in this, and I don't know what to do. It pours out, drowning me, always more and more. I ran to the end of the hallway, but that didn't fix anything. After I left my house, my things, documents, souvenirs. I can't escape; I have to do something about it. I have to fight, as always.

SHE

Maybe there's someone you can call, for help...

VERA

Wiseass. First you're discombobulated. I'm sitting in the hallway, in front of the door and howling. The neighbors across the hall thought I'd gone mad. Particularly, when I tried to explain what had happened.

SHE

And the super?

VERA

Her? The pasty-faced one? Please. She was the first to make fun of me. She just grunted, just like you almost, to call an ambulance, and left.

SHE

I'm so sorry... I...

VERA

I told you - wait, wait. In the end I came back to the apartment. To save everything. It stank horribly. And I didn't even have rubber gloves, because those scums stole them from me long ago. Just a dustpan, rags, and my bare hands. Bucket after bucket I had to clean. Can you imagine?

SHE

No.

VERA

With my bare hands and a rag. And then I had to clean myself, scrub, scour every inch. And that's how the problem started. Like in Shakespeare. "Out, out, damn spot!" Sacre bleu!. I almost scraped my skin off. And I'm not sure that it went away. Did it go away?

(Vera shows HER her forehead.)

SHE

I don't see anything...

VERA

I'm probably marked for life. With shit! I can only kill myself. Give me some water already, and a little tissue.

SHE

Here.

VERA

Hey, you drink it yourself, because you're turning pale. Can you manage?

SHE

I can manage.

VERA

I thought I'd never experience anything worse in my life, but I experienced it here. Even in the Ghetto, I didn't feel so beaten down. Can you believe me?

SHE

It's hard to compare, perhaps.

VERA

For you. I can. And believe me. I know just what I'm talking about. The shit defeated me. Not the Ghetto, the Germans, or my enemies. Maybe they piped it into here. What do you think?

SHE

I'd rather not ...

(Runs to the bathroom, vomiting.)

VERA

Crap. And you promised. Good that you didn't swear. Your "mommy" would have had to answer for it. Did you make it?

SHE

I made it.

VERA

The lid?

SHE

Raised....

VERA

I hope so. That's the only hope I have left. That the toilet lid got out alive.

(Louder)

And pull the chain carefully, because it will all come crashing down...

SHE

That's how it is. I know.

(Returns, fatigued, with a pale smile.)

Nothing happened, and I'm fine.

VERA

I see how fine you are. You can barely stand up. And what did you have to tell me?

SHE

I just came to say farewell, Madame Vera, I'm leaving, for Warsaw.

VERA

You're leaving? Something must have happened.

SHE

It ended... My... my scholarship ended.

VERA

You're leaving me? In Alzheimer's fond embrace?

SHE

Well, Madame Vera... I just...have to go.

VERA

But you'll come back? I still have a lot to tell you, about various and sundry.

SHE

I also have something for you. I just need to breathe. I mean, to take a deep breath, for a minute.

VERA

Certainly, there's no rule here against breathing. Particularly after such a promising puke.
(Shrewdly.)

Ah, that kind of breath, you mean. For that you take at least three. That's what I always did, when I had stage fright.

SHE

(Positions herself at the piano.)

Now.

VERA

(Shrewdly.)

Touch the piano? That also works.

SHE

(Takes another breath. With a clear and increasingly quiet voice, starts to sing.)

"It was already so late.

Good lord! What of it?

I didn't realize how much time had passed.

So I sat, and I thought,

and I thought how to write him

that this letter would be my last."

VERA

(Visibly moved.)

My child...

SHE

"Farewell. I can see!

In fact I'm very happy, I was just about to leave...

Nothing strange, I know I'm not wanted..."

(The doorbell, sharp, insistent. They hold still for a moment, and Vera gives a sign not to open it.)

VERA

It might be them. The ones who always come. Or Kazio. He still visits me occasionally.

SHE

Or rather it might be...

(Carefully approaches the door. It rings again.)

VERA

Kazio, no. It's the people from the sewer department. They want to finish me off again.

SHE

It's not them.

VERA

I know very well what I'm talking about.

(The bell rings again, always more insistent.)

Let it ring. They won't fool me.

SHE

They won't fool you, not anyone. Not anymore.

VERA

Well, let's do it. Just softly.

SHE

(Only moving her lips.)

VERA

But not quite that much.

SHE

(In a whisper.)

"Farewell! I can see!

In fact I'm very happy, I was just about to leave.

And what! Nothing strange, I'm bored, so I'm leaving.

You would do the same."

(The doorbell rings just once more as if to say farewell. Vera looks through the peephole.)

VERA

They left. No one is there.

(Soberly.)

It was him? Marcel?

SHE

I don't know... Yes.

VERA

They deserve each other... them and that Paula of theirs.

(VERA gives a sign like a choral conductor)

SHE

(Loudly.)

"Farewell! I can see!

You'll see me no longer, if you do me wrong.

You can burn this letter, and don't let her see it.

"Farewell! Only know, that my hatred burns stronger

Than I first was in love with you"***

VERA

Well, well, well! You mixed up all the words, but beautifully. B-plus!

SHE

Farewell!

(Starts to run to the bathroom, but gathers herself and turns around half way.)

VERA

Girl, you're pregnant!

SHE

Me? "Good lord, what of it? "

VERA

So what happens now?

SHE

I don't know.

VERA

(Wants to hug HER, but stops herself. SHE hugs Vera first.)

SHE

I have to go now, Madame Vera.

(Releases her grasp and moves toward the door.)

I... Really...

VERA

Go, go... I also...

SHE

Please close the door after me.

VERA

Close up when you leave. My child...

(SHE leaves. Vera walks first to the table, and then to the wardrobe. Opens it and stands before a great black fur. In her hand, hidden behind her back, she holds a knife.)

THE END

* "Żebyś ty mnie zrozumiał" – Music: Mieczysław Wróblewski, Lyrics: Jerzy Nel.

** "Trzy listy" – Music: Leon Boruński, Lyrics: Jerzy Jurandot.

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