

SEAGULLS IN A CHERRY TREE

By William Missouri Downs

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SYNOPSIS: A Chekhovian comedy about Boris and Stan, two Hollywood screenwriters who have been hired by a large studio to adapt Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* into a new movie. In order to finish the stalled adaptation and get away from L.A.'s smog, they trek to an isolated Arts Colony just outside Moscow, Idaho. The colony is full of navel-gazing, self-indulgent, philosophizing, chronically indecisive Chekhovian artists. All plot points come from Chekhov's plays, plus a touch of invention, all of which have been rearranged and shaped a modern Chekhov comedy.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(3 females, 5 males)

CONSTANTINE (m).....	20s; A young screenwriter just out of USC Film School. (174 lines)
MARSHA (f)	20s; Natasha's disappointed daughter, works as a maid. (149 lines)
BORIS (m).....	50s; Constantine's uncle, a veteran screenwriter. (158 lines)
MADAM NATASHA (f).....	50s; A veteran actress, owner of the Dantchenko Colony for Artists. (144 lines)
BOB (m)	Ageless; A bumbling artist. (79 lines)
NINA (f)	20s; A beautiful wannabe actress and poet. (124 lines)
UNCLE PETER (m)	40s; Natasha's brother, an unemployed optimist. (120 lines)
DR. ANTON (m)	Ageless; A podiatrist. (93 lines)

DURATION: 100 minutes

TIME: The Present, early May.

SETTING: Moscow, Idaho. In and outside the antediluvian Dantchenko Colony for Artists and Creative Inquiry.

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

PART I: Flirting

PART II: Eating

PART III: Drinking

PART IV: Talking Stupidities

SET

Archetypal; simply rearranging the furniture represents settings.

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

There are references to popular culture within the script (Mel Gibson, Johnny Depp, *Book of Mormon*, etc.). Feel free to update to current popular culture references as necessary.

PREMIERE PRODUCTION

SEAGULLS IN A CHERRY TREE premiered at the Orlando Shakespeare Theatre's Playfest in Orlando, FL. The production was directed by Tom Joyner with the following cast:

NINA	Mindy Ander
BORIS	Tom Nowicki
PETER	Kristian Truelsen
MARSHA	Michelle Krause
CONSTANTINE	Michael Marinaccio
BOB	Brandon Roberts
NATASHA	Mary Knoll

Special Thank You To: Tom Joyner, Ceil Herman, Joseluis Solorzano, David Arias, Jamie Bronstein, Elli Hernandez, Heather Castillo, Eric Brekke, Joshua Taulbee, Monte H. Wright, Peter Herman, Jeanne Luper, Karen Ross and Monty Moroni

PART I: FLIRTING

AT START: *Lights rise on the main room of the Dantchenko Colony for Artists and Creative Inquiry. CONSTANTINE, a young and sensitive screenwriter sits at a laptop. Behind him stands UNCLE BORIS, an older, oversized, self-important screenwriter.*

BORIS: Laptop computer!?

CONSTANTINE: Check.

BORIS: Dictionary?

CONSTANTINE: Check.

BORIS: Thesaurus?

CONSTANTINE: Check—Wait. No Thesaurus.

BORIS: That's because it's here.

CONSTANTINE: Excuse me?

BORIS: Here! In my head! Give me a word – any word!

CONSTANTINE: You mean—

BORIS: Yes, any word—!

CONSTANTINE: Like, off the top of my—?

BORIS: Make it a hard one!

CONSTANTINE: Okay. Ah... Ah... "Flirting."

BORIS: Ha! Easy! Winking, wooing, teasing... Goo goo eyes! I tell you, I'm a walking, talking... (*Snapping his fingers – trying to find the right word.*) Repository!

CONSTANTINE: That's amazing.

BORIS: Remarkable, wonderful, stupendous!

CONSTANTINE: Quite a talent.

BORIS: Skill, proficiency, gift!

CONSTANTINE: (*Stretching his fingers.*) Okay. Ready? Here goes. (*Typing.*) "The Cherry Orchard by Anton Chekhov. A new adaptation for the screen for Walt Disney Productions—."

BORIS: Draft one – Quentin Tarantino. (*He tosses a thin manuscript in the trash.*) Draft two – David Mamet (*He tosses an extra thick manuscript in the trash.*) Draft three by...

CONSTANTINE: (*Typing.*) Constantine—

BORIS: Whoa Whoa Whoa! Me first! Boris R. Slavsky! Don't forget the "R."

CONSTANTINE: Sorry, Uncle Boris. What was I thinking. *(Typing.)*

Boris R. Slavsky and Constantine Slavsky.

BORIS: Your first paid writing job, how do you feel?

CONSTANTINE: Scared.

BORIS: Good! Work off that energy.

CONSTANTINE gently places his fingers on the keyboard waiting for inspiration. Pause. They're both totally blank.

CONSTANTINE: Fade In!

BORIS: Ah! I like it! Type it.

CONSTANTINE types. Beat – again, they're blank.

CONSTANTINE: *(Typing.)* "Interior!"

BORIS: Good!

Once again, they're blank. Beat.

BORIS: Did I ever tell you about the time I was hired to rewrite the script for *Star Wars*?

CONSTANTINE: You rewrote *Star Wars*?

BORIS: I didn't get credit – no, but, yes! I did lots of improvements, character tweaking—That whole lightsaber thingy, that was my idea.

CONSTANTINE: *(Not impressed.)* Wow, I didn't know that was you.

BORIS: Not bragging, I'd-never-do-that, no, but, yes! I think my re-writes saved the picture.

CONSTANTINE: Okay. First scene. Here goes...

They go back to the blank screen. Still nothing. Beat.

BORIS: Remember the movie *Titanic*?

CONSTANTINE: I suppose you re-wrote that too?

BORIS: Oh god no, but yes!

CONSTANTINE: Look, Uncle Boris, can I be perfectly honest? Your stories of old Hollywood are just... just...

BORIS: Amazing, impressive, spectacular!

CONSTANTINE: But—I'm sorry. I'm creative only in Los Angeles – and you want to come to this colony, full of writers and artists in the middle of—where? What's the name of this place?

BORIS: The Dantchenko Colony for Artists and Creative Inquiry, Idaho—

CONSTANTINE: We wasted a whole day getting here—Two speeding tickets—

BORIS: You wanted to drive—

CONSTANTINE: We're left with less than two weeks to finish the rewrite. And a movie version of *The Cherry Orchard*? What are the executives at Walt Disney thinking? I read they've already signed Mel Gibson to play the role of (*Reading.*) "Yermolay Lopakhin!" Did I pronounce that right?

BORIS: I suppose – we can always change it.

CONSTANTINE: What am I doing? I can't even pronounce the characters' names! What right do I have to rewrite Chekhov?

BORIS: Look, Stan, simplify. Start at the beginning – What's the play about?

CONSTANTINE: It's hard to say...

BORIS'S back is turned, so CONSTANTINE quickly takes a book from his satchel and opens to a marked page.

CONSTANTINE: (*Quickly reading.*) "Chekhov simply puts real life on stage: Its folly, its tragedy, and lost moments—."

He hides the book before BORIS sees it.

BORIS: Wrong!

CONSTANTINE: Wrong? Really? What's it about then?

BORIS: Furniture!

CONSTANTINE: Furniture?

BORIS: Yes. During the play, people sit on furniture. Later, they stand in front of furniture. Between acts, they move furniture. I've read it twice – almost all of it each time – and all I know for sure is that it's a play populated with fools, amateur philosophers, draining inactivity and *furniture!*

CONSTANTINE: Uncle Boris—

BORIS: I concede! Walt Disney made a hideous mistake hiring you. They've made an even bigger mistake hiring me! So let's do the right thing.

CONSTANTINE: Admit we're unqualified and go home?

BORIS: Yes, but no! I was thinking more along the lines of taking damaged goods, adding a few scenes of our own devising, paraphrasing a little and cashing the check.

CONSTANTINE: I just thought my first Hollywood writing assignment would be more romantic. I mean, rewriting Chekhov, (*He checks the book once again – reading.*) “The greatest Russian playwright of all time. Born 1860 – died 1904”

BORIS: What's the one thing I taught you – how to appeal to an audience! Audiences today want something that astonishes them without surprising them. They want us to make a bold new statement – without being bold or making any statement. Now let's stop thinking and start writing! Let's here-and-now agree that there shall be no further interruptions! Nothing will stop us! Absolutely nothing!

CONSTANTINE: Agreed.

SFX: car horn. BOB enters in a panic.

BOB: They've arrived! What time is it? (*Checking his expensive watch.*) Almost two. Two hours late – two hours!

CONSTANTINE: Excuse me, we can't be interrupted – we were told we wouldn't be interrupted.

BORIS: (*To BOB.*) And could I have a tiny shot of vodka? (*Responding to CONSTANTINE'S concern.*) It's not me that wants it, it's my leg.

BOB: You should've woke me up! She's arrived!

BORIS: Who's “She”?

BOB: Madame Natasha!

BORIS: Ah Madame Natasha – the owner!

BOB: (*Panicking.*) She's been with the road company of *Medea* for six months! Imagine all that luggage – six months of luggage! How did she fit it all in the cab, god knows—. Wait, perhaps she didn't take a cab. Perhaps she took a shuttle—. Or perhaps she's having it sent after—. The possibilities are unfathomable!

CONSTANTINE: You are?

BOB: I'm Yepikhodov Vassilyitch Ivanitch Chubukov, but you can call me Bob.

CONSTANTINE: Look, Bob—

BOB: I changed my name – It was Madame Natasha's idea – went through all of the legal doings, because she, as an artist, thought I should have a unique name that could not be forgotten. But I've found that no one can remember it – that no one has the time to remember it – that no one can even pronounce it! My career died the moment I changed my name—

CONSTANTINE: Bob—

BOB: Yes! Exactly. Regret it? I do! *(Exits running. From offstage. Yelling.)* She's here! Marsha, she's here!

BORIS: *(Beat.)* I wonder if he's getting my vodka.

MARSHA enters. She's been reading "Modern Bride Magazine".

MARSHA: She's finally here! Two hours late! I waited so long I almost got bored.

CONSTANTINE: Miss, we were told that we could work here in peace and quiet. What's the use of working at an arts colony and writer's retreat if you can't—

MARSHA: *(Fixing her hair.)* Do I look okay? Tell me I do. Tell me the truth, even if you must lie.

Panicked, BOB runs through, bumping into a chair.

BOB: See! Right there! That's what I'm talking about!

BOB runs into the kitchen.

CONSTANTINE: We were told – unquestionably told – that this room had little floor traffic—

MARSHA: "Little floor traffic?" Who told you that?

CONSTANTINE: Him, that guy, Yak-off.

MARSHA: *(Flirting.)* Did you know you're cute when you fret?

CONSTANTINE: Please, I must concentrate!

CONSTANTINE takes the laptop into the corner and attempts to focus only on his work. BOB runs in hyperventilating.

BOB: The cab just pulled up! Tons of suitcases! Wait – I'm going to black out! I'm blacking out!

He doesn't black out, instead, BOB runs out just as the front door opens and MADAME NATASHA enters. She's followed by her brother UNCLE PETER and NINA.

MADAME NATASHA: No no no no, Yes! It can't be true. But it is! I'm home! My hands are ice. Look, they're ice!

UNCLE PETER: *(Holding her hands.)* They are ice. I swear they are ice!

MADAME NATASHA: *(Off the room.)* Nothing has changed!

UNCLE PETER: The train was two hours late—two hours! I ask you, is that any way to run a choo-choo?

MADAME NATASHA: When I was a little girl, on sweltering summer nights, I slept in this room. And now, six months away... I didn't sleep a wink. Oh! My table! My chair—!

MARSHA: Welcome back mama.

MADAME NATASHA: My daughter!

MARSHA: *(With a self-flattering look towards NINA.)* Yepikhodoff Alexeievitch Semyonoff Tchekhoff has proposed to me.

NOTE: No one ever pronounces Bob's Russian name the same way twice.

MADAME NATASHA: Who?

MARSHA: Bob.

MARSHA and NINA glare at each other.

MADAME NATASHA: I thought you were in love with Doctor Anton?

UNCLE PETER: She is but *he* doesn't know *she* exists.

MADAME NATASHA: Doctor Anton – that sad, overworked man – does he still stop by on that adorable bicycle of his?

UNCLE PETER: Almost every day. He sits on the back porch, talks with Bob, gets staggering drunk, throws his bicycle in the lake, then sleeps it off in the boathouse – he's there now.

MARSHA and NINA scowl at each other.

UNCLE PETER: And as you can see, the childish competition is still with us – Who will marry prosperity first – Nina or Marsha? Anyone care to take a bet on who will win this one? All for Nina?

UNCLE PETER, MADAME NATASHA, BORIS and NINA raise their hands.

UNCLE PETER: All those for Marsha.

Affronted MARSHA raises her hand.

MADAME NATASHA: Don't worry dear daughter you're still a winner in God's eyes.

UNCLE PETER: What can I say; pride and the rat race will be the end of us! Oh, that reminds me. *(He takes out a small note pad and writes.)* Note to self – Fish bicycle out of lake!

MADAME NATASHA: *(To BORIS.)* And who's this? You weren't here when I left.

BORIS: It's me, Boris, Madame.

MADAME NATASHA: Boris? The Hollywood screenwriter! It's so good to have you back after all these years. Are you writing?

BORIS: My nephew and I have been hired by Walt Disney to adapt Chekhov for the silver screen!

BOB enters.

MADAME NATASHA: Yermolai Andreievitch Panteleievitch Ignateieitch!

BOB: Madame Natasha! Welcome home!

BOB throws out his arms to greet her and knocks over a lamp.

MADAME NATASHA: No matter, no matter. It was given to me by my dear departed mother – It's worthless.

UNCLE PETER: (*Upbeat. To CONSTANTINE.*) You know, I always wanted to be a writer myself – Not a big writer but a little writer.

MADAME NATASHA: (*To BOB.*) Look, I bought you some colored crayons during my stopover in Moscow.

BOB: Madame Natasha, you still treat me like a child. I'm a serious artist now. I don't use crayons—! Ooooo! They brought periwinkle back!

MADAME NATASHA: You're most welcome. Since we are standing so close, we should hug.

BOB: Yes, we should.

They do not hug. NINA clears her throat.

MADAME NATASHA: Oh yes! Everyone, this is Nina Ranevskaya! Nina's a wannabe poet/actress who lives next door. She's locked herself out so she'll be staying with us until her father returns with a key.

NINA: (*Shy.*) Hi.

MADAME NATASHA: Nina, darling, recite one of your poems.

NINA: Oh-no, I'm much too tired.

MARSHA: (*Snide.*) And we are thankful.

MADAME NATASHA: Don't make us beg! We need a performance!

NINA: Well, okay. (*She clears her voice.*) "Midnight and the dog—."

MADAME NATASHA: Wait! Nobody move! I've lost a contact! This may take a while; can we have some coffee please? I'd give my life for a cup of coffee.

BOB: I've already made it – I'll check to make sure.

BOB runs out. MADAME NATASHA, MARSHA and UNCLE PETER get down on all fours to find the contact.

MADAME NATASHA: Has Bob paid his rent?

MARSHA: Not a penny in eight months.

MADAME NATASHA: But, if I'm correct that's a Rolex he's wearing.

MARSHA: Trust me, it's fake.

BORIS: (*Sotto to CONSTANTINE.*) Don't just stand there – help her.

CONSTANTINE: We need to write.

CONSTANTINE reluctantly joins the search for the contact.

UNCLE PETER: *(To BORIS.)* You know, I was thinking, isn't it amazing that someone with my intelligence has remained so optimistic! There's something to be said about passive metaphysical optimism!

NINA: *(To BORIS.)* Oh my god! I know you.

BORIS: *(Proud and pompous.)* Entirely possible.

NINA: You're Boris R. Slavsky. The screenwriter.

BORIS: That I am.

NINA: You wrote *The Godfather!*

BORIS: And *Crime Wave II.*

NINA: I loved those movies. And you're staying here?

BORIS: Yes. I find that I need to get away from L.A.'s smog. You know, ambush the creative spirits.

NINA: Now I know I can't recite my poems – Not in front of you. I'll get the luggage. *(Exits.)*

MADAME NATASHA: *(Standing.)* Wait! That's right! I forgot to put my contacts in this morning! I'm wearing glasses. I'm so silly, I can see perfectly. Give me a hug dear daughter.

MADAME NATASHA hugs CONSTANTINE.

MARSHA: *(Waving.)* Mom, I'm over here.

MADAME NATASHA: Then who's this?

CONSTANTINE: I'm Constantine—. I'm paying money – hard earned money – to have peace and quiet—

UNCLE PETER: That's what Dantchenko is all about. It's a haven for intellectuals. A place to think and what-not. To contemplate, to create! There's not even a phone to trouble you!

MARSHA: At least not until we pay the phone bill.

UNCLE PETER: Then I hope we never pay it! Silence is golden. Silence is good for the soul. You know, I just finished my one hundredth book on metaphysics and I still don't know what a soul is! Ha! "If I could have chosen not to be born, I certainly would not have accepted existence under such ridiculous conditions!"

MADAME NATASHA: I know that quote! That's Dostoyevsky – *The Idiot!*

UNCLE PETER: He may well have been, but he was a good writer!

SFX: (Offstage.) small explosion

MADAME NATASHA: Oh my god! He blew himself up!

MARSHA runs out to check on BOB.

MADAME NATASHA: The man goes to the kitchen to make coffee and he blows himself up. Will wonders never cease!

CONSTANTINE: *(Desperate to find the right words.)* Madame Natasha, you must understand, we – my Uncle and I – came here for quiet. To work. To to to—practice my art—

MADAME NATASHA: And what's your art, young man?

CONSTANTINE: I'm a screenwriter.

UNCLE PETER: Why do you say that as if you're better than me?

MADAME NATASHA: Screenwriting is not an art. It's a craft. Am I right, Boris?

BORIS: You're right, screenwriting is only a craft!

MADAME NATASHA: Like basket making.

UNCLE PETER: I made a basket once.

CONSTANTINE: I must disagree. Screenwriting can be an art, it's just that most writers have sold out. They write for money. I, on the other hand, write for passion! Money is inconsequential!

CONSTANTINE tries to close the door and catches NINA who is struggling in with at least five bags of luggage.

CONSTANTINE: Oh! So sorry.

NINA: That's all right. Doors in my face I can deal with. It's those front steps I have trouble with. They're awfully slippery, Natasha. Someone's going to break her neck.

CONSTANTINE becomes distracted with NINA's stunning beauty.

CONSTANTINE: Hello.

NINA: Hi.

CONSTANTINE: As I was saying – I'm a screenwriter. I get paid *lots* of money to write. *(To NINA.)* That's my brand new Porsche out front.

NINA: *(Looking out at the car.)* Oh. Cool. Green?

CONSTANTINE: Spring garden sage.

MADAME NATASHA: Nina! A poem!

NINA: What? Oh-no please. I'm much too tired.

MADAME NATASHA: Oooo. I like how this one starts.

NINA: No. I'm really very very tired.

MADAME NATASHA: The plot thickens.

NINA: Goodnight.

NINA picks up the five bags of luggage and starts for the bedrooms.

MADAME NATASHA: I believe that is what they call a haiku!

CONSTANTINE: *(To NINA.)* May I be of some assistance?

NINA: That'd be nice.

CONSTANTINE takes her bags and they start out.

CONSTANTINE: I'm Constantine, but you can call me Stan. Did I mention that that's my Porsche out front—?

NINA: Do you know where you're going?

CONSTANTINE: I have no idea – you?

NINA: No.

CONSTANTINE and NINA exit to the bedrooms. MADAME NATASHA looks out a window towards the audience.

MADAME NATASHA: Oh dear brother, is it true? Am I standing here? Oh! Listen! The first starlings are singing as they greet the morn! And my trees. My wonderful trees— *(Squinting.)* Where are my trees?

UNCLE PETER: They cut them down three years ago when we sold our acreage off to that substandard subdivision.

MADAME NATASHA: We did? You'd think I'd remember that.

UNCLE PETER: Our trees are no longer, dear sister – Replaced by "Cherry Pit Estates" – a gated community that wants nothing to do with us. There's only one tree left and that's out back where no one can touch it. (*Shaking his fist.*) Damned upper middle class – always defending their values and-so-on-and-so-forth. They're only delaying the inevitable!

BORIS: Which is?

UNCLE PETER: Collective ownership of the suburban proletariat, what else!

MADAME NATASHA: No matter. I'm home! I feel... I feel... so... so—

BORIS: Alive, animated, dynamic, au courant?

MADAME NATASHA: I noticed the sports car out front – are you making gobs of money, dear Boris?

UNCLE PETER: Yes. Tell us about the moolah.

BORIS: That horrible contraption belongs to my nephew. He's already blown his check. Me? Yes, but no! They pay me small potatoes these days and what I do make, my ex-wives gobble up. But when I walk into a room, people know me. People shake my hand and say, "What's it like to work with Johnny Depp." That makes it all worthwhile.

UNCLE PETER: And what's it like to work with Johnny Depp?

BORIS: Don't know – never met him.

MARSHA: (*Enters.*) Bob dropped the kettle, it exploded, he burnt his thumb. He's holding it in the snow bank out back.

MADAME NATASHA: Snow in May. Will wonders never cease—
How are the boys?

MARSHA: They checked out three months ago.

MADAME NATASHA: Did they finish their metrical composition?

MARSHA: They did not, nor did they pay their bill. (*To BORIS.*) We had two artists from Madrid staying here. They were working on this performance-art-type-thingy. They tried to kill each other, went out for more Cuervo and never came back. (*To NATASHA.*) Oh! Pauline, the cross-eyed pottery-maker, died of her injuries.

MADAME NATASHA: Yes, Peter wrote me. God rest her merry soul.

UNCLE PETER: Yes, God rest her—. Ooooo! Confectionery!

UNCLE PETER becomes distracted by a bowl of hard candy.

MADAME NATASHA: Did you replace the kiln?

MARSHA: What's the point?

BOB looks in, holding his thumb in pain. He growls like a bear then exits.

MADAME NATASHA: Oh, what shall we do. An arts colony that can't keep artists. We're failures! We should simply admit it.

UNCLE PETER: *(Unwrapping a candy.)* Admitting failure set me free!

MADAME NATASHA: Then I shall do it also. I shall now admit failure. *(She closes her eyes, inhales and blows the air out.)* There! I feel better.

MARSHA: Mother, there's a little bad news. We got another notice from the I.R.S. I'm afraid they want to sell the place for back taxes.

MADAME NATASHA: *(Dismissive.)* Oh, they tried that two years ago—

MARSHA: This time, they're serious. A man came to the door.

MADAME NATASHA: *(Mocking.)* Ooooo! A man came to the door! Dear brother, are you frightened?

UNCLE PETER: *(Mocking.)* Oh yes, quite frightened. Let's hide the door.

MARSHA: There's only one way to save Dantchenko. We must close, totally remodel and reopen as a bed and breakfast.

MADAME NATASHA: A bed and breakfast? What dimwit came up with that?

MARSHA: It was Bob's idea.

MADAME NATASHA: We've hit a new low, we're listening to Bob.

MARSHA: Mother, the writers never pay their bills. We're broke. The I.R.S. agreed to delay the auction—

MADAME NATASHA: I don't want a house full of strangers—

MARSHA: What's the difference—?

MADAME NATASHA: Artists look inside. They bring a level of joie de vivre to the place. Tourists would just... gape at the scenery.

MARSHA: Mother, we must do something!

MADAME NATASHA: I'm not listening to you. Not listening!

MADAME NATASHA covers her ears and hums the La Marseillaise, the French national anthem.

MARSHA: Mother!

MADAME NATASHA: (*Humming to herself, ears covered.*) Ta Da Da Dum Dum Dum Dum Daaaaa Da Dhum...

UNCLE PETER joins in. Soon BORIS does too.

MARSHA: Mother! If this were a bed and breakfast, with flat screen TVs in every room, we'd make \$250 per night, per room – Even more!

MADAME NATASHA exits, humming La Marseillaise. MARSHA follows. CONSTANTINE enters.

CONSTANTINE: I think I'm in love.

BORIS: With Marsha?

CONSTANTINE: Who?

BORIS: The maid – the owner's daughter. I think she has eyes for you.

CONSTANTINE: Oh, I didn't notice her. I'm kind of intrigued by Nina the young poet/actress. Do you believe in love at first sight?

BORIS: That's the only kind! Trust me, I've been married four times.

UNCLE PETER: I always wanted to fall in love. Always wanted to be a writer-type. Neither happened. Even being a second-rate Hollywood hack with a commonplace wife sounds good to me. What a life that'd be!

CONSTANTINE: (*In his own little world.*) Did you see her eyes? Wonderful eyes.

UNCLE PETER: (*Sucking on hard candy.*) I wish I had a laptop like yours. If I did – I could've been a writer.

BORIS: This is an oldie, but it's never failed me. It's five years old.

UNCLE PETER: Five years! And it's never failed?

BORIS: Not once.

UNCLE PETER: (*Pontificating.*) My god, that's, like, a hundred in human years. Isn't that amazing? Just think – It's an inanimate object, yet it serves humankind. It's nothing but wires and plastic, yet it makes life better. Dear, kind, laptop, we thank you for caring, for helping, for sustaining us in our moment of darkness, for starting up when everything else is shutting down!

BORIS: By the way, how are you going to come up with the money?

UNCLE PETER: What money?

BORIS: To save Dantchenko.

UNCLE PETER: Oh! Don't worry. I'll get a promissory note from the credit union. I'll—If only Marsha would just stop fussing about and marry Doctor Anton—

BORIS: Doctor Anton?

UNCLE PETER: The intoxicated podiatrist sleeping it off in the boathouse. He's got money – podiatrists always have money. But Marsha insists on hanging about with Bob. What a queer duck! One potato short of a pancake, if you catch my drift. He is absolutely worthless, can't even pay his rent—!

BORIS: Then why is he wearing a Rolex?

UNCLE PETER: Trust me, it's a clever fake. In fact he's a penniless artist – and not even a good artist but a cheap knock-off of an artist.

BOB enters holding his wrapped thumb.

UNCLE PETER: (*Not seeing him.*) Yes. Bob is a slow-witted useless excuse for a human being whom we should've booted out years ago. He is—

CONSTANTINE: Standing in the door—

UNCLE PETER: (*Suddenly covering.*) Ah! I've got something in my eye! Damn contacts! There. Much better. What were we talking about? Oh yes! You're right, hormonal imbalance should always be grounds for immediate acquittal— (*Acting surprised to see BOB.*) Oh! Hi! Bob!

BOB: (*Suspicious.*) Hello.

UNCLE PETER: (*Pretending to hear something.*) What's that? They're calling me in the kitchen. Yes. (*Starts for the door but stops.*) I know! I'll call Aunt LaBelle! She's got gobs of money. I shall flirt with her and she'll be putty in my hands! The money is as good as ours! (*Exits.*)

BOB: I need advice. I'm sorry, were you writing?

CONSTANTINE: Yes—

BORIS: But no! It's time for a break.

BOB: I'm in love!

BORIS: Really, so is Constantine.

BOB takes out a gun and points it at his head.

BOB: (*Panicked.*) With whom?!

CONSTANTINE: What?!

BOB: Whom are you in love with?!

CONSTANTINE: Nina. Why?

BOB: Oh! (*Takes the gun down.*) I'm in love with Marsha. Ever seen the movie *Fifty Shades Of Gray*?

BORIS: Seen it, I rewrote it!

BOB: When I look at her—

CONSTANTINE: Who?

BOB: Marsha.

BORIS: The maid – Natasha's daughter.

BOB: (*Obsessive.*) When I look at her, I can't even begin to express myself. When I even think of her, I'm dumb struck. For example, right now, I'm thinking of her and I'm unable to put three words together in a simple sentence. One thought of her wipes my mind clean—unable to communicate, unable to talk, unable to make my diaphragm function properly. It's paralyzed. Right now, my diaphragm is totally paralyzed because I'm thinking of her. How I long to express myself, but it's impossible. There's something mysteriously difficult about even the most unmitigated remark. I've completely lost confidence in my ability to deal with language. I'm in a neuro-linguistic stupor! I'm having an apoplectic fit! I can't even say her name, Marsha, when I try it gets impaled in my throat. I try to say it and all that comes out is "Marsh...."

BORIS: Then you're in love!

BOB: Here's what I can't understand. Should I live or die. Nietzsche says that if your life is meaningless there's absolutely nothing wrong with launching yourself into nonexistence. Nietzsche was a great philosopher – a celebrated mind! I shall now go for a walk on the lake and be alone with my thoughts. (*Stops at the door.*) Rousseau was correct, mankind is only "a society of the malicious!" (*Exits.*)

CONSTANTINE: Is he insane?

BORIS: No, he's in love.

MARSHA and MADAME NATASHA enter.

MARSHA: ...Mother, what do I have to do – Spit blood? The I.R.S.–

MADAME NATASHA: Marsha, darling, please, quiet. I have marvelous news. Yermolai Vassilieitch Solyony Romanovitch—

MARSHA: Who?

MADAME NATASHA: Bob. He's in love and wants to marry.

MARSHA: I just told you that.

MADAME NATASHA: (*Not listening.*) Just now, in the kitchen, while I was bandaging his thumb, he asked permission and I said "yes". You shall be a June bride. He's no Doctor Anton, but he'll have to do.

MARSHA: Mother, the only reason I would marry that that, that, that—

BORIS: Numbskull, lightweight, simpleton.

MARSHA: Is so that I would win the bet.

MADAME NATASHA: What bet is this?

MARSHA: The bet with Nina. All my life she's been the pretty one, the one with "personality." All the boys hang on her every word. But I will be the first to marry! (*Beat.*) Then I'll divorce Bob or off myself, but I will be a winner.

BORIS: My wife has threatened to off herself many times.

MADAME NATASHA: Really?

BORIS: Yes, she's clinically depressed. All she does is philosophize and attempt suicide. I'd leave her, but then I'd have to find something new to complain about.

MADAME NATASHA: I thought we were lovers?

BORIS: You're correct! Last time I was here. I was re-writing *Bonnie and Clyde II* and your husband had died. We weren't in love – no, but, yes! We... commingled.

MADAME NATASHA: It's all coming back—! On the billiards table!

UNCLE PETER enters with two billiards cues.

UNCLE PETER: Billiards anyone?

BORIS: Colossal idea.

CONSTANTINE: Uncle Boris, we have to write. If we don't email pages by Monday—

BORIS: I'm just going to play one little game with... with...

UNCLE PETER: Peter.

BORIS: With Peter and Madame Natasha.

MADAME NATASHA: Shall we?

BORIS and MADAME NATASHA exit. UNCLE PETER turns to MARSHA and CONSTANTINE.

UNCLE PETER: Did you hear, I've decided to commit philosophical suicide? *(They don't ask so he does.)* Really, how does one go about doing that? *(Answering his own question.)* By unswerving adherence to optimism! *(Exits.)*

MARSHA: Yephikhodoff Serebryakoff Vassilina Voinitskya proposed to me.

CONSTANTINE: *(Concentrating on the laptop.)* Uh huh.

MARSHA: But I don't love him.

CONSTANTINE: *(Not listening.)* That's great. Go away.

MARSHA: You know there aren't that many eligible men in these parts – It's an isolated existence. And most of the artists that stay here are either self-absorbed losers or gay. You have no idea what it's like to grow up with Nina next door – always flirting – always dating. I once had a boy pick me up for a date, but when he saw her, he took her out instead. What can I say, she's a slut. Not the marrying type. *(Flirting.)* Whatcha writin'?

CONSTANTINE: *(Not listening.)* Huh? Oh. It's a movie for Disney. But it'll never work. People today don't care about Chekhov. They think he's just the helmsman on Star Trek.

MARSHA: Navigator, actually. (*He doesn't follow. She elaborates.*) Sulu was the helmsman, Chekhov was the... (*Realizes her inner geek is showing.*) Never mind.

CONSTANTINE: This is a total waste of time. I'll only be rewritten by some other desperate hack followed by another who'll rewrite both of us.

From her apron, MARSHA takes a large cucumber and begins eating.

MARSHA: Do you think there's a logical explanation as to why people fall in love, or do you think it just sorta happens?

CONSTANTINE: (*In his own world.*) And to top it off, I don't know why I was hired. My thesis script at USC was a science fiction thriller.

MARSHA: (*Not listening, eating the cucumber.*) My love life is a fiction. I've been in love with a local doctor for years – a podiatrist. He comes by nearly every day – sits on the back porch. I fluff his pillow – bring him vodka and nuts and he doesn't even know that I exist.

CONSTANTINE: (*Not listening.*) Fluff! Maybe that's why I was hired. My spec script was unlike any other science fiction movie. They must have seen that I wanted to write a blockbuster for the intellectual elite, not just fluff for the foolish masses.

MARSHA: (*Not listening.*) Many years ago, he asked me out on a date. We went to Moscow, saw a double feature: *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *The Birdcage*. He pointed out that according to the ancient Chinese calendar, *2001: A Space Odyssey* would be called *The 18th Year Of The 78th Cycle: A Space Odyssey*. That's when I knew I loved him – he's so refined.

CONSTANTINE: (*Not listening.*) Wait. I'm about to be brilliant. Absolutely brilliant! ...*Chekhov – A Space Odyssey!* (*Starts writing.*)

MARSHA: (*Not listening.*) Someday he'll ask me out again. Until then I'm pursued by a fool, a clown. But once in a while, someone comes into your life who can change everything. (*Flirting.*) Do you believe in love at first sight?

CONSTANTINE: (*In love.*) Yes. Nina.

MARSHA: Nina?

CONSTANTINE: That actress/poet. I can't concentrate knowing she's here.

BOB: *(Enters, his thumb is bandaged.)* There you are.

MARSHA: What do you want?

BOB: I've behaved badly. I have no tact. But you – you're pure – profound. Infinite.

MARSHA: Bob, your love touches me, but I cannot return it.

BOB: I know, you love the doctor.

MARSHA: Well, I did, but now *(Looking at CONSTANTINE.)* I see that that is just as hopeless as your love for me. So I'm going to find a new love.

MARSHA smiles at CONSTANTINE. He doesn't notice her.

BOB: You have incredible eyes.

MARSHA: *(Ignoring BOB, lusting for CONSTANTINE.)* Yet, he doesn't seem to know that I exist. It's terrible to be in the room with someone who doesn't know you exist.

BOB: *(Lusting for MARSHA.)* If you do not love me back, I think I'll off myself.

MARSHA: It's hell on earth when they don't hear a word you say. So, Bob—

BOB: Please, call me by my real name.

MARSHA: Yepikhodov Ivanitch Lvovitch Tuzenbach, goodbye.

BOB: *(In love.)* I'm not on earth anymore! I'm on a different planet.

MARSHA: Why do I have this choking feeling?

BOB: I just want you to know that I hold my love for you the way other people hold their liquor— *(Kneeling.)* Marry me and I'll be your errand-boy. I'll rush around like a scalded cat at your beck and call—

MARSHA: This is unbearable. *(Exits.)*

BOB: *(Calling after her.)* I don't expect you to love me back.

BOB walks up to CONSTANTINE and breaks down in tears.

CONSTANTINE: You okay?

BOB: *(Tears of joy.)* Isn't... love... fabulous!

A waltz by Shostakovich fills the theatre. In half-light, the actors rearrange the furniture for Part Two.

PART II: EATING

AT START: *The lights rise to reveal the back lawn of the Dantchenko Colony for Artists and Creative Inquiry. A small temporary stage has been built for an amateur performance – its curtain is closed. MARSHA sets up folding lawn chairs and prepares for a staged reading. DR. ANTON, a contemplative professional drinker, sits on his bicycle eating cake and watching her work. During this act everyone should eat cake.*

DR. ANTON: Andreievitch Yermolai Tchekhoff Vassilina worships the ground you walk on.

MARSHA: I'll never marry Bob, he's boring.

DR. ANTON: Then tell him. Let him find true love with someone else. So few know what it's like to be loved – unequivocally loved.

MARSHA: Oh Dr. Anton, I can't think straight. I don't even know how to say "lawn chair" or "cake" in Italian anymore. My brain is drying. I'm thinner. Older. You know how long it's been since I've been in Moscow?

DR. ANTON: What's in Moscow?

MARSHA: Only the best places to eat! Real food, not the crap I serve here. Plus bars! Movies! Life! It's only one of the most exciting cities in all of Idaho. (*Hinting.*) What I would give for some shy podiatrist to invite me on a date to Moscow. You know, I heard that a man in Moscow died after eating fifty servings of French-fries in one sitting—

DR. ANTON: One of my patients died this morning.

MARSHA: I'm so sorry. Is there anything— (*Looking off.*) Oh! Here he comes!

SFX: *Far off a dog barks. UNCLE PETER, CONSTANTINE and BOB enter. UNCLE PETER snacks on a double sized serving of cake.*

BOB: (*Continuing a conversation, upbeat.*) ...I'm a failure as an artist. I support myself by substituting in the public schools, which, as you know, is unrewarding. Since I've been teaching, I've felt my strength, my youth, ebbing. I'm more dead than alive—

MARSHA: (*Seeing only CONSTANTINE.*) Hello, Constantine. Lovely evening.

CONSTANTINE: (*Counting the chairs.*) Huh? Oh, yes, hello... So sorry, I forgot your name.

MARSHA: Marsha.

CONSTANTINE: Yes, Marda, I was wondering if—

MARSHA: —sha – Marsha.

CONSTANTINE: Sorry. Could you find more chairs? (*Concentrates on his script.*)

MARSHA: Of course. (*To BOB.*) More lawn chairs. Now.

BOB: Yes, my dove. (*Runs out.*)

MARSHA: Is there anything else I can do for you—?

Offstage, there's a crash.

BOB: (*Offstage.*) It's okay! No one got hurt! I'll put ice on it!

UNCLE PETER: Doctor Anton, you appear to be sober – will you be drinking?

DR. ANTON: No. I've come for a reading of a play.

CONSTANTINE: It's a screenplay.

UNCLE PETER: Doctor Anton, meet Constantine, a big Hollywood-type writer.

DR. ANTON: Oh yes. You seem a little young for gout.

UNCLE PETER: No, that's his uncle – an even bigger Hollywood-type.

CONSTANTINE: We'll start the reading at exactly eight. That way the moon'll rise right during the flashback, car chase scene.

UNCLE PETER: Wow, you writer-types really plan things down to the last nuance.

DR. ANTON: What're we reading?

MARSHA: Since his Uncle has been irresponsible, Constantine has taken it upon himself to write a rough draft of Disney's new movie. And it's going to be brilliant.

CONSTANTINE: How do you know?

MARSHA: I typed it for you while you paced.

CONSTANTINE: Oh. Right.

UNCLE PETER: You literary types! So self-centered. Ya gotta love 'em!

CONSTANTINE: Has anyone seen Nina?

DR. ANTON: I know where she lives. I'd be happy to get her.

CONSTANTINE: Would you? She's late.

DR. ANTON: My pleasure.

DR. ANTON gets on his bicycle and exits. We hear the sound of Dr. Anton's tinkling bicycle bell, ring-ring, ring-ring, and a dog's bark.

CONSTANTINE: That dog must not bark during the reading.

MARSHA: Uncle Peter, could you stop that dog from barking. It barked all night.

UNCLE PETER: (*Sing song – setting up chairs.*) I can do only one thing at a time.

MARSHA: And please do something about your appearance. Your beard...

UNCLE PETER: (*Upbeat.*) I know. It's the bane of my existence. Women are never attracted to me because of it. But what can one do?

MARSHA: You have cake crumbs in it.

UNCLE PETER: I always look like I'm drunk. In fact, it's just too much sleep. Last night I went to bed at ten, woke up at nine. Eleven hours! I feel as if my brain is stuck to my skull. (*To CONSTANTINE.*) Oh! I must warn you, my sister's in a mood.

CONSTANTINE: Problem?

MARSHA: No. My mother is just ticked because you cast *Nina* in the reading rather than herself.

BOB enters in a panic. He has an ice pack on his forehead.

BOB: Have you seen my gun? I've lost my gun!

MARSHA: I sent you for chairs, not a gun!

BOB: Strange. I could have sworn you said gun.

MARSHA: You just gotta do it yourself. Everything yourself! (*Storms off.*)

BOB: Do you think I have an underdeveloped ego?

UNCLE PETER: I think you're sick in the head. Please go away.

BOB: "Better to vanquish one's desires rather than the world order."

Descartes.

UNCLE PETER: *(Beat.)* I haven't seen your gun.

BOB: It was a simple question.

CONSTANTINE: *(Looking off.)* Oh my god! Nina's coming. How do I look?

UNCLE PETER: Like a writer.

CONSTANTINE: God, she's a dream.

NINA enters.

BOB: Have—?

NINA: No, I haven't seen your gun.

BOB runs off.

CONSTANTINE: The star of the reading has arrived!

NINA: I hope I'm not late.

CONSTANTINE: You're right on time. *(To UNCLE PETER.)* We're running late. Call the audience.

UNCLE PETER: I shall return with an audience. *(Singing.)* "Have you ever heard of an optimistic Russian? All his hopes and dreams – Those winters are a-crushin'. How can he be cheerier when he's in Siberier?" Once I sang while I was walking through Moscow, this fellow stopped me dead in the street and said, "You have a strong voice." Then he added, "strong but crappy!" *(He laughs.)* "Strong but crappy!" *(He pulls himself together – then sadly.)* I'm so bored. *(Exits.)*

CONSTANTINE: We're alone.

CONSTANTINE kisses NINA'S hands.

NINA: *(Not interested.)* Yes.

CONSTANTINE: I just want to say that the last few days have been... I think I'm falling in—

NINA: Constantine, may I be perfectly honest?

CONSTANTINE: Please, call me Stan.

NINA: I'm worried about your script. It doesn't have any living human characters, it jumps around so much I'm never quite sure where we are and I just don't get the global warming bit.

CONSTANTINE: I stood outside your window for six hours last night.

NINA: I wish you wouldn't. It makes Laika bark.

CONSTANTINE: What I would do for one little... (*Leans in for a kiss.*)

NINA: (*Looking off.*) Oh! They're coming.

CONSTANTINE: It's time. Are you nervous?

NINA: I don't know what to do with my hands when I act!

CONSTANTINE: Just hold the script. You'll be wonderful—

NINA: But, your Uncle, he's such a famous writer. I don't know if I can act in front of him.

CONSTANTINE: Don't worry about my uncle. He's nobody.

NINA: Did he really work with Johnny Depp?

CONSTANTINE: No, but I did.

NINA and CONSTANTINE run behind the stage. DOCTOR ANTON, BORIS, NATASHA and UNCLE PETER enter. BORIS needs a cane to walk. They all eat cake.

MADAME NATASHA: (*Continuing an off stage conversation.*) ...A movie version of *The Cherry Orchard*? What is Disney thinking?

BORIS: I believe they are trying to say that there's not an iota of difference between us and Russia a hundred years ago. We both live under oppressive governments. We have no ability to take action or think for ourselves. And that we have become a shallow people who would sell our very souls for a paycheck. Of course he's totally wrong, but I'll take his money.

MADAME NATASHA: Doctor Anton, I'm thrilled that you stopped by. But you look a little...

BORIS: Depressed, glum, doleful.

DR. ANTON: One of my patients died this morning.

MADAME NATASHA: I'm so sorry.

DR. ANTON: I blame myself.

MADAME NATASHA: But, it's in the past. And those who remember the past should be... should be—

UNCLE PETER: Taken out and shot!

MADAME NATASHA: Dear brother, what am I going to do with you, you have crumbs all over your mouth.

UNCLE PETER: I admit it, I'm uncouth!

CONSTANTINE comes out from behind the little stage.

NINA: *(Offstage.)* Am I hyperventilating? I think I'm hyperventilating!

CONSTANTINE: *(Talking backstage to NINA.)* Deep breaths. You can do it—

DR. ANTON: Sorry Stan, I knocked on her door but no luck—

CONSTANTINE: That's okay, she's backstage. She just needs a moment to center herself.

NINA takes loud labored deep breaths from offstage.

CONSTANTINE: I'll be right back.

CONSTANTINE runs backstage to see to NINA. Everyone else sits in the folding chairs.

UNCLE PETER: *(Teasing.)* Hear that, Natasha, Nina's backstage. She's going to act tonight and you're not.

MADAME NATASHA: *(Pissed off.)* Change the subject.

BORIS: While we wait, what shall we talk about?

MADAME NATASHA: Let's talk about how life will be in three hundred years. Doctor, I believe it's your turn?

DR. ANTON: Well, I suppose cars will be self-driving by then. Body piercing will be passe. And we'll've discovered a cure for flat feet. And people, unlike today, will be happy.

UNCLE PETER: *(Upbeat.)* I'm happy.

BORIS: Ah yes, Doctor, I see your point – we may be happy – yes, but, no! In fact we aren't happy because we cannot know happiness until we admit we're unhappy.

DR. ANTON: Only our distant descendants, our children's children's children, will truly know happiness.

UNCLE PETER: *(Beginning to doubt.)* I was happy this morning...

SFX: Far off, a seagull's sharp cry.

MADAME NATASHA: Yet we must do what we must do. (*Pointing off.*) For example, that seagull must fly.

UNCLE PETER: Point taken. A gull doesn't question flying. It can talk philosophy all it wants, but it must fly—

BORIS: Ah yes, but we, like most, are failing to look at the broader philosophical issues here.

UNCLE PETER: Exactly – Is the gull happy?

BORIS: No. Why are there seagulls here in the first place? Aren't we what's called land-locked?

UNCLE PETER: Ah! The name "seagull" is a misnomer. Inland gulls are quite common. In fact, there are gulls that spend their entire lives and never so much as glimpse the ocean.

SFX: dozens of gulls cry out, over the lake.

MADAME NATASHA: And they don't seem too happy about it. Listen to them complain.

BORIS: (*Pointing out a nearby seagull.*) Not that one.

UNCLE PETER: Which?

BORIS: That one there, standing in the cherry tree looking at us seems quite content.

MADAME NATASHA: A seagull in a cherry tree – that's not right.

UNCLE PETER: I didn't know they could do that. They don't have, you know, claws, only paddles.

MADAME NATASHA: Paddles?

UNCLE PETER: Paddles for feet. We're witnessing something that is physically and aviatically impossible. How odd.

DR. ANTON: No more odd than we. Are any of us truly at home? We're all out of place. Lost in a world that has never quite accepted us.

MADAME NATASHA: Ah. There it goes.

They watch the seagull fly away.

UNCLE PETER: Yes, there it goes. Out of place, no more.

SFX: A seagull's lonely cry.

DR. ANTON: Yes, but will it ever know the ocean?

A sad pause.

UNCLE PETER: ...I wonder if there's anything on HBO tonight...

MARSHA enters. BOB follows carrying a chair.

BOB: *(Continuing an offstage conversation.)* ...So I said, you're right, hippopotami in tutus is obviously an attempt to ridicule fleshy people. They're suing. You know if you think about it, we're all victims.

MARSHA: *(Tormented.)* I know I am.

MADAME NATASHA: My darling daughter! And her fiancée!
(Singsong to her daughter.) You're late. *(To BOB.)* And you have bird do-do on your shoulder.

BOB: What? ...Damn gulls!

BOB grabs a napkin from UNCLE PETER and wipes the do-do off his shoulder.

MARSHA: Mama, we got another letter from the I.R.S. They want an answer. A decision!

MADAME NATASHA: And they shall have one. My decision is...
(Takes a dramatic pause.) I shall organize a telethon for the homeless!

UNCLE PETER: Philanthropy and amusement rolled into one. I say we do it!

MADAME NATASHA: I could perform an acting marathon – set the Guinness Book of World Records by playing *Medea* for twenty-four hours straight. That would let people forget their problems! And my darling daughter could play the piano! Shostakovich!

MARSHA: Mama, I haven't played since the piano was repossessed two years ago.

MADAME NATASHA: That's my daughter, always finding excuses. Rather than applauding society for its generosity, she's thinking of herself!

BORIS: Constantine! We're running out of things to talk about.

CONSTANTINE: (*Sticking his head out from the curtain.*) Please be patient. We'll start in a minute.

UNCLE PETER: (*Panicking.*) Oh god, no, I'm about to get bored.

MADAME NATASHA: How about a curtain-warmer to fill the void.

UNCLE PETER: Splendid idea!

MADAME NATASHA steps up on the makeshift stage.

MADAME NATASHA: Since moi was overlooked in the casting.

UNCLE PETER: What shall you perform? Lady Macbeth? Juliet? King Lear!

MADAME NATASHA takes out playing cards and shuffles.

MADAME NATASHA: Think of a card. Any card.

UNCLE PETER: Card tricks! My favorite—! Wait! Let me think. Ah! Yes! I have it.

MADAME NATASHA: Shuffle.

MADAME NATASHA hands the cards to UNCLE PETER.

UNCLE PETER: (*Shuffling the cards.*) It's all in the wrists.

MADAME NATASHA: Give. (*Takes the cards and puts a spell on them.*) "Credo quia absurdum!" Dear Brother, be so kind as to inspect your left pocket.

NOTE: "Credo quia absurdum" translates to "Belief because it is unreasonable."

UNCLE PETER: (*Pulling a card from his pocket.*) Eight of spades! My card! Imagine that!

MADAME NATASHA: Doctor Anton, your turn. Quick, don't think – what's the top card?

DR. ANTON: Ah... Queen.

MADAME NATASHA: Of?

DR. ANTON: Hearts.

MADAME NATASHA: "Credo quia absurdum!" (*Takes the top card from the deck.*)

MADAME NATASHA: You are correct, monseigneur!

UNCLE PETER: Bravo! Bravo! More! Fill the void!

MADAME NATASHA: One more! (*Takes off her cape and holds it up.*) "Credo quia absurdum!"

CONSTANTINE steps out from behind the curtain.

CONSTANTINE: We are ready to start.

MADAME NATASHA: I've outdone myself. Out of nothingness, I've produced a screenwriter!

Applause as MADAME NATASHA curtseys and takes her seat.

CONSTANTINE: Thank you all for coming. I've been thinking a lot about what the Disney Corporation is asking us to do – obsessing on it I guess – after all, we have only a week until it's due – then, it hit me. They want more, they want me to take the art of screenwriting to a higher level! So I thought, what if we placed *The Cherry Orchard* 200,000 years in the future? Today's jaded teenagers love *Star Wars* – you know, Darth Vader, Luke Skywalker, bad acting and all that – so why wouldn't they go ape for *Orchard 200,001*? So... I take you far far into the future. Where we find...

CONSTANTINE opens the curtain to reveal NINA, sitting alone – holding her script.

CONSTANTINE: (*Reading from his screenplay.*) "Nothingness. A void. Nuclear holocaust. The orchard wasn't chopped down it's been incinerated in a terrifying blast a thousand times brighter than the sun. Humans, lions, quail, geese, spiders, the silent fish, the invisible amoebas, every form of being has ended its sorrow and become extinct. "

MARSHA: (*Unconsciously aloud.*) Wow, that's great writing.

CONSTANTINE: “Fade in. Exterior. An anthropomorphic spaceship in orbit around Regulon Seven – Night. In juxtaposition to the destruction, we hear a voice – an exquisite voice. V.O.!”

MADAME NATASHA: V.O.? What’s this V.O.?

BORIS: Voice Over. It’s a screenwriting term.

MADAME NATASHA: Oh! (*To MARSHA.*) It’s a screenwriting term.

MARSHA: Shhhh!

NINA: (*Reading the screenplay.*) “I am alone – I speak but my woeful voice echoes sadly in a vacated void—”

MADAME NATASHA: Boris, what do you think so far?

MARSHA: (*Whispering through gritted teeth.*) Mother! You are one of the most self-important people I’ve ever met.

MADAME NATASHA: I’m asking someone else’s opinion, not giving my own! How is that self-important?

NINA: “I am the only woman left – the spirit of the world! I am unchanging. I am eternal. But the world is now controlled only by men and so I am a prisoner that does not know what awaits me. I only know that I am locked in a savage struggle with the Ronulates—!”

MADAME NATASHA: What the blazes is a Ronulate?

NINA: “I must smooth the flow of plasma to the dilithium chamber or my damaged injectors will rupture, forcing me to override the lateral grid balance on my electro-deflector Tricorders—.”

MADAME NATASHA: Okay, I’m lost.

CONSTANTINE turns a knob. SFX: sound of gas escaping.

BORIS: What’s that?

MADAME NATASHA: Something stinks. It’s smells like... like...

NINA: (*Point up.*) “Look! Global Warming!”

MADAME NATASHA: My god, it’s part of the performance!

CONSTANTINE steps up on stage with a script.

CONSTANTINE: (*Reading from the screenplay.*) “Not to worry, I’m here. And I know how to repair damaged dilithium injectors.”

NINA: “Who are you?”

CONSTANTINE: “I’m the screenwriter—.”

BORIS: Oh my god! He's written himself into the movie!

CONSTANTINE: *(Taking NINA'S hand.)* "And I'm here to save you."

MADAME NATASHA: *(Coughing.)* It's smells like... sulfur. Stan, is that sulfur? Stan?

CONSTANTINE: *(Breaking character.)* What? Yes! It's sulfur! When sulfur combines with oxygen, it forms sulfur dioxide, a gas associated with global warming! Do I have to make everything totally obvious?

MADAME NATASHA: I think I might be sick!

UNCLE PETER: The smell?

MADAME NATASHA: No, the writing.

CONSTANTINE: *(Pissed off.)* That's it! Reading's over! Curtain! Close the curtain!

Hyperventilating, NINA yanks the curtain shut.

MADAME NATASHA: Oh, don't be such an artist.

CONSTANTINE: You're just jealous because I didn't cast you! Forgive me, I gave Nina a chance! I forgot that only a chosen few are permitted to be creative at Dantchenko! I've infringed on your monopoly! You... you—

BORIS: Infidel, heathen, jackass!

CONSTANTINE makes a gesture dismissing them and storms off.

MADAME NATASHA: Well that's it. No more cake for him!

UNCLE PETER: Writers! Moody little poops – ya gotta love'm.

MARSHA: Mama, you hurt his feelings! *(Starts off.)*

BOB: May I assist you?

MARSHA: Leave me alone!

BOB: I'll take that as a "yes."

MARSHA runs off to comfort CONSTANTINE. BOB follows.

BORIS: These young writers today, they think they know it all. They all think they're victims.

MADAME NATASHA: If anyone is a victim here it's me - I've had to endure lousy dialogue, no story, and to top it off, I've been fumigated.

UNCLE PETER: (*Sucking on caramels.*) If that was my nephew, I'd fry him up in a pan and eat him.

DR. ANTON: He's young. He just wants to please.

MADAME NATASHA: Then let him write an ordinary screenplay. Not gobbledygook.

DR. ANTON: You know, when Nina spoke of vast solitude, it struck a chord. I was transported back to my youth.

BORIS: (*Not paying attention.*) I wonder if there are any fish in that lake.

UNCLE PETER: In my youth it was teeming. Every night there'd be music – music and laughter and lovemaking and the shooting off of guns and hubbub and the rest of it.

BORIS: I love to fish. Didn't we have fish for dinner?

UNCLE PETER: I don't remember.

MADAME NATASHA: Mercury poisoning, boys. All the fish have scoliosis.

UNCLE PETER: (*Upbeat.*) If only Stan had written about an uncle who's totally bored with life – now that'd be exciting. An uncle who is bored so he... he...

BORIS: Fishes!

UNCLE PETER: Yes! He fishes for fish! (*Suddenly jumps up.*) Wait a minute! Wait just a minute. I've had a revelation! We are little more than fish! We waste our lives swimming blindly with the school, leaving no time to wonder, weigh an argument – let alone know ourselves. Dostoyevsky was right; all we crave is “miracles, mystery and authority.” In short, we live in filth, stupidity and cruelty and we lack the will to stem it! (*Beat.*) No, wait, that's not right. (*Sits back down.*)

MADAME NATASHA: (*Dramatic – looking out at the lake.*) Ladies and gentlemen, the sun is setting.

The conversation dies. They watch the sunset.

UNCLE PETER: The angel of silence... Oh my god, we are so alone with ourselves...

MADAME NATASHA: And the sun hasssssssssssss...

A massive pause as they wait for the sun to set.

MADAME NATASHA: Set.

UNCLE PETER: *(Starting to panic.)* And all the cake is gone. Ah! We have time! A whole evening to fill! It's enough to give you the willies! *(Shaking off.)* Must fill the void, keep busy. But how?

MADAME NATASHA: Gentlemen, they may disconnect the cable tomorrow, but tonight!

UNCLE PETER: Yes! Tonight!

MADAME NATASHA: We have 550 channels. Seven HBOs.

UNCLE PETER: Perfect! We won't be alone. But choices! Damn choices!

UNCLE PETER and MADAME NATASHA start for the house.

UNCLE PETER: *(Showing his shaking hands.)* You know when I haven't had my hand on a remote control for several hours it trembles!

UNCLE PETER exits. MADAME NATASHA lingers for a moment.

MADAME NATASHA: Doctor Anton? Come along before the mosquitoes consume you.

DR. ANTON: Madame, could I stay the night? I've no reason to go home.

MADAME NATASHA: Of course. So a patient died.

DR. ANTON: In my arms.

MADAME NATASHA: *(Not listening.)* Boris, will you be joining us?

BORIS: First a smoke.

MADAME NATASHA: What a horrible habit. Tobacco products rob you of your personality. You are Boris, but when you smoke you are Boris plus Phillip Morris.

DR. ANTON: It'll kill you, my friend.

BORIS: I know. But what's a fellow to do?

MADAME NATASHA and DOCTOR ANTON exit to the house.

MADAME NATASHA: (*Exiting.*) Global warming - that can't be good for my actor's instrument!

BORIS starts to light up but before he can...

NINA: (*From behind the curtain.*) Is it safe?

BORIS: Who's that now?

NINA enters from behind the curtain.

NINA: Boris...?

BORIS: Nina?

NINA: I was hoping that you'd linger.

BORIS: Really?

NINA: I think... I'm in love... with your writing.

BORIS: And I kind of enjoyed your performance.

NINA: Really! It wasn't easy. I don't know what to do with my hands. And Stan's so young. I can't bear these youthful writers. They're so desperate.

BORIS: Yes, naiveté and the voice of confidence – a dangerous combination.

NINA: But you... you're... you're...

BORIS: Mature, developed, grown-up, ripe.

NINA: You must lead a wonderful life – being famous and all.

BORIS: Well it's not all sunglasses and autographs you know.

NINA: Normal people drag themselves through their dull, miserable existence, but not you.... What's it like to read about yourself in the *Hollywood Reporter*?

BORIS: You're very kind, but being a writer is joyless. All I am is obsessed. I mean, look at me – script after script, I sell myself. I take the meaningful bits of my existence and sell them to the highest bidder. Even now, I'm alone with a beautiful young thing—

NINA: Thank you. (*Sensual.*) Totally alone.

BORIS: And what am I thinking.

NINA: What are you thinking?

BORIS: I'm thinking youthful demographics, cross-promotional marketing and a blockbuster sequel. In other words, this would make a good movie. A mature man – a George Clooney-type – seduces a pretty young thing – an Emma Stone-type.

NINA: I'd pay ten bucks to see that.

BORIS: I steal my stories from sweet young things like you – steal the sweet honey from strangers, rob my best blossoms and turn them into commercial hits.

NINA: I think I'm in love with you—

BORIS takes out a notebook and pencil.

NINA: Whatcha writing?

BORIS: A note to myself. I must record this.

NINA: It was a simple line. "I think I'm in love with you." You have to write that down?

BORIS: No, my line before yours. (*Writing.*) "...sweet honey from strangers..." That's not bad.

NINA: If I were in Hollywood, I'd do anything it takes – eat rotten bread, live in a cold water flat, sleep with anyone who could further my career— (*Innocently seductive.*) Did I say that out loud?

BORIS takes NINA'S hand.

BORIS: I've forgotten what it's like to be young. I can't even picture it. When I write young women, it's all wrong. How I'd love to be in your shoes – for three to five minutes. Just long enough to see life through your lovely eyes.

NINA: Why don't we go to a hotel? You can try them on for size.

BORIS: Ohhh. Nina.

NINA: I know what I want.

BORIS: But what about Stan—?

NINA: Shhhh.

NINA passionately kisses BORIS. Pause. They look at the lake.

NINA: The moon is rising.

BORIS: Yes. Happiness – it's coming. Yet, if we don't find it, it hardly matters. Others will.

NINA: This can't be real—

BORIS: Nina—?

NINA: I'm dreaming—

BORIS: Nina—?

NINA: Yes, sweetheart?

BORIS: My foot's gone to sleep.

BORIS puts his arm on NINA'S shoulder and helps him walk it off.

BORIS: Ouch ouch ouch.

NINA: How does your story come out?

BORIS: Which one?

NINA: George Clooney meets Emma Stone.

BORIS: He destroys her.

CONSTANTINE: *(Offstage.)* Nina! Nina!

NINA: Damn, it's him. I can't wait for the hotel. Let's go to the lake. I've lived here all my life. I know every nook and cranny.

BORIS: Capital suggestion.

NINA helps BORIS limp off. A moment later CONSTANTINE enters.

CONSTANTINE: Nina!

MARSHA runs in with a cake.

CONSTANTINE: You're not Nina.

MARSHA: No, but I'll try to be.

CONSTANTINE: I need Nina.

MARSHA: I saw her heading towards the lake with your uncle.

CONSTANTINE: What does she see in him? He's got gout and rheumatism. His liver is swollen with envy, yet he strides around like a demigod!

MARSHA: I agree she's not your type. *(Picks up his abandoned screenplay. Lovingly.)* I think you're a competent writer.

CONSTANTINE: I'm nothing. I feel sorry for the poor pages that must endure my pitiful words.

MARSHA: Maybe... Maybe you should write a movie about real life. I mean, in real life people don't fly around in anthropomorphic spaceships. We're more occupied with flirting, eating, drinking, and talking stupidities.

CONSTANTINE: Oh Marsha—

MARSHA: You remembered my name!

CONSTANTINE: I'm stupid, inadequate and boring.

MARSHA: Why?

CONSTANTINE: 'Cause I just don't get Chekhov.

MARSHA: ...Maybe I can help. Let's go down to the lake and make love. Let's do it in the moonlight...

*Perhaps for the first time CONSTANTINE really looks at MARSHA.
SFX: seagull's lonely cry.*

CONSTANTINE: *(Looking off.)* ...Did that Seagull just crap on my car? It did! Willfully and with forethought it crapped on my car! My brand new car!

CONSTANTINE runs out. MARSHA is left alone. She takes a handful of cake and eats. The Shostakovich Russian Waltz fades up and the lights melt.

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