

New Year's Blizzard over the Toll Road to Paradise

A Play in Two Acts

Author's Note: For stage productions, the title may only be changed with the author's consent. If the title seems too long or not stylish enough, either of the two following titles may be used as an alternative: "New Year's Blizzard" or "The Toll Road to Paradise."

Characters:

- **Yegor Georgievich Chashev** – Approximately 75 years old (plus 1-2 years). A mid-level member of the nomenklatura until the 90s, he tried to stay afloat and not lose his position until the mid-2000s, with some success. He has been retired for the last five years but hasn't severed his useful connections.
- **Driver** – of a corporate Mercedes.
- **Anna Karamzina** – Taxi driver (Chinese SUV).
- **Fatima Gamidovna Alanova** – Obstetrician-gynecologist, 45 years old, head of the maternity ward at the "Troitsa" (Trinity) clinic.
- **Syapa** – Age between 35 and 45, operator at the "Rusoil" gas station, also works as a barmaid and shop assistant in the mini-mart.
- **Svetoniy Bubola** – Syapa's husband, age uncertain but younger than his wife, a domra player.

Act One

Moscow 2026

December 31, 2025. Early twilight. A Mercedes. Inside are two men: the driver and a passenger. The passenger, Yegor Georgievich, is in the back seat, to the right of the driver. He is either leaning on, holding, or keeping watch over a large, unremarkable-looking bag (a dirty white and dark gray striped pattern). The car is moving along a Moscow suburb highway. It is overcast. Headlights of oncoming cars flash occasionally. Sparse snowflakes drift by.

The navigator speaks in the voice of a digital assistant: "Route calculated. In two hundred meters, toll road 13 Berezina."

Yegor Georgievich (to the driver). How long do you think this will take us?

Driver. According to the navigator, 55 minutes.

A transponder beeps.

The driver slows down, almost stopping. The barrier rises, the Mercedes passes under it and accelerates again. The driver turns on the radio.

A sweet female voice sings:

*...Five minutes, Make up, those who are in a quarrel Five minutes, five minutes
To sort things out, if strictly Even in these five minutes You can do a lot*

The men are silent for a while, as if listening.

Driver (turning down the radio). People are probably already eyeing the tables.

Yegor Georgievich. Yes...

Driver. We start seeing the New Year in at home around six.

Yegor Georgievich. Do you always celebrate at home?

Driver. Well, yes... Except for two years in the army. First with my parents, then with my wife and parents, and my wife's friend, (he then lists his relatives with an intonation as if listing medals) and with my father-in-law, and mother-in-law. With my brother-in-law, with my sister-in-law... Well, naturally, with my brother-in-law and sister-in-law, with my nephews, with my brother, with my children... I have four of them. And this year, with my first grandchild. Today, they're finally going to show him. Introduce him to the family, so to speak. We'll meet him. I have four girls, so at least a man has appeared. A grandson. And sons-in-law, naturally.

Yegor Georgievich. An impressive iconostasis.

Driver. The children and nephews have spread out across the world, so New Year is the only time we all get together now.

Yegor Georgievich. Do you all fit in the apartment?

Driver. Well, it'll be at the apartment this year. Because of me. This side job came up, they called this morning. Extra money is never a bad thing, I consulted with my family, and we decided not to turn it down. Otherwise, we'd already be celebrating at the dacha. There's three hundred square meters there. Plenty of room for everyone. (after a pause) And where will you be celebrating?

Yegor Georgievich. It depends.

The driver turns the radio up. Pop music plays in the car.

Driver. Yeah...

Yegor Georgievich. Yeah.

Driver. Everyone criticizes the Soviet Union, but they still can't write good songs.

Yegor Georgievich. Well, what can you say?

Driver. Well, it's not all so straightforward.

Yegor Georgievich. Straightforward or not... Well, yes. But where's the...?

Driver (benevolently). And my young folks sing at the table... (suddenly, in a surprisingly beautiful tenor voice) *Across the wild steppes of Transbaikalia, where gold is washed in the mountains, a tramp, cursing his fate, dragged himself with a knapsack on his shoulders...* (somehow proudly) And by the way, in Transbaikalia, they're already listening to the chimes. If you think about it, Russia is a great country. (after a pause) And if you think and reflect some more... Well, before, we used to sit at the table and stare into the stove. It was cozy in its own way, but still, the TV is better.

Yegor Georgievich. You probably have a stove at your dacha too.

Driver. Don't insult me. A boiler... (after a pause) Oh, look how it's blowing up ahead. We're about to drive right into a blizzard.

And as if to confirm his words, the car suddenly drives into a different weather situation, into a swirling vortex of snow. The driver slows down slightly.

Driver. We'll go a bit slower. We're not late, are we?

Yegor Georgievich. We're not late.

Driver. Now the navigator says 50 minutes. So far, we've lost about twenty minutes.

Yegor Georgievich. Not critical.

Driver. And if you have to wait when we get there... how long? How are you calculating it?

Yegor Georgievich. Well... It's not up to me. If it's business, an hour will be enough. But... It has happened, of course, that I've been held up for six hours. Depending on the circumstances.

The driver whistles.

Yegor Georgievich. I'm going to see a stranger. I have no idea how he'll handle things there. But you're paid by the hour. Ideally, the longer, the better for you.

Driver. If it weren't New Year's Eve, then yes.

Yegor Georgievich. Well, I don't think anyone will want to drag it out.

Driver. Well, let's hope it works out quickly.

Yegor Georgievich. I'll try not to let you down. We'll manage. If it drags on, I won't keep you. I'll take a taxi back.

Driver. And yet, New Year is a great holiday. The most cheerful and light of all the holidays in the world!

Yegor Georgievich. Agreed.

Suddenly, another large car bursts in from the right. Its lights blast through the Mercedes' windows, brakes squeal and hiss, a horn blares. The Mercedes is spun, its left side facing the newcomer. The cars swirl together, and the Mercedes' left rear side hits the concrete barrier. The driver is heard cursing. Instantly, both the driver and the passenger are slammed and pressed by the airbags. Then silence. The airbags begin to slowly deflate.

Yegor Georgievich. The bag? Where's the bag? (carefully moves to the left) Baaag? (anxiously, as if expecting the bag to answer) There it is (with obvious relief).

After this, he reaches for the driver. The driver sits motionless.

Yegor Georgievich. How are you doing? (a little louder) How are you there? (after a pause) Can you hear me?

Driver. Looks like I'm alive, if that's what you mean.

Yegor Georgievich. Did the airbags concuss you?

Driver. The airbags, to hell with them. But my leg... One hurts a lot... And the other one is pinned.

Yegor Georgievich. Phone... (searches for his phone) Here! (fumbles with it) It's glitching... (to the driver) Is your phone nearby?

Driver. I don't see it.

Yegor Georgievich. Where did you leave it?

Driver. On the magnetic mount. It flew off!

Yegor Georgievich (about the driver's phone). Ah, here it is! (to the driver) Can I use it?

Driver. Yes.

Yegor Georgievich. How do we call the police here?

Driver (clearly in severe pain). 102.

Yegor Georgievich. Right. (into the phone) Police? Happy New Year. There's been an accident. On the toll road 13 Berezina. Where exactly?

Driver (with difficulty). About fifteen kilometers from the entrance.

Yegor Georgievich (into the phone). Approximately fifteen kilometers from the entrance to the toll road. (after a short pause) A collision. The Mercedes driver is alive but injured. No information about the other car. Will you send an ambulance yourself? (to the driver) They'll be here in about ten minutes, maybe sooner. Can you hold on?

Driver (with difficulty). Don't worry about me.

Yegor Georgievich. The police aren't something I need right now.

Driver. I understand. But they might call you as a witness.

Yegor Georgievich. If they call, I'll come. But not now. Returning your phone. Here, I'll put it on the seat. (places the phone on the front passenger seat; fumbles with his own phone again). It's working! Okay. Taxi in two minutes (starts getting out of the car).

Driver. We should check on the other driver.

Yegor Georgievich. Of course, of course.

Yegor Georgievich gets out with his bag. It's noticeable that the bag is heavy for him. He approaches the other car. He shines his phone light through the window, then knocks on the glass. Nearby, headlights and a horn are heard. He turns and walks towards the sound. On the way, he opens the front passenger door of the Mercedes slightly.

Yegor Georgievich (to the driver). The taxi is here. It's quiet with the other driver. I can't help anyway.

Driver. I understand.

Yegor Georgievich (hesitating). Well... Happy New Year.

Driver. Likewise!

Yegor Georgievich (hesitantly). I can't stay. Contact with the police is undesirable. Any kind.

Driver. I understand.

Yegor Georgievich (in an apologetic tone). The police would be a disaster right now, in a way.

Driver. I understand.

Yegor Georgievich. Well... I wish you a proper family New Year's Eve, the way you wanted.

Driver. And don't you miss yours.

Yegor Georgievich walks back to the taxi. He gets inside, sitting in the same position as in the Mercedes. He manages the heavy bag somewhat awkwardly. He places it similarly to his left and leans on it. Behind the wheel of the SUV is a woman in a beautiful fur coat.

Yegor Georgievich (not looking at the driver). Why are we stopped?

Anna (very politely and cheerfully). Hello! I'm Anna. Happy New Year!

Yegor Georgievich looks at his phone and doesn't reply.

Anna. Would you like to put your bag in the trunk?

Yegor Georgievich. No.

Anna. What happened to the Mercedes? (starts the car)

Yegor Georgievich. Excuse me. (presses a contact) Savva Nikitich? Here's the situation. We had an accident. In principle, everyone's alive... I left the driver waiting for the police and the ambulance, and I'm already in a taxi. Do you have any comments? Well, yes... I understand... Of course... I'll keep you posted. I'm fine.

Anna (breaks the silence). A blizzard...

Yegor Georgievich. Yes.

Anna. Visibility is poor.

Yegor Georgievich. Yes.

Anna. We're going seventy.

Yegor Georgievich. Hm... How about at least ninety to a hundred? No way?

Anna. Are you in a hurry?

Yegor Georgievich. Why don't Russian people like to answer a direct question?

Anna (without irritation). Blizzard!

Yegor Georgievich (in a dissatisfied tone). Still, could you answer my question?

Anna. Please. I'm answering. More than seventy is dangerous.

Yegor Georgievich. And how much longer do we have?

Anna (after a pause). Navigation is dead, no internet. Again, I can't answer your question, I'm sorry.

Yegor Georgievich (still in the same dissatisfied tone). How long have you been driving?

Anna. Since I was eighteen.

Yegor Georgievich. How long have you been driving a taxi?

Anna. Almost forty years.

Yegor Georgievich. Good. (it dawns on him) How much-how much?

Anna. Yes, exactly. (her voice hints at a smile) I don't want to repeat those numbers.

Yegor Georgievich. But how old are you then?

Anna. A real woman never reveals her age or the price of her diamonds.

Yegor Georgievich. Got it. (a smile flickers in his voice) You look much younger.

Anna (chuckling). Younger than what?

Yegor Georgievich. Well... Uh... (can't find a reply) Just, younger...

Anna. Thank you.

Yegor Georgievich. And are you satisfied with working as a taxi driver?

Anna (after a pause). I love the road. By the way, my photo is on the honor board in the taxi fleet. For about twenty years now.

Yegor Georgievich (perplexed). Is that so! Congratulations.

Anna (quite seriously). Thank you. And what do you do?

Yegor Georgievich (clearly avoiding a direct answer). Well, right now I'm heading to Paradise...

Anna. A place or the destination?

Yegor Georgievich. A place. There's an elite cottage village called "Paradise." I need to deliver something to a client there.

Anna. Sounds prestigious.

Yegor Georgievich. It used to be.

Anna. And what about your family? Are they waiting for you at home?

Yegor Georgievich. There is no home. Or rather, there is, but no one's waiting there.

Anna. I'm sorry.

Yegor Georgievich. It's all right. I made my choices.

Anna. But what about the New Year?

Yegor Georgievich. I don't really celebrate it.

Anna. Why?

Yegor Georgievich. Because... A person should not be alone on New Year's Eve. I'm not alone, am I?

Anna (after a pause). No.

Yegor Georgievich. That's what I'm talking about. I'm not alone.

Anna. It's probably time to get to know each other. I'm Anna.

Yegor Georgievich. Yegor Georgievich.

Anna. Pleased to meet you.

Yegor Georgievich. Likewise.

Anna. In the same taxi, on New Year's Eve, during a blizzard... It seems we are destined to spend these hours together, Yegor Georgievich.

Yegor Georgievich. What's your patronymic?

Anna. No patronymic. Just Anna.

Yegor Georgievich. I like the name Anna.

Anna. I like the name Yegor. A strong name.

Yegor Georgievich. My mother thought so too.

Anna. Your wife? Do you have a wife?

Yegor Georgievich. There is one. She's been my wife for forty years. But that's not a hindrance.

Anna. A hindrance to what?

Yegor Georgievich. I don't know yet.

Anna. It's okay, you don't have to decide right now. (after a pause) Do you have children?

Yegor Georgievich. Children... not with my wife. (after a pause) There were different ones.

Anna. Do you see them?

Yegor Georgievich. No. They don't want to, and frankly, neither do I.

Anna. That's sad.

Yegor Georgievich. Many things are sad. But not everything. Do you know Kipling?

Anna. Of course.

Yegor Georgievich. He said: "What should they know of England who only England know?" That line has saved me many times.

Anna. Indeed.

Yegor Georgievich. Or here's another one: "If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster and treat those two impostors just the same..."

Anna. Kipling. I've loved him since childhood.

Yegor Georgievich. Me too.

Anna. I also love the song by Sviridov to Kipling's words: "I will not press my ear to the damp ground..." And "Give me your hand, Comrade, overseas friend..."

Yegor Georgievich. Kipling. I've loved him since childhood.

Anna. Me too.

Yegor Georgievich (after a pause). The blizzard is unnerving.

Anna. A blizzard... It's so strange... Extraordinary things happen in a blizzard, surprises.

Yegor Georgievich. I hope the surprises of today's blizzard are over for me.

Anna suddenly brakes hard.

Yegor Georgievich (lurches forward). Again?!

Anna. Look! Look ahead!

A figure in red is rushing towards their car, waddling as they run. One hand holds a bulky bag, the other waves above their head. In the twilight, the figure seems too tall and wide. Under the streetlamp, it casts a huge shadow, seeming to consist of many moving white pixels.

Yegor Georgievich. Drive around!

Anna. It looks like someone needs help.

Yegor Georgievich. And it looks to me like we're on an empty highway at night.
(sharply) Lock the doors.

Anna. Should we take a risk?!

The figure is already at the front left door, knocking on the glass.

Yegor Georgievich. We shouldn't take risks!

Anna. I'll just roll down the window and ask.

Yegor Georgievich. You can't be too careful. We're in a moving car. It's our advantage. We can't...

Anna ignores his advice and rolls down the window.

Anna. Good evening! Can we help you?

Fatima (leaning heavily on the door). I'm a doctor! I'm a doctor, but I can't drive. I can't... I can't, take me, you have to take me!

Anna. Where do you need to go?

Fatima. They're coming! They're coming!

Anna. Who?

Fatima. The babies! Twins! (to herself) Don't give in to the panic, don't give in... (to Anna) Is there a free bed in the back? (to herself) Don't give in... (to Anna) Listen, can you put me on the back seat?

Anna. Come in, quickly.

Fatima heaves herself through the door, practically falling into the seat. She's holding her huge belly.

Anna. Are you in pain?

Fatima. No! Labour! Labour! (to Yegor Georgievich) Move over, please, move to the other side. (with some effort) Thank you. (to Anna) I need you! I need your help more than I've ever needed anyone! I'll tell you what to do. (to Yegor Georgievich) And you too! Both of you! Where are we?

Anna. On the toll road 13 Berezina. We can be at the hospital in thirty minutes, maximum.

Fatima. Is there a hospital nearby?

Anna. I can take you to a hospital.

Fatima. It's too late for a hospital! (groans) My water already broke! I'm in labour! (groans) Listen to me carefully! There is a large pharmacy on the floor in a bag. Give me iodine and alcohol. And from the bag, a sheet, a diaper, a blanket, and a little hat.

Anna (doing it). Looking, looking... Found it! (pulls out the items)

Fatima (fidgeting all the while to get comfortable). Give me the bag under my back.

Anna (does it). Is that comfortable?

Fatima (uncertainly). I think so... A little to the left. A little to the right... A little higher. A little more to the left. I think so... Good. It's just a New Year's miracle that I met you! I was almost losing consciousness, barely holding on! (quite nimbly throws her left leg over the back of the front seat)

Anna (comments). Wow.

Fatima (searching for something to brace her right foot against, pushes against Yegor Georgievich). Young man, can you put your bag back on the seat, I'll brace against it.

Yegor Georgievich grunts uncertainly but puts the bag back on the seat. Fatima immediately shifts her support to the bag.

Fatima. And now, quickly, quickly, take off my leggings and underwear.

Yegor Georgievich. What do you mean?

Fatima. What's not clear?

Yegor Georgievich. I don't wear leggings...

Fatima. Have you never taken a woman's underwear off in your life?

Anna (rushes to Yegor Georgievich's rescue). Let's switch places.

Yegor Georgievich opens the door.

Fatima (after him). Oh-oh-oh-oh-oh, there's a draft!

Yegor Georgievich stands bewildered. Anna opens the front passenger door, pushes Yegor Georgievich inside, and slams the door. She takes his place. She immediately pulls off Fatima's leggings, tights, and boots, and does it quickly but mechanically, somewhat neatly placing them on the driver's seat.

Fatima. The sheet under me!

Anna complies.

Fatima (breathing heavily). One, two, three, four, five, six... (after a pause)
One, two, three, four, five...

Yegor Georgievich. Just a moment, ladies! Are you planning to give birth here?

Fatima. It's starting!

Anna. What are the options?

Yegor Georgievich. The surprises of the blizzard. Someone is definitely going to crash into us.

Anna (to Yegor Georgievich). You're right! (runs back to the driver's seat, directly transferring Fatima's belongings in an armful onto Yegor Georgievich's lap) I'll pull over to the shoulder.

The car pulls over.

Anna. I'm turning on the heater, I'm turning on the hazard lights.

The hazard lights flash. Anna returns to Fatima.

Anna. Everything all right?

Fatima. Nothing is all right. (breathing heavily, counting) One, two, three, four, five, six... Has either of you ever delivered a baby?

Anna. No.

Fatima. But have you at least seen it done?

Anna. Of course! Many times!

Fatima. Praise be to Allah!

Anna. In the movies.

Yegor Georgievich. Oh, Lord! I haven't even seen it in the movies.

Fatima. Then you both have a few interesting hours ahead of you!

Anna (cheerfully). Sounds exciting!

Yegor Georgievich. Undoubtedly. Unfortunately, ladies, I can no longer stay in your company. I'm in a hurry. (mutters something like "a pity, a real pity," takes out his phone) I'm calling another taxi.

Fatima (suddenly screams loudly in pain). Mommy! Mommy!

Yegor Georgievich (almost drops the phone). I'm calling an ambulance.

Fatima (stops abruptly and speaks very concretely). Go!!!

Yegor Georgievich (stunned). Me?

Fatima. Who else? You and your wife. (to Anna) What are you looking at?!

Anna (almost in a panic). Where should I be looking?

Fatima (to both). Go!!! Has the head appeared?

Anna. Where from?

Fatima. Allah, help!

Anna. Got it! (to Yegor Georgievich) The baby is coming!

Yegor Georgievich. Coming where?

Fatima (with a loud groan). Don't miss it when the head appears! (suddenly screams loudly in pain)

Anna. I understand everything! Don't worry! (to Yegor Georgievich) You look here too, watch!

Yegor Georgievich hastily puts on his glasses, follows where Anna is looking, and stares intently in the same direction, even leaning over the back of the seat to see better.

Yegor Georgievich. Ladies, don't be nervous! I have it under control!

Fatima. Oh, Allah, help me in this trial! (suddenly, specifically to Yegor Georgievich) And you, help your wife!

Anna (trying to hide her panic, to Fatima). What should I do?

Fatima. Repeat after me: "Girl! Take a breath! Hold the breath! Help the baby! You can do it!"

Anna. Taking a breath (dutifully takes a breath) Holding the breath (she can barely say this because she's holding the breath; waits for something).

Fatima and Yegor Georgievich look at Anna, also waiting for something. Fatima suddenly screams. The screaming stops.

Fatima. It's working, it's working!

Anna (can't stand the tension and exhales, guiltily). Took a breath, held the breath, I'm dizzy. I can't do it again.

Fatima (mobilizing all her energy). Tell me! "Take a breath! Hold the breath! You can do it!" Tell me, tell me!

Anna (repeats). Take a breath! Hold it! Help the baby, Mommy! I can do it.

Fatima. Yes! Yes! It's coming! I see the head! (to Anna) You're amazing! You're great! (suddenly screams) You're doing great! (to Yegor Georgievich) And you, what are you looking at? Why are you looking there? Look here! (points) Here! Look here!

Yegor Georgievich shifts his gaze.

Fatima (screams). Ah-ah! One, two, three, four, five, six. One, two, three, four, five. Yes! The head is out! (to Anna) Now you take it! (to Yegor Georgievich) And you watch! (to Anna) Wait! (screams again) One, two, three, four, five, six... (breathes deeply) Not yet, not yet, not yet... (screams again) Now! Now! Take it, take it!

Anna takes the baby.

Anna. I have her.

Yegor Georgievich (who has been holding his breath the whole time, now exhales). Thank God! Is she alive?

Fatima (exhausted). She's alive.

Anna. Hello, baby! Hello, little one! (to Fatima) What do we do?

Fatima (almost fainting, barely audible). Put her to my breast.

Anna does so. The baby whimpers. Fatima, gathering her last strength, begins to say something, but Anna interrupts her.

Anna (to the baby). Just a little more, baby! (to Fatima) Well done, mama!

Fatima. You did well.

Anna. Of course, you did great.

Fatima. Now you're great.

Anna. Thank you! (to the newborn) Come on, come on, come on, little one, reach, little one, reach! We're pushing together, we can do it!

Yegor Georgievich. I'm right here, ladies!

Fatima. I'm pushing! I can do it! I did it!!!

Anna (and now she has the baby in her arms, she kisses it on the cheek out of sheer emotion). We did it! Hello! How do you like it here?

Fatima. Great job!

Anna. Thank you.

Fatima (nods at the baby, relaxed). The little one did great!

Anna (looking at the baby). A girl! A girl!!! The girl did great! (to Yegor Georgievich) And you did great! You were our support group! (to the baby) Oh, you're so beautiful!

Fatima. Slap her!

Anna slaps uncertainly.

Fatima. Harder! (sees that Anna hesitates and shouts louder) Slap her, I tell you!

Anna slaps. The baby cries, wails, sobs with her cries.

Yegor Georgievich (anxiously). What's wrong with the baby?

Fatima (leans back on the bag like a pillow). It's all fine. (changing tone, to Anna) Cut!

Anna (to Fatima). What?

Fatima. Cut the umbilical cord!

Anna. Okay. (to Yegor Georgievich, in a tone as if she cuts umbilical cords in cars every day) Iodine, alcohol, a knife.

Yegor Georgievich gets a little flustered but quickly orientates.

Yegor Georgievich. Iodine is here. Alcohol is here. (looks around for a knife)

Anna. A penknife, in the glove compartment.

Yegor Georgievich finds it, wipes it, and hands it to Anna.

Yegor Georgievich. Looks like we got off easy! Just a little scare!...

Fatima (to Anna). Cut.

Anna. Cut? Where?

Fatima (reaches out and shows Anna on herself). Here.

Anna throws herself at the umbilical cord as if at an embrasure, cuts it.

Anna. Done.

Fatima. Don't relax! (points again at the baby). And here.

Anna. Here?

Fatima. Approximately. Leave two or three centimeters.

Anna cuts.

Yegor Georgievich (to Anna). Precise. Well done.

Anna hands the still crying baby over the seat to Yegor Georgievich.

Yegor Georgievich (accepts her uncertainly). Come, come to me, young lady. I just can't believe it's finally over!!!

The baby cries louder.

Yegor Georgievich. Why is she crying?

Fatima. Because that's what babies do. (to Anna) Is everything ready for the second one?

Anna. What? A second one?!

Fatima. Don't you see? The second one is already on its way.

Anna sees, indeed, the second baby is on its way.

Anna. Why didn't you say anything? Are you out of your mind? (takes a fighting stance) Now listen to me very carefully, mother! You won't be able to rest after the first birth, because the second is already on its way! We need to help the baby!

Anna turns into a commander.

Yegor Georgievich. Anna, you have to take the first one.

Anna. Put her on mom's belly. (hands Yegor Georgievich a blanket to wrap the baby) And wrap her warmly.

Fatima. Yes, do that.

Yegor Georgievich (doing it). What if I do something wrong, what if I drop her?

Fatima. You won't, you're a strong man.

Yegor Georgievich. What if I do something wrong?

Fatima. You won't.

Yegor Georgievich. Well, so be it. (wraps the baby in a blanket, puts her on Fatima's chest) What should I do?

Fatima. She'll manage. Now, help your wife.

Anna (seizes the moment). Breathe in! Hold it! Help the baby! You can do it!

Fatima. Take a breath!

Anna. Hold it!

Fatima. I'm holding it. (screams)

Anna. Help the baby! You can do it!

These short lines follow one another in an accelerating tempo against the backdrop of Yegor Georgievich's muttering: "Hold on, little one. You're brave. You're the smartest! (after a thought, adds) In your age group. You're beautiful! Are you comfortable? I'd be curious to see you... in fifteen years..."

Fatima. I can't anymore!

Anna (still in the heat of the moment). Don't be capricious, mother!

Fatima. I need a break.

Anna. You can rest after you deliver!

Fatima. I'm tired.

Yegor Georgievich (suddenly distracted from the baby, to Fatima). We're all tired, push.

Anna (sternly shakes her finger at the baby). And don't you be lazy! Have pity on your mother! Work! Work! Mama, don't lose the pace!

Yegor Georgievich (to Anna). Now, now, don't push too hard. Let them both rest.

Fatima (to Yegor Georgievich). Don't interfere!

Anna. Tired, she says! How old are you?

Fatima. Forty-five.

Anna. Forty-five?! All the more reason to push!

Fatima. I'm pushing all the more!

Anna. I'm pulling it up! That's it! There he is! (holds the baby in her hands)
Let's see who was born...

Fatima. A boy. (to Yegor Georgievich) Get a sheet, a blanket, and a hat out of the bag. Wrap this one up too. (leans back on the bag and closes her eyes)

Anna. Cutting the umbilical cord. (does it; after a pause) It's done. (to Yegor Georgievich) Hold the next one.

Yegor Georgievich (with alarm). Why is he quiet? (to the baby) Are you a man or what? If you're a man, you should be yelling!

Anna slaps the baby. Slaps again. Again.

Yegor Georgievich (whispers to Anna). He's quiet?

Fatima (loud whisper). Why is he quiet? Bring him to me.

Anna brings him over. Everyone freezes and waits.

Yegor Georgievich (in the silence, with fear). Is it just me, or is he... Is he turning a bit blue?

Fatima (trying to stay calm, to Anna). Oh, Allah, help us...

Yegor Georgievich places the newborn girl on Fatima's chest.

Yegor Georgievich. Can you hold her?

Fatima (in a frozen voice). I can. (takes the baby) That's it, I'm spent, I have no strength left. Oh, Allah, help my son...

Yegor Georgievich (to Anna). Give me the boy. And help me!

Anna hands him over. Now it looks like Yegor Georgievich is the one acting confidently, while the women are completely bewildered.

Yegor Georgievich. Anna, let's do it together.

Anna runs around the car, opens the door, and takes the driver's seat.

Meanwhile, Yegor Georgievich, holding the baby, reclines the passenger seat.

Yegor Georgievich (to Anna). The diaper, here (points to the backrest).

Anna complies. Yegor Georgievich lays the baby on the diaper, puts his hand under the baby's head, pinches his nose, and breathes air from his mouth into the baby's mouth. Once (a second or two) and a second time (a second or two). Then, with the fingers of both hands, he begins to tap the baby's chest.

Yegor Georgievich (for Fatima). Artificial respiration and tapping the chest. Correct?

Fatima (barely). Yes...

Silence in the car. Yegor Georgievich repeats the procedure, then checks the baby's pulse. The baby lets out a squeak.

Fatima (already more alert). Little son, please... Please, try...

The baby squeaks louder. Yegor Georgievich picks him up and hands him to Fatima. He takes the girl back.

Yegor Georgievich. You know best what to do.

Fatima. Thank you.

The baby lies on her, tummy down, face to face with his mother. Fatima gently taps his back in the lung area. Anna carefully covers the baby with the blanket.

Anna (looking at Yegor Georgievich, stunned). Where did you learn all this?

Yegor Georgievich (reluctantly). It happened... In the mountains...

Anna. I'm proud of you!

Yegor Georgievich. And I'm proud of you.

Anna. So, we're a team.

The boy starts crying. Not very energetically, but it's something compared to what was before.

Yegor Georgievich. Don't give up! You're a man!

The girl in his arms also starts crying.

Yegor Georgievich (rocking her). She's worried about her brother. (to the girl)
Everything will be fine! (hums) *Hush-a-bye, baby... A Christmas tree was born
in the forest, it grew in the forest, hush-a-bye, baby... In winter and summer,
slender, it was green.*

Anna. *The blizzard sang her a song, "Sleep, little tree, bye-bye!"* (in passing)
She's smiling, she's smiling!

Yegor Georgievich. *Someone there covered her with snow...*

Anna. *The frost covered her with snow.*

Anna and Yegor Georgievich (together). *Don't freeze, look.*

Yegor Georgievich laughs quietly and briefly.

Yegor Georgievich (lowering his voice). She fell asleep... (hands the girl to Anna)

After this, everyone starts speaking more quietly.

Anna. You know what? Let's see out this wonderful year! I have some Brut sparkling wine with me. (to Fatima) Oh. You probably shouldn't have any.

Yegor Georgievich (to Anna). And neither should you, probably. You are on the honor board in the taxi fleet after all.

Anna. Something doesn't add up for three.

Yegor Georgievich (looks at his watch). Two babies in two hours! An average of one baby per hour! Not bad at all.

Fatima. Tomorrow, your portraits will be on the honor board at the "Troitsa" clinic. I promise.

Anna. So, mine will be not only in the taxi fleet but also in the obstetrics and gynecology clinic. I'm moving up! (to Yegor Georgievich) And you were probably a midwife in a past life, admit it.

Yegor Georgievich. Probably not in the past life. Well, maybe in a past-past-past-past-past life... As some kind of birth attendant.

Anna. That's it! So fast! I'm sad. (to Yegor Georgievich) Aren't you sad?

Yegor Georgievich. What can I say...

Fatima (in a weak voice). I felt good with you!

Yegor Georgievich. I'm glad you enjoyed it! Let's do it again sometime, feel free to call! Will you allow me? (takes the baby from Fatima, swaddles him; the baby makes some sounds, quite encouraging)

Anna (hands Fatima her clothes). Well, now we'll take you all to the maternity hospital.

Fatima gets dressed.

Fatima (to Anna). What's your name?

Anna. Anna.

Fatima (to Yegor Georgievich). And you, birth attendant?

Yegor Georgievich. Yegor Georgievich.

Fatima (already sitting up). Pleased to meet you. Fatima.

Yegor Georgievich. Likewise. Well, now to the maternity hospital? Let's decide how to get there.

Fatima. We don't need to decide anything. My car is two steps away.

Anna. Then what? I'll drive your car, and you (to Yegor Georgievich) help carry the babies and come back here.

Yegor Georgievich. I can't.

Anna. What do you mean you can't?

Yegor Georgievich. I can't leave the car.

Anna (looks at Yegor Georgievich attentively). You look pale.

Fatima. Blood pressure. (takes out and hands him a pill) Put it under your tongue.

Yegor Georgievich puts the pill under his tongue.

Fatima. Take the whole blister.

Yegor Georgievich. Why?

Fatima. It might come in handy.

Yegor Georgievich. I doubt it. (but takes it)

Fatima (to Yegor Georgievich). It's all right. (to Anna) I'll manage on my own. (to Yegor Georgievich) Give me your hand. (takes out a professional

tonometer, measures his pressure) One hundred and sixty over one hundred.
Pulse?! Wow! Tachycardia or stress?

Yegor Georgievich. Age.

Fatima. Are you dizzy?

Yegor Georgievich. Not exactly dizzy, but I feel a bit unsteady... (after a pause)
It's passing, though.

Fatima. Are you sure?

Yegor Georgievich (confidently). I'll live a bit longer, don't worry. (puts the seat
back in place)

Fatima (to Anna). You don't need to take me to the maternity hospital.

Anna. But...

Fatima. No "buts." (gets out of the car awkwardly, struggling with Yegor
Georgievich's bag and the door)

*At the same time, Anna, having pulled Fatima's bag inside, wants to leave the
car. Suddenly, another car races past them at high speed. It's important that
everyone's attention is focused on this speedster for a few moments.*

Anna (to the driver of the speeding car). Where are you rushing?! To the table?
You might end up on the table yourself!

Fatima (approaches the driver's door; to Anna, who has also gotten out,
holding out her hands). Put my babies here.

Yegor Georgievich hands the babies to Anna one by one, and Anna, having placed Fatima's bag on the ground, places them in Fatima's arms.

Anna. But...

Fatima. No "buts." Take care of your husband! He's a real man! (to Yegor Georgievich and Anna) Thank you, friends... (silent, can't continue due to overwhelming emotion) Thank you, friends... (again can't continue) In short, thank you... In short, friends...

Anna (gently embraces her, along with the babies). Are you sure you'll manage on your own?

Fatima. I'm sure. Just walk me to my car.

Anna. Alright.

Fatima. Reach into my pocket.

Anna puts her hand into Fatima's jacket pocket.

Fatima. Take my card.

Anna. Got it.

Fatima. Walk me to the car and immediately call the number written by hand.

Anna. I will. Health, happiness, well-being! To you and your children...

Yegor Georgievich, being a true gentleman, clambers out of the car with some effort.

Fatima. Thank you! And to you too! And to your husband! (turns her head towards Yegor Georgievich) You are such a wonderful couple. You can see how much you love each other. Take care of each other and remember, now the two of you have a friend! A true friend!

Yegor Georgievich (though awkwardly, also embraces Fatima with the babies).
Happy New Year!

Fatima (to Anna). It's time, or your godchildren Yegorushka and Anechka will freeze.

The women leave. Yegor Georgievich stands in thought near the car for a while. Then he gets into the front passenger seat and turns on the radio. Chaliapin sings:

On Earth, the entire human race Honors one sacred idol, It rules over the entire universe, That idol is the golden calf.

In heartfelt reverence, Glorifying the idol, People of different castes and countries Dance in an endless circle, Surrounding the pedestal...

Yegor Georgievich slightly reclines the seat and throws his head back. It's evident he's not feeling very well.

...To appease the god of gold, Region rises against region in battle, And human blood flows like a river Along the blade of damask steel. People die for metal, People die for metal, Satan rules the ball there, Satan rules the ball there...

Anna returns. Yegor Georgievich turns off the radio and puts the seat back upright.

Anna. Everything all right?

Yegor Georgievich. Yes. Well? Let's go?

Anna. Just a moment. A call for a friend. (takes out the card and her phone)

"Troitsa" clinic? I'm calling on behalf of Fatima Gamidovna Alanova. She is currently in her car on toll road 13 Berezina, approximately twenty-five kilometers from the Moscow Ring Road. You need to pick her up. Urgently! (after a pause) She's alive and well. Everything is fine, she gave birth to twins! A boy and a girl. Just now! (hangs up and starts the car) A blizzard!

Yegor Georgievich. What's wrong with the blizzard?

Anna turns on the stereo. A song plays:

I wanted love and luck, Friends and fiery speeches, I dreamed of a house full of children! Alas, everything turned out differently.

In the radiance of charm and courage, My prince from his high horse Would jump down... for me Across a field of white... paper.

With my hand from the last pier, I waved to him like a wing... And, as in a crooked mirror, The dull reality swayed.

Yegor Georgievich (takes out his phone and presses a contact; Anna turns off the stereo). Hello. (to Anna) Voicemail. Savva Nikitich, everything's fine, we'll talk. (hangs up; to Anna) "The dull reality swayed"... A good song.

Anna (brightened). Are you serious? You really liked it?

Yegor Georgievich. Yes.

Anna. That particular line?

Yegor Georgievich. Among others. "The dull reality." About my life, in a way.
How much longer to Paradise?

Anna. Approximately 25-35 minutes. If nothing else happens. Are you spending
New Year's Eve in Paradise?

Yegor Georgievich (corrects again). In Paradise? I hope not. I'll deliver
something and head back. And where are you celebrating?

Anna. I don't know yet.

Yegor Georgievich. Are you expected?

Anna. At least I don't know anything about it. I have sparkling wine with me, it
doesn't even need chilling. And also a little black dress with spaghetti straps. I
have nice legs, and I like to show them off. Notice, I'm fully prepared for
emergencies.

Yegor Georgievich. Well, if you could wait for me...

Anna. And then?

Yegor Georgievich. And give me a lift back to Moscow.

Anna. Where exactly?

Yegor Georgievich. Somewhere. Can you?

Anna is silent.

Yegor Georgievich (looks at his watch). Half past nine... (to Anna) How much longer?

Anna. About twenty minutes, maybe. Blizzard.

Yegor Georgievich. We're on the final stretch. Let's hope for no more surprises.

And immediately, the car starts making an unusual noise.

Yegor Georgievich. I think I jinxed it. What's that noise?

Anna (stops the car). I'll check the muffler. (gets out, walks around the car, kicks the muffler, returns) The muffler seems to be holding on. (starts driving)

Yegor Georgievich. But it's making noise. I always thought these Chinese SUVs were unreliable.

Anna. It's not far now, pray.

Yegor Georgievich. What if we don't make it?

Anna. We'll call a tow truck.

Yegor Georgievich. On New Year's Eve?

At that moment, the engine stalls. Yegor Georgievich and Anna are silent for a while.

Yegor Georgievich. There's the surprise.

Anna. We'll overcome it.

Yegor Georgievich (snorts). You overcome it.

Anna turns the key, and the car starts moving.

Anna. We overcame it!

Yegor Georgievich. Well, well.

Anna. A reboot.

Yegor Georgievich. No, no, it's not for nothing your portrait is on the honor board at the taxi fleet.

Almost immediately, the engine stalls again, and the car stops.

Yegor Georgievich. We didn't overcome it.

Anna tries the starter, but the car won't start.

Anna (to Yegor Georgievich). I will get you to Paradise today, don't worry.

Yegor Georgievich (sighs). We'll see...

Anna. Could you give the car a slight push towards Paradise?

Yegor Georgievich gets out with the words "understood" and pushes the car from behind. Anna also gets out and, holding the steering wheel, pushes it by the front door. The car slowly moves to the shoulder. Anna turns on the hazard lights.

Anna. Thank you! How are you?

Yegor Georgievich. Fine.

Anna. Come back.

Yegor Georgievich returns to his seat. Anna lifts the hood. She shines her phone light inside the car. Yegor Georgievich pats his pockets, muttering "the pill, the pill," finds the blister, takes out a pill, and puts it under his tongue.

Yegor Georgievich. It came in handy, though.

Anna closes the hood. Returns to her seat. Yegor Georgievich is silent.

Anna. Nothing serious. I'll change a fuse and we'll go.

Yegor Georgievich is silent.

Anna (puts her hand on his shoulder). I'm proud of you. Just reminding you.

(Gets out of the car, crouches, and opens the fuse box under the steering wheel). More or less... More or less. We won't take risks. (to Yegor Georgievich) From the glove compartment, please, the owner's manual.

Yegor Georgievich takes it out and hands it to her. Anna places the brochure on the front seat, opens it, and gets engrossed, still crouching outside the car. Both are silent for a while. Anna is fiddling with the fuses.

Yegor Georgievich. Anna.

Anna looks up and looks at him.

Yegor Georgievich. Honestly, I would gladly stay here with you.

Anna (awkwardly). Well... You... You're saying that so seriously. In reality... It's nothing... I'll survive...

Yegor Georgievich. I don't doubt it. But right now, I'm thinking more about myself. I was just thinking and thinking... You see, I'm seventy-five years old, but for the first time in my adult life, how should I put it, I have this feeling of happiness... It's as if it's not a blizzard, but spring.

Anna. In Russia, one doesn't necessarily exclude the other.

Yegor Georgievich. This is the first time in... over sixty... years for me. (he fell silent)

Anna (after a pause). Do you want to talk about it?

Yegor Georgievich. If it were up to me, I would sit here with you and talk... It wouldn't matter if we're moving or standing still. But... I have to deliver the bag. This is serious. Take my word for it. The whole catch is in the bag... I have to deliver it. (His phone rings) Yes, Savva Nikitich. Everything's under control, just a blizzard. I'll deliver it in half an hour. Happy New Year. Of course, of course, I'll call you right away. We'll be in touch. (Hangs up, looks around the car and says as if to himself, calmly for now) Okay... And where's the little bag? (Gets out of the car, opens the right rear door, looks around inside) Anna, do you remember if we put my bag in the trunk?

Anna quickly stands up, approaches the trunk, and opens it.

Anna (slowly). We didn't.

Yegor Georgievich. So... It's not there.

Anna. It seems so...

Yegor Georgievich. Okay... (examines the interior again, walks around the car, for some reason looks under it) Then where is it?

Anna. Let's concentrate. Where was it?

Yegor Georgievich (remembering, points). Right here. Fatima was bracing her foot against it.

Anna. Did the bag fall out? Could it be? But how could we not notice?

Yegor Georgievich. Probably when that speedster raced past us.

Silence.

Anna. Was there something important in the bag?

Yegor Georgievich. You could say that.

Anna. Maybe it's not so bad?

Silence.

Anna. You're right, the bag could only have fallen out when Fatima was getting out of the car.

Yegor Georgievich. Can we go back?

Anna. Theoretically yes, but first, let's change the fuse. You're right, we need to go back.

Yegor Georgievich. The chance is, of course, small.

Anna. But it's worth a try. (fusses with the fuse, brightens) Great idea! Let's call the police and ask them to find the bag.

Yegor Georgievich. That idea isn't very suitable.

Anna (trying to console). Maybe someone has already found your bag and is about to hand it in to lost and found. Or to the police. They'll open it, examine the contents. They'll surely find some contact information inside.

Yegor Georgievich. I hope they don't...

Anna. Well, we could place an ad. Describe the contents. What's valuable to you might be completely worthless to others.

Yegor Georgievich. That's unlikely. Inside are, so to speak, universal human values.

Anna. So what's in the bag?

Yegor Georgievich (after a pause). Thirteen million.

Anna. Thirteen million what?

Yegor Georgievich. Thirteen million euros.

Anna. Thirteen million euros what?

Yegor Georgievich. In the bag.

Anna. Well, thirteen, so thirteen. Are you superstitious or something?

Yegor Georgievich. Superstitious? Interesting reaction.

Anna. You don't have to tell me.

Yegor Georgievich (sighs). In the bag are thirteen million. In 500 and 200 euro bills. In vacuum packaging.

Anna. In vacuum packaging? Are you joking?

Yegor Georgievich. Anna, is it really so hard to believe?

Anna (after a pause). Well, you see, my life has turned out so that I and thirteen million euros have never been in the same place at the same time, anywhere near each other. (suddenly exclaims) Thirteen million euros!!! Are you serious?!

Yegor Georgievich. The money belongs to someone else. I just agreed to deliver it. To transport it, so to speak, from point A to point B.

Anna. Thirteen million euros? At night? In a taxi?

Yegor Georgievich. It was planned differently.

Anna. Thirteen million euros... You mean that bag? The one Fatima was bracing her feet against? What is this all about?

Yegor Georgievich. A bribe.

Anna. Thirteen million euros? For what and to whom?

Yegor Georgievich. Those are minor details.

Anna. But why did you get involved?

Yegor Georgievich. For five percent.

Anna. Five percent of what?

Yegor Georgievich. Of thirteen million.

Anna. Of thirteen million? That's how much?

Yegor Georgievich. Six hundred and fifty thousand.

Anna. Euros?!

Yegor Georgievich. Yes. My fee is six hundred and fifty thousand net.

Anna. Six hundred and fifty thousand euros? In 500 and 200 euro bills?

Yegor Georgievich. Is something not to your liking?

Anna. Can I ask a personal question? Will they kill you now?

Yegor Georgievich. Theoretically, they could. But the probability is very low.

Anna. I'm scared.

Yegor Georgievich. Are you scared for me?

Anna. For you and in general. The toll road ends in two kilometers. Let's turn around and go back, look for your thirteen million.

Yegor Georgievich. No, you shouldn't get involved in this. It's dangerous.

Anna (gestures at the car). Get in the time machine. We're going back to the past, two hours ago. And we're saving you!

Yegor Georgievich. (pause) Thank you. (pause) If only no one finds that damned bag before we do.

Act Two

A typical gas station complex: a canopy on pillars and a control room. Between the gas station and the dark sky, a bright greeting "Happy New Year" sparkles and shimmers. In front of the complex is a large Christmas tree with shimmering ornaments, continuously and slowly rotating on its round platform. Inside the control room, Syapa is mopping the floor with a large rag mop (from a distance, it looks like Syapa is inside a giant aquarium). Here are also the cash register, a mini-mart, a minimalistic cafe, and a restroom. In the restroom, a closed toilet lid and all the usual fixtures are visible. Night. The blizzard continues. There are no cars at the gas station. The network name "Rusoil" glows.

Along a narrow, trodden path, Svetoniy Bubola approaches the gas station from afar, dressed as Ded Moroz (Father Frost). From the control room, faintly audible through the light blizzard:

I'll sing you a song about five minutes, Let everyone sing this song of mine...

Instead of the traditional sack of gifts, Svetoniy is barely dragging that same striped bag. In his other hand, he has a case for a musical instrument. The Ded Moroz looks somewhat unconventional. His beard is elastic-banded and pushed back so it doesn't get in the way. His hat is askew. His coat is hitched up so it doesn't hinder his walking, and the folds hang over his belt. He stops. Sits down on the bag. Rests in the pose of Rodin's Thinker. He hears the same "Five minutes, five minutes..." from the control room, but a little louder now.

Svetoniy Bubola stands up, walks around the bag, examines it carefully; it's clear he's not doing this for the first time.

Svetoniy Bubola. Who could have lost such a dirty, striped, ugly thing as you?..
He drags the bag further.

Meanwhile, on the same toll road, Yegor Georgievich and Anna are standing on the shoulder. The "Five minutes, five minutes..." can also be heard here, but very, very faintly.

Yegor Georgievich. Where is that damned bag now?

Anna. Searching in a blizzard is hard.

Yegor Georgievich (takes out his mobile and checks something). Eight missed calls from Savva Nikitich... I won't call back yet. Oh, I ruined his New Year's Eve... And I ruined yours completely.

Anna (slowly). Ruined it?.. Well... I don't think so.

Yegor Georgievich (half-question, half-statement). The tank's empty, right?

Anna. It's annoying. Especially since the gas station is right there. (waved her hand towards the gas station)

Yegor Georgievich. Any chance we can coast there?

Anna. No chance. The road isn't downhill, it's slightly uphill. So I suggest we walk to the station. Buy a canister, come back, fill up and...

Yegor Georgievich. And? And what exactly "and"? Where exactly "and"? We need to think and think. Where could that damned bag be?

Anna. I suggest the deductive method.

Yegor Georgievich. Go ahead!

Anna. The bag is heavy. It weighs...

Yegor Georgievich. Well, about thirty kilograms...

Anna. It looks unappealing. Drivers wouldn't stop for it. A random passerby? On New Year's Eve? In a blizzard? On a toll road? Unlikely. Well, as they say, a random passerby could be anywhere.

Yegor Georgievich. The bag has a combination lock.

Anna (approvingly). Important detail! A random passerby wouldn't drag such a heavy thing without information. And the information is under a combination lock.

Yegor Georgievich (seems to be reassuring himself). You're a smart woman, and you're right, this unknown weirdo, if there is one, will surely just throw the bag away.

Svetoniy Bubola. Should I just leave you here?.. (kicks the bag angrily) I'm tired of this!!! Carrying such a huge bag... Dropping it. How much would you have to drink to do that?! I drag and drag... But maybe it's in vain? (kicks the bag several times) What's inside? Answer me! What's so valuable in there... Fine... Not much left. (sighs a few times and continues on his way, still dragging the bag behind him)

Yegor Georgievich waits on the road. Anna approaches with a plastic bag.

Anna. Well? Let's go!

Yegor Georgievich (about the bag). Allow me?

Anna (a smile in her voice). Oh, I'm afraid you'll lose it.

Yegor Georgievich. That much, though. May I offer you my arm? (offers Anna his bent arm)

Anna. Accepted. (takes his arm, and they carefully walk towards the gas station, steadying each other)

Svetoniy Bubola (stops near the control room and sighs heavily). I dragged half a pood here and I don't know what for!

At this moment, the control room moves closer to the audience, to the forefront. All subsequent events will take place inside this room or right next to it. Syapa looks around the space with satisfaction, takes away the mop and rag. The phone rings.

Syapa. Hello, Ilya Vladimirovich. It's me... Bubola... Syapa... Syapa Bubola... Everything is fine with us, everything is good. (continues hurriedly, as if about something unimportant) But we have another one here who filled up a full tank... In short, from the third pump it went into "milk." Blizzard... The license plate didn't go through. A bit of a New Year's surprise. (pause, listens) One hundred liters... (hurriedly) Yes, of course. I sent you the report right away. Did you see it? (pause) And a copy to the police... (pause) They won't find him? Yes, I understand. But what if... Yes, I understand. Yes, I understand. You'll deduct it from me? No, I don't understand. I still don't understand. (after a pause, in a different tone) I understand only one thing! Of course, I agreed to

cover the shift for nothing. (pause, then bitterly) Well, yes, the New Year's rate. I understand. The entire rate will go to the fine, I'll have to add my own. I'd be better off celebrating at home. What could I do, Ilya Vladimirovich? It's unfair! (pause) What could I do? There were so many cars here. And in general... Well, at least on New Year's, don't fine me. (pause) I understand that it's New Year for you too. But our "New Years" are very different. For you, profit, for me, fines. (pause) Oh, go ahead and fire me... Don't be offended, but I'll tell you straight: it's far from paradise here, you know! (annoyed, raising his voice slightly) Yes, I'm calm. Now? (tries to calm down) It's quiet here now. No cars at all. That is, absolutely none. A blizzard. New Year. They'll start coming in the morning. What do you mean, "alone"? I'm waiting for my husband. We'll celebrate a bit here together and then go home. He promised to come closer to the new year. He's working. It's New Year already? What do you mean? What time is it? About five minutes? Thank you... And I wish you a Happy New Year too... Yes, thank you... And I wish you too. Yes, thank you. No, I'm not offended. See you in the new year. (hangs up and repeats, bewildered) About five minutes?... But where is Svetik? This is always how he is! Where is my husband?!

Svetoniy Bubola opens the door of the control room. As he drags the bag inside, a snatch of the song "Five minutes, five minutes" bursts in. Svetoniy Bubola closes the door behind him, cutting off the song.

Svetoniy Bubola (from the doorway). Svetoniy Bubola has arrived from his labors! Syapa, dance! I bring you lots and lots of money!

Syapa, without saying a word, demonstratively walks over to the monitor and studies something there.

Svetoniy Bubola. Happy New Year, Syapa!

Syapa doesn't answer, just looks at the monitor.

Svetoniy Bubola (good-naturedly). I'm waiting, I'm waiting, I'm not bothering you.

Yegor Georgievich and Anna slowly, carefully making their way, trudge along the same path to the control room. The song sounds more clearly for them.

Svetoniy Bubola. Come on, Syapa, what movie are you watching?

Syapa (without any expression). A movie? Sure! Very festive. "Remaining Fuel Inventory."

Svetoniy Bubola (leaves the bag at the door). I've come with a gift.

Syapa. What kind of gift? A snowstorm? A frozen one?

Svetoniy Bubola. Domra! (waves the case)

Syapa. I've known your domra for twenty years. But today, something new.

Svetoniy Bubola (kicks the bag). Ah, this. I found it!

Syapa. Found?! This?! And what's in it?

Svetoniy Bubola (philosophically). Who knows?

Syapa. And where did you find it? And who lost it?

Svetoniy Bubola (shrugs and spreads his hands). It was lying on the road.

Syapa. Lying there? This? And you didn't even look inside? You just dragged it?

Svetoniy Bubola. It's lo-cked...

Syapa. Open it!

Svetoniy Bubola. Combination lock.

Syapa. Did you try to feel it?

Svetoniy Bubola. I couldn't feel through it. You go feel it. Or let's break the lock.

Syapa. Not me. Svetoniy Bubola, do you realize what's around us?

Svetoniy Bubola. A blizzard.

Syapa. Svetoniy Bubola, that's the wrong answer. Around us is gasoline!

Svetoniy Bubola. So what?

Syapa. Svetoniy Bubola, who's around us?

Svetoniy Bubola. No one. Silence.

Syapa. Svetoniy Bubola, wrong answer. Around us are terrorists! You start smashing the lock, and it will blow up!!! And we'll be in paradise in an instant!

Svetoniy Bubola. Syapa, did you ever think that maybe it's New Year's presents?

Syapa. I most certainly did not! Svetoniy Bubola, drag this back to where you found it. And never, ever get involved in events you don't understand!

Svetoniy Bubola. Syapa! What if there's money in there?

Syapa. Svetoniy Bubola, can I laugh now? Out!

Svetoniy Bubola reluctantly drags the bag out, shoves it under the Christmas tree, and positions it so it's not immediately visible from the path.

Svetoniy Bubola. Don't be offended. You lie here for now, and in the morning I'll hand you over to the police. *(The sound of bells begins)* It really is "five minutes." *(returns to the control room; to Syapa)* Champagne!

Syapa. No.

Yegor Georgievich and Anna approach the control room.

Yegor Georgievich. Well, here we are.

Anna. "Here we are" isn't about us. *(hands him a bottle of sparkling wine)*
Quickly, quickly, quickly open it! *(the chimes begin to strike)*

Yegor Georgievich manages to open it. Anna already has two plastic cups ready. He pours the sparkling wine.

Anna. A Christmas tree, chimes, a blizzard. A real New Year and a real man next to me! To the holiday and to real men! *(raises her cup)*

Yegor Georgievich. To true friends!

They clink glasses and drink. Anna decisively takes his arm and leads him to the control room door. The sound of the national anthem is mixed in. Fireworks and salvoes of celebratory fire. Yegor Georgievich and Anna pause to watch the fireworks.

Inside the control room.

Syapa (finally breaks the silence). Where have you been wandering?

Svetoniy Bubola. Yes, I was wandering! I walked a long way and got frozen through, I've traveled many roads! I was wandering and thus earning money (after a pause) for a present for you. And I earned a lot! Because your husband is talented and hardworking! I am a cheerful Father Frost, I brought gifts for everyone! I played the domra, I collected a bunch of money!

Syapa. Money is the best gift. Give it here. (approaches him)

Svetoniy Bubola starts frantically searching for the money in his pockets. He takes off his coat and searches the pockets of his everyday clothes. He takes off his felt boots and shakes them over the floor. There's nothing in the boots. He opens the case, puts the domra next to it, and carefully examines the case.

Svetoniy Bubola (guiltily and desperately). I couldn't have lost it, could I? I worked all day and lost everything? (sits down right on the coat and clutches his head) I can't believe it!

Syapa. And I certainly can't... Did you drink it away?

Svetoniy Bubola. I didn't drink at all today... (adds) On my own dime.

Syapa. The money. Now.

Svetoniy Bubola. I lost it.

Yegor Georgievich and Anna enter the control room and stop at the door. Neither dares to address Syapa because the spouses are actively communicating, not noticing the newcomers.

Svetoniy Bubola. I lost it... I lost everything... Never in my life have I earned so much... And I lost it all. I lost everything.

Anna. Looks like we have some fellow sufferers here.

Syapa (shouts at Svetoniy). I work as a cashier, a salesperson, a barista, a cleaner, a dishwasher, a consultant... And all at the same time!

Svetoniy Bubola (gets up from the floor). Forgive me...

Syapa (adds). And a fuel equipment specialist!

Svetoniy Bubola. I've been trudging, dancing, singing, and performing since ten in the morning, all outside! And I lost it.

Syapa. At two gas stations at once! At two!! Gas stations!! At once!!

Svetoniy Bubola. I must have walked at least forty kilometers today! And I lost it.

Syapa (speaking in an unrealistically fast, accelerating tempo). I've been slaving away from eight in the morning to eight in the evening on the toll road! Then from eight in the morning to eight in the evening on Verhnepetushinskaya, and then straight to the toll road from eight in the evening to eight in the morning. And from eight in the evening to eight in the morning again on Verhnepetushinskaya, and without a break to the toll road. And from eight in the morning to eight in the evening on Verhnepetushinskaya, and from eight in the evening to eight in the morning on the toll road again. And again from eight in the evening to eight in the morning on Verhnepetushinskaya, without sleep from eight in the morning to eight in the evening on the toll road. And in

my free time, I slave away at Rogozhka or near the Lenta supermarket. I can only catch up on sleep on New Year's! All the other gas stations are closed, but this one isn't, so I took the shift, and now I have to wait a whole year to catch up on sleep? Was there even any money, Svetoniy Bubola?!

Svetoniy Bubola. Syapa, I already apologized...

Syapa (shouts). You apologized?! I appreciate it! But I appreciate money more!

Svetoniy Bubola (stunned). You, an Orthodox Christian, are raising your voice at an Orthodox Christian... Over money? I need to process this, feel it, comprehend it, reconsider it, think it over, weigh it, analyze it, perceive it... and structure it.

Svetoniy goes into the restroom and slams the door behind him. Immediately, the sound of a nightingale singing begins from inside the restroom.

Syapa. Svetoniy Bubola, come out!

Svetoniy Bubola. Never. (sits down on the toilet lid) A nightingale is singing in here...

Syapa. Come out, I'll stand here.

Svetoniy Bubola. No!

Syapa. What, is this how we're going to meet the new year?

Svetoniy Bubola. We've already met it. Thank you.

Yegor Georgievich (to Anna). I think we're out of place here.

Anna. I think we're unnoticed. Invisible.

Yegor Georgievich. Anna, may I ask you something? Where were you going to spend New Year's Eve, if... well, if...

Anna. I had many options, I didn't have time to choose...

Yegor Georgievich (after a pause). Are you hinting that you're expected in several places? Maybe you need to call someone?

Anna. I'm not sure.

Yegor Georgievich. But surely someone is waiting. A husband.

Anna. I never had a husband. Not even a fiancé.

Yegor Georgievich. Well, a friend...

Anna. She's spending New Year's at her dacha with her daughters and sons-in-law, with her grandson and her parents, with her sister and her husband, and, of course, with her husband's relatives, with his brother and his wife, and with his parents. I'm not a rescue from loneliness for her, I'm just a bonus at the New Year's party.

Yegor Georgievich. I've heard something like that before... (thinks)

Anna. Shouldn't we sit down? (points to a corner sofa near one of the two tables)

They approach the table. Yegor Georgievich places the half-finished bottle of sparkling wine on the table. Anna places the same two plastic cups. Yegor Georgievich takes off his coat and hangs it on the back of a chair near the next

table. He gallantly helps Anna out of her fur coat. Hangs it on the same chair back. Anna remains in trousers and a sweater.

Anna (examines herself). I need to transform!

Yegor Georgievich. It looks like the only place for that is occupied. And it's better not to disturb anyone there.

Anna. Please turn around.

Yegor Georgievich turns around. Anna, not too hurriedly, pulls off her sweater, kicks off her boots and trousers, pulls on tights and the little black dress with spaghetti straps. Her changing is a whole little performance. Whether for herself or for unseen spectators. Syapa suddenly notices her and watches from afar with amazement.

Yegor Georgievich (without turning around, clears his throat, to Anna). There are cameras everywhere.

Anna (elegantly and cheerfully bows towards the supposed cameras). Happy New Year to everyone, with new happiness! (to Yegor Georgievich) You can turn around.

Yegor Georgievich turns. In front of him stands a woman in high heels and an evening dress. Anna takes out a hairpin, and her hair falls over her shoulders.

Yegor Georgievich. Ooh...

Syapa (knocks on the restroom door; in an undertone). Svetik, come out. We're not alone.

Svetoniy Bubola. Don't make noise, I'm dozing to the nightingale's song.

Syapa. I also have the right to sleep!

Svetoniy Bubola. So go to your workplace and sleep.

Syapa approaches the tables and stops in front of Yegor Georgievich and Anna.

Syapa (not very politely). What do you want?

Anna. A canister of petrol and some coffee.

Syapa (gloomily). The coffee machine is in front of you, self-service. And the canister, right away. (leaves)

Yegor Georgievich approaches the coffee machine and tries to make coffee, but he can't. Syapa returns with the canister.

Yegor Georgievich. I can't get it to work.

Syapa (listlessly). The coffee machine broke down this afternoon.

Yegor Georgievich. And what to do?

Syapa (looking at the coffee machine). Plugged in? Yes. Power? There is. Coffee? There is. Water? There is. Waste container? Empty. Drip tray? Clean. Fuse? Intact. (leaves the coffee machine alone) I didn't understand anything. I'm going to sleep. (goes behind the counter and lies down on a mattress)

Svetoniy Bubola (from the restroom). And I'm staying here. The nightingale is sleeping, but I can hear it.

Anna (to Yegor Georgievich). The New Year has begun, but we're still on the road. How long can we be on the road? (laughs) Let's drink to the journey!

She reaches for the bottle. Yegor Georgievich stops her.

Yegor Georgievich. We'll drink in a minute. (takes out his phone and looks at it)

Anna. News?

Yegor Georgievich. News.

Anna. Anything interesting?

Yegor Georgievich. I have a feeling I'm beginning to fade out of this world.
(shows the news)

Anna (looks at the news, a little shocked). It wasn't for nothing I was scared.
What's it like in your Paradise, with all this?

Yegor Georgievich. I'm not sure my client is in Paradise anymore.

Anna. What about the money?

Yegor Georgievich. What about the money?

Anna. If he's not there, does the money still need to be there?

Yegor Georgievich (takes the phone from her, scrolls through the news). I was supposed to deliver the bag... But it seems the context has changed dramatically.

Anna. How does he know you're delivering the bag?

Yegor Georgievich. Because it was me who... (pauses)

Anna. You what?

Yegor Georgievich. It was me who introduced him to the one who gave him the money. (after a pause) Oh, what a fool I am! A blind fool! Lately, I make the wrong choices.

Anna. Why did you decide to deliver the money?

Yegor Georgievich. I thought I had the last chance to improve my financial situation. But that chance is gone.

Anna. But there must be some way out.

Yegor Georgievich. There is. To continue looking for the bag.

Anna. What will you do with it?

Yegor Georgievich. I haven't decided yet. But the money is probably no longer needed in Paradise.

Anna. Don't get ahead of yourself. Let's find it first.

Yegor Georgievich (looks at his phone). Interesting, interesting... (reads aloud) "In a blizzard on New Year's Eve, security forces raided the owner of a cottage in the elite suburban village of 'Paradise'." So, so, so, so, so, so.

Anna (brightened). Paradise? Security forces?

Yegor Georgievich. "Caches were found in walls, ventilation, window frames, and even in door trims." So, so, so, so, so, so... "From 6 p.m. on December 31

until midnight, six trucks packed to the brim with rubles and foreign currency left the cottage."

Anna (slightly slyly). But there's also good news.

Yegor Georgievich. That's true. Go ahead.

Anna (reads on her phone). "On this New Year's night, a pregnant woman got behind the wheel herself to drive to the maternity hospital, but labour began on the way, right in the blizzard. On the highway, she was lucky to stop a car driven by a woman with an elderly passenger inside. It was these people, under the guidance of Fatima Alanova herself, who successfully delivered the emergency birth. Twins were born – a boy and a girl. The happy mother named the children after her rescuers. Now both the babies and their mother, who, by the way, is herself a highly qualified obstetrician and head of the maternity ward at the 'Troitsa' clinic, are feeling well."

Yegor Georgievich. Just like that. Well, I suggest we drink to that. (pours the sparkling wine)

They clink glasses and drink.

Anna. The sparkling wine is gone.

Yegor Georgievich. I'll try to fix that. (approaches Syapa and sees that she is asleep and even snoring)

Syapa (immediately lifts her head, as if she hadn't been asleep). What did you want?

Yegor Georgievich. Sparkling wine.

Syapa. We don't sell alcohol.

Yegor Georgievich. But how can it be New Year without sparkling wine? Isn't there any way you can help me and my lady?

Syapa (thinking). Depends on how much you're willing to pay.

Yegor Georgievich. How much are you asking?

Syapa comes out from behind the counter, approaches him, and whispers something in his ear.

Yegor Georgievich. Oh. It turns out there is sparkling wine. And it's very expensive.

Syapa. So? Are you buying?

Yegor Georgievich. What brand is it?

Syapa. Santo Stefano.

Yegor Georgievich. Santo Stefano? I don't know that brand.

Syapa. Despite that, it's popular.

Yegor Georgievich. Who's the producer?

Syapa (takes a bottle out from under the counter and reads the label).
Ramenskoye, Moscow region.

Anna (from her seat, to Yegor Georgievich). Take two.

Syapa takes out a second bottle.

Yegor Georgievich. Do you have decent glasses?

Syapa. Glasses are available.

Yegor Georgievich. Give them to me. (looks at the box of glasses) There are four here.

Syapa. Are you buying them? (adds) They're on sale.

Yegor Georgievich. Well, if they're on sale... I'll take them. (pays, takes the bottles and glasses, returns to Anna, puts everything on the table, sits down)

Anna (takes a bottle and examines it; reads). "Carbonated wine beverage." (to Yegor Georgievich) I feel almost like a teenager right now.

Yegor Georgievich. There was no choice.

Syapa (approaches the table; already more friendly). Would you like something hot?

Anna (to Yegor Georgievich). Would we like something hot?

Yegor Georgievich. We would. What can you offer?

Syapa. Grilled sausages. Very tasty.

Yegor Georgievich. Anna?

Anna. Thank you. That sounds fine.

Yegor Georgievich (to Syapa). Yes. Please.

Syapa walks away and busies herself with the sausages and the grill.

Anna (confidentially). Do you want to talk now?

Yegor Georgievich. About what?

Anna. There on the toll road, you said that if it were up to you, you would sit right here next to me and talk and talk. Well, here we are sitting. Do you want to talk?

Yegor Georgievich (not immediately). Probably.

Yegor Georgievich. It was '49. I'd studied well for half a year and, according to my parents, deserved a gift. A New Year's party in the Columned Hall of the House of Unions. The most, most, most special party in the Soviet Union! A ticket of unimaginable beauty! And with it, a coupon with the word "gift" on it. All the letters were bright! Different colours!

I go in, and the little kids are dancing around the Christmas tree, nearby the older kids are throwing rings onto sticks, sports games. I'm watching. A woman comes up to me and says: "Boy, what's your name?" I say: "Yegorka." "Yegorka, do you like poetry?" I nod: "Yes." "Do you like reading poetry aloud?" I nod: "Yes." And she says: "Then come with me." She leads me into a small hall. Around the perimeter are the parents. Waiting for their children. In the centre is a chair. And this woman announces: "Now Mashenka will recite a poem." And she whispers to me: "You listen for now." A stunningly beautiful Mashenka in a pink gauze dress flies onto the chair in the centre and starts reciting about butterflies and bugs. Everyone claps for Mashenka, and the same woman announces: "Mashenka, here's your reward." And she hands her a coupon for a gift. And it dawns on me! Now Masha has two gifts! And the woman asks me: "Will anyone else recite?" I recite! A huge success! They give me a coupon too,

and I leave, happy that I also have two gifts. But this same woman catches up with me in the foyer and says: "Yegor, could you recite the poem again? The people are asking." I nod: "Yes." I come back, and the hall is now packed! I climb back onto the chair and recite the same poem again. And then it's not applause, but an ovation and shouts of "Bravo!", "Encore!". They clapped, they laughed, they cried. And I'm seven years old, can you imagine? I get another coupon! I clutched all three coupons in my fist and guarded them until I exchanged them for gifts. And in the gifts – a teddy bear, another teddy bear, "crayfish neck" candy, a tangerine, and the most priceless treasure – chocolate "medals." And that same evening, I divided everything equally among everyone in the family. And for many years after that, I remained in blissful belief in my incredible acting talent. And at times, I bitterly regretted that I didn't become an actor and that a great actor in me was lost. For decades, I lived in this delusion. Until computers appeared. Once I told a colleague this story about how I'd known I was a great actor since I was seven. But my mother advised me against following my calling. And my colleague asks: "What poem did you recite?" I answer: "I don't remember." He says: "Well, do you remember any words from the poem?" "Well, something like... A soldier. A starling..." And he immediately found the poem for me. By Aleksandr Tvardovsky. About a starling. And the whole story appears in a completely different light. And the emphasis shifts to something else entirely. Should I read it to you?

Anna. Of course.

Yegor Georgievich: *A soldier sits on the porch. He marvels at a starling:—
Whatever you say, a starling is a proper bird. All day long, as we stand here, in*

the burnt-out garden, It minds its own business, Its household chores. It repairs its little house, Left without care. "War is war," it seems to say, "But one must multiply!"

Anna (laughs). I can almost see you on that chair in the center of the hall, full of people. Admit it, you were wearing a white shirt?..

Yegor Georgievich (thinking). You're right, a seven-year-old in a white shirt. And this call: "But one must multiply!" The war wasn't even over yet, there was still ruin, not everyone was fed, and a seven-year-old boy is calling: "But one must multiply!" And only then did I understand, the reason for my success wasn't my talent, but the repertoire.

Anna (laughs). The poem is wonderful! But the success was also due to talent.

Yegor Georgievich. Oh, Anna, Anna... How would you know?

Anna. Because I think I'm a talented person too. (pause) Don't you think so? (pause)

Yegor Georgievich. I'm sure of it.

Anna. I'm a poet. (pause; hums softly). *I wanted love and luck, friends and fiery speeches...* Remember?

Yegor Georgievich. How could I forget? Those were your poems?

Anna. Yes.

Yegor Georgievich. More than remembered.

Anna. I may not be a star, but there are a few songs with my lyrics. They are sung, and people listen.

Yegor Georgievich. And why is taxi driving in your life?

Anna. I love the road.

Yegor Georgievich. You know, I just realized I'm almost not upset anymore. As if I hadn't lost thirteen million... (after a short pause, adds) Only ten. Could you read something of yours?

Anna. Alright. (silent, then, hesitating slightly)

Random friend! Where does this tenderness come from, That envelops me like a cloud? An orchestra of love! The serenity of violins, But the timpani ring, teasing. And the brass suddenly calls somewhere, The harpsichord enters, luring me into a dream... Answer me, oh God, what is my sin? Tell me, who deceived me? But my orchestra, it seems, was created by God! And I wait for the whole power to descend from heaven, My dear, and the finale will sound With mad Wagnerian force!

(Avoiding a pause out of shyness, she continues immediately) We were going to dance. Have you changed your mind?

Syapa (approaches). Here are your sausages. (places a plate with sausages, bread, and cutlery in front of them, then immediately walks away)

Yegor Georgievich (to Anna). Maybe we should eat first?

Anna. Dance first.

Yegor Georgievich (somewhat taken aback). But... without music?

Anna. The music is inside me.

Syapa (from behind the counter). The music is inside the restroom. (to Yegor Georgievich) Come with me. (points to the restroom door) Right here, behind this door, is a great musician. Wake him up, and you'll have music.

Meanwhile, Anna, after waiting a little, starts on the sausages. Yegor Georgievich knocks delicately on the restroom door.

Svetoniy Bubola. Who's there?

Yegor Georgievich (slightly flustered). Yegor Georgievich.

Svetoniy Bubola. Are you alone?

Pause.

Syapa. He's alone, he's alone.

Svetoniy Bubola. Go away, wife.

Syapa. I've already gone. (remains in place)

Svetoniy Bubola. Gone? Are you sure?

Pause.

Svetoniy Bubola. Why don't they put peepholes on restroom doors?..

Yegor Georgievich. Good question.

Syapa. I've already left, I've left. (returns to her workplace; from there, throws to Anna) Tasty?

Anna. Delicious!

Syapa. Enjoy your meal.

Anna. Thank you.

Svetoniy Bubola. Has she gone?

Yegor Georgievich. Completely. So, how are you doing in there?

Svetoniy Bubola. The bird is singing, the lavender is blooming. To open or not to open? That is the question. And why aren't there chains on restroom doors?..

Yegor Georgievich. Just one question: Are you really a musician?

Svetoniy Bubola. A musician, yes. And?

Yegor Georgievich. I have a job offer.

Syapa (from her spot). When? Where? How much?

Yegor Georgievich (in the same tone). Now. Here. Generously.

Syapa. Svetik, come out!

And immediately the door swings open and Svetoniy comes out.

Svetoniy Bubola. I'm ready.

Yegor Georgievich. Thank you.

Both return to the table.

Anna (to Svetoniy). Can you play "The Apple"?

Svetoniy Bubola. I can. (picks up the domra, adjusts it, and looks at Anna, waiting for a sign)

Anna stands up, gestures to Svetoniy to start playing. Svetoniy plays the first notes of "The Apple" ("Yablochko"). Anna begins to dance a tap dance, gradually increasing the tempo. Syapa comes out from behind the counter. Svetoniy suddenly changes the rhythm, playing more energetically. Anna matches his rhythm. It turns into a real dance. Syapa, looking at Anna, applauds, then starts singing a song about "The Apple" (Yablochko):

*Oh, my little apple, Where are you rolling? You'll end up in the devil's hands,
You won't come back.*

*Oh, my little apple, On a little plate! We're going off to serve at the front!
Goodbye, girls!*

Throughout the dance, all the dancers gesture to Yegor Georgievich, beckoning him into the circle. At first, Yegor Georgievich taps his foot a little, claps his hands slightly, and nods from time to time. But finally, unable to resist the "onslaught" of the dancers, he joins in. He steps into the circle with a restrained, dashing gait and freezes in front of Anna. Anna freezes too. For a while, they stand silently, looking into each other's eyes. Then Yegor Georgievich, with bows, circles Anna, clearly demonstrating his attention and respect for her. Anna turns to follow Yegor Georgievich's movement, and all

this time they don't take their eyes off each other. Syapa steps aside, watching them.

Anna suddenly stops. She approaches Yegor Georgievich, puts her hand on his shoulder, and points to the clock with her other hand.

Anna (to everyone). Well, gentlemen! Let's have some sparkling wine for the road!

Yegor Georgievich pours the sparkling wine into glasses, everyone clinks glasses and exclaims: "Happy New Year!", "With new happiness!", "Let everything be fine!", "Hurrah!". Syapa divides the remaining sausage into four parts, and everyone has a bite.

Anna (sinks onto the sofa). Half a kingdom for a cup of coffee!

Svetoniy Bubola. I second that! I've been on my feet for almost twenty-four hours!

Syapa. Well, I don't know how to fix these machines, I just don't!

Svetoniy Bubola (to Syapa). Well, at least you can make me some tea, wife, if there's no coffee?

Syapa. Tea I can do, come on. (leads him to the counter, where she puts a thermos and a cup in front of him; to Yegor Georgievich and Anna) Would you like some tea?

Anna. I only drink coffee.

Yegor Georgievich. I'll try to fix the coffee machine. (approaches the coffee machine)

Syapa (from a distance). Do you need the manual?

Yegor Georgievich. Please.

Syapa brings the manual, Yegor Georgievich flips through it, muttering: "First, diagnostics..." Syapa doesn't return to Svetoniy Bubola but sits down next to Anna. Anna slowly changes back into her everyday clothes.

Syapa. It's been a good New Year. What do you think?

Anna. Good.

Syapa. Me with my husband, you with yours – a good company. And such a good mood. How about you?

Anna. Good.

Syapa. I wanted to apologize... Don't get me wrong...

Anna (puts her hand on Syapa's). I'm not.

Syapa. Well, in short... You might have thought I was greedy.

Anna. I didn't.

Syapa. I'm not greedy. I just worry about every penny.

Anna. I understand.

Syapa. Well, I work my hardest and save my hardest. I deny myself everything.

Anna. So you're saving for something very valuable to you.

Syapa. How did you guess?!

Anna. Just a guess.

Syapa. You're right. For the most valuable thing in my life. But I won't say what for. I'm afraid to jinx it. Don't even ask.

Anna. Don't worry, I won't ask.

Syapa. You won't ask?

Anna. I won't ask.

Pause.

Syapa. But ask me!

Anna. Ask?

Syapa. Well, I really want to answer!

Anna (stops dressing and looks at Syapa). I'm asking. What is the most valuable thing in your life? I'm not just asking, it's important to me. Very important.

Syapa. And you won't think I'm stupid?

Anna. I don't know in advance what I'll think.

Syapa. So be it! I can take it. I want to tell someone.

Anna. Then just tell me.

Syapa. Do you know what my favorite fairy tales were as a child?

Anna is silent, waiting.

Syapa (continues). About the dead princess.

Anna. Strange!

Syapa. Why?

Anna. Because those were mine too.

Syapa (joyfully). Then you're "my" person and you'll understand everything!

Anna. I'm sure I will! Go on!

Syapa. Imagine! Two centuries ago, or maybe three, somewhere in the mountains of the Caucasus, a little fir tree appeared. Just a tree, and she grew and grew... And there was no one around for centuries. No one. But the tree grew special, but there was absolutely no one to notice it. Imagine?

Anna. That's sad.

Syapa. The tree was perfection. Incomparable to any other tree around. Imagine? Not a single crack, not a single flaw. You understand what I'm saying?

Anna. I understand. Go on.

Syapa. She lived to be a hundred years old, and no one noticed how beautiful she was.

Anna. That's sad.

Syapa. And then one day, the strongest storm that ever happens in the mountains broke out! Our tree was uprooted and thrown into a deep river.

Anna. Very sad. To be perfection and live a life that no one noticed.

Syapa. And she lay on the bottom, covered by cold water.

Anna. The dead princess, right?

Syapa. And another hundred years passed... You have tears, Anna.

Anna. Don't mind me, go on...

Syapa. But she was found! A genius craftsman. A wizard. Our fir tree was extracted, dried, and carefully, carefully, gently, gently sawed into thin boards.

Anna. Go on...

Syapa. The master gently tapped each board and listened to how it vibrated. And finally, someone understood that this fir tree was perfection. And while the fir tree lay at the bottom of the cold river, in other mountains, far away, a tiny, barely noticeable, very thin stalk with two light green leaves was born.

Anna. Life is sad.

Syapa. Not always! The maple noticed him, and our great master-wizard noticed him too. And he understood that this maple had a high purpose on this earth. The master took away a block of maple wood and began to carve a bowl. Haven't you ever admired the body of a domra?

Anna is silent.

Syapa (brings the domra; on the way, to Yegor Georgievich, who continues to fiddle with the coffee machine). How's it going?

Yegor Georgievich. Not great. I checked the waste container – empty, everything's fine. Checked the drip tray – clean, empty, also fine. Checked the socket – it works. Checked the circuit breaker – it's fine.

Syapa (heading back to Anna, cheerfully to Yegor Georgievich). Just don't break it, or they'll deduct it from my pay.

Svetoniy Bubola (still drinking tea; sympathetically to Yegor Georgievich). Forget it... Come here, let's have some tea.

Yegor Georgievich (spreads his hands). My lady wants coffee. (continues fiddling with the machine)

Syapa (lays the domra in front of Anna). Here's a domra. Here's the body. It's a hemisphere, as you can see.

Anna (examining it). Yes.

Syapa. The wood of our maple had a wavy, shimmering pattern. The wood itself is a work of art. And the master created a perfect body from it and began to bend the ribs.

Anna. Ribs? (laughs)

Syapa (shows Anna). Here. The ribs.

Anna. Ribs. Beautiful.

Syapa. And, of course, the sound! A sound resembling the human voice.

(almost in a whisper) I dream that my Svetik has such a domra. And I dream that he works in a real, big orchestra. And I dream that everyone finally notices how beautifully he plays! His playing is perfection. And I'm so sad that only I can see it.

Anna. I appreciated his playing.

Syapa. Thank you. (in a different tone) Such a domra costs about twenty thousand dollars. I've been saving for more than three years. I've driven myself crazy, I've driven him crazy... But I believe that someday my Svetoniy will play in an orchestra on such a domra, and I will sit in the front row and be proud of him and his domra.

Anna. And of yourself.

Syapa. Thank you.

Anna (after a pause). I envy you. Not that you are capable of dreaming, but that your dream will definitely come true.

Syapa. Do you believe that if you make a wish under the chimes, it will come true?

Anna. I do.

Syapa. I wished for it to come true right away, immediately after the New Year.

Anna. Here's my card. Call me when it does, and we'll celebrate together.

Syapa. I will! (gives her her card) Call me too. Just in case I lose yours.

Anna. We'll be in touch. It's starting to get light though. (calls out) Yegor Georgievich, how's it going?

Yegor Georgievich. I doubt you'll manage to start the first morning of the new year with a cup of coffee.

Anna. Well then... We have to go! Time to search.

Syapa. What are you looking for?

Yegor Georgievich. Oh, nothing important... It seems we found the most important thing already. (approaches, hands Anna her fur coat, and gets dressed himself)

Syapa. I'm a little sad you're leaving.

Yegor Georgievich (puts money on the table). Here. Thank you. I think we started the new year quite well.

Anna. Wonderfully! But now the main thing is not to forget the canister.

Syapa (takes the money, examines it). This is a lot.

Yegor Georgievich. Take it, from the heart.

Syapa. I shouldn't...

Anna. Take it.

Yegor Georgievich takes the canister, Anna picks up her things, and they head for the exit. Svetoniy is still in the same place. Dozing.

Yegor Georgievich (to Syapa). Your husband fell asleep...

Syapa. Let him be, don't wake him.

Yegor Georgievich. Please convey my deepest gratitude to him.

Anna. And mine.

Syapa. I will. Good luck with your search. (after them) Anna, I'm sorry about the coffee.

Anna (laughs). Don't worry. Good luck!

Yegor Georgievich and Anna exit. The blizzard has subsided. Syapa remains standing, lost in thought.

Anna (to Yegor Georgievich, already outside). This is the most New Year-like New Year of my life. (looks at the Christmas tree) Goodbye, little tree. Maybe you are perfection too. (to Yegor Georgievich) Let's walk around it, bow, and say goodbye.

Yegor Georgievich. I definitely believe you're a poet.

Anna laughs, takes his hand (he leaves the canister), and they slowly walk around the tree.

Anna (suddenly stops, looks under the tree). Oh, my God! I definitely believe that Father Frost leaves gifts under the tree! He definitely left a gift for us.

Yegor Georgievich (looks where Anna is looking; stunned). I see it.

Both drag the bag away from the tree. They stand and look at it.

Anna (feeling the bag). It feels... full... It feels... All your notes are in place (not without irony) in 500 and 200 euro denominations.

Yegor Georgievich. And the combination lock is untouched. (sits down on the bag)

Anna. Untouched. (sits down on the other side of the bag)

They sit back-to-back and are silent.

Yegor Georgievich. Does this ever happen?

Anna (convinced). It never happens.

Yegor Georgievich. I don't believe it.

Anna. I don't believe it either. That is, about five hours ago, I still believed we'd find it, but now I don't.

Yegor Georgievich. And I didn't believe it. But now I'm starting to.

They sit and are silent.

*Syapa approaches the coffee machine and mutters to herself: "What happened to you, huh? I'll try running the cleaning cycle. It's stupid, I know, but I'll try."
She starts it.*

Yegor Georgievich and Anna still sit and are silent.

Yegor Georgievich. It turns out that no one knows about this money right now. And those who do know will keep quiet.

Anna. Could we hand it over somewhere?

Yegor Georgievich. Why? And where?

Anna (vaguely). Well, somewhere. Where do people hand in found money?

Yegor Georgievich. I don't know any such places.

Anna. Well then, let's try to think. What do honest people do in such situations? They hand in the find to the police. If the owner isn't found, then after six months the money becomes the finder's property. Or do they do it differently now?

Yegor Georgievich. I don't know about the money, but the bag definitely can't be handed over to the police. (changes the subject) What did you dream about as a child?

Anna. Love and a house full of children. Well, I loved, and I have a full house of children... I adopted a lot. But... they grew up and left. We keep in touch, but... I'm not their mother, after all. I'm like a grandmother they sometimes visit. They're all scattered. So, my dream didn't come true. And what was your dream?

Yegor Georgievich. As a child? To be a great actor. (laughs) That didn't come true. It didn't.

Anna. But you're a great person. And I'm happy I met you. Let's go.

They stand up. Yegor Georgievich picks up the bag and the canister. They walk slowly along the path. The melody of the song "Five Minutes" is heard. Chaliapin's voice is heard from somewhere far away.

Anna. What will you do? You have the bag.

Yegor Georgievich (sighs). I need to think.

Anna. I won't ask any more. (looks at her watch) But it's already...

Yegor Georgievich. Already what?

Anna. I don't know.

Yegor Georgievich and Anna stop near the Christmas tree. They are silent.

Anna. Tell me honestly, one more time: what are you thinking about?

Yegor Georgievich. (silent for a long time, then answers) If I could start all over again...

Anna. What would you do differently?

Yegor Georgievich. Everything. I'd be an actor. I'd be a different person.

Anna. In what way?

Yegor Georgievich. I don't know. I'm seventy-five. I have a lot of money, but I don't feel like I've lived my life right. I don't know what's ahead, but there's so much behind me that I want to... forget. I want to disappear and start all over.

Anna. But that's impossible. It only happens in fairy tales.

Yegor Georgievich. In fairy tales.

Anna. But wait... If you were given a chance to start over and correct what seems wrong to you, you'd take it, wouldn't you? At least your life would turn out differently.

Yegor Georgievich. It's too late.

Anna. It's never too late.

Yegor Georgievich. Really?

Anna. It's never too late to start over. Even if you only have five minutes left.

There is silence.

Yegor Georgievich. Let's go.

And Chaliapin's voice is heard from the heavens:

People die for metal, People die for metal, Satan rules the ball there, Satan rules the ball there...

Anna (anxiously). What are you thinking about now?

Yegor Georgievich. Honestly?

Anna. I'd like that.

Yegor Georgievich. You won't believe me. We haven't known each other long enough for such an intimate confession.

Anna. Confess immediately.

Yegor Georgievich. I'm thinking... (pause)

Anna. Tell me!

Yegor Georgievich. I'm thinking... (pause)

Anna. Yegor Georgievich!

Yegor Georgievich (decides). I'm thinking... I would give a million for a cup of coffee for you.

They walk along the path towards the toll road.

Meanwhile...

Syapa (near the coffee machine). It turns out all you had to do was run the cleaning cycle.

Svetoniy Bubola (suddenly jumps up and shouts). Syapa! Syapa! Wife, where are you?!

Syapa (rushes to him). Svetik! Svetik! Did you have a nightmare? We're at the gas station. Happy New Year, everything's fine.

Svetoniy Bubola (in some sort of operatic tone). A nightmare! I remembered everything! Syapa, everything is fine with us! I remembered where I put my earnings! I put them in the side pocket of that bag I dragged here.

Syapa. And where's the bag?

Svetoniy Bubola. Right there, under the tree. (runs to the tree, the bag is gone; looks around, but there's no one and nothing; clutches his head) Never, never listen to a woman when she's angry! Never! Why did I listen to her? Why did I let go of the bag?

For a while, he stands clutching his head, then he seems to pull himself together and returns to the control room. He enters. Syapa is standing by the coffee machine with a cup of coffee.

Svetoniy Bubola (trying to keep his composure, but still speaking rather gloomily). Syapa. I have bad news. The bag was taken from under the tree last night. And we will never see my New Year's salary again.

Syapa (with surprising nonchalance). But I have great news for you, Svetik! I fixed the coffee machine. And here's your coffee. The first cup of the new year. For good luck!

Svetoniy Bubola (taking a sip). Starting the new year with coffee – that's definitely a good sign. And we met the new year with good people, which means good people will be around us all year. That's a sure sign.

Syapa. Yes. A wonderful couple. You can see they've lived their whole lives together happily.

Svetoniy Bubola. It's a pity if we never see them again.

Syapa. Maybe. (thinking) Or maybe not!

Svetoniy Bubola. Anna wanted coffee so badly. (thinks for a moment) Did they leave long ago?

Syapa. About fifteen minutes ago, maybe.

Svetoniy Bubola. So they haven't left yet. They still have to fill up, start the car...

Syapa (quickly catching on). I'm on it! (makes coffee)

Svetoniy hastily makes himself presentable, puts on his Ded Moroz coat.

Syapa (hands him a paper cup with a lid). Here's the coffee! And run, Svetik, run!!! You have to catch them!

Svetoniy Bubola runs along the path, holding up the skirts of his coat with one hand so they don't hinder his running, while holding the coffee cup high in the other.

On the toll road, Anna and Yegor Georgievich. The canister is already gone, the bag too.

Yegor Georgievich. I guess I should say "let's go," but where to? I don't know...

Anna. Then let's just stand here.

Yegor Georgievich (uneasily). You look pale. Are you feeling unwell?

Anna. My blood pressure dropped... I'm very dizzy. I wish I had a strong cup of coffee right now.

Svetoniy Bubola (runs up to them, waving the cup). Coffee for Anna! Coffee for Anna!