



Play by
Antoine Dupont

Antoine Dupont

Happiness (a play-truth).

Dramatis personae:

Arthur

Alex former classmates, 35-40 y.o.

Laura, Alex's wife

Max

Albertina Arthur's ex-girlfriend, 25 y.o.

Various quotations taken from literature that are used throughout the play as dialog are given to the audience in a pamphlet as they leave the performance.

All of the action takes place in Arthur's apartment.

The light dies out. A voice is heard:

"In order to be happy, you need a gift. For happiness, you need good hearing as you do for singing or dancing. So I think that happiness can be inherited and it can be bequeathed."

{Milorad Pavich, "The Writing Box"}.

Scene One.

A large room.

A radio on the floor can barely be heard playing.

There is a television screen on the wall. It's turned off. Books are scattered about the floor. A stylish table and chairs. A red board stands in the corner of the room.

In the room there is a large bed covered in a white sheet.

Arthur is sitting on a chair – a young man of 35-40 years of age with a striking appearance.

Arthur gets up from the armchair. He goes over to the radio. He turns the music up. He goes in the direction of the bed. He passes the window. He sees his reflection in the glass.

A voice rings out: "Dance!"

Arthur begins to dance to the music.

There is a knock at the door. Arthur goes to open it. He comes back with Alex.

Alex is of medium height and normal appearance. He's wearing a classic suit and tie.

Alex. Arthur, either you finally help me or it's all going to the dogs! Will you ever get involved? (He goes over to the radio and turns the volume down. The radio almost can't be heard.)

Arthur. What happened?

Alex. Don't play the fool, Arthur. You could've already guessed ... Max!

Arthur. What's up with him?

Alex (shouting). Not with him – with me!

Arthur (it's clear that he's not very interested, but he's forced to listen). Well, maybe you could actually explain what happened?!?

Alex. Max is a scoundrel! Max-is-a-scoun-drel!

Arthur. Right, so that means something's up with him after all.

Alex (almost growling). Arthur! (Arthur raises his hands in a gesture of peace) He was late again. If it wasn't for me, we'd have lost the contract. The commissions, a load of problems, our image, the scoundrel!

Arthur. Was he very late?

Alex. Very... He's got a new love, you see, and this time it's for real. He's found his happiness. He forgot about the time. He simply forgot about the time, you see! He didn't forget to buy some condoms. Arthur, this firm belongs to all three of us: me, you, and Max ... All three of us are fed and clothed thanks to our firm. Fed and clothed – you get it?!?

Arthur (thinking about it). On the other hand, sometimes he comes up with ideas.

Alex. It'd be better if he came up with some money.

Arthur. You're the one who's responsible for the money.

Alex. Your happiness.

Arthur (smiles). Well, are we still afloat? Have we still got some? Enough for condoms?

Alex. We're afloat, of course. But there are limits. It can't go on like this forever ... And, to be honest, it's my dear Laura who always restrains me from having a serious conversation with you two about our equal shares in the business.

Alex's mobile phone rings, he talks as he heads into the entrance hall, shouting into the phone and waving his hands, but we can't hear him. We hear the radio, the sound of the radio gets louder and louder. Arthur walks up to the window and dances.

The music dies out. We can barely hear the radio.

Alex, having calmed down, goes back to Arthur.

*Alex. That's the way things are...
If it wasn't for our youth, our shared, our shared past as students, I'd send you packing. I'm serious.*

Arthur (plopping himself down on the bed). Everything will work out, Alex. Relax. For once in your life.

Alex wearily waves him off. He sits down on the other end of the bed. He sighs in weariness.

Arthur. Alex.

Alex (shaking his head). What?

Arthur. What in general?

Alex. In general? Laura and the family are fine, everyone's happy. I'm bringing up you and Max, you idiots. It's fine.

Arthur. Nooo... How are things overall?

Alex. Like, really overall? They're ok too, basically.

He waves Arthur off.

Just don't put that old record on again about us being kids playing "cold ... cold ... warmer" but with the difference that no one's explained the rules to us.

Arthur frowns.

Alex goes up to the table and pours himself a drink. He takes a very small sip. He sighs deeply.

How are you, my old pal? ... in general?

Arthur. In Japan there's a place, Alex, it's called the Ryoanji Garden – the Philosopher's Garden. There are fifteen large rocks scattered around it; they're positioned in such a way that from any point you can only see fourteen. You move to see the fifteenth and the preceding one falls out of your field of vision. That's just how we, in our souls, only see fourteen. At best ... For better or for worse, I don't know ... It's almost always like that with me ... in general.

Alex. Laura passed on a hello to you and that freak with his new true love. That's it. Bye.

Alex tightens up his tie as he walks. When he gets right to the door he notices the red board.

Alex. What's that you've got there?

Arthur (suddenly livening up). It's the greatest invention of all time and all peoples.

Alex (looking quickly at his watch) Go on.

Arthur. It will save the world.

Alex. What ... the world is...? *(He passes his forefinger across his throat, as if slitting it.)*

Arthur. Basically.

Alex raises an eyebrow.

Arthur. We just have to patent this discovery and use it for the good of mankind.

Alex. And?

Arthur. For the good of mankind.

Alex. Well, tell me, don't drag it out.

Arthur (proudly). It's a board of justice!

Alex. I don't get it.

Arthur. A board of justice.

Alex. Explain.

Arthur. You see, this is the most just board.

Alex. Explain the principle, damn it – you know I'm in a hurry.

Arthur. Well, all right ... Look. You can see that right at the end of the board 'twenty' is written. You see? So. A little lower, there's a 'nineteen.'

Alex (interested). I see that.

Arthur. Even lower – eighteen. Then seventeen. You see that?

Alex. All right, I get the principle. Then what?

Arthur. It's impossible in one go. My whole life may have been leading up to this.

Alex. Explain the principle, you scoundrel!

Arthur. The principle is that the lower you hold the board, the more painful the blow on your head will be.

(Arthur shows with his hands how he hits someone over the head with a board).

Alex (involved). Go on, go on...

Arthur. If you hold it at twenty and whack the skull with it, then the swing won't be large and you'll barely feel anything. If you hold the board at eighteen and crack your nut with it, it'll hurt more...

Alex. And?!

Arthur. If you grab it at fifteen, and thump your dome it'll be significantly more painful.

Alex. Arthur, come on?!

Arthur. If you take it at ten and spank your mug with it!

Alex. I think I've got it. But why whack them on the head? Why, you idiot?

Arthur. You see, this is a board of justice.

Alex. I already heard the name; you're abusing my time.

Arthur. All right! Imagine a guy goes up to another guy and asks: How many books did you buy over the last year? Not about computers or business success, I mean literature. Good books, right? If that guy says zero, then the first guy takes the board of justice by the end where 'zero' is written, and then with the other, at full swing, he cracks him in the mush. If the second guy says ...

Alex. I get it. *(He starts moving in the direction of the door, with Arthur following him).*

Arthur. They spend money, after all. Every day.

Alex. I understand. *(doing up his tie as he walks)*

Arthur. They spend it on new mobile phones.

Alex. Understood.

Arthur. On condoms.

Alex. All clear.

Arthur. On...

Alex (interrupting him with a shout). I totally understand, you abuser!

Alex leaves, walking out into the entrance hall. The sound of steps heading in a downward direction can be heard.

Arthur (shouting after him). If everyone read 'Sexus' by Miller or 'The Arch' by Remarque, then there'd be no freaks and halfwits!

The noise of the main entrance door closing.

Arthur (to himself). No freaks, no halfwits...

Arthur goes over to the bed and climbs onto it fully dressed.

Arthur (looking out into the auditorium). Where's the need for rudeness, it's just the truth ... Although I have to agree – there's always that touch of rudeness in the truth. Because not everyone has the right and, on the other, not everyone is given that right.

{Andre Bitoff. "A. Tired-Boffin. The Teacher of Symmetry"}.

The lights fade.

The radio can barely be heard. There are sounds – something is being moved.

Scene Two.

Arthur comes back from work. He throws his briefcase on the table. He takes out a sandwich and pours himself a glass of whiskey.

There's a ring at the door. Arthur quickly downs the whiskey in one. He runs to open the door. He comes back with Laura (a beautiful, striking woman, carrying a briefcase). From different sides, they climb onto the huge bed. Their entire dialogue takes place on the bed.

Arthur. Laura, will you have a drink? *(he smiles).*

Laura. On my lunch break?

Arthur. If I had my way, I'd cancel all lunch breaks. Naturally, along with the entire second half of the working day.

Laura. If you had your way, progress would stop.

Arthur. Definitely. And that would benefit mankind. And so, Laura, will you have a drink?

Laura. I'll have a drink, dear. *(She drinks from Arthur's glass)* What was that joke you always had with Max and Alex? Nobody's going to drink it for you... *(They're laughing).*

Arthur. How's your husband?

Laura. What about my husband? Alex is always all right. That's probably why I'm with him. Why do you ask?

Arthur. I don't know. Just asking. For form's sake.

Laura (somehow disengaged). He says that I'm his happiness. I believe him and that's probably why I love him in my own way.

Arthur (craftily). He loves you a lot more.

Laura. Yes ... He, unlike you, shall we say, knows how to love and not just how to suffer.

Arthur. (As if he hasn't noticed the final remark) More well-brought-up than educated; more decent than in love – I can't remember where I read that phrase. Alex is virtue itself.

Laura. Somebody has to embody virtue.

Arthur. He'd like the entire universe to be virtuous and doesn't sense that everything would instantly die if there was only virtue. {Marquis de Sade}.

Laura. He's close to me, but that doesn't appear to be enough. I understand perfectly well that you and Alex are different and perhaps that's why I possess both of you?!?

Laura takes a bottle of whiskey with a striking label out of her briefcase.

Actually, Alex brought a vintage whiskey back from Dublin. If he asks where the bottle went, I'll say I gave it to Mom. I hope you enjoy it, my beloved aesthete. Can you see it's got the number 15 written on it?

Apmyp. Yup.

Ilopa. All of the bottles are numbered, there's no other one like this. There were thirty-five of them in all – it's really stylish, try it.

Arthur takes the bottle and puts it under the bed.

Arthur. He'd do anything for you, and that makes our sin all the more serious.

Laura. You're starting to turn into my mother – stop sniveling. I've got enough love for two, and you were the first, after all.

Arthur. But your mother was right when she told you that we could stop right after your marriage ... By the way, how's she doing?

Laura. Ehh... she...

Arthur (interrupting). You know, I'll never forget how, straight after you and Alex's wedding, she brought Alex into the back room of her old house ...

Laura. She sold it recently. She's moved into a small apartment. Now she's eating her way through our old house (*laughs*), in the most literal sense of the word.

Arthur. Your old house ... Remembering it, I feel like I'm twenty years older. It was all so long ago, and so great.

Laura. I worked out who I love most between the two of you, but you didn't propose ... As always, you were suffering and searching for something.

Arthur. But now you've got a wonderful husband... By the way, about your husband and the old house. You remember the back room, of course: the old family crystal, the family silver and, of course, the books. Although I never once saw her with a book ... So: your respected mother pointed to it all and said to him: Alex, this is all yours. Then she left a pause, before adding: Just don't touch anything!

They laugh.

Laura. Mom asks why you never visit. She loves to talk about you. She remembers the time when you were in love ... she tenderly refers to you as the honorable son of a bitch.

Arthur. I don't know about the rest, but "I really do regard myself as an honorable man. I never lie, or rather I only lie in lover's talk..." {Umberto Eco. *The Island of the Day Before*}. (*sighs*) But "any love is an attempt to command one's fate, it's a naïve illusion of momentary immortality, but it is best of what we are capable of. Although, as we can everywhere, in this, of course, we can easily see the slow work of death. Wanting consumes us, and being capable destroys us."

{Gaito Gazdanov. “The Ghost of Alexander Wolf”}.

Laura (slowly). Wanting consumes us, and being capable destroys us.

Arthur. That’s it, roughly speaking.

Laura. Physiologically they’re almost one and the same thing. You read too much, my dear. Perhaps that’s why you’ll never find your true love ... If, of course, you need to find it at all... You’ve always seemed to be the way you are now: a dreamer, either chasing or overtaking your dream. I think I must have loved you more than all the rest. I loved you, and was jealous ... You were in love with her, and not with me.

Arthur. Laura.

Laura. You loved. Her. Albertina.

Arthur. Laura, I’ll drink myself to death if you don’t stop.

Laura. You loved.

Arthur pours himself another drink. Laura points at her glass. Arthur pours her a drink too. He hands her the glass. He looks at her sternly.

Laura. I must still be jealous of her with regard to you, despite you having split up long ago and now you’re tormenting that unfortunate beauty Vicky .

Arthur. Vicky ’s not unfortunate. She has fun like that. And then she’ll dump me. Just as Albertina once dumped me.

Laura. You dumped her yourself. Or did everything to make that happen. Perhaps without even realizing it.

Arthur. Many of her words concealed her inability to love. Her inability to be a woman. To the end. I don’t want to explain it all to you.

Laura (not listening to Arthur, as if simply continuing).
And “Like a recovering but emaciated patient mentally feeding on all the dishes he isn’t yet being served, you asked yourself a question: should you marry Albertina or not, are you spoiling your life, are you not taking on too heavy a burden, with another person being around you the whole time, forever depriving yourself of the joys of solitude.” {Marcel Proust “The Prisoner”}

Arthur (tired). You don’t know the whole story, Laura.

Laura. I don’t need to know all of it. I know you.

Arthur. You don’t know it all, Laura.

They both freeze. The light slowly dims. Only Arthur and Albertina are lit by yellow spotlights.

They are the only two people we now see on the stage - the rest are in darkness.

Arthur. I’m tired, Albertina.

Albertina. I'm tired too, Arthur. I'm very tired of you living just for yourself. Don't deny it – when everything's ok with you, you don't notice anyone else around you.

It's only when you're having it tough that you want to be the good guy. You believe whatever you want. Like a child. I can talk to you, make you make promises ... but as soon as you're even slightly forced out of your routine, out of your confident state, and you're already different, the very best. You can never offend anyone. You leave work on time, you smile to the cleaner, who you didn't notice before, you surprise yourself by discovering that the people around aren't just the viewers that you need.

Arthur. I feel bad because of you. Because ... (*Arthur falls silent*).

Albertina. I'm the way I was created. And if you love me, you'll accept me the way I am.

Arthur. It's tough for me too sometimes. When you can't give yourself to me. Whole.

Albertina. Maybe you can't take me whole? Or maybe I can't accept that some little stone in your soul accidentally blocks up some blood vessel, your life is transformed. Suddenly you're wonderful, normal, you notice the neighbor across the hallway, and not just some tiny bird up in a tree. Lord, how I love you when you're like that, but dear, life isn't just made up of brief moments. And I understand: soon, very soon, that stone will fall from that string that only you can see, that string in your heart will again straighten out, and ...

Of course, I'll continue loving you, but something will happen to you inside and ... I can already see the normal Arthur. That's it, you're back in your shell. You can live perfectly well alone. You don't need anyone, even me. Don't answer me, I can see how indifferent you are to me.

Arthur. I need you.

Albertina. Need. A young, beautiful woman. In order to hurtle at breakneck speed from work to a florist's. Not to make an order, but to choose the flowers for me yourself, to tell the whole world how you love me. And bring those flowers to me in bed. And kiss me. Lord, yes, yes, I feel like I'm the most beautiful woman in the world, but Arthur ... You love me for yourself! Only for yourself! It's as if I don't exist. Maybe there's something hidden here that stops me giving all of myself to you.

Arthur. Maybe I became like this because of you?

A pause hangs in the air.

Albertina. Find yourself some silly girl and make her the happiest woman in the world. You can do it.

Arthur. I don't need a stupid girl. I need happiness.

Albertina. You need a slave.

On the smaller section of the stage where Albertina is standing the light fades out and we now see Laura again.

Arthur. She thought I needed a slave.

Laura. That's not the case?

Arthur. No.

Laura. What am I, then?

Arthur. My lover. No – I'm your lover. And right now we shall sin.

Arthur freezes.

Laura (very slowly, towards the spectator). "Every spectator is an intriguer if he is searching for an explanation for the word (he wants it explained! He's scared of experiencing it ...) ... The spectator allows himself to be manipulated by his instincts, merely being within a cottonwool refuge. Because of that, at home lie the burdens of family life."

{Tristan Tzara. From "Dada Manifesto", 1918}

On the final words, Laura and Arthur hide under the sheet, each on their own side, and roll towards one another.

The lights dim.

Scene Three.

Arthur, sitting on the floor, watches the television. There are several open books lying around him. There's a large number of bottles and glasses on the table. Several of the bottles are already empty.

A voice sounds out: "All right, all right. A more indifferent gaze. Like that, good. Oh, excellent. You haven't got that much property; at any moment you can go wherever you want. You pack your only suitcase, pay for the electricity, and leave. You're independent, right?! First and foremost, independent from yourself."

There is a knock at the door. Arthur goes to open it. He comes back with Max (tall, beautiful). Max is in excellent spirits.

Max speaks very slowly in the direction of Arthur's back as he following him around in a circle.

Max. A state of refined indifference – that's the logical consequence of your egotistical life. You dealt with the problem of existence in society by becoming lifeless; the real problem for you isn't about learning to live together with others, just as it's not about working for the well-being of the country, the real problem for

you is acknowledging your purpose and living your life in accordance with the strictly organized rhythm of the cosmos.

...But heaven, my friend, is all around us, all roads lead to it if you'll only go far enough... But remember, you can move forward only by going backwards, then to the side, and up, and then down." {Henry Miller. "On Writing"}

Arthur. You decided that today you'll go to heaven through my crib.

Max. Yes. And you know why?!

Arthur. I can guess.

Max. You'll never guess. I came because I've got a lot to tell you.

Arthur. And I was thinking that you came for the leftover brandy.

Max. It's completely different today. Today you're going to turn from a storyteller into a listener. And for a long time, pal. A long time.

Arthur. But drinking never does any harm.

Max. I've got something to celebrate. But to do that I need all of you, all of you, my wounded philosopher!

From the shelf by the table, Max takes two clean glasses and he clears all the used glasses and bottles from the table. He notices a bottle of whiskey with a striking label under the bed – it's the bottle that Laura gave to Arthur – and he puts it in the middle of the rest on the floor.

Arthur, meanwhile, goes up to the television and turns it off. So he doesn't see Max moving the whiskey bottle with the striking label from the floor to the table.

After Arthur has turned off the television, the radio can be heard.

Max. Turn off the radio. I need your complete attention.

Arthur. The knob's broken. *(He points at the radio.)* You can only adjust the sound.

Arthur lies down on the bed. Max brings him a full glass. Then he sits opposite him.

Max. Arthur, something incredible has happened to me.

Arthur. Alex dropped round yesterday.

Max. Let's not talk about that today, I beg you. You should know that I've discovered within myself...

Arthur (continuing). He looked as if he'd just heard of the death of all of his relatives {Leo Tolstoi, War and Peace}... How can you say that? We're keeping it all together on his industrious nature. You have to eat sometimes.

Max. He likes earning money ... listen ... We're not just talking about love. I now ...

Arthur (interrupting). ... Even the word "money" itself gets him going. You see? Not money itself. But that word ... Although, undoubtedly, at heart our friend Alex is a good guy.

Max (seeing that Arthur doesn't want to listen to him). I would've been offended by you before. But not today. I'll tell you about that some other time, you damned egomaniac. I'll tell you when you're fully sober, so that you'll be able to understand. I'm not sure that you're up to it, but I'll definitely give it a try. Definitely.

He looks at Arthur reproachfully.

Maybe it'd be better if I told you about that a different time; I'll understand it better myself.

No. Definitely. I won't take offense. Not today.

Max goes up to Arthur. They clink glasses.

Well, let's drink to Alex, then – a good friend, a good father and a good husband.

Arthur. To Alex! And to the internal contradictions within every person!

Max. Whatever you say...

Arthur. Because in a bad person you're unlikely to encounter the slightest contradiction, even the slightest hint of contradiction ... In a bad, revolting, pathetic, greedy person you won't find any contradiction.

Max. I agree.

Arthur. ... If he's a hypocrite, a skinflint, a liar and his breath smells and his soul does too – there won't be any contradiction there, you needn't even look...

Max. I understand...

Arthur. If he's petty, dirty in his essence, feeble...

Max... I understand, I understand.

Arthur. If he understands everything from the age of eight because that was the way he was brought up, if it's impossible to shock him, as it were, in his soul, or in what's left of it, but I'm convinced: everyone is given a chance to have a soul!

Max (shouting). I understand!

There's a knock at the door. Max jumps up and runs in the direction of the door, coming back with Alex. Alex whistles a song, transferring bits of paper from one pocket to another.

Arthur. Something happened within me..

Max. What was it this time?

Arthur. Vicky ... I don't find it that interesting to be with her anymore like I used to.

Max. Vicky is a wonderful woman, Arthur, wonderful.

Alex is in wonderful spirits. Humming something to himself he examines some pieces of paper. He sits down at the table, lays out his pieces of paper on it and suddenly discovers the collector's bottle of whisky that he'd given to Laura. He picks up the bottle, examines it, looks at Arthur, and then quickly puts the bottle

back on the table. Perplexed, he turns his gaze back to Arthur, who is talking to Max and doesn't notice Alex staring at him.

Alex understands everything immediately, but he doesn't give anything away. From this moment onwards he simply sits with his friends in silence as they talk enthusiastically.

Arthur. In my heard, I probably don't want to dump her.

Max. Well, don't then – you don't want to, then don't dump her.

Arthur. All right, I'll dig a little deeper: Vicky, in her heart, is a pure nymphomaniac, right?!?

Max. Rejoice, son.

Arthur. Wait, wait. You see, until recently everything was wonderful between us. I mean in bed. But that was down to, basically, my attitude to her outside of the bed too. Don't get me wrong – I'm in great shape (*Max ostentatiously applauds*), but! Basically, I'm not going to force myself to sleep with her.

Max. Well, don't force yourself ... Don't do too much of that sleeping!

Arthur. Now we getting to the crux of the matter – if I don't then she'll sleep with others too.

Max. All right, but I don't understand – how can I help you?

Arthur. Oh! How can you help us?

Max. Hey-hey-hey, calm down. Don't play the fool. Don't even think about it. How could you even think of such a thing?

Arthur. Hang on, I'm not planning on marrying her. What's more, as you know, I prefer to attend weddings even in the worst case scenario as a witness. But at the same time I don't want to lose her... Now I don't want to force myself. Maybe in the near future I'll find myself another partner in unhappiness, but Max! I don't want to lose her now. At times it's even magnificent with her. Sometimes I even feel like I'm almost happy with her.

Alex (looking at Arthur). That's an unusual concept of happiness.

Max. Hang on, hang on, you haven't understood yet, we don't discuss that subject.

Arthur. Why not?!? This isn't our first experience, after all. And as for my feelings for her, I already explained it to you. It also adds some spice to the dish of life, my dear Maximus! And if she agrees and then later gets upset or something – there's no understanding women – and leaves me, I still won't object to paying the price for that spice, for those couple of grams ... (*he drinks, coughing*) ... of that sweet spice ... She's hinted that she wouldn't be against an experience like that.

Max applauds at an exaggeratedly slow pace. Arthur slowly gets up, bows in all directions, and then sits back down in his place.

Alex looks at Arthur contemptuously.

Arthur. So what, then?

Max. What an idiot!

Arthur. (*shouting*) What difference does it make how I lose her?

Max. No, you really are an idiot. An awful symbiosis of a stupid and destructive person. All right, I'll explain it to you ... In simple terms ... Without any complex phrases.

Arthur. I would be extremely grateful.

Max. If you don't understand something, ask immediately, because we won't be coming back to this subject.

Arthur. I've turned into an enormous ear.

Max. Even if the changes in my life that you don't even want to hear about hadn't taken place I'd still refuse ... I'm not talking about her now, right? Even if I was the same person I was until recently, I'd still say 'no.' I just don't want, when you calm down from your latest idea, to lose our friendship. And that's all there is to it. Do you get it, dimwit?!? You need everything set out in black and white, otherwise you don't understand with your tragic idiocy.

There is a pause.

Arthur (*in a quiet voice*). Although ... if you went through certain changes ... maybe Alex could help me? (*He looks at Alex*) Listen, Alex, this is my idea, after all. Consequently, the entire responsibility lies with me. Whatever happens, I'll answer for it, and that means that I can't hold anything against you ... You can say, of course, that you know me well, that this is just another one of my stupid ideas in order to avoid myself. But can't you cheat on Laura even once? I've heard that little betrayals strengthen a marriage.

Alex (*it's clear that he has to force himself to speak*). This isn't about me. This isn't just a normal case of a mistress for two, Arthur, she was your girlfriend, after all.

Arthur. It's a joy for all the participants. It'll all come to an end eventually anyway. So why don't you try something more? Maybe force yourself? I understand ... you'll be ashamed, feel dirty... but, on the other hand ...

Alex looks at the bottle of whiskey with the striking label.

Arthur is lying on the bed, so he hasn't yet seen that Alex has noticed the bottle.

Alex. Ashamed and unpleasant?

Arthur (*challengingly*). What about it?!

Alex (*very low-spirited*). Nothing. I think you've got too caught up in yourself. You don't see what's going on around you anymore.

Arthur. Are you again hinting at the fact that each of us has a third of the shares in the company, but in your view it's you who's doing all the work?

Alex. No.

Arthur (smiling insolently). Then let's discuss our joint sexual farewell to my former girlfriend...

Max (interrupting Arthur). Do you remember Kat?

Arthur raises an eyebrow inquisitively. Then nods affirmatively.

Max. Back then it all seemed joyful and fun to me. But today I'd prefer it if it wasn't in my life.

At that party – you remember! – when we'd already had a lot to drink, I suggested to her that the three of us sleep together. Hearing my proposal, she got terribly angry.

I told her back then – we'd already had a serious amount to drink – that you and I are like one person; she would get more; unconsciously, everyone dreams of that: the drunken, good-hearted ravings of a young nihilist! Then she takes me by the shirt and says to me: all right, I'll sleep with him, and you just watch. But you'll never touch me again, and she laughs.

Arthur. I was a toy in your grasping hands.

Max. (as if he hasn't noticed the words that have been spoken) In accordance with our customs, I agree. Do you remember that intercourse, young alcoholic?

Arthur. Wonderful sex. With a touch of hate.

Max. So, anyway, the window onto the balcony was open, and I saw everything. What's more, I found something interesting for me to do. But the main thing, Mister "I'm the only one who understands": Despite the fact that Kat didn't play a decisive role in my life, in that moment I found you deeply unpleasant. I could barely hold myself back from whacking your bare ass. And you know why? Not because of what you were doing; even without knowing about our conversation. Or even knowing. It doesn't matter. And not because of her, of course. Because of jealousy. You get it? Because of natural, pure jealousy. And on top of that! Recently, it's been really unpleasant for me to remember that evening, thinking about it is repulsive. Maybe it's because I've finally started to believe in happiness! In purity, and not in bohemian filth!

Arthur. Each to his own, Horatio.

Max. I'm worried about you, Arthur ... You'll end up locking yourself in your apartment and trying to have intercourse with yourself before turning up your toes in egotistical convulsions.

Arthur. We're beyond help. It's all in the head. There's nowhere to go (*he taps his fingers on his forehead*)... At least there'll be a beautiful finale.

Max (shouting). What have your relations got to do with it! Can't you think about something else other than yourself?!?

Max finishes his glass and then heads for the door. Then he turns back to his friends.

Max. I wanted to tell you something important, but clearly today it's not fated to be...

How I love you both, and how badly I want to miss both of you.

Max leaves.

A pause hangs in the air.

Alex. Tell me, do you really think that I can cheat on Laura?

Arthur. I don't give a damn any more, my friend.

Alex Friend?

Arthur. Are we no longer friends?

Alex heads for the door.

Alex (already at the door). Do you know what the difference is between us and Max?

Arthur looks at Alex in silence.

Alex. Max, unlike us, has never lived a lie. Despite everything. Max never lied to us or to himself.

Alex leaves.

Arthur goes up to the table. He notices the bottle that Laura had given him and picks it up. He looks in the direction of the door that Alex left through. He turns the bottle in his hand. Then he opens it, pours himself a glass and takes a sip. Then he goes over to the bed, lies down and falls asleep.

The lights slowly die out. The sound of the radio is heard. The radio station changes, and then a radio news broadcast is heard. We catch the end of the news: "...The largest observation satellite ever has been launched into space at a speed three times faster than the speed of the fastest planet. Perhaps this additional eye for humanity will again prove that we are alone in this universe."

The lights die out. Something is moved. Sounds are heard. The sound of the radio.

Scene Four.

Max sits on a chair in the center of the stage. A few meters away from him on each side sit Arthur and Alex. The stage is bathed in darkness, only the three figures are lit by narrow rays of light from spotlights above. All three of them look out into the auditorium, looking straight ahead, and the impression is created that they don't see one another.

Arthur. An untried life isn't worth living. I think Socrates said that. It seems he had love in mind ... Or wine. I don't know what he meant by that, but he was right. Many who were among us thought the same. True, some of them went insane. Not many ... but some of them went insane.

Personally, what drives me insane is that I can't allow myself to stop working. No, I've got some savings. From today onwards, I wouldn't have to work for seven and a half months. True, then the money will run out.

Those ugly mugs at the meetings that we have to attend for money, those damned papers, those damned meetings where we see those ugly mugs. And all of it for money.

Basically, I really don't like that "...within the catechism of the virtuous and the merits of a civilized western person, historically and almost as the main point, the ability to acquire capital was included." {F.M. Dostoevsky, "The Player"}.

Max. One of the Argentinians, I think it was Borges, had some lines about a machine of talents. On some island there was a machine that established the extent of someone's talent. And not in some specific field – someone's level of talent overall. Each of the island's citizens was obliged to go to the machine once a year and he was awarded a yearly income in accordance with his talent level...

There is a pause.

I'm ready to work as hard as needed for our happiness. I just don't want to lose her. Even for a minute.

Arthur. And whoever hasn't got any talent, be my guest, earn capital, pay taxes, earn more capital.

Max. Capital ... We didn't even think about words like that ... in our student campus. Sometimes it seems to me that I'm still there... there, where we shared fifteen square meters between the three of us

And our crowd. What a crowd we had. Legends! Donald alone. And his friend ... what was he called ... with the red cheeks ... The doctors banned the guy with red cheeks from drinking. He would sit at the table with us in the evenings, and we'd be drinking cheap port wine, discussing Montaigne's Essays, and he'd be grinding his teeth so hard that it was almost as if he'd chew himself up from within. We thought that eventually his teeth would poke out of his eyes he wanted to drink so badly.

Alex. True, they eventually operated on him in our last year and cut all that much out.

Max. The way he started drinking again! Any classical Greek bacchanalia seemed like a children's sandpit with pink buckets in comparison with his drinking sessions.

Alex. He was so happy, but now I think he's a doctor or an academic or something. ... Yes, Donald...

Max. The main thing was that Donald had learned how to sing from childhood. He sang ... and birds and women would come flocking towards his voice. All of

the girls in our student dorm – beautiful, ugly, shameless or bashful, would flock to his voice and start moaning at the first sounds fluttering out of his shameless lips, from his bottomless throat, and all of them, the beauties, would look into his half-closed, tipsy eyes with hope. They were struck dumb, they'd listen, afraid of making a move, afraid of interrupting that even, almost faultless line of notes.

Arthur. They all dreamt of giving themselves to him, and they all gave themselves to him. That Caruso of our student hostel gave them all a little happiness, the beautiful, the ugly, the tall and those who didn't win in the height stakes.

All of them...

Max. ...Apart from one ...

Natalie!.. A beauty the like of which the world has never seen before. Four different bloodlines had flowed into her and that mixture sent our comrade Donald out of his mind, but! ...She didn't love him. It's a mysterious story, but in her heart she carried some sort of mysterious, universal sorrow...

One day, because of that universal sorrow, Donald got so drunk that he barely survived. And when they offered him a wonderful job on the other side of the world, he didn't go, he stayed in the dorm, got into debt and drank.

Alex. It all sorted itself out suddenly.

Arthur. She came along, and without giving him a chance to pull himself together, she took him.

Max. And before slamming the door, asked him to leave immediately.

Arthur. Donald only managed to recover after a good-sized glass of gin. He downed it in one. Then he walked around the room for a long time. Then he packed up his stuff, drank another glass of gin and, without saying goodbye to anyone, left for the other side of the world...

Alex. ...leaving behind him, not out of greed, of course, all his debts.

Max. Natalie ...

I don't know what the burden was she was carrying in her heart. And, no doubt, now I'll never find out, but it was, in my opinion, a heroic feat. An enormous woman's heart, with one sigh she cut the Gordian knot that was our talented comrade Donald.

Then, going on her own words, or maybe it's a legend, people said she was terribly in love with him. They said that she sat with him for a long time, then undid her braid, then retied it, and only then left, she didn't meet up with people until they stopped talking about Donald having left...

Alex. ...and the red-cheeked friend of Donald's, having got some money from somewhere, paid off all his debts, although nobody asked him to do that.

Max. A sad story, although I see it as being a very hopeful story of love.

Arthur. Love... What is it?

Am I capable of loving? And if I'm not, can I learn how to be? To learn to love ... It's unlikely that I can learn to love just anyone while I'm sleeping with the wife of my best friend ... although ... Alex probably knows. And if he doesn't know, he

senses it. Or he should sense it... And who's worse off after all of that? Which of the three of us is worse off after all that? And most importantly ... what good is all this to me?!?

Alex. What should I do? Pretend I know nothing, that I haven't worked it out. How can I live without her? I know everything. I understand it all. And I can't. I can't go on without her...

And this isn't just about the children ... I can't go on without her.

Max. They think that'll just say that I love her. That's not it. It's something else. It's such a shame that on this particular day, when I was supposed to pass on something sacred, something that's bursting through, tearing through the muscles, coming out of my chest, one of my friends had had too much to drink, and the second one has his head stuck in business affairs...

But I'll tell them. I'll definitely tell them.

They're my friends, after all, they're close to me. And if they can't, who is capable of understanding it all? It's important to me that I share this with them – specifically with them.

(A pause).

And they'll understand, because today we are becoming different. There was a time when we were all ... well, we were all as pure as each other, when, it seems not that long ago ... we danced!

The lights dim.

Scene Five.

It is dark. We can only hear the sound of the radio, the stations switching. The radio tunes into a beautiful melody. A pale yellow turns on over Arthur's room. A bright yellow light turns on over the front of the stage: there, Arthur, Alex and Max, holding glasses of whiskey in their hands, are dancing.

They are wearing jackets with the identical emblem of an educational establishment. From time to time, the friends swap glasses and then carry on dancing.

Alex. "The entire exercise book was full of caricatures, usually repeating this one: a fat, short woman beats a matchstick thin boy with a rolling pin. Beneath it, in large, uneven letters, an inscription is scrawled: 'Beg for forgiveness, puppy', and in answer: 'I won't, for the life of me.'" {L. Andreyeff, "Little Angel"}

Max. "In order to be happy, you need a gift. For happiness, you need hearing just as you do to sing or to dance. So, I think that happiness inherited and it can be bequeathed." {M. Pavich, "Writing Box"}.

Arthur. "... in our free and pluralistic industrial world, I prefer beyond all others a free boot cleaner who proudly turns down tips" {Heinrich Boll, "Absent Without Leave"}

Alex. Now that's a lie ... Firstly, you don't give a damn about some boot cleaner. Secondly, you don't give a damn about any boot cleaners. And thirdly, and most importantly, no cleaner, just like no waiter, will ever turn down a tip ... But that's not even the main thing. The main thing is that today we opened a company, we divided the shares up between the three of us. Symbolically, we've got the remaining one percent to my Laura. We can't get by without one another, I'm married and happy, and you – two idiots – will also find love one day, despite you being a degenerate. Especially yours, Arthur, my dear.

Arthur. Our world is by no means perfect. I didn't invent this imperfect world. And that's the only thing that justifies some of my actions.

Max. What are you talking about? The world is beautiful, and don't go ruining my beautiful mood.

Arthur. I don't agree with you. Even if it's only to be contradictory.

Alex. That's enough, Arthur, that's the way it is. Whether you're against it or not.

Max. Let's say you're against loutishness – but it exists all the same.

Arthur. Yes.

Max. Or when a car on purpose – on purpose! – drives through a puddle in order to soak you. To soak your new coat. Made of cashmere and camelhair. Your new coat that you spent half your pay packet on. And those attractive scoundrels who were at the wheel will laugh about it as they drive home, where, exhausted, without having scraped the dirt from under their fingernails with a fork, they fall asleep.

Arthur. Absolutely correct. But to some extent the blame is ours.

Alex. How? In their upbringing? In the fact that they've been scraping the dirt out from under their fingernails with a fork since childhood? Or in the fact that they splashed your cashmere coat?

Arthur (already indifferent). I don't know.

Max. Listen, to hell with global problems ... Personally, I wouldn't reject happiness, but where can we find it?!? And what is this happiness? How do you know that you're happy? For example, the hairdresser from the salon on the corner recently told me that her dream is "to get married to a rich queer" {Boris Vian, "Red Grass"}.

Arthur. So, what? I should start looking for a rich queer too?!?

Max. You know, friends, I should admit, however shameful it might be ... On the outside it's just a bit of nonsense, even a bit of a stretch, I'd say, but for me it's a block. It scratches away at me from within my chest.

Alex. Open your soul, don't waste our time.

Max. I'm ashamed to admit it, but for me, any secretary – just a normal secretary – is tea. A cup of tea. Get it? Well, I mean, I can't imagine how she pours it, or, even worse, how she brews tea. She's a secretary, I associate her with a cup of tea... It's

terrible. Carrying that feeling inside. Secretary equals cup of tea. Secretary equals cup of tea. And I'm ashamed. You know why I suddenly became ashamed? I think that I suddenly started to believe in my happiness. I haven't attained it yet, haven't found it. But I started believing in it. And that immediately turned everything upside down... everyone has the right to happiness, don't they? And if I can be happy, that she too – that secretary – can and should be happy. And that means that even the slightest contempt is demeaning, first and foremost, for me. I can and should be better.

Arthur. I don't know. Let's have a drink instead.

Alex. Instead of what?

Arthur. Instead of not having a drink.

They clink glasses and drink.

Max. All right! You still don't understand me. Arthur doesn't believe anything at all, and you, Alex, are in love and happy. So, to entertain you and so as not to ruin this evening among friends, I'll tell you about Redmond O'Hanlon...

Alex. Who is he?

Arthur. A famous traveler.

Alex. First I've ever heard of him.

Max. ...He was going down some river in some country where they only speak Portuguese...

Alex. Must've been somewhere in South America.

Max. That famous Redmond O'Hanlon...

Alex. Well, I've never heard of him.

Max. ...he was going down the river with his friend. What was special about this river was that it had really small fish in it, they were all about the size, say, of mollusks. I can't remember what those nasty little fish were called, but they only swim against the current. And they do it so skillfully that the slightest little current for them is like a walk in the park. And this isn't some theater anecdote, this is a story that happened to the great O'Hanlon.

Alex. I've never heard of him. (*Arthur gestures to Alex with his hands and his facial expression that he should shut up and let them listen*)

Max. So. His friend, in order to save time and in order not to have to run into the forest for a pee, decided to pee into the river. O'Hanlon was walking in front, so he couldn't warn his friend, of course.... So, the guy is, you know... (he indicates the action, circling his palms over his crotch) and these fish-mollusks go up the (he shows the jet of water with his hands as he pees)) ... they swim upwards against the current and stick their sharp teeth, dozens of sharp teeth, into his private parts...

Alex (grimacing). Good heavens!

Max. And this great, brave traveler Redmond O'Hanlon drags his friend to the nearest hospital, where the guy shrieks out in perfect Portuguese: "Guys, cut my dick off!"

They are silent while, continuing to dance.

Arthur. "... but all the same: if men such as us, these fearless conquerors of life, can't change even one verdict of Fate, then is man doomed to be eternally stuck in the minor affairs that have been foreordained for him?" {Edward Dunsany, "Carcassonne"}.

Max. But we can, at least, support a change to fate.

Alex. Are you talking about everyone getting at least one chance in their life?

Max. Of course ... We create a certain word, a sentence, a story, a novel ... with our lives, and throw it out into the world ... spray and pray, as it were, to two, three, and so on.

Alex. So we're laying claim to a certain truth?

Max. No. That's the whole point – no. Doing that certain something, we simply throw it out into the world. We take it and we throw it out ... That's the most that we can do for humanity. Maybe it will only happen one time, or it won't happen at all. Maybe we'll create a certain atmosphere, and in that atmosphere maybe some passing will accidentally someone or other with an elbow.

Arthur. And that someone, thanks to our word, will find his happiness in this imperfect world?

(They again fall silent for a short time)

Alex. I'm no expert when it comes to literature, of course, and don't know anything about travelers cutting off their friends' holy of holies, but there's one thing I can't understand: how can you, Arthur – a person who doesn't know what happiness is – make someone else happy?!?

The music that had been providing a background the entire time suddenly breaks off.

A voice is heard: "End of Part Five!"

As the radio is heard changing stations, the light dies out. Again stuff is moved about.

Scene Six.

At the table: Arthur, Laura, Alex, Max. They are all dressed just as they were in the first three scenes.

The radio is playing. The actors are talking, but they can't be heard.

A voice is heard: "Laura, look at Arthur sometimes. A barely perceptible smile. Only the eyes – only the eyes smile. Good. That's it ... But you like your husband too. You don't know who you're attracted to more. The eyes... the eyes..."

The sound of the radio becomes barely perceptible. The actors can be heard.

Arthur. As far as all this is concerned, “I think our culture’s trait of expecting every person to always be able to solve his problems is disgusting and comical. It means that a problem can always be solved if you make a little effort, you struggle a little harder. That’s so far from the truth that I want to cry. Or laugh. Again, in keeping with the cultural traditions of our time, today’s heroes don’t have the right to cry. So I don’t cry that much, but I laugh a lot.”

{Kurt Vonnegut. “Cat’s Cradle”}.

Laura. It’s almost always the same. Until our dear Arthur has drunk his first half bottle of whiskey, we are fated to talk about truth.

Alex (sorrowfully). Yes, our Arthur loves good whiskey.

Max. On the other hand, between the third and fourth half bottle is a total unknown. It’s a boundary, beyond which there’s always a certain optional course. What’s awaiting us today, pal, a discussion on the impossibility of complete treachery, an unhappy stream of conscious following the act of love or, perhaps, a moral?

Arthur. No, no. “I’m not that much of a scoundrel to think about morals.” {V.V. Rozanoff “Lonely”}.

Alex. But you can think about the global collapse and misfortune and snivel, turning the sound up or down. The world is definitely your old radio, which you should have thrown out long ago.

Arthur. I don’t understand the cause of your aggression... “In a certain sense, the world itself is charged with misfortune, it represents a perfect form of imperfection, it is the consciousness of collapse. When you understand that, you stop sensing the collapse.” {Henry Miller. “Thoughts on Writing”}.

Alex. Well, I think that you understand me.

Laura. My dear shareholders, don’t argue. You’re not at work.

Max (festively). My friends, before you start fighting, I’ll tell you why I’ve brought you all together...

With the palm of his hand, Max indicates the bottle to Arthur. Arthur fills the glasses with whiskey.

Remember, Arthur, the last time on the islands, we came out of the hotel before leaving. There was a very light drizzle ... As ever, we were tipsy, you tried to introduce yourself to everyone we met and offered them brandy, and suddenly I got really sad ... I suddenly didn’t want my best friend to be with me ... I suddenly wanted happiness to be with me ... under that drizzling rain, I wanted to hold happiness by the hand...

And I found the person I want to walk under that drizzling rain with!

I shared your views about man’s loneliness right up until my heart started beating in a different way.

I liked thinking the way you do, Arthur. Denying everything and hiding behind that denial. Laughing at other people, gripping the glass in your hand. Laughing at the

whole world, watching the idiotic television alone... and being scared, scared of your happiness, closing up and running away from it like a coward. But then suddenly it all turned out to be so simple. Everything suddenly turned out to be so simple and beautiful that I'm even afraid of talking about it.

Max's mobile phone rings, he looks at its screen, and his face is lit up by a smile.

Max. Forgive me. Give me a minute, and then I'll tell you the main thing.

Max, talking on the telephone, walks away to the window.

Alex. As far as I can understand, I'm only talking to my friend Arthur now, right? I'm happy for Max ... But the two of us can't keep our business going.

Laura. I don't think it's that bad, Alex ... if we don't write the situation of as a tragedy.

Arthur. Are you finally going to use this moment to get rid of me?

Alex. Don't talk nonsense!

Arthur. You've always dreamed of doing it. You didn't know how to end our friendship beautifully, and, most importantly, not lose the firm! For once in your life, just say something straight.

Alex. I'm starting to get bored of your ravings.

Arthur. (Already fairly drunk) You're ... so clever ... with me and our dreamboat Max ... if it wasn't, damn it, for our friendship ... You've been trying to take over our firm your whole life ... You know perfectly well that this isn't ravings.

Alex. Shut up.

Arthur. ... so we have just enough for whiskey...

Alex. You'd better shut up...

Arthur (raising the tone of his voice). It's you who'd better shut up... otherwise I'll smash my favorite board over your head.

Alex (with a threat in his voice). Of course not, you genius of sorrow, I'll ... use this stick on you. I'll just use the other end, the end without the markings of the number of books bought.

Arthur. I'm so sick of you all.

Alex. You are so disgusting.

Arthur. Finally. Finally you've said something straight. You no doubt think that I'm over the moon about you.

Alex (angry). Ungrateful beast.

Arthur. I hate you.

Alex. You piece of shit!

Arthur and Alex get up from their places, each of them ready to throw themselves at the other. A tense pause hangs in the air.

Arthur and Alex, together, hurl themselves towards the board of justice. A struggle breaks out. They both grab the board. Max hurries over to them (Laura carries on calmly sitting in her place; she observes what is taking place).

During the struggle the board breaks, Alex shouts out; there is blood on his hand. Max runs over and stands between the two combatants, each of them holding pieces of the board in their hands.

Laura (loud). That's enough! We're leaving, Alex. Everyone could do with calming down! Especially as we've got to discuss the candidacy for our new partner tomorrow.

Alex. We won't have a third partner anymore ... There aren't going to be any more partners.

Laura (after a pause, in a tough voice). Then I won't be here either.

Alex shakes his head. He looks at Laura. He throws the piece of board on the floor. He sits down on the bed. He drops his head.

Laura slowly gets up and heads towards Alex. Suddenly a voice sounds out.

Voice. The line! The line!

Laura (turning to the spectators) "I was told off for mixing styles, but mixing is what style is" {I. Severyanin. "Ambiguous Fame"}.

A light turns on over the director's table in the auditorium. The director climbs up onto the stage.

Director (climbing up onto the stage). Wonderful! Much better than yesterday. Although you're still skipping over the odd thing from the text.

Right, now we go on to the seventh part: at Laura's insistence, there is a conversation between Arthur and Alex. And there, Alex, pay attention to these lines of yours:

"When you sleep with my wife, Arthur, I can't be seen, just like the fifteenth rock in the Philosopher's Garden that you told me about?"

And Arthur replies to him (*he turns to Arthur*): "Each of us, from time to time, is the fifteenth rock that can't be seen."

Right (*he looks at his notes*) ... and there's another important thing. In the eighth section, during another meeting, Arthur asks Laura: "After all, when we founded our firm, your third was paid for by your mother, Alex didn't have any money at all. Tell me, please, why did you give 33 percent of the shares to Alex, rather than taking them yourself?" And Laura answers: "Firstly, I knew that Alex would always belong to me. And secondly... knowing that Alex would get the firm going, I wanted him to not only love me – I wanted him to feel in debt to me too."

The director's mobile telephone starts ringing. He answers, quickly agreeing a meeting with someone; as he does this, none of the actors move, as if they're continuing to perform in the play.

Director (sticking his mobile phone in his pocket). Well, I think that's it. We'll continue tomorrow from this point. At six. Don't be late, Arthur!

The light over the director's table dies out.

Thank you, everyone!

The director leaves.

The stage hands appear in boilersuits and clear away the main components of the interior: the table, the chairs, they start dismantling the bed.

Laura goes backstage.

Alex and Arthur look at one another angrily, as if the rehearsal hasn't ended, then they follow Laura out.

Max starts moving in the opposite direction. When he's almost reached the edge of the stage, the lights die out entirely. We can hear the noise of the street, cars beeping their horns, the sound of car doors opening, the noise of a lift. Max says hi to a neighbor; the sound of a key turning in a lock, slowed down, is heard.

The lights come on. Max is in his apartment which looks very much like a theater set. Over Max, on one side, there is a pale yellow light. On the other, there is a bright yellow light.

Max. You can find so much within yourself! ... when you take off your skin – within yourself – one after another, like the leaves of a lettuce, another and another. You see new layers, roots, branches, you sense the currents deep underwater. You go through that lettuce and deeper within. Days and nights pass, and you keep on going, and you start to like this process of transformation, these new, astonishing phenomena within yourself, there are doors, walls, rains, and you're not afraid of it all. That's a good feeling – not being scared of yourself. You open up, you crack off large pieces, you tear them off, you unstick them, you never tire of listening, looking, speaking, understanding anew. And suddenly it seems that you've arrived, that's it, stop. But no, that's not right: you push, like Pinocchio, a door that's been drawn ahead of you, and it's a miracle! It opens. You go through the labyrinth, that you know and don't know, you go through days and nights again, you relish the sun, the darkness, sorrows, tears, you drink to those that have passed away, you laugh at the wrong time and then inside. And there's the last room, the last room within the lettuce. You enter it and in time you reach its last wall. That's it. There's nothing beyond. And, unconsciously, you're happy about that. You're happy and tired, you just want bread and wine. You've reached the finish line. Where are my friends? I want to set the table and call my old friends over, my acquaintances, comrades, girls, gypsies with guitars and magnificent black hats, gypsy girls with a hundred skirts on each of them, women, tired but happy men, sad poets, those blessed by fate and failures. I'll pour wine for them, it's a red, laughing wine, and we'll all be drunk. I won't let anyone go: everyone is staying

here for the night. In their clothes. Tired, they lie around on the floor. “We be of one blood, ye and I.”

And there I am, spinning in a waltz, striding a tango, hurtling around the room, never tiring, I dance with myself until the guests arrive, I’m not bored, but I’m waiting, waiting for their arrival. I’m waiting for the hustle and bustle that they’ll bring, their sorrow, their joy, their fresh air; tomorrow will bring whatever it brings, but today is a celebration in that room, that vast room of happiness, in that vast room of being free from oneself.

I walk up to the last wall in my journey. I laugh to myself, with that wall, I give it a pat on the shoulder, like an old friend, and then suddenly!! There will be no celebration, no gypsies with guitars. The journey isn’t over. It was just an illusion. It’s collapsed. As soon as I touched the wall, it began to shudder, and the rocks fell from it, all of them, down to the last stone. They fell, but they didn’t hit me, they lay there next to me, at my feet, they flew past my head, my shoulders, but not a single rock hurt me. I didn’t even have time to take fright, I just stood there until it all quieted down, I just stood there with my eyes open...

And then the final rock turns over in the silence, and I saw what lay beyond that wall that no longer exists – space! Happiness! I stood on the edge of an abyss that I wasn’t afraid of.

I’ll come back a different person, friends. I’ll come back and gather you all together again. The wind pushes me from behind, dragging me by the chest, injuring me. I don’t say goodbye as move on to happiness. I simply take a step forward.

Paris, 2023