

KONSTANTIN ILIEV

GOLDEN BRIDGES AND SEQUOIA

Translated by Andrey Filipov

PART ONE

GOLDEN BRIDGES

Characters:

DOCTOR NICKY

THE WOMAN IN BLACK

A doctor's office. The telephone is ringing.

THE DOCTOR (*picks up the receiver*). Yes ... I've written it down, I'll read it to you. (*Reads.*) His condition is not good, right limbs are with severe paralysis of one leg and palsy of the arm, the speech is also affected though the hearing is somewhat preserved.

Someone knocks at the door.

Come in! ... I'm back: Most of the time he's in clear consciousness, but there are moments of somnolence, especially during the evening hours of relatively brief episodes of hyperactivity. The prognosis ... Well, I'll be in touch a little later.

A woman dressed in black enters. They stand silently looking at each other for a short time, then impulsively the woman hugs the doctor. She kisses him.

I should have...

THE WOMAN IN BLACK. It doesn't matter ...

THE DOCTOR. Well... Nothing can be done.

THE WOMAN. I know Nicky. You've done everything possible.

THE DOCTOR. When is the...

THE WOMAN. The day after tomorrow. Problems arose with the burial-ground.

THE DOCTOR. Oh. Is it the municipality?

THE WOMAN. No. His relatives. His other ones, I mean. They're really mean.

THE DOCTOR. Are they? I didn't have that impression.

THE WOMAN. Believe me!

A brief silence.

THE DOCTOR. When the head-nurse mentioned the Golden Bridges, you've spoken with the head-nurse, I immediately knew.

THE WOMAN. Really?

THE DOCTOR. Well, yes.

THE WOMAN. I think you understand...

THE DOCTOR. I understand.

THE WOMAN. What did she say?

THE DOCTOR. Who?

THE WOMAN. The nurse. The head-nurse.

THE DOCTOR. She said you'd come. That you were tense. She's tense too. She called and mention the Gold Bridges.

THE WOMAN. Nicky, I hope you understand.

THE DOCTOR. I understand very well.

THE WOMAN. No, I don't think you understand.

THE DOCTOR. Why didn't you tell her who you are? Why didn't you tell the nurse? She said: Someone is trying to reach you. A female name. I forgot what it was. And - Golden Bridges, she said. It sounded like a password.

THE WOMAN. Oh, come on – a password!

THE DOCTOR. Want to see him?

THE WOMAN. Now?

THE DOCTOR. Whenever.

THE WOMAN. Where is he?

THE DOCTOR. In the morgue.

THE WOMAN. I saw a coffee machine in the corridor. Would you?

THE DOCTOR. Sure.

THE WOMAN. A large cup, please.

THE DOCTOR. Sugar?

THE WOMAN. No thanks.

The doctor goes out. The woman takes out a cell-phone.

Hello, I am here now in the office of the head of the ward ... I haven't yet. I just can't. In a bit ... Well, he was also his doctor, it simplifies things ... No, I'm alone, he went to the coffee machine ... More than an acquaintance, I told you ... Do you remember all your boyfriends from college ... No, I want to do it through him, I don't feel like dealing with the lower staff and other types of idiots ... I'll ask you another thing.

The door opens and the doctor enters with two plastic cups in hand.

Alright, till later. I'll call you again in a bit.

THE DOCTOR. So, Golden Bridges?

THE WOMAN. Nicky, did you really give such importance to that?

THE DOCTOR. Of course I did, I cut my veins.

THE WOMAN. What?

THE DOCTOR. My veins. I cut them.

THE WOMAN. You did?

THE DOCTOR. Yep.

THE WOMAN. But why?

THE DOCTOR. Just so.

THE WOMAN. Inadvertently?

THE DOCTOR. What do you mean?

THE WOMAN. Didn't you just say you cut your veins?

THE DOCTOR. Yes.

THE WOMAN. Well, why?

THE DOCTOR. What do you mean “why”? After that conversation we had.

THE WOMAN. And which conversation was that, Nicky?

THE DOCTOR. The one we had with you from the Vitosha mountain, the Golden Bridges.

THE WOMAN. I can't believe it. This is such a female response.

THE DOCTOR. Not the way I did it.

THE WOMAN. So, you slit your wrists?

THE DOCTOR. No. My ankle. Veins – in the conventional sense. You told me on the phone from the Golden Bridges, that (по-ясно ще бъде , ако стане “Че ти и Виктор”)Victor ... that it is all over, all over, the end. And what was I to do – like in the movies: an inn, went with these three idiots and we got into boozing brandy. Why brandy? No idea. Since then I can't stand brandy. Did the others drink? No. I drank. Look at me, I don't give a damn. May she do as she please at the Golden Bridges! I'm a man! And then I'm standing by glass – a window. Some basement flat on Patriarch Evtimiy Street, a large window on the level of the sidewalk, waiting for a trolleybus or something. I don't know. And I look through the window, inside a party, they're eating, drinking, laughing. Don't know where it came from, couldn't help it, I kicked in the glass with all my force. I was wearing some crummy shoes, everyone had one pair of shoes ... Crush-Crash-Tinkle! ... Women were screaming, my shoe – full of blood ...

THE WOMAN. Goodness, Nicky!

THE DOCTOR. Well, yeah, goodness.

THE WOMAN. And then?

THE DOCTOR. Well, nothing. Escaped getting beat up in the militia station. Because I was taken to the Pirogov Hospital.

THE WOMAN. Now I remember. They told me.

THE DOCTOR. They must have told you.

THE WOMAN. So? Are you still mad?

THE DOCTOR. What do you mean?

THE WOMAN. For what happened at The Golden Bridges. With me and Victor.

THE DOCTOR. The morgue is down below. I'll go with you.

THE WOMAN. Let me finish my coffee first.

THE DOCTOR. When did you arrive? I know you're in America.

THE WOMAN. Last night. Lilly will land tonight. Lilly's my daughter.

THE DOCTOR. I know. Victor told me.

THE WOMAN. What did he say?

THE DOCTOR. Told me about your daughter.

THE WOMAN. She couldn't go with me.

THE DOCTOR. I gave the epicrisis to his brother. I didn't know you would arrive.

THE WOMAN. Of course I would arrive.

THE DOCTOR. It couldn't be helped.

THE WOMAN. It's good that you and Victor saved your friendship.

THE DOCTOR. Wasn't like way back. We were together then every day. I told him once: "Be careful, they'll take us for faggots". It was "faggots" not "gays" back then.

THE WOMAN. But you did see each other later too.

THE DOCTOR. Yes. Once every five years.

THE WOMAN. He hadn't married me but the typewriter.

THE DOCTOR. Since then, though, I can't watch Bulgarian movies.

THE WOMAN. It wasn't the film's fault.

THE DOCTOR. Whose fault was it?

THE WOMAN. Why did you suggest we go to "Fonfon"?

THE DOCTOR. What "Fonfon"?

THE WOMAN. "Fonfon". The mountain hut.

THE DOCTOR. "Fonfon"?

THE WOMAN. Well, yes.

THE DOCTOR. We weren't in "Fonfon". We were at "The Golden Bridges".

THE WOMAN. The area is called The Golden Bridges.

THE DOCTOR. So is the hut.

THE WOMAN. The hut was "Fonfon".

THE DOCTOR. "Fonfon" is on the other side.

THE WOMAN. Where on the other side?

THE DOCTOR. Beyond the bridge.

THE WOMAN. On the contrary. It's on this side of the bridge.

THE DOCTOR. What do you call "this side" and what "beyond"?

THE WOMAN. What do you mean what? On this side is "this side" and beyond is "beyond".

THE DOCTOR. Viewed from where?

THE WOMAN. Viewed from where?! From the bridge!

THE DOCTOR. If you stand on the bridge, what is on this side and what is beyond?

THE WOMAN. If you stand on the bridge, nothing is on this side and nothing beyond. You're on the bridge.

THE DOCTOR. Yes, but Sofia is on this side and The Black Peak is beyond.

THE WOMAN. So what?

THE DOCTOR. Where were we? Towards The Black Peak or Sofia?

THE WOMAN. What Black Peak are you talking about, Nicky? We never got to The Black Peak.

THE DOCTOR. Where did we get to?

THE WOMAN. To "Fonfon".

THE DOCTOR. The Black Peak or Sofia?

THE WOMAN. Enough with this Black Peak!

THE DOCTOR. Where was the hut? Closer to The Black Peak or to Sofia?

THE WOMAN. To Black Peak, of course.

THE DOCTOR. So, it's beyond the bridge.

THE WOMAN. So it's on this side. Beyond it was another hut. The one you say was called "The Golden Bridges".

THE DOCTOR. Now I understood why you confuse the two huts. With me you were at "The Golden Bridges", with Victor at "Fonfon".

THE WOMAN. Do you remember what you said early that morning? "We're going to the "Fonfon" hut. They're shooting Victor's movie there".

THE DOCTOR. I don't remember what I said some thirty odd years ago, but it never was "Fonfon".

THE WOMAN. It was "Fonfon".

THE DOCTOR. The crew was in "Fonfon". You and I and the rest were in "The Golden Bridges". On this side of the bridge. We registered but didn't stay overnight there. In "The Golden Bridges" hut. That's why you don't remember.

THE WOMAN. Well, yes. And you got mad.

THE DOCTOR. Of course I'd get mad.

THE WOMAN. The director said: "I want this student girl in the movie."

THE DOCTOR. I know what he said.

THE WOMAN. It was just a short twenty second scene.

THE DOCTOR. And it took ten days to shoot this short scene.

THE WOMAN. There was no sun ... They were waiting for the sun.

THE DOCTOR. Ten days. Let them wait nowadays ten days for the sun. And keep thirty people in a hotel.

THE WOMAN. It was not a hotel but a hut. "Fonfon".

THE DOCTOR. So, the fat director didn't get lucky. However – Victor did.

THE WOMAN. Well, you picked up and left. Why did you leave me there?

THE DOCTOR. I didn't leave you there. You were to come home to Sofia at night. He said so. Fatso. They were to drive you back.

THE WOMAN. That I don't remember.

THE DOCTOR. An idiot! I sat like an idiot in the apartment waiting. At one time I got the hint, but couldn't get back up the dark mountain. There were no minibuses then.

THE WOMAN. There were regular buses to The Golden Bridges.

THE DOCTOR. There weren't.

THE WOMAN. That was a crazy day. I was with a very nice skirt. In purple and red. Do you remember?

THE DOCTOR. The skirt? I remember it.

THE WOMAN. Shall we go?

THE DOCTOR. Let's go.

THE WOMAN. One moment, Nicky. Was an autopsy performed?

THE DOCTOR. Yes.

THE WOMAN. Why?

THE DOCTOR. It's the procedure here. He didn't die of his primary disease.

THE WOMAN. I know. A stroke.

THE DOCTOR. A massive stroke.

THE WOMAN. So, in the head. And you've ... you know... cut it open.

THE DOCTOR. I didn't. It's the pathologist's job to do that.

THE WOMAN. Were you there?

THE DOCTOR. Was I where?

THE WOMAN. Where the ... where the autopsy was performed.

THE DOCTOR. No. But I checked everything. And the epicrisis was received by Victor's brother.

THE WOMAN. I know.

THE DOCTOR. Sorry for the awkward question, but I have the impression that you hadn't been, how shall I put it, close lately... you and Victor.

THE WOMAN. He refused to come to America.

THE DOCTOR. What would he do in America?

THE WOMAN. Well, what would I do here?

THE DOCTOR. He was joking once, that his pension was as much for one year as your son in law's salary in Boston for a week.

THE WOMAN. Did he find that funny?

THE DOCTOR. He seemed to, but I don't think I've met a more desperate person. Lately.

THE WOMAN. Really?

THE DOCTOR. He told me that he'd not left home in a month. Before he registered here.

THE WOMAN. Can you live with somebody who in twenty-four hours wouldn't hear a word you said?

THE DOCTOR. Was it like that?

THE WOMAN. He would just stare out the window, wouldn't shed a word.

THE DOCTOR. And his drink?

THE WOMAN. Bad alcohol too.

THE DOCTOR. Why?

THE WOMAN. Go ahead, guess why.

THE DOCTOR. Did they never publish any of Victor's things? Липсва ми еквивалент на думичката "пък", която тук изразява очудване.

THE WOMAN. One has to write something for it to get published.

THE DOCTOR. So it came to them – the day of reckoning.

THE WOMAN. Who do you mean?

THE DOCTOR. Writers.

THE WOMAN. Why writers, Nicky?

THE DOCTOR. You can't deny that the previous regime pampered them.

THE WOMAN. All of them?

THE DOCTOR. Victor was not overlooked.

THE WOMAN. Because he was talented!

THE DOCTOR. His talent I wouldn't deny.

THE WOMAN. What then?

THE DOCTOR. Come on now, enough said.

THE WOMAN. After the Golden Bridges, Victor wrote another screenplay - you can't imagine what trouble he got into for it back in those times.

THE DOCTOR. Well yes, but then ...

THE WOMAN. Then what?

THE DOCTOR. Come on now, enough said.

THE WOMAN. Victor did not write political things. He wrote science fiction.

THE DOCTOR. And others were writing science fiction. There was one, forgot the name... he died too.

THE WOMAN. I know who you mean. Victor was better.

THE DOCTOR. Maybe he was. I don't read such stuff.

THE WOMAN. Maybe you don't but others did. Do you know in what circulation his book came out?

THE DOCTOR. But why did they no longer read him?

THE WOMAN. Unfortunately, no one forgives the talented ones.

THE DOCTOR. Sorry?

THE WOMAN. All right. I know you're very good at your profession. But Victor was...! Nicky, I had made all plans for you and me. How we'll get married... However, Victor! He then drove all of us wild at The Golden Bridges. Standing on a railing, on the bridge railing he stood, while across, on a rock, sat one of the lighting technicians with a guitar, such an eccentric. And they'd fire words at each other, improvising – sometimes in rhyme, sometimes in blank verse. Such fun! The whole crew there. Grannies and old men, coming along the trails with backpacks, they crowded all around. Yet those two wouldn't shut up. Victor's wit was razor sharp. Amazing improvisations! At night all would crowd at his table. Women swarmed him. One of them said to me that he's not good looking. What an airhead! Worse than an airhead. A smart guy is always good looking.

THE DOCTOR. Shall we get going?

THE WOMAN. Oh, come on. Do you smoke? Got a cigarette?

THE DOCTOR. There might be some around.

THE WOMAN. Hold on, Nicky, this patho... whatever he was... how was it?

THE DOCTOR. How's what?

THE WOMAN. What do you call the guy who does an autopsy?

THE DOCTOR. A pathologist.

THE WOMAN. You know him well?

THE DOCTOR. Well, he's a colleague. Why?

THE WOMAN. Not that it matters, but I've heard things. That they replace things back inside. Intestines, brain. All in one place. In the stomach.

THE DOCTOR. Come on, don't bother with such things. Want a cigarette?

THE WOMAN. No, don't. I shouldn't start smoking.

THE DOCTOR. What now? Thinking about his brain?

THE WOMAN. What about his brain?

THE DOCTOR. Just a normal brain. With hemorrhaging in the right hemisphere.

WOMAN. I don't envy him, that doctor...

THE DOCTOR. The patho...

THE WOMAN. Pathologist. I don't envy him.

THE DOCTOR. Occupational hazards.

THE WOMAN. What about the others?

DOCTOR. What others?

THE WOMAN. Attendants. Supporting staff. What do they do? I know they're very poorly paid.

THE DOCTOR. I don't know why you worry about all those things.

THE WOMAN. Don't mind me. I just can't yet, can't go yet. They told me I should give them something. The staff. That they're very badly paid.

THE DOCTOR. Don't worry about them all that much. They get helped by the relatives. It's the custom. When they bring clothes for the dead they give something to the morgue people. On the pretext that the corpse be dressed smartly. Are you giving clothes?

THE WOMAN. No. His brother is. So we agreed. I have no car.

THE DOCTOR. Don't worry.

THE WOMAN. One must be down and out to work this. Alcoholics?

THE DOCTOR. You mean those working in the morgue?

THE WOMAN. Yeah.

THE DOCTOR. Two of them are musicians. The younger has a conservatory diploma.

THE WOMAN. No!

THE DOCTOR. He's a fiddler. We call him Paganini.

THE WOMAN. Is he young?

THE DOCTOR. Yes.

THE WOMAN. Young, but a boozier?

THE DOCTOR. No. He's set up an account. When someone dies, his relatives are generous. And they give. For redemption, I guess. With the violin, he can't earn anything close to that.

THE WOMAN. Paganini, you say?!

THE DOCTOR. Paganini.

THE WOMAN. Nicky, because Victor was in the leadership of their fucking Writers Union, is that why you got this thing for him?

THE DOCTOR. What “thing”? He was my friend.

THE WOMAN. Two years. He stayed only two years. Unable to endure those nerds.

THE DOCTOR. Nerd, that’s a slang word from our time. I’d forgotten it.

THE WOMAN. I’ll tell you something, but you won’t get offended. I liked him even before. Victor.

THE DOCTOR. Before what?

THE WOMAN. Before The Golden Bridges.

THE DOCTOR. Let’s go down.

THE WOMAN. He was an amazing guy. A rare breed. (*Hands him a piece of paper.*) Here.

THE DOCTOR. What’s this?

THE WOMAN. A certificate. A certificate of heirs. I got it at the municipality.

THE DOCTOR. Why give it to me?

THE WOMAN. His brother is a disgusting type. A drunkard and gambler. Claims that he cared for him during those months. Nonsense. I’ll see what he’s pinched from home. I’ll check everything. Now it comes to those things, things of gold.

THE DOCTOR. This is your family’s affairs.

THE WOMAN. You don't understand. I told him, Victor, to put something more modern in – ceramic plates. He meant to do it at some point but kept postponing and so they remain. On both sides. I spoke with the dentist. I'm sure. On both sides.

THE DOCTOR. Are you talking about his teeth?

THE WOMAN. Yes.

THE DOCTOR. And?

THE WOMAN. I don't want his brother to throw it away gambling.

THE DOCTOR. His brother?

THE WOMAN. He's a boozier and gambler.

THE DOCTOR. I had no such impression.

THE WOMAN. But it's true. He would bribe the morgue fellows. You can't imagine how bold he is.

THE DOCTOR. And what...

THE WOMAN. The dentist told me that there are two ways. One – by bribing those guys. Which I'd rather avoid. Here's the certificate.

THE DOCTOR. We'll go to the Head Nurse. These things are done with an application.

THE WOMAN. Exactly. I spoke with the Head Nurse on the phone. She was in a rush. And nervous.

THE DOCTOR. A pipe burst in the laboratory.

THE WOMAN. Very nervous.

THE DOCTOR. Flooding in the laboratory. A burst pipe. She mentioned something about the bridge work – about golden bridges. It got me all confused.

THE WOMAN. You thought of The Golden Bridges in the mountain.

THE DOCTOR. Yes – it wasn't the nurse's fault.

THE WOMAN. Yes. On both sides. Our dentist is a friend.

THE DOCTOR. There's no longer work for a dentist here.

THE WOMAN. I know.

THE DOCTOR. That gold doesn't cost much.

THE WOMAN. I know. I know how much it costs.

THE DOCTOR. All right.

THE WOMAN. I want things to be done legally.

THE DOCTOR. However things are done – it all leads to the same thing.

THE WOMAN. What's that?

THE DOCTOR. It comes down to pliers. Shall we?

THE WOMAN. Let's go.

(Heads towards the door.)

They use dental pliers, right?

THE DOCTOR. No. Most ordinary ones. They call them tongs.

THE WOMAN. Tongs. I've heard that word.

THE DOCTOR. So, you say – he was an amazing guy? Victor.

THE WOMAN. Quite amazing.

THE DOCTOR. Wait for me in the hallway. *(Returns, dials a phone number.)* Get me ... Alex Paganini, there's some work needs to be done immediately. The writer guy in room five... So, you know already... Get some tongs... his bridgework. There are two gold bridges.

Fadeout.

PART TWO

THE MIRROR

An intermezzo for an actor or actress

Downstage an actor (or actress) appears, carrying a roughly human-sized, nicely constructed wooden frame.

THE ACTOR/ACTRESS. Here it is. Finally. And I'm on stage. For the first and last time. An actor will speak for me.

I'm the Mirror.

I'm in a hurry. Because any time now they will get me out of here. And I want to know what it's like – to be on stage.

I am the Mirror. I'm number 273 in the inventory book of the theatre – a mirror in the theatre's green room. Tonight I looked at only five actors' faces. In the past they would look at about twenty-five. Tomorrow no one will look at their reflection.

I'm in a hurry because they're taking me down.

What is a green room, you ask? It's a space – between backstage and onstage. That's where actors wait to hit the stage. Every theatre has one. I hung there for many, many years. Tomorrow they'll bring me down. I've been depreciated.

My job is to inspire confidence and courage in actors. I'd like to know with what it is that you get them frightened so.

I don't even see your faces. I only see the spotlights. And they're scared.

An actor. Thirty-five years on the stage. Waiting for his cue to enter... looks at me – as if just about to dive into icy waters...

Often they talk of you. Look at that one in the second row for a moment – hasn't stopped coughing. By the way – if you have a cough, don't come to the theater. Or keep it in for a while. Do you know how many times one repeats a line during rehearsals? Five? Ten? A hundred? A thousand times? I guess five hundred is about right. "Poor, poor Uncle Vanya, you cry ..." Not so corny! "Poor, poor Uncle Vanya, you cry ..." The handkerchief is not a

good idea! "Poor, poor Uncle Vanya, you cry ..." Don't put your hand on his shoulder! "Poor, poor Uncle Vanya, you cry ..." Lightning! How many times do I have to tell you – projector number thirteen! A notch lighter ... OK. "Poor, poor Uncle Vanya, you cry ..." I told you – keep your head up! And don't look at him. "Poor, poor Uncle Vanya, you cry ..." And so - nine hundred ninety-nine times. At the premiere: "Poor poor..." and then comes cough-cough... from the second row. Or the third row.

And is it really so necessary to have candy that you'd munch on or suck on during a performance? Do you know what it's like to be slowly roasted? Someone in front of you or behind you unwraps a candy wrapper. Slowly. Carefully. On and on. Pausing every now and then. Then someone whispers: "Want one?" And again – slowly, continuously, intermittently ...

But... still, the theater's no church. You shouldn't be uptight! Laugh, react. Cough. And if you don't like it really, well, you can get up and leave. A German once advocated that people should have the right to smoke in the hall. Like at football games. Seize your emotions – light a cigarette. The spectator would comment: "Othello reacts sensibly, Iago – doesn't". Yet, you can't smoke in the hall.

If you ask me - Mirror,

There's all sorts of theatre.

So:

Go to church with a candle,

to the stadium with a cigarette

and into the theater...

possibly

with a play programme.

That's sufficient.

Last night an actor spat at me. He stood before me. He just stood there for a couple of seconds. And spat at me. With fury. Actually, he spat at himself. The cleaning lady cleared it off in the morning. While wiping she kept muttering "How now, why so ..?"

Well, he spat at himself. The actor. Wasn't happy with himself.

If only you knew what tears came down! What weeping there has been before me a few days ago ... She came late in the afternoon, it was getting dark. I barely recognized her. Wrinkles, thin legs. And her abdomen... One spring many years ago, she stood before me. Her first season – her first part. She was so beautiful, she leaned over and kissed me. Me. That is – herself. As Narcissus – the one from the myth.

Rehearsals. Performances. And comments from the director. Notes from him – and again with me in the green room. The director is full of himself: explaining all the levels. Action, immersion. Distancing. Expropriation. Gestus and discourse. "Now act! Don't show feelings". She looks at me, I at her. She secretly turns her eyes towards the clock. Someone is waiting for her outside.

The whole town knew of her. Shopkeepers kept products under the counter for her. Schoolgirls imitated her. And after the matinee mothers wonder how to get their sons out of the toilets. You know what I mean.

A big wig tried to shoot himself for her with a hunting rifle. And that was a serious embarrassment. Dimitar, the lighting man, on his part, took off his clothes one night and jumped naked into the main square fountain. Got a serious beating from the militiamen.

Spring.

In Italian – primavera.

Prima primavera.

Prima donna.

Prima prima donna.

Yes, but

Even prima donnas

Descend their thrones.

I'm a mirror.

I am sorry,

Sometimes unawares
I talk in rhyme and rhythm.
So many years in the theater –
That's the reason.

Rehearsals. Premieres. Performances.
Plans and playbills.
Things work well or not.
In the theater actors
Count victories
In spring
Not in autumn,
And their
Failures too.

And as Khan Omourtag said: "Even if a person plays well, one day he gets off the stage.

Three or four days there was some sort of anniversary. People came from near and far. She arrived by train. She thought somebody would meet her. No one greeted her in the streets. They didn't recognize her. Or had simply forgotten her. She asked the night watchman to let her into the theater. Twilight. Mirror. She alone. In the mirror - wrinkles. Thin legs. Oh, how she cried. I think I already mentioned this.

That is how it is in the theater. Premieres. Lights. Glasses clinking. Then darkness. Summer boredom. Silence. In the watchman's back room – a half-asleep fireman.

I have a sin. I acted as part of a joke played on a director. Two actors, supposedly as a joke, conspired for it. (Not as Fiesco of Genoa. There is such a title.) They said: "If the director is so strict, we'll act as he desire. A concept piece instead of playacting. Blood, he'll pee blood in anger. " And that is what happened. He got out of his seat at some point during the rehearsal. Dismissed all. After that – the backstage empty. Silence in the corridors. He stood before me stood and then smashed his head against me twice. Blood came pouring down his face.

So it is sometimes.

About the theater they say

That it has a tough soul.

The theatre

is hard to kill.

On the contrary even –

it has not as cats

nine lives

but ninety-nine

and another ninety nine

times nine

lives.

Somehow

the theatre cannot die.

That is what they claim.

But those who've been in the Epidaurus

or any other ruined temple

of Greek drama

know that there

where Prometheus argued with

the almighty Zeus Thunderer

and Antigone with Creon fought,

Clytemnestra pledged vicious love,

but from the eyes of the pale, sad Oedipus

blood black tears dripped

subsequently
more than a thousand years
snakes and lizards lay
and sunned themselves.
Cow-bells and goat bells sounded too.
Snorting and rolling
in the dust were
lewd and evil
modern-Greek asses.

A human necessity, they say,
the theater is.

Wise reflections...

Eating too is
a human need.

But –

if there is no food
along with the consumer
consuming will end.

Yet, wise old statesmen of times long past
used to give drachmas
to the Athenian audience –
rich or poor,
overdressed or ragged,
to enter the theatre
as a stupid crowd
and leave it as
citizens true.

It is immortal, they say

of the theater.

But how can I be well

if something here is gone

even if it will appear

and blossom in,

let's say, Mozambique

or in the Oceania.

I am a mirror.

I reflect

what is around.

Of course, I'm not a mirror.

I'm an actor.

The mirror does not speak.

The mirror is my role.

Now - in prose:

Let's take count of things.

That's what they say when they sack us.

There's no money for theater.

Theatre's enough theatre in Bulgaria.

Other countries might need to spend for it,

England, France or Germany.

They need to spend because they are behind.

We are fed up with culture.

Culture overflows from
our eyes and ears.

You see!

So – fire everyone, fire away...

They can do without me, they say.

I'm not a mirror.

Even though the verse
doesn't want to fucking
leave me.

So - in prose, again:

I wasn't, unfortunately, given a role in those two one-act plays. Yet I still wanted to get up on stage one more time. That's why I came up with this little tiny role of Mirror, for which I kindly beg you to forgive me.

The mirror exits.

PART THREE

SEQUOIA

Characters:

THE MAN

THE WOMAN

A hallway with open front door and a living room. A half-naked, 45 year old man, in shorts and flip flops, rushes through the hallway into the living room.

THE WOMAN (*closes the door and goes after him*). What about the glass?

THE MAN. What?

THE WOMAN. The glass. What's it for?

THE MAN (*realizing that he's holding something in his hand*). Oh, I'll leave it here.

THE WOMAN. And you?

THE MAN. Sorry?

THE WOMAN. What shall I do with you?

THE MAN. Me?

THE WOMAN. You.

THE MAN. Give me something...

THE WOMAN. What is it you want?

THE MAN. A pair of trousers.

THE WOMAN. I don't have any. I do but they wouldn't fit you. Why are you naked?

THE MAN. I told you.

THE WOMAN. You said you're Vera's cousin. Don't tremble like that!

THE MAN. I'm not trembling.

THE WOMAN. Where is she?

THE MAN. She's away.

THE WOMAN. Why are you trembling?

THE MAN. I'm not trembling.

The woman brings him a blanket. The man wraps it around himself.

Isn't there something else?

THE WOMAN. Like what?

THE MAN. This is very prickly.

The woman produces a folded sheet. Throws it to him. The man lets the blanket fall. Wraps himself in the sheet.

THE WOMAN. What happened?

THE MAN. The cat!... Fucking cat.

THE WOMAN. Who's fucking whom?

THE MAN. Where's the cell phone?

THE WOMAN. Excuse me?

THE MAN. The cell phone. When you opened the door, you were holding one.

THE WOMAN. Yes, I was.

THE MAN. Can I use it?

THE WOMAN (*rummages in the pocket of his dressing gown*). You may.

THE MAN (*presses a few buttons*). Do you know the number?

THE WOMAN. What number?

THE MAN. Vera's.

THE WOMAN. Your cousin's?

THE MAN. Your neighbor's.

THE WOMAN. We don't talk on the phone. We don't talk at all. You look very impressive with this sheet. Why not go out like that on the stand?

THE MAN. Excuse me?

THE WOMAN. On the stand, I said. In the National Assembly.

THE MAN. You what? You're having fun, right?

THE WOMAN. You want me to cry, do you?

THE MAN. Anyone can find themselves in such a position.

THE WOMAN. And what position is that?

THE MAN. Last night there was a party across from here. At Vera's. I drank something, I don't know what, got blasted. Woke up at some point. All were gone. She too.

THE WOMAN. Did she go last night?

THE MAN. Yes.

THE WOMAN. Vera went somewhere this morning. Alone. By car.

THE MAN. Really?

THE WOMAN. Yes. *(She sees the man thinking of dialing a number and hesitating whether to leave the room.)* Would you like a minute alone?

THE MAN. If you please.

The woman exits.

THE MAN (on the phone). Hello, it's me... Don't talk nonsense now, I'm in session ... No, everything is fine ... Tonight or tomorrow. I have some more work to do ... I told you, I'm in session... Open the phone book, I need a phone... Sasho. Alex Altunkov ... Look first at A. ... Alexander or Altunkov. Then look at S ... Sasho, the short name ... I said S! That's what I said ... I'm not screaming. You're screaming. I'm sorry. I'm putting it down... what is it? OK, hugs and kisses. Bye! (*Dials another number.*) Alex! You forget, brother, what I said and about work we do ... It's me Oggie ... Get out of there, I'm also in a meeting ... Screw your meeting, this is urgent. What size shoes do you wear? .. You get in your car, you go to your place... What do you mean! What are you doing in Varna? .. OK, give me Petar's phone number ... I'll explain later. I'm ready to write it ... Zero, eight, eight ... Hello?! .. Alex!? .. Hello!? .. (*Loudly.*) Mrs.! .. Miss! .. Mrs.! ..

THE WOMAN (*enters*). This "miss" thing was quite something! Don't repeat it.

THE MAN (*looking at the cell phone*). It died. No screen. What's up?

THE WOMAN (*takes the cell phone from his hand*). You seem to really be out of luck.

THE MAN. What 's with it?

THE WOMAN. I've been looking for the charger since yesterday, can't seem to find it.

THE MAN. Well, look for it some more!

THE WOMAN. OK. You sit down now and stop bossing me around. Who are you?

THE MAN. I thought I told you.

THE WOMAN. This stuff about you being cousins, suggest we forget it.

THE MAN. All right.

THE WOMAN. One questions I find particularly interesting: how can a silly little bitch like Vera – probably not even thirty years old be a counselor at the Ministry. Who does she advise?

THE MAN. Ask her.

THE WOMAN. I interact with a whole different class of whores. I can't stand Vera's type.

THE MAN. Not like that! This won't do!

THE WOMAN (*pointing at the exit*). The door is there. You'll have to leave the sheet though.

THE MAN. She spoke very differently of you. I was left with the impression you were friends.

THE WOMAN. So, you talked about me?

THE MAN. No.

THE WOMAN. How did you get locked out?

THE MAN. That fucking cat. Vera's cat.

THE WOMAN. I don't know how fucking awful the cat is. Name is Vesselin.

THE MAN. Yeah.

THE WOMAN. Vesselin locked you out?

THE MAN. Somebody kept ringing at the door, of course I didn't open. Keeps ringing. Finally they go away but not before sticking a note on the door. I open, naturally, there's nobody there.

THE WOMAN. And Vesselin darted out.

THE MAN. Scrambled out between my legs, the idiot.

THE WOMAN. I know where he went.

THE MAN. He fled past the elevator. On the other side of the staircase.

THE WOMAN. Don't tell me you tried to lure him with milk.

THE MAN. Why? Do you think cats hate milk?

THE WOMAN. Did you trick the cat back?

THE MAN. He stood two feet away. Right next to the rubber plant. He just looked at me.

THE WOMAN. And you rushed to grab him.

THE MAN. Were you watching through the peephole?

THE WOMAN. No.

THE MAN. Then the door slammed shut.

THE WOMAN. So, you're really afraid of Vera?

THE MAN. Meaning?

THE WOMAN. Why not let him escape?

THE MAN. I'm not afraid of anyone.

THE WOMAN. Vesselin is cool. Granma Petrana downstairs takes care of ten cats. There's always one in heat.

THE MAN. I got it! You could go down a floor or two and ask a neighbor for a cell phone.

THE WOMAN. Really? Who'd let me carry around their cell up and down the building?

THE MAN. They would.

THE WOMAN. Haven't you noticed how everyone in Sofia says that they share a building with Bulgaria's biggest idiots?

THE MAN. I see. I know what you mean.

THE WOMAN. I don't communicate with neighbors.

THE MAN. And this grandma ... whatever her name... In with the horny cats?

THE WOMAN. Grandma Petra. She has no cell phone.

THE MAN. Maybe she has a landline.

THE WOMAN. And she'd listen in on me talking to this Sasho was it, how I ask him to bring you clothes and shoes. When will Vera be back?

THE MAN. Tomorrow afternoon at the best.

THE WOMAN. Whoa!

THE MAN. Can't you look for the charger?

THE WOMAN. No sense in it. I know where I lost it.

THE MAN. Those clothes really become you. Don't you have anything my size?

THE WOMAN. What do you mean by "anything"?

THE MAN. I don't feel particularly comfortable in this sheet.

THE WOMAN. What will happen if you felt comfortable?

THE MAN. Nothing.

THE WOMAN. Why is it when someone goes into politics they become thick-skinned?

THE MAN. What do you mean?

THE WOMAN. Once, you were at all the rallies when they went on ... I don't know anymore what you were doing there, but you used look better.

THE MAN. Alright. I get it. Give me a minute to decide what to do.

THE WOMAN. OK. Take your time.

THE MAN. Is that coffee over there?

THE WOMAN. Yes. Want some in Vesselin's bowl?

THE MAN. No!

THE WOMAN. Vesselin is a serious idiot. He's fucking grandma Petra's cats as we speak, while you're standing here wrapped in a sheet.

THE MAN. Shall I remove it?

THE WOMAN. Why remove it?

THE MAN. I've never had coffee wrapped in a sheet.

THE WOMAN. I did not invite you for coffee. (*Turns her back to him, stoops and tries to raise the collapsible bed mattress.*) Find it interesting?

THE MAN. Find what interesting?

THE WOMAN. Watching me do this.

THE MAN. What could I do?

THE WOMAN. Well, I think you could help out.

The man lets the sheet fall to the floor. Goes to the bed, lifts the mattress bed.

OK. Take a seat. (*Hands him a folded robe.*) This belonged to an idiot. You may throw in the trash can as you leave from here.

THE MAN. How do you expect me to do that?

THE WOMAN. However, you will leave here at some point.

THE MAN (*dresses the robe, slowly ties the belt.*) Is there no risk of him coming around?

THE WOMAN. Who?

THE MAN. The idiot.

THE WOMAN. Didn't Vera tell you I've not been interested in men? Lately. Nor in women, don't look at me that way.

THE MAN. It seems you don't allow to be watched at all.

THE WOMAN. Who said that politics is the greatest aphrodisiac? I guess Berlusconi.

THE MAN. Why should we talk about Berlusconi now?

THE WOMAN. Because I drank a cup of coffee and there is the look of a boar in your eyes. (*With a jerk she opens the robe at her chest.*) How does it look?

THE MAN. Good. Very good.

THE WOMAN. Shall we begin?

THE MAN. Yes.

THE WOMAN. Won't you finish your coffee?

THE MAN. I'm done.

THE WOMAN. Stay there. Be patient.

THE MAN. Whatever you say.

THE WOMAN. Why should I be the one who dictates things?

THE MAN. Because you call the shots.

THE WOMAN. What about Vera?

THE MAN. What about Vera?

THE WOMAN. What would she think?

THE MAN. Vera is my cousin. Didn't I make that clear?

THE WOMAN. Yeah, right. Why didn't you tell your wife that you're at your cousin's when you asked for the phone of what was he called – Alex.

THE MAN. So you listened in?

THE WOMAN. No, I didn't listen in but you were screaming. It's not good to get that excited.

THE MAN. You're mistaking me with someone else. I am not easily shaken.

THE WOMAN. I am not mistaking you with anyone. I voted for you. Twenty years ago. The first vote in my life.

THE MAN. Do you regret it?

THE WOMAN. You used to be very eloquent... back then.

THE MAN. Vera said you'd had major trouble with the local authorities.

WOMAN. And that I'm crazy, didn't she tell you that too?

THE MAN. It's normal to get aggressive toward a state employee.

THE WOMAN. Aggressive? No, I wasn't aggressive, I just beat him up.

THE MAN. How so?

THE WOMAN. Easy. On the staircase.

THE MAN. And now what?

THE WOMAN. Now I've been taken to court. For vandalism.

THE MAN. Not good. Not good at all.

THE WOMAN. You think so?

THE MAN. Yeah. But we'll see what can be done.

THE WOMAN. Don't worry. I can take care of myself.

THE MAN. Who knows. Beating up a civil servant...

THE WOMAN. I have been certified. By a psychiatrist.

THE MAN. Really?

THE WOMAN. Can't you tell?

THE MAN. I don't know. It's not in my field of expertise.

THE WOMAN. You'll find out.

THE MAN. Me?

THE WOMAN. Just don't think I'm kidding. You won't get out of here alive.

THE MAN. Wow, really?

THE WOMAN. You may have a gun. But if so, it's locked in Vera's place. I think I might use a knife.

THE MAN. A knife?

THE WOMAN. A knife.

THE MAN. And then what?

THE WOMAN. Then the journalists would arrive. MP so-and-so killed while attempting rape.

THE MAN. Can't we do without rape?

THE WOMAN. But won't you get exhausted? Early in the morning and after such a tigris as Vera.

THE MAN. It would not. Don't worry.

THE WOMAN. But you had to check down there.

THE MAN. Down where?

THE WOMAN. Where you touched yourself. To make sure.

THE MAN. I don't need to touch myself anywhere.

THE WOMAN. Now I remember. Vera has a habit of leaving the key with grandma Petra. If it's there I will get you some clothes.

THE MAN. Why'd you change the subject?

THE WOMAN. How many different political parties did you switch in the past twenty years?

THE MAN. Is it politics we should be talking about now?

THE WOMAN. I think it was Kissinger who said that about politics as an aphrodisiac. It wasn't Berlusconi.

THE MAN. Well then go downstairs to that grandmother and ask for keys.

THE WOMAN. I'd go to rallies because I was tired of listening to foreign stations - the ones they used to muffle. And the theater – hoping to see some helpless playwright do an Aesop imitation. That's it, I thought, it's the end of this. Democracy! I won't even care who governs the country. What's important is democracy. Now I sit again in front of TV – so-and-so stole that much and so-and-so this much. You've started in environment, right?

THE MAN. Yes, in environment.

THE WOMAN. Well, couldn't you speak up in the National Assembly and say: Stop! You can't dump all this shit in the Black Sea.

THE MAN. That's not how things work.

THE WOMAN. And how do they work? They transfer into your account a certain sum and tell you how to vote for whatever law that's being passed?

THE MAN. What you're saying is very naive.

THE WOMAN. Well, if I weren't naive, would I'd voted for you?

THE MAN. Is that why you want, to cut me up?

THE WOMAN. The abolition of the death penalty should not apply to MPs. Every lie should lead to the gallows.

THE MAN. Whoa!

THE WOMAN. No "whoa" about it! Any serial killer might murder fifty, let's a hundred victims. A common liar like you - a hundred thousand. A million.

THE MAN. So I'm a serial ...

THE WOMAN. Mass...

THE MAN. Murderer...

THE WOMAN. Liar, you lie that you're an ecologist, now you're lobbying for gambling.

THE MAN. A dictator. That's what you need, a dictator. You don't need democracy.

THE WOMAN. Is that so?

THE MAN. Yes it is. Your lawmakers are always to blame. You claim we're dumb and thieving.

THE WOMAN. Aren't you?

THE MAN. Well, vote for better ones. What's in your way?

THE WOMAN. You're in our way. Because you make the laws as you choose – so that you always get elected.

THE MAN. Well, why don't you form a party, lady?! Make your own party. And when you win an election, you can pass the laws you like.

THE WOMAN. I won't form a party, but I might get to scratch and kick.

THE MAN. What have I done to you that... or rather – Vera and I ...

THE WOMAN. I don't want to be governed by boars!

THE MAN. Come on now, is it morale you want to dispense?

THE WOMAN. Do your job for which you're paid and then, if you wish, don't put it back in your pants.

THE MAN. What job?

THE WOMAN. You lied you're an ecologist.

THE MAN. Come on, enough with this environment shit! There are more important things than ecology.

THE WOMAN. Maybe. And which of those things did you fix?

THE MAN. A dictator. That's what your type need.

THE WOMAN. There was a grove of fig trees near Sozopol at the Black Sea. When I saw that they'd covered it with concrete, I thought – I'll kill somebody. I'm sorry. You got lucky.

THE MAN. How did you get your name?

THE WOMAN. Sorry?

THE MAN. Sequoia Balabanova. That's what it says on your door.

THE WOMAN. Why are you changing the subject?

THE MAN. Just interested.

THE WOMAN. While you were shivering pantless on the stairs, is that when you read it?

THE MAN. I'm not pantless.

THE WOMAN. Don't you know what sequoia means?

THE MAN. A tree. A kind of tree.

THE WOMAN. Not just some kind of tree, it's the oldest living thing on the planet. Five thousand years old. A hundred thirty-five meters high in Canada. If it grew here you'd bring it down with your axe.

THE MAN. Please go downstairs for the key. Could you do that?

THE WOMAN. No.

THE MAN. Why?

THE WOMAN. Because I have an idea.

THE MAN. All right, Sequoia.

THE WOMAN. Come here. Come. You see this building? Not there. On the left of the tall building. Where the excavator is.

THE MAN. I see a crane.

THE WOMAN. Do you see the tree? At the end of the parking lot.

THE MAN. Is that a sequoia?

THE WOMAN. It's not five thousand years old. Fifty years at the most. A professor lived there, there was a yellow house fifteen years ago. He explained to the officials, explained a hundred times in the municipality, that there should be no building there. Because there's many interesting greenery there. It's like a natural botanical garden. His father had planted some of it, his grandfather had started it. The technical director's called Vladimirov. Are you listening carefully? According to the blueprints the tree is outside the scope of construction. They'll be building a mall.

THE MAN. A mall?

THE WOMAN. A mall.

THE MAN. Can't help you. Those guys will stop at nothing.

THE WOMAN. They won't cut it down.

THE MAN. They will cut it down.

THE WOMAN. They won't. Because you will go every day and take care of it.

THE MAN. Me? Every day? You said it's beyond the scope of the site.

THE WOMAN. That's what Vladimirov says. And then he grins. Such as him that infested Sofia lately, hate trees because they remind them of their rural origin. They like cement. No soil should be seen.

THE MAN. And I will come here every day to control them?

THE WOMAN. Twice a day - morning and evening.

THE MAN. Ms. Redwood Tree, you have a great sense of humor.

THE WOMAN. I don't. I have no sense of humor.

THE MAN. Do you realize how long this would last for me?

THE WOMAN. I do. The less free time a corrupt politician has, the less malice he is.

THE MAN. There's no way what you want could happen.

THE WOMAN. But I could call the vultures of the yellow press. In no time at all they'll make minced meat out of you. They'll devour you. And shit you out.

THE MAN. Don't threaten me.

THE WOMAN. Remember that you have no clothes on.

THE MAN. What exactly do you want?

THE WOMAN. We'll sign a contract. You, as a Member of Parliament, shall be obliged to control those idiots every day so that they won't cut down the tree. No excuse on their part accepted.

THE MAN. Can't I just give you a promise?

THE WOMAN. No. It has to be a written contract.

THE MAN. No can do.

THE WOMAN. I'm going downstairs to use Granma Petrana's telephone. Remind me which is the most disgusting rag?

THE MAN. Alright. Give it to me.

The woman pulls a sheet of paper and hands him a pen.

OK, what shall it be?

THE WOMAN. Full name and then: on this date – the twenty-fifth of September this year I spent the night with my mistress Vera ... so-and-so... Mikhailova ...

THE MAN. Forget it.

THE WOMAN. I'm not kidding.

THE MAN. In legal language this is called extortion.

THE WOMAN. Exactly. So, now what?

THE MAN. Wait.

THE WOMAN. What is it?

THE MAN. The cat!

Somewhere close meowing is heard.

THE WOMAN. Vesselin.

They both rush into the hall.

THE MAN. Is that Grandma?

THE WOMAN. Shush!

THE MAN (*not giving way to the peephole*). Let's go!

THE WOMAN. What?

THE MAN. She went inside with the cat.

THE WOMAN. Okay, so she's gone in.

THE MAN. Well, come on then!

THE WOMAN. What do you mean – come on?

THE MAN. Get the key from her.

THE WOMAN. How could I get the key from her?

THE MAN. I'll get it.

THE WOMAN. Go ahead.

THE MAN. You can think something up about you and Vera. ...

THE WOMAN. Enough nonsense - the woman is in her right mind. (*Looking through the peephole.*) Quiet!

THE MAN. What's happening?

THE WOMAN. She's coming out.

THE MAN. Move away! (*He pushes her away from the peephole. Standing, head stuck in the door with outstretched hands, as not to scare a bird perched nearby.*) That's it! All's in place!

THE WOMAN: What's in place?

THE MAN. She's hid the key in the flowerpot.

THE WOMAN. Quiet down.

THE MAN. Under the india-rubber plant.

THE WOMAN. Wait. She's not using the elevator. It would probably take her ten minutes to get to her floor. Wait!

THE MAN. Alright, enough is enough. (*Opens the front door and goes out.*)

THE WOMAN. What an idiot! (*She produces a charger and plugs it into the socket. Opens the top of her laptop. Unfolds a thin cable. Sets things up.*)

THE MAN (*enters, dressed in a suit. Throws carelessly the robe on the bed.*) Trees die standing. There was such a title. Once I too used to go to the theater.

THE WOMAN. Is that a threat?

THE MAN. You're too smart to need any kind of explanation.

THE WOMAN. Now, that's a threat.

THE MAN. Ciao, Sequoia.

THE WOMAN. What about the contract?

THE MAN. The contract. I undertake not to open my mouth. Signature: Sequoia. How do you like it?

THE WOMAN. I don't.

THE MAN. Another option is: I am obliged to keep my big mouth shut. Signature: Sequoia.

THE WOMAN. All right. And what will you do on your part?

THE MAN. On my part – this. (*Shows her his a middle finger. Leaves.*)

THE WOMAN. Your glass. You forgot your glass.

The man returns.

Would like to see something of yourself? (*Points at her laptop screen. Operates with the mouse.*) This is you with your back turned. The moment I opened the door. Now you face this way. My cell phone is great. Here's Vera's doorplate. I'm going to enlarge it. There you go. You're very sexy in those boxer pants.

The man reaches for the keyboard, pulls the cord from the outlet.

You can take the laptop, I've emailed this.

THE MAN. You know what could happen to you?

THE WOMAN. Let's make a deal: the moment they've hung the flag on the roof – the builders do that when they're done – I'll delete the photos. If the tree is still there.

THE MAN (*goes towards the door*). The psychiatric testimony might come in handy.

THE WOMAN. Bye! And keep an eye out for that flag.

The end