

Grayish green into black

by Elsa Demo

Translated from Albanian by Edvin Shvarc

Characters

Riza – the father, 54 years old

Jana – the wife, 48 years old

Neli – the daughter, 18 years old

The Expert

The Doctor

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Scene I

The stage is empty. A dim light illuminates one sole woman at a deep point in the stage. She is wearing a dress, on top of it, a sweater and a scarf on her head while speaking and slowly advancing.

Jana – The air here stands still. I have a dry throat and a bitter, sour mouth. I wake up every morning feeling thirsty for water. This is my house, but not my home. My home is a few villages away. A friend came to my family and asked for my hand in marriage for an acquaintance of his, a worker. – *She will enjoy a better life*, he said.

I did not want a different life. I did not seek a better life. When something good comes to you, it illuminates every little bit, when sorrows come, again they darken every little bit. You are deceived by goodness as you are by evilness. I wanted a life that blinds you little by little, that moves you forward as you please, without a plan and without a promise. I feared the good life, the promise of a stranger, furthermore the joy that your folks try to conceal with an unspoken compassion that they are finally handing you over to someone somewhere.

When my parents gave their word to the “working man”, I wanted to touch the knee of Pepe¹ who listened silently, but I didn’t touch it. You just can not do these gestures, and that’s why they are not permitted. Feelings are not expressed; and that’s why they are forbidden.

I was wishing at least that the promised husband would resemble my forgiving Pepe. Forgiving, meant a weak husband to my Meme’s² eyes.

The wedding dress came with yellow flowers, *xana* flowers³. (*She changes the tone of voice, imitating her mother*) “Jana, pluck up some butterweeds!”... Xanas... yellow butterweeds... Everything I know about marriage, I learned from butterweeds. *Xanas* rescued the unhappy marriages. Women who dissolved spells made the *xanas* bleed. When the *xana* was bleeding, the witchcraft was dissolved and the couple, that until then had not touched each other in bed, managed to sleep properly like a man and a woman. (*She changes the tone of her voice*) “Jana, knead the bread! Men come back from work exhausted, they have to be washed, changed, fed... A full belly makes no fuss... Jana, clean the dump hole... and take that damned book off your hands...!”

I do not remember the books I read. Their language was not my language. What I held inside me was the most complete book I had ever read. The books did not stun and frighten me more than a viper hanging on the tree branches, which froze my step in the summer heat; they did not scare me as much as the silence of the forest, they did not

¹ *Pepe*: Father

² *Meme*: Mother

³ *Xana*: Yellow butterweed flowers.

teach me not to think and to admit not to think at all, to do nothing, that a certain day when you do nothing, is more innocent than the unceasing change of day into night; the books did not confuse me with love stories, as much as when my body shivered from the night chill under the nylon shirt of my girlhood; they did not anger me as much as the submissive knee of Pepe; they did not voice me anything about a mother's complacency as much as Meme's self-assurance about the physical strength of her sons and the headaches about the hygiene of her daughters... and of the shithole.

My parents are dead. As it turns out, I have not buried them yet. The body that dies, does not take everything. (*A uniform drill sound probing begins to be heard, mixed with undetermined engine effects.*)

The word "worker" opened the eyes to my farming parents. They coveted something that they had never possessed. I would live in a country that was neither a village, nor a city, with a new working class.

I was told that there is a white river, Argyas.

I saw along the way men collecting *kulmak*⁴ in the swamps, women making baskets, and the Argyas' waters changing color, first into gray and then into black. The ponds in the fields reflected a glittering green that latter turned into azure. It was the dark and dazzling light of oil, its thick liquid.

I have no photos of my wedding. Vito tore them up during his moody hours. It happened every blooming season.

I remember Riza's breath and my sister's words: "*That's how the breath of men smells and you are no better than the others.*"

It was October. The air was standing still. I witnessed small fires burning incessantly in the air. Nymphaeum in an iron forest.

Riza's strong and hungry body fell on me. My body was neither strong, nor hungry. I imagined the waters of Argyas, first grayish, then blackish, flowing into the sea. I do not know anything about the sea. I have not seen it. Riza's body was looking to satisfy his hunger on me. I imagined the horseheads of the wells, their wings holding the steel columns in constant motion. They rise slowly above the ground, break through the sunlight by day, the darkness by night, and enter slowly to strike in, deep, so in and so deep, where there is no more day, nor night, on the black earth.

Their noise came roaring from hundreds of thousands of meters away. In the stillness of the night I heard it close to me.

The previous noise grows louder. The light goes out.

SCENE II

Indoor environment containing few objects: an eating table with a chair, a closet, a stool and a toolbox. There is a ladder in the background, where the yard is supposed to be.

⁴ *Kulmak*: Bulrush plant. Rushes or sedges growing in wetlands.

The man enters the stage. He is wearing a work shirt and pants. Takes off his shirt and washes half of his body in a copper vessel. A dim light falls on the girl who is talking in frontstage, while the man acts in the background: cleansing his forearms, wipes them off, and then sits down at the table in the middle of the stage. The lighting focuses on the man who starts eating hungrily, while the rest of the scene is immersed in such a dim light to allow the shadows of objects being barely visible.

Neli – He is coming back from the first shift. Requires water from the Dry Tap. I rush to the neighborhood below the barracks. The street is empty. Children are inside the thresholds either sleeping or doing homework. Women are on farms. The April' sun and metallic forest hide behind the olive groves and poplars. The white shirts of men with their jackets barely hanging on one shoulder radiate from far away. They walk three kilometers to the house, those who have a house, while others to the dormitory. They look for water from the spring or from the well in the courtyard and take off the clothes that the oil has taken out of use. They bear the stench of onion and rotten eggs, that children do not smell, as long as they are children. When they are no longer children, that mixed smell of men body odor and sulfur will remind them of the powdered milk ration, which fathers bring back home as a gift, along with persimmons when their ripping season comes. A spoonful in the mouth from that powder that sticks to the palate and slowly melts, then off to the threshold all the way to the springwaters.

This part of the world alongside the Adriatic Sea represents a remnant of the vast and deep Tethys that, in times which cannot be remembered, encompassed the Mediterranean and transcended our continent. There is a connection between the quality of the water, drank by these people and the sleep they barely get, between the air they breathe and how they are tied together in marriage. It all has to do with their economic situation. They are a group, the most selected social group of the peasant-worker nature, whose labour has made people stronger than nature, as the chronicles write.

I enter the house and find him digesting his meal that was eaten alone. He enjoys to eat in solitude. It does not make him feel lonely. The lonely man does not need to be served the ritual... He takes the jug full of cold water from my hands and drinks, keeps on drinking. His Adam's apple climbs up and down like a gadfly. I look at it. While on his neck hangs loose a black oil-stained towel.

The man has left a bag of white powder into one hand of the girl while he has sat down to eat. The girl takes some powder and tastes it. The man looks at her.

Riza – It tastes better than a roasted eel with chicory?

Neli – Mmmm...

Riza – You're faking it.

Neli – I will never eat eels.

Riza – That's a mistake.

Neli – They scare me.

Riza – You think while you eat, that’s why!

Neli – Words chase hunger away.

Riza – When you eat, you just forget about it and enjoy the meal (*The man handpicks a piece of roasted eel and swallows it*)... What was the seller’s face, where did he come from, where did he catch the eels?

Neli – There were people standing in line who asked him about everything and he was giving everybody the same answer, always. They complain that the oil water spills on the bread land.

Riza – Oh, it’s not like they have any other job to do...!

Neli – He told them that the river flows, cleans itself and nothing affects the eel. It is a better bread than the wheat they sow.

Riza – Smart ass!

Neli – Then they were talking about the death of three workers they had found this morning. They passed away in their sleep. It happened in...

Riza – Usoja.

Neli – Yes, that’s what they said: Usoja. Ah, you have you heard of it! What happened?

Silence.

Riza – It was during the night, third shift, under exhausting heat. The gas made them all lazy, until they fell asleep.

Neli – How come they did not feel anything?

Riza – When the body gets used to it, it does not longer feels anything. (*Ironically*): “Comrade workers, be vigilant! Try to protect yourself and your friend by your side!”

Neli – What will happen to their families?

Riza – As they dealt with other families: just a handshake and “may the living stay healthy!”.

Neli – What about the children?

The man cannot help himself from hiding a certain kind of nervousness.

Riza – Whoever is lucky enough to be of a working age, takes the place of his father.

Neli – And when they are small children?

Riza – The state provides them with a certificate: “*Due to civil bravery*” to their fathers.

Neli – What does it mean?

Riza – That the others should witness someone’s death with their very own eyes.

Neli – A death with eyewitnesses...

Riza – Yes.

Neli – No one has witnessed the death of those three.

Riza – No! It is not death “*On the line of duty*”. They were truly at work, but they were found asleep.

Neli – It does not count?

Riza – It does not count.

Neli – Not even the newspaper will mention it?

Riza – “*Dying while asleep*”? The Company would smear, so would 600 others who work in the same place. You talk of newspapers!

Neli – Since it’s not a “*Civil bravery*”...

Riza – No, it isn’t! They are not “*Martyrs of the Homeland*” who gave their lives for the “*Great Motherland’s oil*”.

Neli – So, their deaths will pass from mouth to mouth, as it was done today in the eel market.

Riza – People like stories. They think it’s just stories. They’re mean!

The man is reaching the end of his meal. The girl observes him and changes the subject.

Neli – You also have some *brushtull*⁵, if you like it, made with powder milk.

The girl serves a dessert and a raki⁶ brandy. The satisfied man cannot hide his pleasure.

⁵ *Brushtull*: A traditionally area meal, made and cooked with flour and sugar.

⁶ *Raki*: The traditional strong Albanian brandy made of grapes.

Riza – Your mother (*He drinks bottoms up his glass of raki*), she is a blessed woman!

Neli – Mmmm, You liked the meal...! Try to tell her sometimes!

The man wipes his hands with the towel that was hanging around his neck, as if to end it.

Riza – I married her? Isn't that enough?

The girl cleans the table.

Neli – Yes, that's enough ... roasted eel, chicory, *brushtull* with powder milk...

Riza – So many words don't let me digest it.

The girl takes an atlas in her hands and sits on the stool. The man gets up, takes a sickle and a long piece of gasket rope from the crate. The stage has deepened by means of a projection that depicts in the background the garden with a vine bed and shed shoots sprouts. The man begins to tighten the vine bed with ropes. He softly sings. Pulls up the ladder, climbs up and looks at the shoots sprouts.

Riza – Damned worm...! First it eats the branches, then it devours the buds.

Neli – I hope it rains...! This dust, this heat, and the summer has not even begun...

Riza – The rain ruins them.

The man stops, looks at the girl who continues to lean over the atlas. He uses the sickle and carefully inserts a needle tip into what seems a small butterfly. He comes down the ladder and approaches the girl with the butterfly on the back of his hand.

Riza – It is attracted from the fluid that flows from the tree trunks.

The girl does not hide her pleasure. The man places his hand under the electric light.

Neli – No, do not do it like that! They are sensitive!

Riza – They like the light.

Neli – Yes, but it also stuns them.

Riza – You can add the butterfly to your museum.

Neli – It's not a museum.

Riza – Oh really, what is it?

Neli – It’s knowing nature in practice.

Riza – Aha!

Neli – (*While carefully observing the butterfly*): It’s still alive. It must be from the twilight ones.

Riza – How do you know that?

Neli – Because they fly around this time, before nightfall.

Riza – (*Tries to catch another butterfly*) Here, is another one!

Neli – No, leave it! It’s enough for me to have one for each species.

The man gets back to his work. The girl browses the atlas and reads it loudly by indentifying through her voice.

Neli – It is named *Ghost Butterfly* (*while pointing and showing it to her father*), or otherwise called “*Hepialus Humuli*”... Its males are white into silver, so they look like ghosts when hovering over the plants at dusk. When darkness comes, they drag their friends through the groves by flying and dancing in groups.

The females usually are larger and have pale yellow forearms mixed with pink or color pink into brown. They can spread their wings four and a half to six centimeters... From the color, this must be a male... It will wiggle a little bit more.

The girl opens the closet and pins the butterfly on one of the shutters as she has done with all the others. She looks at her father, hesitates, but approaches him anyway.

Neli – Two months have passed since Vito is there.

The man listens to her without even turning his head.

Riza – I know.

Neli – That’s it?

Riza – So what?

Neli – When are we going there?

Riza – We will.

Neli – When?

Riza – I do not know.

Neli – I will come with you.

The man does not respond.

Neli – I have not seen him since he left us.

The man does not make a sound.

Neli – Why don't you answer me?

Riza – I have nothing to say.

Neli – How is he?

Riza – How could he be?

Neli – I want to see him.

Riza – Who do you want to see?

Neli – My brother.

Riza – Yes, of course. Do you have a strong stomach?

Neli – For what?

The man pauses. A young boy in a hospital garb appears on the right side of the scene. A doctor brings a crib where the boy lies. The doctor puts on the electric shock and the boy's body spins and shivers. This corner of the stage is brightly and coldly lit, while we hear an electroshock sound effect. This moment lasts long enough for the body of the young boy to get tired from the convulsions.

Riza – To see a shadow (*the man turns and faces the girl*) that can barely stand up! They have placed him under those machinery equipments... The second time they tried, the machinery did not function. He did not react at all when I went to see him. Nor did he accept to take the food I had brought him... But he is not that weak with those he does not like. (*The man spits out the last sentence through his teeth.*)

Neli – Then we are going with Mom.

Riza – So?

Neli – Since you are not coming...

The man has come down from the ladder. By now they are facing each other.

Riza – No, you are saying that he has a beef with me...

Neli – No, I was just saying to change places with one another.

The man interrupts her.

Riza – ... that he can not stand me, that I drive him crazy, I wake up his devils. Even your mother thinks so, too. I know.

Neli – I do not know...

The man continues to interrupt her.

Riza – Your brother started to talk a lot; he swore filthy things, he spat, he stroke, even hit me when they dragged him to the car. That angry face, eyes agape, chafed skin, dry lips, reeking breath, without eating, without sleep...

Neli – I am fully aware of his insomnia..., even his angry eyes...

Riza – He had shitted and peed himself in his underpants...

Saddened, the girl clings to the words that hurt her the least.

Neli – He had the right to do it.

Riza – Yes, you are aware of it..., but you do not know that when he entered the doctor's room, he started crying out loud. Then he calmed down and said that at home, he hears voices that speak ill of him, that command him: voices of men, women, children, the voices echoing in his household, the voices from his village. Covering his ears with his hands, he said that even the thoughts sounding in his brain, do not belong to him, but to the world, which enter his head against his will. There are figures that appear in his dreams that he is afraid of, that he does not understand..., a series of barracks' shitholes dumpsters filled with slaughtered and skinned horses' heads... Do you get it?

Neli – No!

Riza – Then?

Neli – What if he puts an end to it?

Riza – They guard him closely.

Neli – He can...

Riza – ... and if necessary, they tie him up. They have already done it.

The man interacts with the doctor to tie the son's hands with a rope. Then he walks away from this angle and tighten the rope in a loads sprout. This is where the staging of the psychiatric ward's corner ends.

Riza – He does neither long for us, nor feels any love.

Neli – It is not true.

Riza – Yes, it is. From time to time he would whisper a single phrase: “*Who is the culprit?*”... Then and there I could no longer bear to suffer his suspicious look thrown at me, like he was putting me under investigation. Although I do not believe in magic and in demons..., yet I saw a demon.

Neli – He liked loneliness, the music that he listened on the radio, which you took away from him to listen politics.

Riza – My fault again...

Neli – The music was always there; it thought about him even when he did not think about himself.

Riza – Cut it!

Neli – Yes! (*Silence*) He has left a mark here (*pointing to the atlas*): “*The Albatross is a migratory bird that conserves its energy by using special flight techniques. This bird, which spends 92 percent of its life at sea, has a wingspan of three and a half meters. It can fly for hours without fluttering its wings. It uses the wind for this, placing its arms in a suitable position ...*” and then added with a pencil: “*I can not be an Albatross.*” (*She speaks to herself and then addresses her father.*) Do you remember us making carts with the ball bearings that you brought, and then sliding up and down the streets. We ran through the cemetery, playing and hiding behind the cypresses... I do not forget the day he gathered us, all the neighborhood kids, in the movie theatre. That was the first time we saw black shadows moving on a white piece of fabric.

Riza – What do you think, why did he drop out of school?

Neli – School was only violence for a child like him.

Riza – School means craftsmanship.

Neli – School substitutes what we are born by nature.

The girl says these words strangely as if she speaking to herself.

Riza – No one has asked him for more school than just to get a craftsmanship.

Neli – School is the parent's fossil.

Riza – Ah, you!

The man approaches the girl and closes the atlas she holds on her knees. He looks her straight into the eyes.

Riza – These are acts of violence...

The girl keeps talking about that Vito she remembers.

Neli – He had just a few friends... and they swam in the Eel canal. He liked the blowing wind, the falling rain..., because they are not man-made. He liked girls, but nonetheless he was shy like a girl.

Riza – No one prevented him from getting married. But here, the girl he wanted to marry turned him down, and he went berserk.

Neli – You are attacking him with the same words he used to protect himself when he was defenseless.

Riza – Attacking him, you say...! What the hell are you talking about?

Neli – When he laid in bed the first year, my mom covered the mirrors and removed all the red clothes around the house...

Riza – (*Interrupting her*) Ah, her spells, her demons...!

Neli – ...Well, women greased his body with oils. He quickly sprang up from the bed, with those angry eyes of his, and said: "You drive me mad, you drive me mad". He had not spoken for a whole week and it was not him speaking. It was his anger speaking.

Riza – Anger for what? What's the reason for being angry?

Neli – I do not know for sure. But I understand him, perhaps.

Riza – He vented his anger as much as he really wanted.

Neli – How?

Riza – He said "No!" any time he wished.

Neli – Because he wanted to do something else?

Riza – What the hell did he want to do?

Neli – I don't know.

Riza – I do not know, I do not know... He quit his job. One beautiful day he quit his job... Just left. That's all.

Neli – I remember that day. It was raining. He appeared at the end of the road. He was soaking wet and was barefoot.

Rizai – Why the heck were you there?

Neli – I do not know. I felt like I was there and saw him.

Riza – You always think that you looked at, it seems to you as if...

Neli – ... until he approached the gate. And when he was very close to me, he disappeared from my sight... He was not free to accept the job that you say, to do what you do. He was not the man you think he was.

Riza – No, he was not. You too are saying so. A real man is the one who has a secure job and well-paid, too.

Neli – Yes, a man is worth his work. He did it as long as he gave up. He was Vito, before he was transformed into a demon. A demon. What is a demon? A fallen angel!

Riza – You have never heard how people talk; how they point fingers at us? His madness is a stain on this house. And I am not even mentioning the money for all this.

Neli – The man gets sick, the pig does not.

The man makes a derogatory gesture with his head.

Riza – Hmm ... You have inherited this from your mother, right? The washed up sow returns to its muddy slurry.

Neli – And the dog returns to its vomit as well.

The man gets even closer to his daughter.

Riza – Listen to me well, hear me out!

Neli – Apparently, the world is more bearable for Vito where he is at.

Riza – Listen to me, I am telling you! Do you remember the fields above us? After we harvest them, they are scorched, so as to be planted the following year. This is how his brain burns, year after year, with no return.

The man grabs the girl by her jaw. It seems like a strong, almost a menacing caress.

Riza – A man who does not fight, is useless.

The girl lowers her head as if to avoid her father's hand.

Neli – Yes, and people accept you when you become who you are not.

Riza – You are talking to me like a woman in labor. Are you telling me what children I gave birth to?!

Neli – No!

Riza – Then, let us have our turn. You will suffer less and you will not feel guilty at all!

The man watches Jana as she enters the stage and gently pushes the girl aside to clear the way.

Riza – She could tell you the labors of a woman who gives birth!

The woman enters the stage in the same outfit that we saw in the first scene. She holds a purse in her hand. The man leaves the stage. The lights go out.

SCENE III

Night. The girl in a nightgown. The interior of the house is dimly lit.

Neli – Three leopard-skinned cats, sleeping, under the feet of the bed where the father sleeps. I see them. I'm not alone. A nun with a deformed mask, instead of a face, with a grinning, frozen, noiseless pity, hangs over the head of the sleeping father. In fact he is dead. He is naked, his hair is thick and slightly gray. I guard him and wait to be sure, but also fearing that he will wake up. My feet are wet and dirty with soil. I have an adult body, but I feel I'm five years old. I feel I'm five years old and a thousand years old, at the same time.

The closet is where it is, the bathroom with the door locked, the wall next to it, overflowing with letters and numbers – a primer or a bookkeeping list? I do not know. The air is frozen. It is neither winter, nor summer. There is no season, at all. I wait for my father to open his eyes. And he opens them, I shout: “*He is risen!*” Nobody listens. The three leopard-skinned cats are under the feet of the bed. Two continue to sleep. The third one opens its mouth wider than the body, loudly, shouting with me: “*He is risen!*” I feel the wakening energy of the father making a draught as someone else is entering the house. I’m scared. The large and upright body of someone whose gender I cannot determine, comes to me with a complete, menacing certainty. Its arms are bare and strong. They are more than a man’s arms. Its body is covered with a unfurled veil, thick, black and on the face... Oh! Every word of mine is one more step of he/she, towards me, to go through me, to split me in two, to deny me, as if I were a transparent and dull wall between her/him and my father. It is not a man. Her/his face is not human. The expression gray on black is not human (*the girl protects her face*). It is coming; it is penetrating my face; it is replacing my face with its own. It’s not me anymore. I’m not at all.

A bed appears on the stage as the girl speaks. The same actor goes through the transformation from the dead father in the dream, into a masked nun and finally, he becomes the shadow of death wearing a thick black veil that grips the girl like a nightmare. The transformation of an actor into three figures/characters occurs under the eyes of the spectators, just like a vision. Once the transformation is over, the girl continues with her monologue.

Neli - I have an image: I’m being ripped with a knife in the street. I have an image: I’m to be ripped with a knife in the street. I have an image: I’m afraid I’ll be ripped with a knife in the street.

The woman, wearing a nightgown, who during this time she has carefully listened to the girl, takes a vessel and furiously throws water at her. She shakes her up and down, hits her, ties her hands behind her body, while the girl resists. Both bodies are struggling and wet. The mother holds the daughter close to her body until the daughter gives up.

Jana – We are here. I am here.

The girl is lying with her head on her mother’s lap. The narration of her dreams continues more calmly, in a state between sleep and wakefulness.

Neli – I see a compact, heavy, dried up sea. Water is not liquid, but brown earth, which instills me with the fear that water gives to me. I batter my arms as if I had steel arms, and the earth splits. The sky is black. The sun is a crumb of a night star, dim and distant. The rain does not delay, rain that I do not see, but feel. The soil is damp, thin, slippery mud.

Jana – We are here. I am here.

The mother puts a mirror in front of the girl's face.

Neli – I am alone, between the sky and the earth, at that crossroads of the cemetery and the movie theater, where you return from work, with other women. You pass by me, you do not see me, and you go and shut yourself at home.

The girl sees herself in the mirror.

Neli – Is there another world rather than this?... I would like to let my mind loose to wander where it wants, I want to walk at lengths, to rest, to do nothing, to sleep. I need to fall asleep with a sweet thought in my mind.

Jana – Just do it!

Neli – I lack imagination.

Jana – I do not believe it!

Neli – My body prevents me-

Jana – Your body is light.

Neli – Nope! It is heavy and wet.

Jana – Mine is wet as well.

The girl cannot help herself from letting go off a mild smile. She has come to her senses and moves a little bit, as if to confirm the weight of her own body.

Neli – I smell rotten flowers.

Jana – Smells like.

Neli – Do you smell it as well?

Jana – It comes from the garden.

Neli – Did you clean it?

Jana – Yes. I burned the dry and rotten ones. I planted other flowers.

Neli – Hollyhock?

Jana – Red hollyhocks, sorrels, marjorams, mint...

Neli – I saw you. You were still wearing your working outfit.

Jana – You asked me about the time. I told you it was six o'clock in the afternoon. You had just woken up and felt sorry it was not in the morning.

Neli – You had a smile wandering upon your lips, at the borderline between the impossibility not to laugh and giving me an answer: Why do I confuse the dawn with the dusk.

Jana – It happens to children when they wake up from their lunch nap.

Neli – You did not answer me properly. Just as now, back then, as now, a smile hung over your lips, the same.

Jana – I could not back then, while now you are becoming a woman.

Neli – Isn't it the same?

Jana – For me yes, while for you, no!

Neli – This is the freedom that a mother offers to her daughter, right?

A smile slips from both corners of their mouths.

Neli – So close! Once we were so close!

Jana – Only once?

Neli – Just once.

Jana – When?

Neli – We are on our way to your village. I am ten years old. A Škoda⁷ truck drops us at an intersection. We walk the rest of the way on foot. We rest for a little bit under a wild pear tree. It is hot. Dust all over the place. No rivers or any stream around. You try to freshen me up by just blowing you breath.

Jana – I do not remember.

Neli – You do not touch me. It is your breath that touches me. I still can feel on my face the coolness that you blow at me with your fresh breath.

Jana – That's all?

Neli – I looked for that fresh breath from a tree, from a cloud.

⁷ Škoda: A Czech manufactured truck.

The woman gets up. The girl, keeps lying down, where she was at.

Jana – You are going overboard.

The girl tries to speak.

Jana – Do not ask me why! And don't give me that kind of look!

Silence.

Neli – Could you picture those women who sit at the door stools in the afternoon? They talk about what they did during the day, how much they washed and how much they sewed. When they are alone with their little ones, they overwhelm them with words: "I did not exist before you came along!" they tell them.

Jana – What strikes you as strange?

Neli – The fact that women have no other life. That they put their fates on the hands of another life.

Jana – They don't lie.

Neli – They don't lie, I know! They don't say it for the children to listen to, but to believe it themselves.

Jana – You are so stupid!

Neli – And don't ask me "How do you know"!

Silence.

Jana – I got pregnant during the first months of my marriage.

Neli – In this house?

Jana – No. For several years we lived in the workers's dormitory. Everything I had brought with me as dowry was useless overthere: curtains, sheets, pillowcases, centerpieces, dress fabrics, socks and nightgowns as well. All we had was one room, while sharing a bathroom at the end of our common hallway.

During the day I worked in the field. I felt sleepy. At night I could not sleep. There was a large moisture stain on the ceiling. I looked at it and it looked at me. I was thirsty. I could hardly drink any water. It stank. Even the water with which we watered the land, stank. The day I was going to give birth, I walked on foot all the way to the maternity ward.

Neli – Where was the father?

Jana – He was working.

Neli – You were alone?

Jana – There was another woman with me. She said: “Just a minute!... From the moment the baby comes out until his first breath, it lasts only one minute. The rest is your task: One, two, three hours you will have to push. When that minute comes, you will hear the baby screaming and you will remember it well, for the rest of your life.” I heard it. I did not speak. When he broke away from my womb and I stopped screaming, when he was no longer sucking from my blood, I heard his screams and I could feel his breathing. His skin had a brown color and remained so for a month. That is how long he lived.

Neli – You did not tell me all these.

Jana – There was no one to tell me why a child with brown skin dies. Your father came down the window. I lifted the baby up in my arms and showed it to him. His face just darkened as soon as he saw the baby and ran away.

The girl gets up and offers a glass of water to her mother. Then a sound effect.

One day I happened to make a stop at the cemetery. I sat on a stone for a while. Felt its freshness. Then I walked around the graves. I saw the tombs with the cross on one side, those with the crescent and a star on top of them, on the other side. They were the old stone tombs. A woman’s grave bore my name: Jana, 1880-1975 on a new plot of the cemetery, with mixed tombs, in marble, without the cross or any other sign. Who was she? Where did she come from? She had survived the cholera and two world wars during her lifespan. Did her children survive? What had this woman, who lived so long, missed in her life! What sufferance!

I did not feel like going home.

I took the way alongside the technical school, passing through some low barracks, laying flat on the ground. Classrooms were empty, with adjoining bedrooms. The yellow light of the afternoon sun came in through the barred opened windows. I saw the bunk beds, the messy sheets, discarded uniforms of the trainees, lockers with some men’s shirts, but not even a single soul around.

At the end of the barracks, where two electric poles joined and where a bunch of broom flowers had sprouted, two bodies were standing pressed to the wall. The girl ran her fingers through his arm, the boy into her hair. The girls, who to the locals seemed like their own hardworking brothers, fell in love with these quarterly trainees who later left and never came back.

I descended down to the shared metal bathrooms in the yard. I pushed the door. The showers were rusty. I did not give it a second thought. I undressed. (*Sound effect becomes stronger*) Water poured vigorously over my body. It was a gentle force hitting me. My brain stopped thinking. It stopped. My tongue was lost. My legs had brought me to this corner where nothing connected me. Nothing.

Soaking wet, I got out. I heard the noise coming from the oil wells. It was not car noise, it was clear, not coming from any car. It was a wailing raising within me, in pieces, a cry

that rose up high into the air in order to be filled with breath and then to sink back to the ground, drowned.

Silence. The girl gets even closer to her mother. She wants to hold her hand, but her mother won't answer. She's cold.

Something in my mind told me to go back to my folks. They'd be ashamed.
By nightfall I was in the neighborhood. I spotted the shadows of women leaving the thresholds one by one and closing their gates. A light came out from Ilia's room.

Neli – Yes, from the small room that could be seen from the street...

Jana – Ilia was a priest, but was no longer serving. It was not allowed.

Neli – I didn't know. But, I remember Ilia and his wife, Paro, who ran barefoot on the street. The children followed and chased her away by throwing stones. When Ilia passed away, they put him in an oxen cart, which crossed through our street, and there were few people who attended his funeral.

Jana – That night, two frozen shadows could be seen from afar under the arch of the gate. Ilia urinated in a bowl that his daughter, Maria, held in her hands. The arch of the door resembled in the darkness to those in the church. A church, I wanted a church that night. Do you understand me?

Neli – Probably.

Silence.

Jana – Riza took me to the movie theater.

Neli – Well, he's not that loathsome.

Jana – Hmmm. The sun falls on the manure also!... (*Silence*) How could they call it a movie theater! That's were groups of amateurs from the city performed some parodies with songs about work, working hard to meet and exceed the quota and the joy of living together.

Neli – What about the trials?

Jana – Do you remember?

Neli – One of them yes. The whole village had been uprooted to see the sentence that would be passed to a peasant for stealing. A woman accused him of stealing the underwears that were hanged to dry in the yard. People stood up on tiptoes just to sneak a look at his face. Elders, mothers with children in their arms, workers. They burst out

laughing several times and when the judge looked at them in the courtroom, they wiped the laughs off their faces.

They laugh.

Jana – I can still see them.

Neli – Then it turned out that the defendant also had a hand in the theft of socialist property, purchasing and selling oil, or something like that. By the time the trial was over, people had lined up in two rows outside the movie theater. The convicted man walked through them, in the middle, dressed in a fur, although it was not cold at all. His head was clean shaven, while his hands tied in handcuffs. From the stairs until the soldiers put him into the Gaz⁸ car, people insulted and spat on him.

Jana – You were so small back then!

Neli – Yes, but I do remember. Anyway he took you to the movies.

Jana – Only that time. He laughed at things that I could not even smile at. He dragged me home with those hands of his. He wanted another child immediately. I wanted one too, but I felt anger, futility. That forest on the way home made of oil wells, was a perfect order, while my mind was cluttered and weak.

Neli – He threw you out once, at night.

Jana – Because he wanted to sleep with me. He wanted to sleep with me at morning and at night.

Neli – I felt it.

Jana – In the morning I took care of the children, in the evening I came back tired and I wanted to stay with my children. You were alone all day. Whoever raises a child learns about life twice as much. But not your father!

Neli – I felt his hunger ... I listened and used to spy on him. I could not stand it... I was nine years old. You had spraypainted the stove in the kitchen with silver dust. Its smell was nauseating and nearly suffocated me. You had laid us on the ground, where Vito and I slept. You began to quarrel. Vito was deep asleep or at least pretending to be asleep. I was out of breath... Could find no peace. I could not cry. I did not understand what it was. I wanted to run away... I focused on my breath, I was pushing it, accelerating it. I was playing with your anxiety, I wanted to see you anxious... I wanted to see you feel bad, to see you in distress...

The mother approaches.

⁸ Gaz: A Polish made jeep.

Jana – Come here, you ancient bird!

The girl does not respond to her voice. It is like a shove and pull that mother and daughter try and playact with each other.

Jana – Did you do that on purpose?

Neli – Yes, and I do not know how we ended up in the hospital. It seemed like I spent a long time there, maybe three months. The day I left, my father came and took me out. Took us in a pastry joint. I did not feel like it at all, but he was hungry. He is always hungry. It was raining. I wanted to go back to where I was, or somewhere else in the village, but not exactly at home, although that's where the courtyard I liked was, the windows, your flowers, the big apricot, where we enjoyed sometimes a warm winter day, when you were at home. I liked it when you bathed and took care of yourselves after bathing, the skin of your face.

The girl places the mirror in front of the mother.

Neli – You are beautiful!

The mother looks at herself in the mirror a few times and then removes the girl's hand. She covers the ears with her hands.

Jana – I still can hear Vito's voice in my head calling: "Oh mom, mom, get me out of here!"

Silence.

Neli – Mom?

Jana – What...

A soft sound effect is heard.

Neli – What is gentleness?

Jana – I do not know.

The woman lifts the girl's head.

Jana – It's something that only you can offer to yourself.

Neli – I cannot. I'm tense as an acrobat's rope.

Jana – Is there anything that you like, my young girl?

Neli – I see things more clearly when the day breaks up. People remove their mask, but so does nature, green tree tops, grapevines with roots on poisoned soil. Then when the dusk falls, I feel better. Then I am struck by the wish to become part of the starless night, of the vast darkness... May a storm break out and let it shake these tree crowns!

Silence.

Jana – It has been leaning at the wall all night long.

The mother shows her a butterfly. The girl gets up and catches it. The sound effect becomes louder.

Neli – Do you know it? The metamorphosis of the butterfly, before it really becomes a butterfly, it is a sacrifice for survival. When the larva emerges from the egg, it eats the empty shell of the egg, then its skin falls off several times. When it is a chrysalis, it resembles to a dried up leaf. In order to protect themselves from cuckoos or bats, they blend in with nature, mimicking a leaf or a bird's droppings. The adult butterfly can be created only after the body parts disintegrate. The night butterfly has the widest wingspan, up to fourteen centimeters.

Jana – What is it called?

Neli – *Acherontia Atropos*, also known as the death's head Hawk.

Mother and daughter look at each other. The light goes out. What felt like the sound effect, is has by now become a loud noise.

SCENE IV

Sounds of rain and water gushing from the ground, mixed with shouts and human voices and roar of a tractor. In the background is screened the chaos of water and mud explosion. The woman's voice is heard loudly in the background, as she enters the stage.

Jana: – Rizaaa... Rizaaa... it has exploded...

Waken up from his sleep, the husband enters half-naked with the clothes in his hand. After a while, the girl appears as well.

Jana – At the cemetery... at the movie theater... the houses...

Riza – Enough, enough already, I heard! Get lost!

Riza gets out running.

Jana – Black water, lime, stone are gushing out. Women and children are leaving. The stinky smell suffocates you. The mud sludge has come to their doorsteps, has covered their trees and gardens. Men look at the open mouth of the earth and they can do nothing, but expect others to intervene. It's raining! Bitches with puppies are covered in mud. They come around and screaming.

The woman speaks with a different tone, as if completely detached from the unfolding event.

Jana – The waterstreams will turn into pitch, the dust into sulphur, the earth will become a fiery resin.

SCENE V

Empty stage. The man is lying in the middle of the stage. Both women are standing up, the girl above the man's head, the woman near his feet. In front of the man there is a third character, also standing, with his back to the hall. He is wearing a black raincoat. He is the accident expert.

Expert – Name?

Riza – Riza.

Expert – Surname?

Riza - Mata

Expert – Father's name?

Riza – Salo.

Expert – Age?

Riza – 54 years old.

Expert – How long have you been working?

Riza – 36 years.

Expert – Profession?

Riza – Cleaning worker.

Expert – So, the second hand in the underground reconditioning.

Riza – Yes! Hard work, but profitable.

Expert – Have you always worked there?

Riza – Yes, in the crater of the oil well.

Expert – On April 1st, of the year one thousand nine hundred and ninety ... (*expert's voice gets stuck*), no... two thousand and... (*his voice gets stuck again and does not say the exact year*), it does not matter, a BKS Company oil well. Petroleum, labeled P38A, exploded in the village.

Riza – That's correct. The government was forced and ordered the evacuation of area's residents.

Expert – There is no need for details.

Riza – People had to leave because of the gas leak...

The expert interrupts him.

Expert – No need for comment!

The man, still lying down, moves a little with difficulty.

Expert – Where were you that day?

Riza – I left home in the morning. My wife informed me about the explosion near the cemetery. I did not stay there long. They did not need me. The rain had stopped. It was still morning. The village was covered with a white layer of air that stretched across the southern terrain, all the way down to Usoja.

Expert – No details! Go on!

Riza – I took the road to the oil well area that you mentioned. The ponds around the oil wells swelled and collected oil, mud, sand due to the rain. This is my job, to clean them up...

Expert – Just simple answers!

Riza – That’s what I’m doing. Tell me about what are interested in?

Expert – This is a form.

Riza – What do you need it for?

Expert – You will find out. Were you working on your shift?

Riza – I was in the third shift. The explosion in the cemetery was the diversion of the source of that oil well, in the area where I work. And so it turned out. I found my shift coworkers there, off the shift as well, like me... then the work quota is increased. Plenty of work in a very few hours.

Expert – I am not interested at all in your comment. So, you were not working in your regular shift.

Riza – I told you, no!

Expert – Who else was with you?

Riza – Michael, Lazarus and Nicholas. We have worked together for many years. Lazarus was the youngest. I learned that...

The expert interrupts him once again.

Expert – We will come to that point, too. What was the task you were assigned?

Riza –We had to pick up the rods, the steel drills. It requires hard work... We got a “Ventisej”⁹...

Expert – What is that?

Riza – A transport car. You never heard of them? “Santasej”, “Zis”, “Harasho”¹⁰...?

Expert – No, yes for sure, I have seen them.

Riza – We got a “Ventisej”, old, but good enough to be driven through roads without roads. The rods had to be loaded across the hill and brought to where the siren we called the *cyl*¹¹ was, because it is long and has the shape of a beak. Do you have any idea when the light fades, what does a steel beak look like on the worker’s head?

⁹ *Ventisei*: An Italian made transporting truck.

¹⁰ *Sesantasei, Zis, Harasho*: Foreign made transporting trucks and machines, used in oil refineries.

¹¹ *Cyl*: A cylindrical siren.

Expert – I have no idea. When did you arrive at the place?

Rizai – Around 5 o'clock.

Expert – Then how did it happen?

Riza – You know what happened! You all know what happened!

Expert – I'm not asking what, but how did it happen?

Riza – (*Takes a deep breath*) Michael and Nicholas were in the oil well tower to maneuver the tying of rods with steel ropes. Lazarus and I were working downstairs, had to do their screwing with levers to get the column entering into the oil well. Two other workers who would change shifts were behind us, were pulling hard as well. They were not enough. Maneuvering in the tower got stalled. At the time when I exchanged hands with Lazarus to get closer to the levers, the rods started to move back and forth. The lever hit Lazarus in the head and the same lever hit me in the leg as well. All this happened within seconds... I found myself in the clay pit. I don't remember anymore.

Silence.

Expert – Were the floodlights on at the station?

Riza –No. They were burnt out.

Expert – You are lying.

Riza – If it only was like that! You need two lies and a bravery. Didn't you tell me that you had no idea what a steel beak looks like at night? Well, one out of ten floodlights was on.

Expert – I don't loose neither my temper, nor waste my time with you. Were you wearing safety helmets?

Riza – No.

Expert – Gloves?

Riza – Gloves prevent me to use my hands properly.

Expert – What were you wearing?

Riza – (*Ironically*) Overalls in summer, Stalin's blankets during winter's time.

Expert – What were you wearing on your feet?

Riza – Boots, yes..., rubber boots, goggles, earmuffs, anti-dust respirator, gas masks... Enough! In the mother twat's everything! I'm not a rookie.

Expert – Try to keep calm! We are almost done.

Riza – What have we done?

Expert – Our Company's form regarding the legality of the work's protection.

Riza – Hahahaha! (*A hard and dry laugh*)

Expert – The Company prescribes rules for the organization and the mechanisms of work processes, while the worker uses instruments. The organization creates and provides conditions for increasing productivity at work, for the sustainable increase of material well-being of employees, but, above all, stands the life and health of workers. It is therefore necessary to make the best use of working time and equipments. Good work organization is a knowledge that is not born with the man, but is established by working. I overspoke, but I had to remind you.

Riza – You are reminding me that the most knowledgeable and capable worker is the one who works well and defends himself properly, respecting the rules of technical safety at work? That the working class must forcefully establish workers' and peasants' control and no concessions at all, no micro-bourgeois liberalism and sentimentality should be allowed in this matter. (*Riza puts an end to his irony*) Didn't that time really end?

Expert – The devil does not destroy his nest. Likewise, time does not harm the goods that come from the past, no matter how bad it may seem to you. Sir, the only difference between today and yesterday, is that we have villages without peasants and cities without working class.

The man rises up, leaning on his elbow.

Riza – You do not want to pay. This is all. You do not want to pay, neither the grave of the one who passed away or his children, nor my foot.

Expert – Not exactly. We are not reached the end, yet!

Riza – You are trying to blame and place the responsibility upon the victims.

Expert – Victim? In no case did I use the word "victim"! On the contrary, I am continuing to treat and deal with you according to the worker status in front of my eyes. Otherwise, I would not be here. But you are not letting me to make the summary.

Riza – I am being patient with you, don't you see? End this charade anyway!

Expert – As we have seen so far, from the information you gave me about the accident, about the working conditions, the circumstances that led to the accident, the causes, the task assigned to the injured – open brackets here (*for the injured*), – and according to the doctor data on the nature of the injury, the company calculates the economic damage as a result of the accident and, consequently, the payment related to the lost working days. The company examines cases where we are dealing with partial, long-term loss of ability to work or accidents with permanent disability as well as accidents with fatal consequences. In conclusion of our case, the responsibility and guilt lies with the injured party. The company does not pay.

Riza – That's it?

Expert – One last thing: Of course you can no longer do the same job, your category is downgraded, as is your paygrade as well. Of course, if you are capable of doing any kind of work.

The man rises up leaning on his elbow.

Riza – I am strong.

Expert – Prove it!

The man tries to get up halfway, but his body does not hold him and he falls again.

Riza – I am still strong.

The man tries again, grabs the expert's legs and pulls him from his raincoat. The expert does not make the slightest move.

Expert – That's it then.

The lights go out. The man's voice is heard in the dark.

Riza – May you find your way blindly! May you drag your feet! Janaaa...! Neli...!

SCENE VI

Empty stage. The man is sitting in a chair in the middle of the stage. He is resting on a crutch. Both women are by his side. In front of the man stands a third figure, standing too. It's the doctor dressed in white.

Doctor – How are we doing today?

No answer.

Doctor – Weakness?

Riza – See for yourself!

Doctor – Yes, visible and sharp weakness. Headache?

Riza – No.

Doctor – Dizziness?

Riza – None!

Doctor - Sweet taste in your mouth?

Riza – Yes.

Doctor – Loss of appetite?

Rizai – No, no change.

Doctor – Any heat waves?

Riza – None.

Doctor – At night, how do you feel at night?

Riza – Cold.

Doctor – I see.

Riza – What do you see?

Doctor – It is the carbon in your blood... Insomnia?

The man does not answer.

Doctor – Good. Let me take a look at the wound!

The doctor sits on his knees and loosens the bandage. One end of the bandage in the girl's hand, the other in the woman's hand. Man, woman, girl tie white bandages.

Doctor – You are lucky!

Riza – Keep doing your job!

Doctor – I know you do not like to hear that. I wouldn't like it either.

Riza – Then?

The man groans.

Doctor – Yes, I have seen some more than you and they were worse than you. Others before me have seen what I've seen. It goes on like this for a hundred years.

Riza – Then you better keep silent!

Doctor – It would be better if the wound was greased with some oil from the beginning, you know?

Riza –What are you mumbling about?

Doctor – Yes, another thing they do not do today: It was once used for wound healing. Think, the Egyptians used natural bitumen for embalming, while the Phoenicians used it for painting and sealing ships. In the gardens of Semiramis it was used as a cement...

The man groans and tries to restrain himself.

In your case ... I was there when they brought you. The cloth you used instead of socks was glued to the crushed bone into the flesh and then, your flesh into the boots.

Riza – My foot, could you have saved my foot?

Doctor – Nope! Forget it!

The doctor looks at the wound.

Doctor – Look, it does not seem so bad!

He treats him.

Doctor – But there were even beautiful days, right?

The man hangs his head down. He is engulfed by a deep sighing emotion that almost chokes him up.

Doctor – ...It's worth remembering, even to cry... It does you good, for one simple reason: the tear glands. Inhalation of vapors and gases cause narcotic actions, poisons the tear glands ... One more thing, between us: (*The doctor speaks to the man in the ear*) In the future, you may notice that sexual virility...

Riza – Really, I left a foot there, but the appetite for my wife has not gone away. (*Turns to the woman*) Isn't that true, Jana?

The man grabs the woman's hand. No reaction from the woman. The doctor bandages the wound, until the bandage ends on the hands of the woman and the girl.

Doctor – As for work, your wife is young. She will work twice as hard. Do you know women like this?

Riza —Isn't that true, Jana?

The man takes the woman by the hand. No reaction from the woman.

Riza – Your predictions are unreliable.

Doctor – Uff...! As for the children, they will understand the moral of the fable themselves. So are the children.

The doctor closes the equipment box. He gets up.

Doctor – That was it. Stay healthy!

The lights go out.

SCENE VII

The household is asleep. The girl wakes up with a headache. Takes a glass of water and sits down at the table. After a while she gets up and listens to the sleeping parents. Blocks the exits of the house and goes to the bottom of the scene to the gas tap. She turns it on all the way.

She goes to her parents' bed again. Removes the crutch from the father's head. She is about to talk to her mother, but then does not. She gets up and goes to the closet, stands for a moment and opens the closet doors with a gesture as if to release the butterflies fixed inside.

Neli – O guiding night!

O night more lovely than the dawn!

She turns back and lies next to her parents, on her mother's side.

The gas pressure noise becomes more sensitive and slowly the faucet nozzle screened on the background, turns towards the spectators and the whole background is lost in a large black hole.