

The Inspector General

A play in 5 acts

By Mattius Rischard

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CHARACTERS

ANTON ANTONOVICH, The Mayor or Mayor. Bloated, sunburned, and blustering. Talks like a Hollywood producer. Every sentence ends like it's the biggest news in the world. Speaks in slogans and superlatives. Thinks he's the smartest guy in the room. Probably isn't.

ANNA ANDREYEVNA, his wife. A retired model with clear contempt for her husband, and an ostentatious sense of fashion.

MARYA ANTONOVNA, his daughter. Beautiful, accomplished, privileged. Her father seems to be attracted to her in an unseemly way.

LUKA KHLOPOV, Director of Schools. Carries both a prayer book and a switch. Quotes scripture and gossip interchangeably. Claims to have met the Czar, though no one believes him. Peddles in conspiracies and a fan of book banning, censorship, and embezzling educational funds.

MRS. KHLOPOV. His wife. A frumpy conservative, who wears outdated clothing in an attempt to look modest. Thinks women should stay at home and obey their husbands.

JUDGE (AMMOS) FYODOROVICH LYAPKIN TYAPKIN, a Judge. Cynical, corrupt, and drinks before every ruling. Fond of foxhounds and fainting couches.

SVETLANA PHILIPPOVA ZEMLYANIKA, CHARITY COMMISSIONER and Warden of the Hospital. A realtor/banker who dabbles in charity and social work to increase her image. Obsessed with relocating to Crimea. Always pitching something. Strong Perfume. Flashy jewelry and rings.

IVAN KUZMICH SHPYOKIN, A POSTMASTER. Small eyes, big ears, and an open mail policy.

IVAN ALEXANDROVICH KHLESTAKOV, a Government civil servant. Relatively young and restless, lounges with a cigar and unread papers. Balding prematurely, his hairplugs/sawdust is constantly coming out, dripping down his face. His boots shine too bright for the dust around them. Wears a black hat that says "Make Russia Great Again". Carries a chainsaw.

OSIP, his servant. Huge glasses, bookish. Pays with stocks for everything.

PYOTR IVANOVICH DOBCHINSKI AND PYOTR IVANOVICH BOBCHINSKI, [independent gentleman] indistinguishable local gossips who finish each other's sentences and wear matching fur coats.

DR CHRISTIAN IVANOVICH HUBNER, a District Doctor. His coat is white in theory, but soiled. Believes leeches cure everything, skeptical of vaccines. Mumbles in Latin, but only quotes peasant proverbs. Advocates eating roadkill and exotic meats.

KAROBKIN - another official

MADAME KAROBKIN, his wife (these two can be interchanged based on gender of cast)

UKHAVYORTOV, a Police Superintendent. His mustache is better groomed than his ethics. Swears allegiance to the Constitution (the Fundamental Laws of 1906 in which Czarist Russia became “constitutional monarchy” as a concession to the revolutionaries), though no one’s seen it. Sees himself as a revolutionary, runs the police as his personal militia (the настоящие бойцы, or “real fighters/proud fighters/proud boys?) predicated on the new freedoms of assembly and the right to bear arms. Loyal only to the Czar, often in conflict with the Mayor as well as the locals.

POLICE CONSTABLE PUGOVKIN, wears body armor and sunglasses. Keeps a flask handy. Sees himself as a leader of the militia against the deep state and government bureaucracy. Loyal only to the Czar.

ABDULIN, a shopkeeper

MERCHANTS

THE LOCKSMITH'S WIFE.

THE SERGEANT'S WIFE.

MISHKA, servant of the Mayor.

WAITER AT THE INN.

PROLOGUE
A Bare Stage (Everywhere and Nowhere)

DOBCHINSKI

We are the first to know things in this town.

BOBCHINSKI

The very first. Often before they're true.

DOBCHINSKI

We hear every rumor, every whisper, every sigh. And we carry it straight—

BOBCHINSKI

—to the **MAYOR**.

DOBCHINSKI

—to the hospital.

BOBCHINSKI

—to the inn.

DOBCHINSKI

Sometimes to all three. We are civic-minded.

BOBCHINSKI *(to audience)*

And now we will carry it to you.

DOBCHINSKI

You should know that we live in a very ordinary town. Perfectly ordinary.

BOBCHINSKI

Completely average. Nothing special at all.

DOBCHINSKI

We have a **MAYOR** who is honest. Mostly.

BOBCHINSKI

Officials who are diligent. When watched.

DOBCHINSKI

A hospital that is clean—

BOBCHINSKI
—where it shows.

DOBCHINSKI
A school that is modern—

BOBCHINSKI
—on paper.

DOBCHINSKI
People pay their taxes.

BOBCHINSKI
When they can be found.

DOBCHINSKI
In short, our town is like... well...

BOBCHINSKI (*gesturing to the audience*)
Like anywhere.

DOBCHINSKI
And then, one day, we heard a rumor. A very important rumor.

BOBCHINSKI
An Inspector was coming. From the capital.

DOBCHINSKI
Someone who sees everything.

BOBCHINSKI
Someone who writes everything down.

DOBCHINSKI
Someone who might tell the truth about us—

BOBCHINSKI
—to people who matter.

DOBCHINSKI (*to audience, leaning in*)
We were the first to hear it.

BOBCHINSKI
The first to believe it.

DOBCHINSKI

And the first to find the stranger at the inn.

BOBCHINSKI

We would like to say we handled it calmly.

(They exchange a look.)

BOBCHINSKI (points downstage)

It begins there. At the inn.

DOBCHINSKI (*gesturing around the stage*)

And then it spreads. To the Post Office, the hospital, the Mayor's house, the streets, the corridors, the town square.

BOBCHINSKI

The details, of course, may have been polished a little.

DOBCHINSKI

Just a little.

BOBCHINSKI (*to audience*)

But the main thing is true.

DOBCHINSKI

The fear is true.

BOBCHINSKI

The laughter is true.

DOBCHINSKI

And the Inspector—

He hesitates, glancing at

BOBCHINSKI.

BOBCHINSKI

Well. You can decide about the Inspector yourself.

DOBCHINSKI

We've said enough.

BOBCHINSKI

The story will speak now.

DOBCHINSKI (*calling upstage*)

Inn!

BOBCHINSKI

Municipal hall!

Together, with a little flourish, they clap their hands. As they do, lights shift; the bare stage transforms into the world of the play (first location the municipal meeting room or inn, depending on your Act I opening). They step back to the sides or upstage as ACT I begins.

ACT I, SCENE I

The municipal hall. Morning. The samovar hisses like a tired bureaucrat. The Mayor stands under the portrait of Czar Putin. His hands wave like flags. Around him JUDGE (AMMOS), SVETLANA, LUKA, and the others. All uncomfortable. All waiting for someone else to speak first.

MAYOR (ANTON ANTONOVICH)

Okay, okay, listen—this is important. The biggest thing. Unbelievable news. There's an inspector coming. A big one. Huge.

JUDGE (AMMOS)

What kind of inspector?

LUKA

A Revizor?

MAYOR

Yes. From Petersburg. Incognito. Secret orders. Very hush-hush. The best kind of secrecy.

SVETLANA PHILIPPOVA ZEMLYANIKA We've dodged this bullet before. Guess we ran out of luck.

LUKA

Good God. Secret instructions? What kind of sick game is this?

MAYOR

I felt it last night. Dreamt of rats. Giant ones. Black. Smelled like betrayal. You know it's bad when even the rats show up. Got a letter this morning. From Chmikov. He knows things. He's plugged in.

(He waves a greasy envelope.)

"...An inspector is coming. Quiet. Private. Watching. Especially your town, your district. Not saying why. You've got your... what do you call them? Perks. Benefits. We all do. But watch it. He could be here already. Hiding in plain sight."

And then something about his cousin and a fiddle. Point is—brace yourselves.

JUDGE (AMMOS)

There must be a reason. They don't just send these guys for fun.

LUKA

Why us, Anton Antonovich? Why now?

MAYOR

Why? Why not? We've been skating too long. Now the blade's on us.

JUDGE (AMMOS)

I say it's war. A test. They want to see how loyal we are. Measure the decay.

MAYOR

War? In this dump? We're three years from the nearest border by horse. No one invades this place except boredom.

JUDGE (AMMOS)

It's internal. Surveillance. Audit. They're sniffing out the soft spots.

MAYOR

Could be. Could not be. Either way, we've got to fix things. Fast. Svetlana—you're first. Hospital's a mess. Patients look like blacksmiths.

SVETLANA PHILIPPOVA ZEMLYANIKA We'll get them clean caps. Scrub the stink.

MAYOR

And labels. Latin. Something foreign. Impress them. Fewer patients would also help.

SVETLANA PHILIPPOVA ZEMLYANIKA We've got Christian Ivanovich. His methods are... natural. You live, you live. You die, you die. He doesn't speak Russian, but the leeches do.

CHRISTIAN

(grunts something vaguely Latin.)

MAYOR

Ammos—your courthouse is a barn. Geese in the lobby? Goslings pecking at petitioners?

JUDGE (AMMOS)

I'll move them to the kitchen.

MAYOR

And clean your desk. There was a whip on it. You like hunting, I get it. But the inspector might not. And your assessor reeks. Like a distillery exploded.

JUDGE (AMMOS)

He blames his nanny. Says she knocked something loose.

MAYOR

Get him onions. Garlic. Christian's nostrums. Whatever.

CHRISTIAN

(grunts again.)

MAYOR

Luka, your teachers—brilliant minds, tragic faces. One looks like he's trying to sneeze out his soul every time he speaks.

LUKA

He's passionate. He grimaced at the headmaster last week. I thought he had a stroke. Turns out he just disagreed on Latin roots.

MAYOR

The history teacher broke a stool. Yelled about Macedon. Nearly lit the curtains on fire. This isn't the battlefield of Gaugamela.

LUKA

He says he'd die for history. I believe him.

MAYOR

It's always like this. The smart ones are drunk or deranged. The rest just grimace. But it's the inspector we need to worry about. He walks in—"Where's the judge? Lyapkin-Tyapkin!" Boom. "Where's the charity guy? Zemlyanika!" Boom. Heads roll. Curtains fall.

JUDGE (AMMOS)

Let's be clear. I take bribes, yes. But tasteful ones. Puppies. Not gold.

MAYOR

A bribe is a bribe, Ammos. Whether it pants or shines.

JUDGE (AMMOS)

And your wife's shawls? Expensive ones. Gifts?

MAYOR

Irrelevant! I attend church. Every Sunday. You? You talk about evolution like it's a card trick.

JUDGE (AMMOS)

I trust logic.

MAYOR

Too much logic and you start doubting saints. Anyway, keep it tidy. Luka, control your faculty. Ammos, hide the whips and drunks. Svetlana, bleach the sheets. The rats are coming. One of them might be wearing a badge.

ACT I, SCENE II — The Post Office Corridor, Moments Later

[The same municipal hall. Portrait eyes still judging. The MAYOR paces, JUDGE (AMMOS) (the JUDGE) lingers, pretending to be relaxed. A door bangs. Enter the POSTMASTER with a bundle of damp letters.]

POSTMASTER (IVAN KUZMICH SHPYOKIN)

Tell me quick—who's coming? What kind of chinovnik—big hat, bigger orders?

MAYOR (ANTON ANTONOVICH)

What—haven't you heard?

POSTMASTER

Heard a rumor.

BOBCHINSKI

dropped it at my window like a secret pastry.

MAYOR

Well—what's your take?

POSTMASTER

Simple. We're at war with the Turks. They are Muslim terrorists.

JUDGE (JUDGE (AMMOS) FYODOROVICH)

Exactly! I said that! Turks.

MAYOR

You're both wrong. It's not the Turks—it's us. Trouble is domestic. I've got a letter.

POSTMASTER

Ah. Then no war with the Turks.

MAYOR

How do you feel about it, Ivana?

POSTMASTER

How do you feel about it, Anton Antonovich?

MAYOR

Me? I'm no coward—but I'm... itchy. The shopkeepers grumble, the townsfolk glare. If I've "borrowed" a kopek, it was with love. Still—(pulls him aside)—I smell a complaint brewing. A real one. (softly) What if—purely for the public good—you, ah, slightly... open every letter that comes and goes. Just a little crack, a little steam. If it's harmless, reseal. If it names me—misdeliver it to the stove.

POSTMASTER

Please. Don't teach me my hobby. I do it already—pure curiosity. Global affairs! Love affairs! A good letter beats the Moscow News and the priest's sermon combined. Sometimes you get a love note—language like butter. Edifying!

MAYOR

Then tell me—anything about a chinovnik from Petersburg?

POSTMASTER

Nothing from Petersburg. Plenty from Kostroma and Saratov. Fine writing lately. A lieutenant described a ball—"Dear friend, I live in Elysium girls in constellations, music like artillery, flags like dawn." Gorgeous. I kept it.

MAYOR

No time for poetry. Do me a favor—if you sniff a complaint or denunciation, sit on it. Without conscience.

POSTMASTER

With the greatest pleasure.

JUDGE (*who has heard enough to be dangerous*)

Careful. That game bites back.

POSTMASTER (*innocent*)

Eh? God forbid.

MAYOR

Nothing—nothing. Private business. If it concerned the public—or you—I'd be a saint.
Which, tragically, I am not.

JUDGE (switching gears)

Speaking of saints—I've a puppy for you. Real bloodline. Sister to the one you liked.
And since Cheptovich and Varkhovinski are suing each other, I hunt hares on both
estates. It's paradise.

MAYOR

Keep your hares, Ammos. I've got that cursed incognito on the brain. Any second, that
door flies open—boom—the Revizor walks in and asks for our souls by item number.

ACT I, SCENE III — The Inn News

[The same hall. The air is stale. Paper edicts peel from the walls. The **MAYOR** paces.
JUDGE (AMMOS) (the **JUDGE**) watches. Doors slam. Enter **BOBCHINSKI** and
DOBCHINSKI, breathless, snow in their hair.]

BOBCHINSKI

Extraordinary.

DOBCHINSKI

Unexpected.

ALL

What is it?

DOBCHINSKI

We went to the inn—

BOBCHINSKI (over him)

Yes, Pyotr Ivanovich and I went to the inn—

DOBCHINSKI

Let me tell it.

BOBCHINSKI

No. You tangle things.

DOBCHINSKI

You forget things.

BOBCHINSKI

I do not. Gentlemen, make him stop interrupting. Please.

MAYOR (*snaps*)

Say it. My heart is in my mouth. Sit. Both of you. Speak.

BOBCHINSKI (*settling, proud*)

I left here at once, after your letter. Went to Karobkin. He wasn't in. Went to Rastakovski. Not in. Went to Ivan Kuzmich to report. Then I met Dobchinski—

DOBCHINSKI

By the tartlet stall.

BOBCHINSKI

By the tartlet stall. I told him the news. He said he already heard it from your Avdotya—
(quick) who was on her way to Philip Antonovich Pachechuyev—

DOBCHINSKI

For a bottle of French brandy.

BOBCHINSKI

French brandy. We went to Pachechuyev's. On the way, Dobchinski says, "Let's stop at the inn. My insides are empty. They have salmon." We go in. We sit. Then he walks in.

DOBCHINSKI

A young man. Well-dressed.

BOBCHINSKI

Well-dressed. A face like a stamp. The kind that sticks. He carried himself like a banner. The hat—black—letters on it. "Make Russia Great Again." Boots too bright for this town. I felt it in my bones.

DOBCHINSKI (*pointing*)

We called Vlas the innkeeper. His wife had a boy last month. The boy cries like a trumpet.

BOBCHINSKI

We asked him

"Who is he?" Vlas says

"A chinovnik. From Petersburg. Name—Ivan Alexandrovich Khlestakov. Papers say Saratov. He's been here over a fortnight. Won't leave. Eats on account. Pays nothing."

I was lit up like a church. I said "Hey—"

DOBCHINSKI

I said “Hey.”

BOBCHINSKI

We both said “Hey.” Why Saratov on the papers, and why sit here? Gentlemen—this is him.

MAYOR

Who—what chinovnik?

BOBCHINSKI

The one from your letter. The Revizor.

MAYOR (*goes pale*)

God help us. No.

DOBCHINSKI

Yes. He doesn’t pay. He doesn’t go. Who else would it be? His travel papers say Saratov.

BOBCHINSKI

It’s him. He sees everything. He saw us eating salmon (because of Pyotr Ivanovich’s condition). He looked at our plates like this.
(imitates a slow, official stare)

MAYOR (*low, fast*)

Room?

DOBCHINSKI

Number five. First floor.

BOBCHINSKI

Same room where the officers quarreled last year.

MAYOR

How long?

DOBCHINSKI

A fortnight. Since St. Vasili’s Day.

MAYOR (*aside, short breaths*)

A fortnight. In that time the sergeant’s wife was flogged. The prisoners ate nothing fit. The dram-shops spilled into the street. The streets are filth. My name is on all of it.
(he grips his hair)

SVETLANA PHILIPPOVA ZEMLYANIKA

Should we go in gala dress?

JUDGE (JUDGE (AMMOS))

No. First send the Mayor, then clergy, then tradesmen. It's written somewhere. Some lodge book.

MAYOR

No. Leave it to me. I've handled worse and lived. Maybe God will cover us again.
(to BOBCHINSKI) He's young?

BOBCHINSKI

Twenty-three. Twenty-four at most.

MAYOR

Good. Young men wear their thoughts on the skin. Old birds hide them in the liver.
(to the room) Put your houses in order. Papers. Floors. Faces. I'll go alone—or with Dobchinski—and make a quiet pass by the inn. The traveler must be honored.
(he calls) Svistunov!

SVISTUNOV (appearing)

Sir!

MAYOR

Find the Police Superintendent. No—send for him. Then back here. Run.

[SVISTUNOV bolts.]

SVETLANA PHILIPPOVA ZEMLYANIKA

Come, Ammos Fyodorovich. Mischief brews like tea.

JUDGE

What frightens you? Give the sick clean nightcaps and be done.

SVETLANA PHILIPPOVA ZEMLYANIKA

Nightcaps—nonsense. I ordered oatmeal. My corridors smell like boiled cabbage. You must hold your nose to cross them.

JUDGE (dry)

My court is fine. If he reads a file, he'll wish he hadn't. Fifteen years on the bench—I never read charge-sheets. Not one. Solomon couldn't.

[The **JUDGE**, SVETLANA PHILIPPOVA ZEMLYANIKA (Charity Commissioner), Director of Schools, and the **POSTMASTER** move to go. They smack shoulders with SVISTUNOV charging back in. A tangle at the door.]

ACT I, SCENE IV — The Door, Then the Street

*[Cold air knives in from outside. The droshky bells jangle somewhere beyond the portico. The **MAYOR** barks orders while SVISTUNOV stands at attention. BOBCHINSKI and DOBCHINSKI hover, eager as sparrows.]*

MAYOR

Is the droshky ready?

SVISTUNOV

Yes.

MAYOR

Go to the street— No. Wait. Bring—Where are the others? Why are you alone? I told Prokhorov to be here. Where is Prokhorov?

SVISTUNOV

In the police office. Can't be used.

MAYOR

Why?

SVISTUNOV

They brought him in drunk at dawn. We dunked his head. He's still under.

MAYOR (tears at his hair, then snaps back)

God help me. Run to my room. Fast. Bring my new hat and my sword. Now—Peter Ivanovich—*(to DOBCHINSKI)*—let's go.

BOBCHINSKI (bouncing)

Me too! Take me, Anton Antonovich!

MAYOR

No. Impossible. Three is a circus. No room in the droshky.

BOBCHINSKI

I'll trot behind. On foot, on foot. I only want a look. A peek through the crack. See how he lives. That's all.

MAYOR

(to SVISTUNOV, taking the sword, grimaces at the blade)

Round up the constables. Each man takes a—Look at this rust. That mutt Abdulin sees a worn sword and won't sell me a new one. They're all cheats. They've got petitions tucked under their coats, I can smell the ink. (presses the sword flat in his palm)

Each man takes a broom. Not a rake. A broom. Sweep the road to the inn. Clean. I want the filth gone before the horse lifts a hoof. Do you hear? (points a finger at SVISTUNOV) And you—I know your little games. You squeeze in, you slide out with spoons in your boots. Try me. I hear silver sing. What was that with the merchant Chornyaiev? He gave you two arshins for your uniform. You walked with the whole bolt. Mind yourself. Steal only what your rank can carry. Go.

ACT ONE, SCENE 5

[Enter the POLICE SUPERINTENDENT (STEPAN ILYICH). The MAYOR is already in motion, hat in one hand, nerves in the other. BOBCHINSKI and DOBCHINSKI hover.]

MAYOR

Hullo, Stepan Ilyich. Where have you been hiding? What do you call that—professional?

SUPERINTENDENT

Only stepped beyond the door a moment.

MAYOR

Listen. A chinovnik from Petersburg. What have you arranged?

SUPERINTENDENT

As ordered. I sent the kvartalny, Pugovkin, with the constables to sweep the streets.

MAYOR

Where's Derzhimorda?

SUPERINTENDENT

Went out with the fire-engine.

MAYOR

And Prokhorov is drunk?

SUPERINTENDENT

Yes.

MAYOR

How did you allow it?

SUPERINTENDENT

God knows. There was a row outside town. He went to break it up and came back broken. Full of vodka.

MAYOR (*short, fast*)

Then hear me. The police lieutenant—he’s tall—put him on the bridge. Optics. Tear down the old fence by the boot-maker’s. Scatter the boards. Plant a post. Tie on a wisp of straw. Call it “repairs.” The more litter the better. Shows zeal. Activity. Leadership. (he stalls, remembering) Forty cartloads of rubbish behind that fence. This town is a midden. Put a monument down, you get garbage as tribute. Every time. (leans close) If the new man asks if the officials are content—answer “Perfectly, your Honour.” If anyone isn’t content, I’ll give him a reason afterward. (he exhales, a tight, tired prayer) I’m a sinner. A terrible one. (he grabs a box, tries to set it on his head) Heaven help us finish this clean. I’ll give a taper like no one ever gave. Three puds of wax. From every merchant. For thanks.

SUPERINTENDENT (*gently*)

Anton Antonovich—that’s the hat-box. Not your hat.

MAYOR (*pitching it away*)

Damn it. Of course. I knew that. If he asks about the hospital chapel—the money from five years ago—say we started it and it burned down. I filed the report. Some idiot will forget and say it never began. Smack him quiet. And tell Derzhimorda less fist. Guilty or innocent—he makes them see stars “for public order.” Not today. (he moves for the door, then back) And keep the soldiers off the street with nothing under their tunics. That scoundrel garrison puts wool on top and air below. Not today. Not while we “Make Russia Great Again” for our guest. (to **DOBCHINSKI**) Come on, Peter Ivanovich.

[They go, fast—brushing past the SUPERINTENDENT, who is already shouting orders down the corridor.]

ACT ONE, SCENE SIX - The Window

[ANNA ANDREYEVNA and MARYA ANTONOVNA rush in. Coats half-on. Pins in their teeth. Breathless.]

ANNA

Where are they? Where? God help me. (opens a door and shouts) Husband! Antosha! Anton! (to **MARYA**, rapid-fire) This is your fault. “I need a pin. I need a handkerchief.” Pins can wait. News cannot. (runs to the window, leans out) Anton! Where are you? Has he come? The Inspector? Does he have a moustache? What kind? Does he wear the black hat? The one with the slogan?

VOICE OF THE MAYOR *(off)*

Wait a bit, ma'am. Wait a little.

ANNA

Wait? Ridiculous. I only want one word. Colonel or clerk? *(beat, seething)* There. He's gone. I won't forgive him for that. *(to MARYA)* And you—"Mama, pin my scarf. I'll come directly." Directly? Curse "directly." Your vanity ruined the news. The Postmaster comes and you pose at the glass, tilt your chin, play the swan. You think he's smitten. He makes faces at your back.

MARYA *(quiet)*

What shall we do then, Mama? We'll know everything in an hour or two.

ANNA

An hour or two? Fine answer. Why not a month? Why not the Resurrection? *(leans out again, calling)* Avdotya! Hey—Avdotya! Have you heard if anyone has come? No? You goose. Then ask! Your head is stuffed with lovers and paper flowers. *(listens, annoyed)* They drove off in a hurry? Then run. After the droshky. Go now. Ask everyone where they are. Ask nicely. Find out what he looks like. Do you hear me? *(firing orders)* Peep through the keyhole. Count his eyelashes. What color are his eyes—black or not? Come straight back. This minute. Now. Quick. Quick. Quick.

[She keeps shouting out the window. MARYA stands beside her, watching the street. They both stay there, fixed to the glass, as the curtain falls.]

ACT TWO

ACT TWO, SCENE ONE - The Inn — Khlestakov's Room

[OSIP lies on his master's bed, boots off, stomach loud.]

OSIP

Devil take it. I'm hungry. My gut sounds like a brass band. At this rate we'll never get home. Two months since we left Petersburg. He burned his money town by town. The young rooster. Now we're stuck and he tucks his tail. He likes the parade. "Osip—best room. Best dinner. Nothing cheap." For a copyist. A clerk. Playing count. He makes friends on the road. Plays cards. Gets skinned.

I'm sick of it. In our village you lie on the stove and eat tartlets. Quiet. No worry. But Petersburg is the city. If you've got money, you live like a lord. Theaters. Dancing dogs. Everything. People speak polite. At Shchukin Bazaar they call you "my lord." You sit with chinovniks on the ferry.

If you want company, you step into a shop. The agent tells you the war news and the stars as if he's got them in his hand. An old officer's wife flirts. A chambermaid cuts you a look. You dog. Fine manners, too. No rough talk. Always "sir."

If your legs are tired, you take a droshky and sit like a noble. If you don't want to pay, you slip through a door. Let the devil catch you. But sometimes you feast. Sometimes—this.

But it's his fault. The old man sends him money—enough to keep us fed. He blows it. Hires droshkies. "Osip, theater tickets." In a week he pawns the new tailcoat. Another time he sells everything down to the last shirt. Keeps some old coat and a dead cape. I swear it. English cloth. Beautiful. A dress suit costs a hundred and fifty—he lets his uncle have it for twenty. His breeches? No buyer.

Why? He never works. He walks the Prospekt and plays cards. If the **MAYOR** knew, he wouldn't care that you're a chinovnik. He'd lift your shirt-tail and stripe you till next week.

The landlord says no more food without cash. If we don't pay—nothing. Oh, God—just a bowl of shchi. I'll bet everyone else has eaten square.

(knock)

There. He's coming.

[OSIP drops off the bed, straightens fast.]

ACT TWO, SCENE TWO
The Inn — Same Room, Continuous

[**KHLESTAKOV** strides in, flicks dust from a black cap with a bold slogan, hands the cap and a walking stick to **OSIP**.]

KHLESTAKOV

Here. Take these. You've been rolling on the bed again.

OSIP

Me? I haven't seen a bed.

KHLESTAKOV (*points*)

It's all creased. Don't lie.

OSIP

Blame the mattress if you like. I've got legs. I stand. What do I want with your bed?

KHLESTAKOV (*pacing, restless*)

See if there's tobacco left in the pouch.

OSIP

You smoked the last four days ago.

KHLESTAKOV (*chews his lip; barks*)

Osip—do you hear?

OSIP

What?

KHLESTAKOV (*less sure*)

Go down there.

OSIP

Where?

KHLESTAKOV (*almost pleading*)

Downstairs. The buffet. Tell them to give me something to eat.

OSIP

No, sir.

KHLESTAKOV (*snaps*)

You refuse? Blockhead!

OSIP

Go or not go—it's the same. The landlord says no more on credit.

KHLESTAKOV

How dare he say that? Nonsense.

OSIP

He says he'll go to the **MAYOR**. "Third week unpaid," he says. "You and your master are cons," he says. "And your master's a scoundrel. We know your kind," he says.

KHLESTAKOV

And you repeat it to my face. You enjoy it.

OSIP

He also says, "You come here, make yourselves at home, run a bill, won't leave. I'll file a complaint. I'll have him taken to the police office and put in jail." That's what he says.

KHLESTAKOV (*cuts him off*)

Enough. Idiot. Go talk to him. The bastard.

OSIP

I'll call him up here.

KHLESTAKOV

Why? Damn it all—we'll go downstairs so you can talk to him yourself while I supervise you.

OSIP

Really, sir—

KHLESTAKOV (*flaring, then flat*)

Go to the devil—and find the landlord.

[**OSIP** exits. **KHLESTAKOV** looks at the door, suddenly small.]

WAITER (*approaches, cautious*)

Would the gentleman care for... anything real? We have bread. It's... mostly bread.

KHLESTAKOV

Bread is legacy. Give me roast beef and data. Feed me blood and numbers.

OSIP

I think he means just coffee. American, please.

WAITER

We only have Turkish. And it's boiled.

KHLESTAKOV (*shrugs*)

Everything's boiled in Russia. Even ambition.

[Enter PYOTR IVANOVICH DOBCHINSKI and PYOTR IVANOVICH BOBCHINSKI, huffing, stumbling, conspiratorial, snow in their fur collars. They stop dead when they see KHLESTAKOV.]

DOBCHINSKI

It's him.

BOBCHINSKI

Definitely him.

DOBCHINSKI

Tall boots.

BOBCHINSKI

Shiny. Too shiny.

DOBCHINSKI

Looks poor, but...

BOBCHINSKI

...carries himself like a businessman.

KHLESTAKOV (*not looking up*)

You're both breathing too loud.

DOBCHINSKI (*nervous, about to launch into the usual*)

Ah! Just admiring the... imperial cut of your coat—

He freezes. So does **BOBCHINSKI**. They exchange a quick, panicked look.

BOBCHINSKI (*to DOBCHINSKI, low, fast*)

Wait. This isn't right.

DOBCHINSKI

What?

BOBCHINSKI

We're not supposed to be here yet.

DOBCHINSKI

We're not?

BOBCHINSKI

No. We already found him at the inn. That was before. We told that story in Act One.

DOBCHINSKI

Right. By the salmon.

BOBCHINSKI

Exactly. And in this act—

They both glance toward the audience, remembering their “narrator” job.

DOBCHINSKI (*to audience, apologetic*)

In this act, officially, canonically, we arrive... with the **MAYOR**.

BOBCHINSKI

Very important detail. Historical.

DOBCHINSKI

Otherwise the report gets messy.

KHLESTAKOV (*looking up for the first time*)

Are you talking to me or to them?

BOBCHINSKI (*cheerfully*)

To the record.

DOBCHINSKI

We got carried away. We're enthusiastic witnesses.

BOBCHINSKI

Sometimes we jump ahead. Timeline issues.

DOBCHINSKI

But if we actually meet you here, like this—

BOBCHINSKI

—then when we show up later with Anton Antonovich—

DOBCHINSKI

—it looks like a sequel instead of a surprise.

BOBCHINSKI

And the surprise is the point.

DOBCHINSKI *(to KHLESTAKOV, apologetic)*

We're very sorry. We'll see you again. Properly. Officially. With hats and authority.

BOBCHINSKI

We weren't here.

DOBCHINSKI

You never saw us.

KHLESTAKOV *(dry)*

I'm very good at not seeing people.

BOBCHINSKI *(to audience)*

So, let's pretend this didn't happen yet.

DOBCHINSKI

You can keep the feeling, though. The suspense. Just put it back a few minutes.

BOBCHINSKI

When the **MAYOR** arrives.

DOBCHINSKI

That's when our entrance counts.

*(They both slowly start walking backward, retracing their steps in exaggerated reverse, nearly colliding with a table, chairs, the **WAITER**—who has no idea what's happening.)*

WAITER *(to KHLESTAKOV, baffled)*

Do... do they always do that?

KHLESTAKOV

Apparently.

[BOBCHINSKI and DOBCHINSKI back all the way out the door, then pop their heads in one last time.]

DOBCHINSKI *(whisper)*

Forget we were here.

BOBCHINSKI

We'll be back.

DOBCHINSKI

Correctly.

BOBCHINSKI

With the Mayor.

[They vanish.]

OSIP (watching the empty doorway)

I hate it when the narrators get ahead of themselves.

KHLESTAKOV

They'll bring somebody important next time. I can feel funding.

WAITER (*shrugs*)

In the meantime, we still have bread. Mostly.

KHLESTAKOV

Then bring it. Until history catches up with itself.

WAITER

The landlord says only if you pay in advance, sir.

KHLESTAKOV (blinks)

In advance?

WAITER

Yes, sir. Specifically he said, "No more free banquets for Petersburg gentlemen who turn out to be from nowhere." His words.

KHLESTAKOV

He doesn't know who he is dealing with.

OSIP

That is exactly his point.

KHLESTAKOV (*to WAITER, sudden grandeur*)

Go tell him this

I do not pay "in advance." I pay in retrospect. History will reimburse him.

WAITER

I can tell him, sir. He will ask if "history" has any smaller bills.

KHLESTAKOV

Go. Tell him his attitude will end up in my report.

WAITER (*flat*)
What report?

KHLESTAKOV
The one I keep in my head. The worst kind.

WAITER
I will mention it.

(He goes.)

OSIP
The worst kind of report is an empty stomach.

KHLESTAKOV
Nonsense. I have feasted in worse places than this.

OSIP
I don't remember you eating in worse places, sir. Or at all, recently.

A beat. KHLESTAKOV's bravado flickers.

KHLESTAKOV
He'll come back with something. They always do. No landlord has ever dared refuse me twice.

OSIP
This one has a wife and four children and a cousin at the police office. Makes people braver.

Lights shift. We hear a distant murmur from the taproom, the clink of glasses, a shout, then footsteps on the stair.

Later. Khlestakov's room at the inn. The same shabby bed, the same crooked chair. It is darker now; the weak light of late afternoon or early evening seeps through the window. KHLESTAKOV paces. OSIP sits on the edge of the bed, clutching his stomach.

OSIP
My insides are eating my outsides.

KHLESTAKOV
If you complain loudly enough, perhaps the landlord will feed you just to shut you up.

OSIP

He says if we shout, he will call the police. If we whisper, he will still call the police, but slower.

KHLESTAKOV

He said that?

OSIP

In his way.

A knock at the door.

KHLESTAKOV (*instantly erect, dignified*)

Come in.

[The WAITER slips in with empty hands. He closes the door behind him as if he's afraid the hallway might overhear.]

KHLESTAKOV (*looking for a tray*)

Where is it?

WAITER

What, sir?

KHLESTAKOV

The dinner, of course. Soup. Cutlet. Something resembling a fish. Bread that is not mostly stone.

WAITER

There is a misunderstanding, sir.

KHLESTAKOV

There always is. That's why I exist. To correct misunderstandings with my knife and fork.

WAITER (*twisting his cloth*)

The landlord says there will be no dinner.

OSIP

None?

WAITER

None.

KHLESTAKOV

For whom?

WAITER

For you, sir.

KHLESTAKOV

For me?

WAITER

And for your servant.

OSIP

So, “none” means really “none.”

KHLESTAKOV

On what grounds?

WAITER

On financial grounds, sir. The landlord says you have been living for three weeks as if the inn were a charitable institution, but it is in fact a business.

KHLESTAKOV (*offended*)

I have been here three days.

OSIP

Three weeks, sir.

KHLESTAKOV

Time moves differently for important people.

WAITER

The landlord says time moves the same for his creditors.

KHLESTAKOV

Listen to me. Do you know who I am?

WAITER

No, sir.

KHLESTAKOV

Exactly. That’s the whole point. If you knew who I was, this room would be full of dinner.

WAITER

The landlord says if he knew who you were, this room would be full of police.

OSIP

He is very consistent.

KHLESTAKOV (*trying another tack*)

Very well. We will arrange it as businessmen. I will give you something as security.

He rummages in his pockets, then in his trunk, producing various sad objects a chipped cigar case, a crumpled cravat, a book of poems with a missing cover.

KHLESTAKOV

Here. A silk cravat. From Petersburg. Worth at least—

WAITER

He already has two of your cravats.

KHLESTAKOV

This one has sentimental value.

WAITER

Sentiment does not roast meat, sir.

KHLESTAKOV

Then take... this volume. Poems. Rare.

WAITER

The landlord does not read, sir.

OSIP

He reads money.

KHLESTAKOV (*growing desperate*)

Then what does he want? My coat? My boots? My dignity?

OSIP

You pawned your dignity in Saratov.

KHLESTAKOV

Lies. Slander.

WAITER

The landlord specifically said, "No more coats, no more boots, no more promises.

Money. Or the gentleman will kindly remove himself to the street. Or the jail, if he prefers shelter.”

A beat. KHLESTAKOV's anger drains out; underneath, his fear shows plainly for the first time.

KHLESTAKOV

So there is nothing? Not even a heel of bread?

WAITER

In the kitchen there is bread, sir. But it belongs to people who have paid.

OSIP *(to KHLESTAKOV, quietly)*

We could leave. There are other towns. Other landlords.

KHLESTAKOV

And walk? On an empty stomach? The road would eat us before we ate anything on it.

He sits heavily on the bed, staring at the floor.

KHLESTAKOV *(to WAITER, softer)*

And if I really were from the capital? If I really were the kind of man whose letter could make or break this inn? What then?

WAITER *(after a moment)*

Then the landlord would be very sorry, sir.

KHLESTAKOV

And now?

WAITER

Now he is only careful.

OSIP

Careful is what people call themselves when they are sure we are nobody.

KHLESTAKOV *(under his breath)*

Then we must become somebody.

He looks up, a dangerous little spark returning to his eyes.

KHLESTAKOV *(to WAITER)*

Go back downstairs. Tell your master that I am making note of all this.

WAITER

In your report?

KHLESTAKOV

In my memory. That's worse. Reports get lost. Memories hold grudges.

WAITER *(faint smile)*

I will tell him, sir.

He moves to the door, then pauses.

WAITER *(lower, almost kindly)*

If it helps... important people have gone hungry in this room before you. It is not a disgrace.

KHLESTAKOV

It is when I'm one of them.

WAITER

Very well, sir.

He exits, closing the door softly behind him.

Silence. OSIP lies back on the bed, groaning.

OSIP

We'll starve to death like noblemen.

KHLESTAKOV

No. We'll eat like noblemen. Or at least look like we do.

He stands, straightens his coat, brushes invisible dust from his sleeves.

KHLESTAKOV

If the inn won't feed me, the town will.

OSIP

How?

KHLESTAKOV

(Sends him away to get food)

[Enter PYOTR IVANOVICH DOBCHINSKI and PYOTR IVANOVICH BOBCHINSKI, breathless again, ahead of the pack.]

DOBCHINSKI

Here, here, Anton Antonovich!

BOBCHINSKI

Exactly here, Anton Antonovich!

[Enter MAYOR (ANTON ANTONOVICH), red ascot, sword he doesn't know how to wear, with SVISTUNOV or another CONSTABLE hovering behind, broom in hand.]

MAYOR

Is this the room?

DOBCHINSKI

This is the room.

BOBCHINSKI

Number five. First floor. Same one where the officers fought last year.

MAYOR *(suddenly doubtful)*

And you're sure he's the man?

DOBCHINSKI

He sits, he eats, he doesn't pay.

BOBCHINSKI

He looks through you like you're state secrets.

MAYOR *(crossing himself quickly, then smoothing his sash)*

All right. Remember

no one says "Inspector." No one says "complaint." We are simply... delighted. Delighted and innocent.

DOBCHINSKI

Innocent.

BOBCHINSKI

Deeply innocent.

MAYOR *(to CONSTABLE)*

And you—if any merchant shows his nose with a petition, you kick him out head-first.
Softly.

(to OSIP)

You—friend. Is your master within?

OSIP (*measured*)

He is resting. He's had a hard journey.

MAYOR (*startled, aside*)

“Resting.” They always say that before an arrest.

(*aloud, oozing charm*)

Ask if he will admit the local authorities, purely to pay their respects.

OSIP (*shrugs*)

I'll ask.

[*OSIP slips into the room.*]

MAYOR (to PYOTRs, hissing)

Stand straight. Don't look guilty. Think of something patriotic.

BOBCHINSKI

Crimea.

DOBCHINSKI

Blini.

MAYOR

Good. Patriotic enough.

[*OSIP reappears.*]

OSIP

He'll see you. But briefly. He prefers efficiency.

MAYOR (*almost bowing to the door*)

Of course. Efficiency is our brand.

[*He wipes sudden sweat from his face, then steps into the room. DOBCHINSKI and BOBCHINSKI squeeze in behind him.*]

ACT TWO, SCENE FIVE
The Inn — Khlestakov's Room

The same shabby room from Scene One, now hastily tidied by the WAITER the bed roughly made, a chipped glass of vodka on the table. KHLESTAKOV stands at the window, back to the door, posing like an important silhouette.

[The MAYOR enters, followed by DOBCHINSKI and BOBCHINSKI, who instantly flatten against the wall. OSIP lingers near the door.]

MAYOR *(half-bow, half-salute)*
Your Excellency—

KHLESTAKOV *(startled, spins)*
Who? Me?

MAYOR
Not “who,” but “whom,” Your Excellency.

(recovers)

Allow me to introduce myself
Anton Antonovich, Mayor of this loyal district. We are honored—deeply honored—to receive such a distinguished guest, traveling incognito for the good of the Empire.

KHLESTAKOV *(blinks, then tests it)*
Incognito... yes. There is nothing I hate more than fuss.

MAYOR
And yet you deserve nothing less than fuss. Tremendous fuss. The biggest fuss.

(glances at his sword, remembers)

I hope the accommodations have been, ah, adequate?

KHLESTAKOV
Adequate?

(thinks of the unpaid bill)

Well—there have been... certain misunderstandings.

MAYOR *(jumps)*
Misunderstandings?

KHLESTAKOV

Some people don't recognize a man who prefers to settle accounts in other currencies.

MAYOR (*to OSIP, terrified*)
You hear that? Complaints already.

(*to KHLESTAKOV*)

Sir, if any creature in this miserable town has shown you even a crumb of disrespect—any landlord, any constable, any samovar—we will punish them. Publicly. With paperwork. Consider it done.

DOBCHINSKI (*timid*)
We were the first to recognize your brilliance, Your Excellency.

BOBCHINSKI
First to recognize, first to rejoice.

KHLESTAKOV (*warming*)
These two... they have potential.

MAYOR (*shoots the PYOTRs a warning look, then turns on the charm full blast*)
You must not, you cannot remain in this squalid inn. It's an insult to the Empire. I insist—beg—that you accept the hospitality of my poor house. Very poor. Almost humble. You will have a private room, decent food, quiet, a view of the statue that almost got built.

KHLESTAKOV
Move? Why?

OSIP (*quiet, to him*)
Free food. Warm room. People afraid.

KHLESTAKOV (*instantly*)
I accept. But I warn you—I am accustomed to certain standards.

MAYOR
Standards are my middle name. We will meet them. Exceed them. We will make this the best stay of your life, believe me.

[**KHLESTAKOV** strolls to the table, picks up the vodka, sniffs it, drinks.]

KHLESTAKOV
Not terrible.

MAYOR (aside, nearly weak with relief)
“Not terrible.” We live.

(aloud)

If there is anything—anything at all—you require
documents, reports, a chainsaw, Crimea brochures, hospital tours—

KHLESTAKOV

For now, a carriage. And my account here settled without noise.

MAYOR

Of course. Silence is policy.

(sharply, to OSIP)

Your master’s bill will be paid by the town. Generously. With gratitude.

(to KHLESTAKOV)

You may consider yourself among friends.

KHLESTAKOV

I never consider myself among friends. But this will do.

DOBCHINSKI *(unable to hold it in)*

What insight!

BOBCHINSKI

What phrasing!

MAYOR (clapping his hands once)

Then it’s settled. We leave this kennel at once.

(to OSIP)

Pack. Anything that still holds together.

(to PYOTRs)

You two—find the droshky. The best one. No drunken coachman.

DOBCHINSKI

At once, Anton Antonovich.

BOBCHINSKI

Together, Anton Antonovich.

[The PYOTRs exit in a tangle of fur.]

MAYOR *(soft, to KHLESTAKOV)*

On the way, if you should notice anything imperfect in our institutions—anything at all—tell me privately. No need to trouble Petersburg with trivia.

KHLESTAKOV

We'll see. The eyes of the Empire are never closed.

MAYOR *(laughs too loud)*

Ha! Yes! That's exactly what I always say.

[ADDED BIT WITH THE RECIPT]

ACT TWO, SCENE SEVEN
The Inn — Yard and Doorway

Outside the inn. Snow, slush, the sound of a droshky being hitched up. CONSTABLES with brooms pretend to sweep the street; they mostly relocate the mud.

[The inn door bursts open. The MAYOR emerges with great ceremony, helping KHLESTAKOV down the steps as if he were royalty. OSIP follows with the portmanteau. DOBCHINSKI and BOBCHINSKI buzz around like overexcited bees.]

MAYOR *(to KHLESTAKOV)*

The carriage is ready, Your Excellency. In a few minutes you will no longer remember this wretched place.

KHLESTAKOV

I never remember places. I remember power.

MAYOR *(nervous laugh)*

Then you'll remember us fondly.

(to CONSTABLES, low but sharp)

Stand straight. Suck in your stomachs. If anyone asks, this is how we always look.

CONSTABLE

Yes, Anton Antonovich.

MAYOR *(with a final bow)*
After you, Your Excellency.

[KHLESTAKOV climbs in, taking his time. OSIP hauls the portmanteau up. The MAYOR wedges himself onto the seat opposite; DOBCHINSKI and BOBCHINSKI cling to the back like decorative gargoyles.]

MAYOR *(calling to the inn, to the town, to the invisible heavens)*
Remember this day! Our loyal district has hosted a great man—and will host him better still!

ACT TWO, SCENE EIGHT

A Street Near the Mayor's House

It is late. A single crooked lamppost flickers. Snow falls in slow bureaucratic spirals. Two constables patrol

PUGOVKIN, stiff with vodka and pride, and UKHAVYORTOV, his mustache waxed and twisted like an imperial decree. In the distance, the faint hum of a drone.

UKHAVYORTOV:

(peering up)

That's not a bird. That's surveillance. Or salvation. Depends who's asking.

PUGOVKIN

(tapping his badge)

We're the front line now. Real fighters. True Russia. No deep state here.

UKHAVYORTOV

(adjusting belt, saluting a passing dog)

I swore an oath to the Czar. The real one. The one no one's seen since Bloody Sunday. He's hidden in a vault. Buried maybe. But I swore to him.

PUGOVKIN

(lighting a cigarette from a candle stub)

I got my October Manifesto printed on a flask. Keeps the heat in and the lies out.

[Enter ABDULIN, a shopkeeper, carrying a basket of unsold onions. He walks quickly but halts when he sees them.]

ABDULIN

Evening, officers. Fine weather for introspection.

UKHAVYORTOV

(stepping in front of him) Your papers?

ABDULIN

These? These are shallots.

PUGOVKIN

You hear that? He's evading in alliums.

UKHAVYORTOV

You hear the inspector's in town?

ABDULIN

(nervous)

Everyone hears. That's how silence works here.

PUGOVKIN

Then you better tidy up that storefront. Make your bribes look like tips.

UKHAVYORTOV

(leaning in)

Or donations.

ABDULIN

(bowing slightly)

Of course. For the health of the province.

[He hurries off. The constables watch him go.]

PUGOVKIN

(quietly)

Do you think this inspector is real?

UKHAVYORTOV

(after a pause)

Real enough to be believed. Fake enough to be obeyed.

*[A long beat. Then both walk off in opposite directions, shadows dissolving in the snow.
Curtain.]*

ACT THREE, SCENE TWO
The Mayor's Drawing Room, Later that Morning

[Same window. Same cold pane. ANNA ANDREYEVNA and MARYA ANTONOVNA stand as before, breath fogging the glass.]

ANNA

We've waited an hour. We could have seen the inspector last night or this morning but they are already gone! Your fault. You were dressed—then pins, scarves, dawdle. Not a whisper out there. A dead town.

MARYA *(peering)*

We'll know in a minute. Avdotya will be back— (startles) Mama—someone's coming. Far end of the street.

ANNA

Who? Where? You always see ghosts— *(leans)* All right. Someone. Short. Dress coat. Who is it? Damn not knowing.

MARYA

Dobchinski, Mama.

ANNA

Nonsense. *(waves handkerchief at the street)* You—come here—quick!

MARYA

It is Dobchinski.

ANNA

You argue to argue— *(leans)* Fine. It's him. Hurry! You walk like a funeral! Well—where are they? Shout from there! Is he harsh? And my husband—what about my husband? *(steps back, vexed)* He won't say a word till he's in the room. Idiot.

[Enter DOBCHINSKI, flushed, winded.]

ANNA

Ashamed of yourself? I thought you the only gentleman of that flock. They all bolted—and you with them. I stood godmother to your Ivan and your Liza. This is my thanks?

DOBCHINSKI *(bowing between gasps)*

I ran first to pay respects. Quite out of breath. *(to MARYA)* My compliments, Marya Antonovna.

MARYA

Good afternoon, Pyotr Ivanovich.

ANNA

Well? Speak.

DOBCHINSKI

Anton Antonovich sends this note. (*hands it*) And—no, not a general. But just as grand. Fine manners. Dignified.

ANNA

So—the one in the letter.

DOBCHINSKI

Exactly. **BOBCHINSKI** and I found him first.

ANNA

Tell it all.

DOBCHINSKI

Thank God, all is well now. At first he scolded said the inn was awful, that he wouldn't go to the Mayor's house, nor to jail for him. Then he learned of Anton Antonovich's innocence, spoke a little, grew warm. Now they've gone to inspect the hospital. I confess, we all feared a complaint. Even I.

ANNA

Why fear? You're not an official.

DOBCHINSKI

When a bigwig speaks, knees remember.

ANNA

Child's talk. What's he like—young or old?

DOBCHINSKI

Middle aged, maybe forties or fifties. Talks like a machine. "Permit me I will go here, there,"—hands like a conductor. "I love writing and reading," he says, "but it's rather dark in my room."

ANNA

Dark or fair?

DOBCHINSKI

Auburn. Eyes like a wild thing's. They rattle you.

ANNA (*opens the note; reads fast*)

“I hasten to inform you, my dear, I was in a critical position; but trusting to God’s mercy—two pickled gherkins, a half-portion of caviar—1 rouble 25 kopeks—” (frowns)
What’s this—gherkins and caviar?

DOBCHINSKI

Old bill on the other side. He wrote on what was handy.

ANNA (*nods, continues*)

“—trusting to mercy, all will end well. Prepare the gold-wallpaper room for our distinguished guest; nothing extra for dinner—we lunch at the hospital with Ms. SVETLANA PHILIPPOVA ZEMLYANIKA—but order more wine. Tell Abdulin to send his best, or I’ll wreck his cellar. I kiss your hand. Yours, Anton.” (*claps the note shut*) No time to lose. (*shouts*) Mishka!

DOBCHINSKI (*at the door*)

Mishka! Mishka!

[*MISHKA appears, broom in hand.*]

ANNA (*already writing*)

Run to Abdulin with this. Give it to coachman Sidor—he runs the errand and brings back the wine.

DOBCHINSKI (*bowing out*)

I’ll hurry—see how he inspects.

ANNA

Go, go. Don’t trip over your own shadow.

[*He exits.*]

ANNA (*to MARYA, brisk*)

Now—our toilette. He’s a young peacock from town. God forbid he laughs. You wear the blue with the little flounces.

MARYA

The blue? I hate it. Lyapkin-Tyapkin wears blue. Zemlyanika’s girl too. I’ll wear the light pink. It really says “I don’t care, do you?”

ANNA

You say “pink” to contradict me. Blue suits you. I will wear straw-color.

MARYA

Straw doesn't suit you.

ANNA

What?

MARYA

Your eyes must be very dark for pale yellow.

ANNA

My eyes are dark. Dark as can be. The cards prove it—I always draw the queen of clubs.

MARYA *(smiles)*

You're the queen of hearts, Mama.

ANNA

Nonsense. I've never been a queen of hearts. Come. *[They hurry off, still arguing in whispers.]*

[As they go, a side door opens. MISHKA sweeps dust in short angry strokes. OSIP enters from the opposite side, a portmanteau balanced on his head.]

OSIP

Where does this go?

MISHKA

Here, mister. This way.

OSIP *(halts, breathing)*

Let me breathe. Empty stomach makes a feather a stone.

MISHKA *(nosy)*

Will the general come soon?

OSIP

General? Who?

MISHKA

Your barin.

OSIP

My barin? A general? (grins) Oh yes—only a different kind.

MISHKA

Higher or lower?

OSIP

Higher.

MISHKA (*awed*)

Aha. That's why the fuss.

OSIP (*eyeing the broom*)

Smart lad. Get us something to eat.

MISHKA

For the likes of you there's nothing fine ready. You won't take plain stuff. They'll send you something when your master sits.

OSIP

What's "plain"?

MISHKA

Cabbage soup. Porridge. Pastry.

OSIP

Bring all three. I'll eat the plates too. Now—this portmanteau. Another door?

MISHKA

Yes.

[They shoulder the portmanteau and vanish into the side room. The broom falls. Silence.]

ACT THREE, SCENE FOUR

The Mayor's Mansion, That Afternoon

[Afternoon light, slightly harsh. ANNA ANDREYEVNA is rearranging cushions with martial precision; MARYA ANTONOVNA is pretending not to watch herself in a mirror.]

[Enter LUKA KHLOPOV, clutching a prayer book and a stack of papers, followed by MRS. KHLOPOV, bundled in outdated "modest" fashion, clutching a rosary and a bag of embroidery.]

LUKA

Anton Antonovich "will be here any minute," they said. "Go wait," they said. And we've been waiting since Christ's second cousin.

MRS. KHLOPOV

Lower your voice, Luka. Walls have ears. And curtains. And maids.

ANNA ANDREYEVNA

(sweet and lethal)

Luka Khlopov. Mrs. Khlopov. What a... wholesome surprise.

MARYA

Good afternoon.

LUKA

Anton Antonovich promised a word about the schools. And about the Inspector. I have thoughts. Scriptural ones.

MRS. KHLOPOV

We came to offer support. Moral support. Real support. Not like these people who only support themselves.

(she scans the room with pious suspicion)

We heard a government man from Petersburg is here. I told Luka we must show we are a proper household. No dancing. No bare elbows. No opinions.

ANNA ANDREYEVNA

(smiles thinly) How lucky he has you to police the elbows of the Empire.

MRS. KHLOPOV

Somebody must. It's always the wives who keep the line. Men wander. Wives tighten the belt.

LUKA

(to ANNA, earnest)

The Inspector mustn't think our girls are... frivolous. I told him in my schools, we teach obedience. Modesty. And a little reading.

MRS. KHLOPOV

Reading is dangerous if you don't know what they're reading.

(to MARYA, appraising)

You should marry well, dear, and stay out of print.

ANNA ANDREYEVNA

(snaps)

We will decide what is "well," thank you.

MRS. KHLOPOV

Of course, of course. I only mean—a man from the capital is a temptation. For everyone.

Pride is a temptation. New clothes are a temptation. Suddenly people forget where they came from.

LUKA

Yes, yes. People start talking about “positions” and “rank” and “Petersburg,” and next thing you know they’re buying wallpaper on credit and drinking French wine.

ANNA ANDREYEVNA

(frosty)

If you have a specific household in mind, Luka Khloпов, you may name it. We are not afraid of nouns here.

MRS. KHLOPOV

We only mean—we hope the Inspector’s visit leads to... repentance. Less theft. More prayer. Not... *(she glances toward MARYA’s dress)* more necklines.

MARYA

(flat)

Thank you for your... concern.
[An awkward beat.]

ANNA ANDREYEVNA

Anton Antonovich is at the hospital... or the court... or the inn... or everywhere. He will not be back “any minute.” If you wish to pray for his success, the chapel is down the street. Three doors past the wine shop he never visits.

LUKA

Perhaps we will do that.

MRS. KHLOPOV

Yes. We will pray that this town remembers its place. And that some people remember theirs.

(she gives ANNA a very deliberate little bow)

ANNA ANDREYEVNA

And I will pray that some people remember who pours the tea in this town and who drinks it.

MRS. KHLOPOV

(smiles tightly)

God sees all.

ANNA ANDREYEVNA

So does the Inspector.

*[They stare at each other a moment; then **LUKA** clears his throat.]*

LUKA

Come, my dove. Let us not keep the Almighty waiting while we gossip.

*[He ushers **MRS. KHLOPOV** out. She exits with one last, critical glance at **MARYA**'s dress.]*

MARYA

Do you think she likes us?

ANNA ANDREYEVNA

She likes heaven. Heaven is very far away. We are right here. Remember that.

*[The **POLICE OFFICERS** fling the doors wide. **KHLESTAKOV** strides in, cap under his arm—the black one with the big white slogan. Behind him the **MAYOR**; **SVETLANA PHILIPPOVA ZEMLYANIKA SVETLANA PHILIPPOVA ZEMLYANIKA** (Charity Commissioner); and **BOBCHINSKI**, his nose plastered. A scrap of paper lies on the floor; two officers dive for it and knock heads.]*

KHLESTAKOV

Fine institutions. I'm charmed. You actually show a man the town. Elsewhere nothing.

MAYOR

Other towns think of themselves. We think of order. Vigilance. The Empire.

KHLESTAKOV

Lunch was excellent. I've overeaten. Is it like that every day?

MAYOR

Only to honor a distinguished guest.

KHLESTAKOV

I live to eat the flowers of pleasure. What was the fish?

SVETLANA PHILIPPOVA ZEMLYANIKA

Labardan, sir.

KHLESTAKOV

Exquisite. That was the hospital?

SVETLANA PHILIPPOVA ZEMLYANIKA

Yes. The wards.

KHLESTAKOV

So few sick?

SVETLANA PHILIPPOVA ZEMLYANIKA

Ten left, no more. Since I took charge, they get well like flies.
Not medicine—prayer and order.

MAYOR (*warming*)

A Mayor's head splits with duty. Streets, filth, prisoners, drunks.
Still—here, all moves well.

At night I pray

“Lord, let the Government see my zeal.”

Honors? Dust. Give me clean streets.

SVETLANA PHILIPPOVA ZEMLYANIKA (*aside*)

Sinner can preach. Heaven help us.

KHLESTAKOV

True. I declaim, myself. Sometimes in prose. Sometimes in verse.

[Scene freezes, DOBCHINSKI enters in a rush, and approaches BOBCHINSKI]

DOBCHINSKI

My god, I forgot that I was in this scene! Of course—I must have been, my brother is
already here! (*whispers to BOBCHINSKI, who unfreezes to acknowledge him*)

Hear that brother? He is educated in the Liberal arts.

[BOBCHINSKI grins and nods, the scene resumes]

KHLESTAKOV

Any amusements? Cards?

MAYOR (*aside, sharp*)

I know what you aim at.

(*aloud*)

Cards? God forbid. Never touched them. Even the king of diamonds makes me spit.

Once I built a card house for the children. Nightmares for a week.

LUKA (*aside, dry*)

He cleaned me for a hundred roubles at faro yesterday.

MAYOR

I use my time for the Empire.

KHLESTAKOV (*shrugs*)

Stop after you lose three quarters—cards are harmless.

[The MAYOR finally acknowledges his family, ANNA ANDREYEVNA and MARYA ANTONOVNA.]

MAYOR

My family. Wife. Daughter.

KHLESTAKOV (*bows, smooth*)

The honor is mine.

ANNA

We are fortunate to greet so... elevated a gentleman.

KHLESTAKOV

No, madam. The fortune is all mine.

ANNA (*seating him*)

You found the road hard, after the capital?

KHLESTAKOV

Brutal. Dirty inns. No society.

But some “circumstances”...

(glances at her, posing)

...compensate.

ANNA (*pleased*)

How unpleasant it must have been.

KHLESTAKOV

The contrary—now.

ANNA

You are kind.

KHLESTAKOV (*launching*)

In Petersburg I drop by the office two minutes

“Do this, that.”
The chief slaps my back
“Dine, my boy.”
They wanted me College Assessor.
The porter begs to shine my boots.
Please—sit, gentlemen.

MAYOR / SVETLANA PHILIPPOVA ZEMLYANIKA / LUKA

We prefer to stand.

KHLESTAKOV

No ceremony. Sit.

(They sit.)

Hard to hide a man like me. “There goes Ivan Alexandrovich!”
Once soldiers saluted me for the Commander-in-Chief.

ANNA

You don’t say.

KHLESTAKOV

I know the pretty actresses. I write vaudevilles.
I say to Pushkin, “How are you, my boy?” He says, “So-so, old man.”
I write for papers. Correct their verses. Smirdin pays me forty thousand.
“Yuri Miloslavsky?” Sometimes me. Sometimes Zagoskin.
My house is first in Petersburg. Balls every night.
A melon for seven hundred roubles. Soup from Paris in the tureen.
Whist with ambassadors and a minister.
Letters to “Your Excellency.”
Once I took over a whole Department. Thirty-five thousand couriers in the streets.
I said
“Sharp is the word.”
The Council of Empire trembled.
Tomorrow they make me Field-marsh—
(he slips from the chair; clerks hoist him back)

MAYOR *(shaking)*

Your E—Ex—

KHLESTAKOV

What?

MAYOR

Won’t you rest? Here’s a room. Everything prepared.

KHLESTAKOV (*sudden*)

Bosh—

(*stops, relents*)

Yes. I will.

Your lunch was excellent.

(*raises a hand, theatrical*)

Labardan!

[He exits to the side room with the MAYOR.]

BOBCHINSKI (*awed*)

There's a man. A real one.

DOBCHINSKI

Almost a general.

BOBCHINSKI

Generalissimo. He bullies the Council of State.

Let's tell Ammos and Karobkin.

Good day, Anna Andreyevna.

DOBCHINSKI

Good day, Ktunushka.

[They hurry out.]

SVETLANA PHILIPPOVA ZEMLYANIKA (*to Head of Schools*)

Anxiety. And no uniforms. He'll write to Petersburg the moment he wakes.

Schoolmaster

God spare us.

[They bow to ANNA and slip away.]

ANNA (*to MARYA, glowing*)

What a charming young man.

MARYA

Delightful.

ANNA

The manners. The carriage. City polish.

He looked at me the whole time.

MARYA

He looked at me.

ANNA

Hush. Don't argue.

MARYA

When he spoke of literature—me.
When he played whist with ambassadors—still me.

ANNA

A glance or two for show. He saved the rest for me.

[MAYOR tiptoes back.]

MAYOR *(hushed)*

He drank too much. But suppose half is true?
A drunk man tells his heart.
He plays whist with ministers. Goes to court.
The more I think, the higher the steeple. My head spins.

ANNA *(cool)*

I saw an educated man. I don't care for rank.

MAYOR

Women. Fiddle-faddle. You joke; I'm the one flogged.

(soft)

Mishka! Find Svistunov. Derzhimorda.

(aside)

How to know a great man? A soldier is obvious.
This stripling—who can tell?
He sat at the inn. Spoke in riddles.
Now he's ours. Said more than needed.
He's young.

[Enter OSIP. They beckon.]

ANNA

Come here, friend.

MAYOR

Sh— Is he asleep?

OSIP

No. Stretching.

ANNA
Your name?

OSIP
Osip, ma'am.

MAYOR (*cuts in*)
Enough.
(*to OSIP*)
Have they treated you well?

OSIP
First-rate, your honor.

ANNA
Do many counts visit your master?

(*OSIP aside*
Say yes; they'll feed me.)

OSIP (*aloud*)
A lot of counts.

MARYA
Your barin is handsome.

ANNA
What is his rank?

MAYOR
Stop.
(*to OSIP*)
Is he strict?

OSIP
He likes order. Everything exact.

MAYOR (*pleased*)
A right face.
Here—tea money. It's cold. Two silver roubles.

OSIP
Thank you kindly.

MAYOR

And—what pleases him most on journeys?

OSIP

To know everything.

Most of all—to be well received. Well entertained.

He even asks if I was treated well. If not—“Bad host,” he says. “Remind me.”

MAYOR

Good. That’s for tea. Here’s for biscuits.

OSIP

Too generous, your nobility. I’ll drink your health.

ANNA (*stage-whisper*)

Come to me for more, Osip.

MARYA

Kiss your master for me.

(*KHLESTAKOV coughs in the next room.*)

MAYOR (*alarmed*)

Sh! Out!

(*to ANNA*)

We’ve had enough of you.

ANNA (*to MARYA*)

Come, I’ll tell you something I noticed—private ears only.

MAYOR (*grim*)

Listen to them and you’ll stuff wax in your ears.

(*to OSIP*)

Go. Order anything in the house.

[*OSIP exits.*]

[*Enter DERZHIMORDA and SVISTUNOV, boots clomping.*]

MAYOR (*hissing*)

Sh! Bandy-legged bears. You drop forty puds with every step.

DERZHIMORDA (*too loud*)

My orders were—

MAYOR (*palms his mouth*)
Quiet. You bark like a raven in a barrel.
Stand on the landing. Don't move.
No strangers. Above all—no merchants.
If anyone brings a petition—or looks like he might—kick him out head-first.
So. Do you understand? Sh.

[He slides out on tiptoe with the officers, already arranging the optics to Make Russia Great Again for their guest.]

ACT FOUR, SCENE ONE

Back Room off the Main Hall —

[A cramped back room off the main hall in the Governor's house. Whispering, tiptoes, anxious ceremony. Present

MAYOR, JUDGE (AMMOS) FYODOROVICH LYAPKIN-TYAPKIN (Judge), SVETLANA PHILIPPOVA ZEMLYANIKA (Charity Commissioner), IVANA KUZMICH SHPYOKIN (Postmaster), LUKA KHLOPOV (Director of Schools), BOBCHINSKI, DOBCHINSKI.]

MAYOR
Tonight is the night... Huge night. Tremendous.

JUDGE (AMMOS)
Yes, Anton Antonovich.

MAYOR
Everyone smiles. Huge smiles.

LUKA
Of course.

MAYOR
No—bigger than that. Painful smiles. That's loyalty.

POSTMASTER
Yes, Anton Antonovich.

MAYOR
Remember
calm faces. Confident posture. We are not merely receiving a guest—we are representing
the entire town.

SVETLANA PHILIPPOVA ZEMLYANIKA Yes, Anton Antonovich. Calm.
Confident.

(He attempts a stiff, ceremonial pose.)

MAYOR
Not like a statue.

POSTMASTER
No, Anton Antonovich.

MAYOR
Natural.

LUKA
Natural.

MAYOR
Opulence with a side of anxiety.

(He straightens the officials.)

MAYOR
Good. Excellent. Continue exactly like this.

MISHKA
Anton Antonovich—your wife asks for you. Immediately.

MAYOR
Now?

MISHKA
Immediately.

MAYOR
(to officials)
Very well. Continue receiving our distinguished guest. Respect. Dignity. Hospitality.

MAYOR
Huge smiles.

(The Mayor exits with Mishka.)

MAYOR *(to the officials)*
Stay here. Don't do anything foolish.

(The MAYOR exits hurriedly. The Officials Stand around awkwardly)

ACT FOUR, SCENE TWO
Back Room off the Main Hall — Continuous

JUDGE
Circle. Military order. Faster. Pyotr Ivanovich—there.

SVETLANA PHILIPPOVA ZEMLYANIKA
We should try... you know.

JUDGE
Palm-oil?

SVETLANA PHILIPPOVA ZEMLYANIKA
A little. Privately. One by one.

POSTMASTER
Or say money came by post and—

SVETLANA PHILIPPOVA ZEMLYANIKA
—and get posted to Siberia. No. Private. Ammos, you first.

JUDGE
Better you; he lunched in your hospital. Or Luka—education.

LUKA
I can't. One rank above me and my tongue goes dead. Please—excuse me.

SVETLANA PHILIPPOVA ZEMLYANIKA
Then it's you, Ammos. You speak like Cicero.

JUDGE
Nonsense. I talk of house-dogs.

ALL (urgent whispers)
Father us, Ammos. Don't desert us.

[Footsteps and a throat-clear from KHLESTAKOV's room. Panic tiptoe stampede. Bumps, muffled "oof," and the room empties.]

[KHLESTAKOV wanders out, sleep-creased, satisfied.]

KHLESTAKOV

Good beds. Heavy lunch. Head rings.
This place suits me. The daughter—not bad. The mother—hmm.
I like generosity with no strings.

[JUDGE enters, steels himself.]

JUDGE

County Court Judge Lyapkin-Tyapkin. Elected '86. Still serving.

KHLESTAKOV

Sit. Profitable work?

JUDGE *(aside, clutching notes)*

Lord—hot coals.

KHLESTAKOV

What's in your hand?

[JUDGE drops the money.] BIT WITH MONEY

KHLESTAKOV

Ah. Money. Lend it.

JUDGE *(relieved)*

With pleasure! No return needed. Honour enough.
Any... injunction?

KHLESTAKOV

No need. Thank you.

[JUDGE bows out, glowing.]

KHLESTAKOV

Excellent fellow.

[POSTMASTER enters in uniform.]

POSTMASTER

Postmaster Shpyokin.

KHLESTAKOV

Good. Sit. Small town, not the capital—true?

POSTMASTER

True.

KHLESTAKOV

Respect and liking—that's all a man needs. True?

POSTMASTER

True.

KHLESTAKOV

Lovely weather, true?

Also—I've spent my last coin. Lend me three hundred?

POSTMASTER

Happiness to oblige. Here.

[He hands over the money.]

KHLESTAKOV

I hate stinting on the road. Right?

POSTMASTER

Quite right. Any postal observations?

KHLESTAKOV

None.

[POSTMASTER exits.]

[LUKA KHLOPOV is nudged in from behind.]

LUKA *(flustered salute)*

Director of Schools, Khlopov.

KHLESTAKOV

Sit. Have a cigar.

[LUKA fumbles; lights wrong end; coughs.]

KHLESTAKOV

Not fond of cigars. I'm weak for them—and for the fair sex.
Your taste—brunettes or blondes?

LUKA *(tiny voice)*

I... daren't give an opinion.

KHLESTAKOV (*teasing*)

Blushing. So—one little brunette?
Anyway—I'm cleaned out. Lend me three hundred?

[LUKA, trembling, hands notes.]

LUKA

Do you accept Liberty Financial rubles?

KHLESTAKOV

I dabble in all forms of currencies.

LUKA

I won't disturb you further.

[LUKA flees.]

*[SVETLANA PHILIPPOVA ZEMLYANIKA SVETLANA PHILIPPOVA ZEMLYANIKA
enters.]*

SVETLANA PHILIPPOVA ZEMLYANIKA

Charity Commissioner Zemlyanika. I conducted you through the wards.

KHLESTAKOV

And fed me well.

SVETLANA PHILIPPOVA ZEMLYANIKA

I labour for the Fatherland.

(leans in)

The Postmaster does nothing—letters detained.
The Judge hunts hares; keeps dogs in the Court.
Also—Dobchinski's away, the Judge is with his wife.
Children look like the Judge.

KHLESTAKOV

Well I never.

SVETLANA PHILIPPOVA ZEMLYANIKA

The Schools? Luka poisons youth with Jacobin nonsense.
Shall I put it on paper?

KHLESTAKOV

Do. Amusing reading.
Your name again?

SVETLANA PHILIPPOVA ZEMLYANIKA
Charity Commissioner Svetlana Philippova Zemlyanika.
Five children
Nikolai, Ivan, Yelizaveta, Marya, Perepetuya.

KHLESTAKOV (*seeing her off, then calling*)
Oh—one odd thing. I'm cleaned out. Four hundred?

SVETLANA PHILIPPOVA ZEMLYANIKA
Yes.

[She gives him the money and exits.]

[BOBCHINSKI and DOBCHINSKI scuttle in.]

BOBCHINSKI
Pyotr Ivanovich **BOBCHINSKI**, townsman.

DOBCHINSKI
Pyotr Ivanovich Dobchinski, landed proprietor.

KHLESTAKOV
We have met. Your nose—is it better?

BOBCHINSKI
Healed, thank God.

KHLESTAKOV
Splendid. Have either of you money? Lend me a thousand.

[They stare.]

KHLESTAKOV
No? Then a hundred.

BOBCHINSKI
I have forty.

DOBCHINSKI
And I have twenty-five.

KHLESTAKOV
Sixty-five will do.

[He pockets it.]

DOBCHINSKI

A delicate favour, Your Excellency. My eldest was born... before marriage. Could he now be considered entirely my son? Called Dobchinski?

KHLESTAKOV

Certainly.

BOBCHINSKI

And when you are in Petersburg, tell all the grandees—senators, admirals, ministers—that in this town there lives Pyotr Ivanovich **BOBCHINSKI**.

KHLESTAKOV

I shall certainly tell them.

[He ushers them out.]

[OSIP enters with ink, paper, and a light.]

KHLESTAKOV (writing)

Do you see, you fool, how they treat me?

OSIP

All the more reason to leave. At once. Fast horses are ready here.

KHLESTAKOV

Tomorrow.

OSIP

Today. Before the mistake is corrected.

KHLESTAKOV

Take this letter. Order a courier troika.

Tell the fellows a rouble apiece if they drive like devils and sing all the way.

[OSIP exits to arrange it. Noise rises outside.]

KHLESTAKOV

What is that noise?

OSIP (*peeking out*)

Merchants. Papers in hand.

KHLESTAKOV

What now? If this town has not run out of grievances, I shall.

Let them in.

[MERCHANTS enter carrying bread, salt, sugar-loaves, and a tray.]

MERCHANT

We appeal to you, Your Excellency. Something's gotta be done. Read our petitions.

MERCHANT

Let us in, I demand we speak to the Inspector.

MERCHANT

The Mayor ruins us!

MERCHANT

He billets soldiers in our houses.

MERCHANT

Calls us Tartar dogs.

MERCHANT

Grabs cloth—a bunch at a time! And demands giveaways and freebies for his wife's birthday!

MERCHANT

Refuse and a regiment camps in your shop.

KHLESTAKOV

A brigand.

MERCHANT

Remove him, Your Excellency. Accept our furs.

MERCHANT

And my potato skin milk. Its unpasteurized, it's a full meal in a cup.

MERCHANT

Be part of my downline!

KHLESTAKOV

No bribes. But if you wish to lend me something—three hundred perhaps—

PRIEST

Five hundred.

MERCHANT

And the tray.

KHLESTAKOV

If you insist, then I accept it as a loan.

OSIP (*low*)

Take the sugar-loaves too. And the cord—for the carriage.

MERCHANTS

Save us, Excellency, or we hang.

[MERCHANTS exit.]

[Women's voices outside.]

KHLESTAKOV

Who is there now?

WOMEN (*off*)

Have pity on us!

KHLESTAKOV

Let them in.

[Enter LOCKSMITH'S WIFE and SERGEANT'S WIFE.]

LOCKSMITH'S WIFE

Justice against the Mayor! He had my husband taken as a recruit though he is married!

KHLESTAKOV

Enough. And you?

SERGEANT'S WIFE

They flogged me. By mistake. Two days I could not sit.
I endured it. But there ought to be compensation.

KHLESTAKOV

Very well. Go now.

[Hands with petitions thrust in from outside.]

KHLESTAKOV

Enough! No more! Tomorrow.
Osip—bar the door.

[OSIP shoves back a bandaged petitioner and shuts the door.]

[MARYA ANTONOVNA slips in.]

MARYA

Ah—

KHLESTAKOV

What frightened you so, mademoiselle?

MARYA

I wasn't frightened.

KHLESTAKOV

Then why do you look as if you were running away?

MARYA

I was wondering whether Mama was here.

KHLESTAKOV

No. And I would like to know why you weren't going anywhere.

MARYA

I should have been in your way. You were occupied with important matters.

KHLESTAKOV (*softening*)

Your eyes are better than important matters. You cannot possibly disturb me. On the contrary—you give me great pleasure.

Sit. A throne would suit you.

MARYA

You mock our town.

KHLESTAKOV

If I were the scarf around your neck, I would count myself fortunate.

MARYA

You speak like a book.

KHLESTAKOV

Then let me close the book and speak plainly

I love you.

MARYA

Love? I don't understand love.

KHLESTAKOV

Why move your chair away? It is better if we sit near each other.

MARYA

Why near? It's all the same if it's far away.

KHLESTAKOV (*moving closer*)

Why far? It's all the same if it's near.

[He edges closer. She moves away. He catches a kiss on her shoulder.]

MARYA

Sir! That is rude.

KHLESTAKOV (*dropping to his knees*)

Forgive me. Love makes men foolish.

[ANNA ANDREYEVNA bursts in and sees him kneeling.]

ANNA

Ah! What a situation!

(to MARYA)

What does this mean? What sort of behavior is this?

MARYA

Mama, I—

ANNA

Go away from here. Do you hear? And don't you dare show your face to me.

[He throws himself back onto his knees before ANNA.]

KHLESTAKOV

Madam, you see I am burning with love.

ANNA

Please—please get up. The floor is not very clean.

KHLESTAKOV

No, I must remain on my knees before you. Decide my fate—life or death.

ANNA

Were you not just proposing yourself to my daughter?

KHLESTAKOV

To you. Love knows no law. Let us run away together.

[MARYA rushes back in.]

MARYA

Mama!

ANNA

Marya Antonovna!

[KHLESTAKOV instantly pivots, seizes MARYA'S hand.]

KHLESTAKOV

No—her! Bless us! It is a constant and faithful love.

ANNA

So—it is my daughter? Very well. Child, be grateful.

MARYA

I will, Mama.

[The MAYOR bursts in.]

MAYOR

Do not ruin me! The merchants are lying; the sergeant's wife was flogged by mistake—

ANNA

He has asked for our daughter's hand.

MAYOR

What?

KHLESTAKOV

I ask in earnest. If you refuse me, God knows what may become of me.

MAYOR

Do as you think right. My head is gone.

ANNA

Bless them.

[The MAYOR blesses them. KHLESTAKOV kisses MARYA'S hand.]

MAYOR

They are kissing. Truly.

Oh! What luck!

[OSIP appears.]

OSIP

The horses are ready.

KHLESTAKOV

I am coming.

MAYOR

So soon?

KHLESTAKOV

Only a day—to visit my rich uncle. I return tomorrow.

MAYOR

Safe road.

KHLESTAKOV (to MARYA)

Farewell—ah, I hate the word.

[He kisses her hand.]

MAYOR

For the road... perhaps you need funds?

KHLESTAKOV

Since you insist—perhaps eight hundred, for roundness.

MAYOR (producing notes)

As if I had it ready.

KHLESTAKOV

New notes. Good omen.

Goodbye, Anton Antonovich.

Goodbye, Anna Andreyevna.

Farewell, Marya Antonovna—angel of my soul.

[They move toward the porch. Bells. The DRIVER clucks to the horses.]

OSIP

The seat is ready, sir.

KHLESTAKOV

Goodbye, Anton Antonovich.

MAYOR

Goodbye, Your Excellency.

WOMEN (off)

Goodbye, Ivan Alexandrovich!

KHLESTAKOV
Goodbye, my dears!

[The troika rattles off.]

ACT V, SCENE THREE

The Mayor's House — Front Parlor

[Same front parlor as earlier, but now in full celebration mode. Flowers slightly wilted in vases, a half-assembled pyramid of pastries on a side table. ANNA ANDREYEVNA struts in a gown that wants to be in Petersburg. MARYA ANTONOVNA sits as if posing for a portrait, dazed. The MAYOR (ANTON ANTONOVICH) paces, flushed, bursting with self-satisfaction.]

ANNA ANDREYEVNA

There. The ribbons are wrong, but the idea is correct. We will look like people, not like peasants.

MARYA

(quietly)

If he really were what they think he is.

ANNA ANDREYEVNA

He will be, as long as everyone behaves as if he is. That's half of power.

MAYOR

(loud, triumphant)

And the other half is having me as a father-in-law.

(he laughs at his own joke, then spins)

Imagine it

Petersburg. A real position. Not this provincial joke. I will walk into the ministry and people will whisper, "That's him. The father-in-law."

ANNA ANDREYEVNA

They will whisper, "That's her. The mother-in-law." Much more important.

MARYA

And what will they whisper about me?

MAYOR

They'll say, "There goes a lucky girl. Married into a star. Straight from this mud-hole to the capital."

MARYA

And what if he doesn't come back?

Silence for a beat. The MAYOR brushes this away with both hands.

MAYOR

Nonsense. He promised. A man like that keeps his word. You saw how he ate. That's a reliable character.

ANNA ANDREYEVNA

Besides, everyone knows. The whole town. Their envy would curdle if the match broke. We cannot let it.

MAYOR

Exactly. Already the officials are sending congratulations. Already the shopkeepers are calculating what they will "humbly present" for our departure. The postmaster will dance attendance. The judge will kiss my boots. The police will stand in a line like fence posts.

ANNA ANDREYEVNA

We will have a proper wedding. A Petersburg wedding. None of this provincial cabbage on plates. Lace, music, candles—

MARYA

(half to herself)

And a groom.

MAYOR

We had him. We have him. We will have him. Do you think the Empire will deny me a son-in-law after such a feast? Impossible. The letter is already on its way to Petersburg announcing it. We simply live in the future in advance.

ANNA ANDREYEVNA

Exactly. We are already half out of this house.

MAYOR

(smiling to himself)

You know, when I walked down the street today, people looked at me differently. "There goes our Mayor," their eyes said, "soon to be a big man in the capital." They'll build statues. Maybe they'll even finish the one we started.

ANNA ANDREYEVNA

Don't get sentimental. It wrinkles your face.

MARYA

Do we... love him, Mama?

ANNA ANDREYEVNA

Love is for peasants and poems. We have something better
an appointment.

MAYOR

Perfectly said. If I had married for love, we would still be living in a one-room hovel and I'd be judging disputes over pigs.

ANNA ANDREYEVNA

You still judge disputes over pigs.

MAYOR

For now. For now.

[A knock.]

MAYOR

There. The flow begins. First the merchants with their congratulations, then the provincial nobility. We must look like we were born in velvet.

(he straightens his sash)

Mishka! Show them in! Gently. We are no longer just "Anton Antonovich." We are almost "Your Excellency's relations."

ACT V, SCENE FOUR

The Mayor's House — Main Hall

[The main hall. Chairs arranged as if for receiving guests. MAYOR (ANTON ANTONOVICH) stands center, basking. MISHKA ushers in three MERCHANTS—ABDULIN and two OTHERS—hats in hands, twisting them nervously.]

MISHKA

The town merchants, Anton Antonovich.

MAYOR

(booming)

Ah! My dear pillars of commerce! Come, come. Congratulations first, then complaints—if you still have the heart.

ABDULIN

(bowing)

We have come with... a petition, your Honour.

MAYOR

A petition? Today? When my daughter is practically on the train to Petersburg? You choose this moment to scratch your sores?

MERCHANT 2

We beg pardon. It is not about the wedding.

MAYOR

Then it can wait until I am too important to notice.

ABDULIN

But—your Honour—our shops... the fines... the bribes...

MAYOR

(bristles)

Bribes?

MERCHANT 3

We only mean—the licenses, the inspections—the fees on top of the fees—

MAYOR

Ah, fees. You call paying what you owe “bribery” now? That’s modern thinking for you.

ABDULIN

We... we are ruined, Anton Antonovich. Every kopek we make goes—

MAYOR

—into my stomach. Yes, yes, I’ve heard this song.

(steps toward them, low and dangerous)

Listen to me, you onions. Have I thrown you in jail?

MERCHANT 2

No, your Honour.

MAYOR

Have I closed your shops?

MERCHANT 3

No.

MAYOR

Have I taken your children for soldiers?

MERCHANT 1

No... but—

MAYOR

But what? I take a little from you, you take a little from your customers, they cheat the next man. That’s how the world spins. You want a town with no “little extras”? Go live with the saints. They have lousy markets.

MERCHANT 2

(with sudden courage)

We only thought—the Inspector—

MAYOR

(erupts)

There! There it is! The Inspector! You promised me—you all promised—you would not whisper about inspectors and letters and “incognito” behind my back.

ABDULIN

We didn’t whisper, your Honour. We came to you directly.

MAYOR

Oh, so now you’re patriots.

(he circles them)

First you run to a stranger with your little stories

“The Mayor is a thief, the Mayor is a tyrant, the Mayor has a second stomach just for our money.” Then, when you think I am rising, when you smell Petersburg on my coat, you remember you have a “petition.”

MERCHANT 3

We thought—if you are going up—you might... remember us.

MAYOR

(laughs without humour)

I will remember you. Oh, yes. As the men who tried to sell me for a discount.

(he suddenly shouts)

Out! Before I decide to show the Inspector how we flog unpatriotic merchants in this town.

ABDULIN/MERCHANT 1

(bowing, shaken)

We meant no offense—

MAYOR

You meant to cover yourselves. Like cats. Out.

[MISHKA hustles them toward the door.]

MAYOR

(calling after them)

And if I hear one more word—one more sigh—about “bribery” and “ruin,” I will personally see to it that you sell nothing but snow!

[MERCHANTS stumble out. A beat; the MAYOR straightens his sash, calming himself.]

MAYOR

(to himself)

They complain now. They'll weep when I'm in Petersburg. Then they'll know what a real tyrant looks like.

[Offstage, we hear distant voices approaching—smoother, more refined.]

MISHKA

(from the door)

The landed gentry, Anton Antonovich. **KAROBKIN** and his lady.

MAYOR

(smiles, instantly composed)

Ah. The people who will pretend they always believed in me.

(He spreads his arms to receive them.)

ACT V, SCENE FIVE

The Mayor's House — Main Hall, Continuous

[Enter KAROBKIN and MADAME KAROBKIN. KAROBKIN is in slightly shabby finery; MADAME KAROBKIN wears country gentility that wants to be city fashion but missed by a decade.]

KAROBKIN

(bowing elaborately)

Our humble congratulations, Anton Antonovich.

MADAME KAROBKIN

(air-kiss near ANNA's cheek)

Such happy news. We heard half the town explode with envy.

ANNA ANDREYEVNA

We do what we can.

MAYOR

(smug)

Ah, Karobkin, dear friend from the old days. Remember when they called us "provincial nobodies"?

KAROBKIN

I recall someone saying that. Often.

MADAME KAROBKIN

When we married, my parents said, "At least he's honest. He'll never rise high enough to be dangerous."

MAYOR

Well. (*preening*) Look at us now.

KAROBKIN

Indeed. Look at you. Very high. Very... visible.

MADAME KAROBKIN

And you, dear Anna Andreyevna—already you carry yourself like a minister's wife.
Such... confidence.

ANNA ANDREYEVNA

It comes naturally.

KAROBKIN

We wanted to be the first among the gentry to pay respects. Once you are in Petersburg, you may forget the little people who once lent you sugar.

MAYOR

I never forget my friends.

MADAME KAROBKIN

Of course not. You only forget your enemies.

KAROBKIN

And even then, only after you have stepped on them twice.
(*they all laugh*)

MAYOR

You always had a tongue, Karobkin.

KAROBKIN

It's cheaper than a lawyer.

MADAME KAROBKIN

We were saying on the way here, "Now we must be careful what we say about Anton Antonovich. He belongs to a higher climate."

KAROBKIN

Yes. We must stop calling you corrupt and start calling you "influential."

MAYOR

(*half laughing, half warning*)
You never called me corrupt. Not to my face.

KAROBKIN

Never, never. Only in the privacy of the hunting lodge.

MADAME KAROBKIN

But now—now we will say, “We always knew he was destined for great things. We saw it in the way he fined people.”

KAROBKIN

And we trust—purely as old friends—that when you are in Petersburg, you will remember that some of us still rot out here in the mud.

MADAME KAROBKIN

A little string pulled there, a little favor granted here. A position for a cousin. A contract for a brother-in-law. Nothing that would trouble an exalted conscience.

MAYOR

(grand)

I will do everything in my power for those who have always believed in me.

KAROBKIN

(smiles thinly)

Then we are saved.

MADAME KAROBKIN

We drink to your ascent. And to ours, clinging to your coattails.

ANNA ANDREYEVNA

We will have you in Petersburg. For a season at least. See the theaters. The shops.

MADAME KAROBKIN

Oh, we hate the capital. Too much noise, too much light, too many people who think they matter. But we adore having someone there.

KAROBKIN

Exactly. We prefer to stay here and complain about it.
[They all laugh. A small awkward silence follows.]

KAROBKIN

(watching him)

You look... thoughtful, Anton Antonovich.

MAYOR

Just thinking how quickly everything changes. Yesterday—filth, petitions, gossip.
Today—merchants bowing, gentry kissing my hand.

MADAME KAROBKIN

And tomorrow? Who knows. Life overturns like a sled in a snowdrift.

KAROBKIN

But you— *(he pats the MAYOR's arm)* you are a man who always lands on his feet. We have wagered on it.

MAYOR

You won't lose your stake.

[From the doorway, a discreet cough. The **POSTMASTER** appears, slightly pale, clutching a letter.]

MISHKA

The Postmaster, Anton Antonovich. On urgent business.

MAYOR

(impatient)

What "urgent" can there be today? We are busy being happy.

KAROBKIN

We'll leave you to your glory.

MADAME KAROBKIN

Yes. We've done our duty

we've envied you, flattered you, and attached our hopes to you. Anything more would be indecent.

[They bow and exit. The POSTMASTER steps in, still holding the letter as if it might burn his fingers.]

ACT V, SCENE SIX

The Mayor's House — Main Hall, Immediately After

[Same space. The MAYOR, ANNA, MARYA, and a cluster of OFFICIALS JUDGE (AMMOS), SVETLANA (SVETLANA PHILIPPOVA ZEMLYANIKA), LUKA, the SUPERINTENDENT, maybe PUGOVKIN. They are mid-chatter about Petersburg futures. The POSTMASTER (IVAN KUZMICH) stands awkwardly at the edge, clutching an opened letter.]

MAYOR

Well, Ivana Kuzmich? Why the face? Did someone forget to lick a stamp?

POSTMASTER

I... have information, Anton Antonovich.

MAYOR

Unless it's about my promotion, it can wait.

POSTMASTER

It is... in a way... about your promotion.

(he swallows)

A letter. From our distinguished guest.

ANNA ANDREYEVNA

Already? To Petersburg?

POSTMASTER

To... Tryapichkin. A friend of his. In the capital.

MAYOR

(amused)

And what business is that of ours?

POSTMASTER

You told me, Anton Antonovich, to maintain a... how did you put it... "open mail policy" in the interests of the public good.

MAYOR

Yes, yes. Public good, my good. Stop circling. Did you open it?

POSTMASTER

I did.

(quietly)

And now I almost wish I hadn't.

JUDGE (AMMOS)

Well? Read it. If we're damned, we might as well know for what.

ALL

Yes, read it. Read!

POSTMASTER

(sighs, then reads)

"I hasten to inform you, my dear friend, that I am having a delicious time in a little provincial hole..."

MAYOR

(uneasy)

"Delicious"?

POSTMASTER

(reading)

“The whole town has taken me for a very important personage. Which, as you know, I am not. But I saw no reason to disappoint them.”

(osip looks down if present; others shift)

“Hearts, doors, and purses fly open at the mere sight of my boots. I dine like a minister, sleep like a prince, and lie like a bulletin.”

(little ripple of discomfort)

JUDGE (AMMOS)

That could be about anyone.

POSTMASTER

“There is a Mayor here—bloated, bribe-stuffed, a perfect hog in human clothing—who fawns on me so hard I fear he will lick the polish off my shoes. He trembles at every word I speak, thinking I have the power to send him to Siberia, when in truth I barely have the power to pay my own bill.”

(murmurs; the MAYOR goes rigid)

SVETLANA PHILIPPOVA ZEMLYANIKA*(soft)*

Hog...

MAYOR

(gritted teeth)

Go on.

POSTMASTER

“There is a judge who smells of vodka and dogs, who takes bribes in the form of hunting puppies and calls it ‘taste.’ He has not read a law book since the Empress had a waist.”

JUDGE (AMMOS)

(offended)

That is an exaggeration. I read the title page last year.

POSTMASTER

“There is a hospital commissioner drenched in perfume and cabbage, who cheats the orphans, starves the sick, and dreams of a villa in Crimea built from stolen bandages.”

SVETLANA PHILIPPOVA ZEMLYANIKA*(appalled)*

I do not “starve” them. I underfeed them.

POSTMASTER

“A school director who beats Latin into children and sense out of them, and a whole squad of policemen who steal spoons faster than they salute.”

SUPERINTENDENT

(to PUGOVKIN)

I told you to stop with the spoons.

POSTMASTER

“The Mayor’s wife flutters like an overripe peacock; his daughter simpers like a half-written love poem. I flirted with both; for sport I proposed to the girl. The father nearly burst with joy like a pig on New Year’s Eve.”

MARYA

(colours, then goes white)

Proposed... for sport.

ANNA ANDREYEVNA

(through her teeth)

I will kill him myself.

POSTMASTER

“There is also a pair of local flies, **BOBCHINSKI** and Dobchinski, who buzz around me with news and gossip, delighted to be near greatness, even counterfeit.”

DOBCHINSKI

We are flies now.

BOBCHINSKI

At least he noticed us.

POSTMASTER

“I leave with full pockets, an empty stomach, and a story that will make you laugh for a week. If you could see their faces! The Mayor already sees himself in Petersburg, the others grovel at my feet, the merchants whimper for justice from a man who has never been just even to his own tailor. In short, my dear Tryapichkin, if you ever pass this way, do not miss the chance to dine on fools. They are the only abundant resource here.”

(he lowers the letter)

That is... the main part.

[Silence. Then overlapping reactions.]

S

VETLANA PHILIPPOVA ZEMLYANIKA

Lies. All lies. I have never even said the word “villa” out loud.

JUDGE (AMMOS)

“Dogs and vodka” is slander. The dogs are outside.

LUKA

I do not “beat” Latin into children. I tap it.

SUPERINTENDENT

The spoons were evidence.

ANNA ANDREYEVNA

(over them all)

He called me overripe.

MARYA

He called me a sport.

MAYOR

(very quiet)

And he called me a hog.

[Everyone falls silent again.]

JUDGE (AMMOS)

So he was no inspector.

POSTMASTER

No. Just a very hungry clerk with a talent for invention.

SUPERINTENDENT

And we bribed him as if he carried our lives in his pocket.

SVETLANA PHILIPPOVA ZEMLYANIKAW We fed him, housed him, gave him
money...

LUKA

...and our daughters.

MARYA

I gave him nothing.

ANNA ANDREYEVNA

You gave him your eyes.

MARYA

Then I will take them back.

[Uneasy, embarrassed laughter from the others.]

SOME OFFICIAL

(trying to chuckle)

Well... it is funny, in a way.

[Others pick up the laugh—thin, brittle, half-hysterical. The MAYOR suddenly wheels on them.]

MAYOR

Enough. You've stared long enough. You think it's funny, don't you? All this running about with petitions, the bribery done with a wink, the lies told so badly that even the dog under the table can smell them. You sit out there in the dark, very decent, very proper, whispering to one another

“What a pack of fools! What a circus of cowards! What a ridiculous little town!” And yet—tell me—where exactly is this town? On which map? In which country? You think it is somewhere far away, behind a bad road and a broken telegraph line, where small officials tremble at every rumour from the capital. But the road isn't so long, and the telegraph runs everywhere now. The ink on our paperwork is the same ink that dries on yours. The hands that take bribes look very much like your hands when they reach out for a favour, or a shortcut, or a little exception “just this once.”

You laugh when we panic at the word “Inspector,” when we rush to whitewash the walls and comb the lice out of the hospital sheets, when we swear we are innocent, loyal, moral. But when your own Inspector appears—whatever name you give him conscience, law, history, the next generation—you do the same dance. You wipe your hands, straighten your shoulders, and hope he won't look too closely at the corners where the dirt is swept.

So go on. Laugh. Point at us. Call us ridiculous, corrupt, cowardly, small. Call us whatever names make you feel bigger, cleaner, safer. But remember—
What are you laughing at? You are laughing at yourself, oh you!

[Silence. No one laughs now. The officials shift, suddenly aware of the audience.]

SVETLANA PHILIPPOVA ZEMLYANIKA*(weak)*

What do we do now?

JUDGE (AMMOS)

We find whose fault it is.

ALL

(turning as one)

BOBCHINSKI.

Dobchinski.

DOBCHINSKI

Me?

BOBCHINSKI

Us?

MAYOR

You were the first to “recognize” him. The first to bring the news. The first to drag us into this swamp.

DOBCHINSKI

We only told what we saw.

BOBCHINSKI

We thought we were helping.

MAYOR

You thought. There’s your crime.

LUKA

We all thought, Anton Antonovich. We all wanted to believe.

SUPERINTENDENT

Easy to blame the messengers when the message is our own stupidity.

[They begin arguing in overlapping accusations and defenses—everyone against everyone, then everyone against no one, the noise building.]

[Suddenly, the door flies open. A GENDARME stands there, rigid, shiny, the real capital in his posture.]

GENDARME

Which of you is the Mayor?

[The room freezes for a heartbeat. The MAYOR slowly raises his hand.]

MAYOR

I... am.

GENDARME

By order of the Imperial government, a government inspector from Petersburg has arrived. He awaits you... at the inn.

[Beat. The MAYOR’s mouth opens; no sound comes out.]

[All faces turn toward him, then toward the audience, then toward some fixed point beyond. The sound drops out. We move into the wordless terror that becomes the next scene.]

[Lights snap to cold as everyone locks into position, and we slide into ACT V, SCENE SEVEN

SILENT TABLEAU.]

(The furniture is slowly exploding outwards, papers flying everywhere)

CENTER

the MAYOR, cruciform, chin knifed upward, mouth a square of astonishment. A granite

silhouette. The red ascot—too bright and long—has fluttered to his shoe and will not stop unravelling.

RIGHT

ANNA ANDREYEVNA and MARYA ANTONOVNA tilt toward him at impossible angles, hands like sharp brackets, makeup running down their faces. Beyond them, the POSTMASTER faces the audience, eyes blank a mute question mark.

Behind him

Director of Schools, face powdered to blankness, neck stiff, palms open—an I-am-innocent icon. Ten Commandments in one hand, Moses-like.

Farthest right edge

THREE VISITING LADIES, identical black veils, identical sneers; they whisper without sound, teeth like thin piano keys. Their elbows make triangles.

LEFT

SVETLANA PHILIPPOVA SVETLANA PHILIPPOVA ZEMLYANIKA (Charity Commissioner) cocks her head, listening for a verdict that never comes. Behind her, the JUDGE droops like a bent weathervane, shoulders shrugging in tiny, mechanical pulses; lips shape a whistle that cannot start.

Farthest left

BOBCHINSKI and DOBCHINSKI—two open circles of mouths—mirror each other, stunned parentheses.

All figures freeze into angles. No one breathes. The back wall becomes a rally screen block letters flare and stutter—MAKE ... AGAIN ... BELIEVE ME—then smear, then reverse, then fall upward like torn posters. A gold rectangle (a tower without windows) rises and tilts; its gilding peels in long, quiet ribbons. A flock of tiny chainsaws drifts across like poppies in a windless room, then stops midair. A hand—huge, flat, cut from cardboard—gives a silent thumbs-up, then slowly rotates to a thumbs-sideways. The shadow of a flag ripples; the cloth itself does not move. Faces do not change. The MAYOR's arms do not lower. ANNA's nostrils are thin black slits; MARYA's pupils are white. One minute of absolute stillness. The red ascot finally settles or blows away.

Blackout. Curtain.

CURTAIN.

EPILOGUE

DOBCHINSKI *(looking back at the frozen officials)*

Well. There we are.

BOBCHINSKI

Exactly as we remember it.

DOBCHINSKI

Or as we tell it.

BOBCHINSKI

Which is almost the same thing.

DOBCHINSKI (*to audience*)

You've seen everything now—the rushing, the bribing, the flattering, the pretending.

You've seen our **MAYOR** swear he is innocent, swear we are loyal, swear that everything is perfectly in order—

BOBCHINSKI

—until someone important walks through the door.

DOBCHINSKI

You've seen us. We ran first to the inn. We brought the news. We carried the rumor like a holy icon.

BOBCHINSKI

We meant well.

DOBCHINSKI

We always mean well. That's the dangerous part.

BOBCHINSKI (*gesturing at the tableau*)

And now they are caught like this. Mid-gesture. Mid-excuse. Mid-lie.

DOBCHINSKI

Waiting for the real Inspector.

BOBCHINSKI

He is coming, you know. Not the one we invented at the inn. The real one.

DOBCHINSKI (*quietly*)

He always comes. Sooner or later. For every town.

They both look out into the audience.

BOBCHINSKI

Maybe he's already here.

DOBCHINSKI

Maybe he doesn't wear a uniform.

BOBCHINSKI

Maybe he looks like a voter.

DOBCHINSKI

A patient.

BOBCHINSKI

A student.

DOBCHINSKI

A clerk.

BOBCHINSKI

A neighbor.

DOBCHINSKI

Or maybe—

He studies the audience closely.

BOBCHINSKI (*following his gaze*)

Maybe he looks like you.

They share a small, nervous laugh.

DOBCHINSKI

We started this story because we thought it was about them.

BOBCHINSKI (*nodding toward the frozen MAYOR and officials*)

About the “big people.”

DOBCHINSKI

But somewhere along the way—

BOBCHINSKI

—the Inspector turned around.

DOBCHINSKI (*to audience*)

If you laughed, that’s all right. We laughed too.

BOBCHINSKI

We always laugh when we’re afraid.

DOBCHINSKI

But remember what the **MAYOR** said just now.

They both quote, together, echoing the Mayor's line

DOBCHINSKI and BOBCHINSKI

“What are you laughing at? You are laughing at yourself, oh you!”

They let that hang in the air a moment.

BOBCHINSKI (*softly*)

That's all. That's the whole story.

DOBCHINSKI

For now.

BOBCHINSKI

Until the next rumor.

DOBCHINSKI

Until the next Inspector.

BOBCHINSKI

Until the next town that says, “We are perfectly ordinary. Nothing to see here.”

DOBCHINSKI (to audience, with a small bow)

You've heard our report.

BOBCHINSKI (matching the bow)

The rest is up to you.

They step backward into the frozen tableau, take their places, and freeze again. Lights
fade to black.

END OF PLAY