

PERUSAL SCRIPT

The Witching Hour

(Four Short Plays)

by Kira Shaffer
and
Cory Larsen



Newport, Maine

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THE WITCHING HOUR

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ORDER #3335

EACH PLAY IS AVAILABLE SEPARATELY FOR PERFORMANCE AS A SHORT PLAY.

A Long Waltz Too Short (3336) Was It a Dream? (3337)

The Ghostly Chaperone (3338) Deserted (3339)

CAST:**Was It a Dream?** 1f, 2m

MAN: devastated by the death of his lover, 20s to 50s

WOMAN: the Man's dead lover, 20s or 30s

JACQUES OLIVANT: skeleton of a dead man

Deserted (1f, 2m)

ARTHUR WOODROW: male vampire, 20s or 30s in appearance

MAUDE ANDERSON: female human, 25

BRANDON: male vampire, Arthur's friend, 20s or 30s in appearance

The Ghostly Chaperone (2f, 1m)

HANK: an amiable young man, 20s or 30s

ARIA: Hank's girlfriend who can see ghosts, 20s or 30s

GWENDOLYN: a well-dressed ghost, Hank's dead mother

A Long Waltz Too Short (2f, 2m)

DMITRI PETROV: an official in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, 20s to 30s

ELENA PETROVNA: Dmitri's new wife, 21 a pretty but indecorous

SVETLANA KARATAEVA: single woman, 20s to 30s

GIBEL SMERTOV: a mysterious man, 20s to 50s

PRODUCTION NOTES:

CASTING CHOICES and possibilities are many and varied. Separate performers may be used for each play, or some or all actors may double through the plays. However, please do not take time between plays to change costumes for cast members for the next play. Plays 2 and 4 could have the same cast with a performer added from play 1. Or play 1 and 3 may share some of the same actors.

SETTINGS should remain simple so they can easily be changed.

PROPS should be minimal.

COSTUMES should help delineate the period as well as the character

THE WITCHING HOUR: Four Short Plays for Halloween (or any time) by *Kira Shaffer* and *Cory Larsen*. 6f, 7m (doubling possible) 60-70 minutes. Period costumes. Simple Setting and props. The festival of Samhain, or as we more commonly know it, Hallowe'en, is a favorite time of year for many people. This collection of short plays of the haunting and the macabre are a perfect fit for the celebration of that season, or for any time of the year. Performed together they are called *The Witching Hour*. A man mourning his mistress stays overnight in the cemetery where she's buried (*Was It a Dream?* [About 21 minutes]); a vampire and human are stranded together in the desert (*Deserted* [About 15 mins]); a couple's private Halloween at home is disrupted by a surprise visitor (*The Ghostly Chaperone* [About 23 minutes]); and a newlywed young woman meets a stranger with grim purpose at a ball (*A Long Waltz Too Short* [About 14 minutes]). Each of these plays may be performed separately, without the other three. Inquire for special pricing. Content Advisory: Thematic elements. Suitable for most teens and adults. **ORDER # 3335**

Kira Shaffer graduated from Brigham Young University–Idaho in 2014 with a BA in English, creative writing emphasis. Her love for Halloween and supernatural stories inspired these plays. She met her collaborator and co-writer Cory Larsen in 2015. They developed a friendship after she joined the volunteer

choir he directed in 2017. She sang under him for five seasons before the choir disbanded with the COVID-19 shutdown of 2020. Kīra lives in Utah with her husband and children.

Cory Larsen has performed on Broadway and toured in Broadway productions. He has directed plays, musicals, and choirs. He shares Kīra's love of Halloween. Cory lives in Utah.

The World Premiere production of *The Witching Hour* was produced at The Hive Collaborative in Provo, Utah, in 2021. Directed by Cory Larsen. The cast was as follows:

Was It a Dream?

MAN: **Matthew DelaFuente**

WOMAN: **Alyssa Garn**

JACQUES OLIVANT: **Joshua Yuen**

The Ghostly Chaperone

HANK: **Kobe C. Black**

ARIA: **Kirsten Rast**

GWENDOLYN: **Sheldon Bladh**

Deserted

ARTHUR WOODROW: **Spencer James Tuft**

MAUDE ANDERSON: **Diane Alisa Tuft**

BRANDON: **Sean Hunter**

A Long Waltz Too Short

DMITRI PETROV: **Mitchell Larsen**

ELENA PETROVNA: **Alanna Koltermann**

SVETLANA KARATAEVA: **Julianne Davis**

GIBEL SMERTOV: **W. Benjamin Hyde**

GUEST: **Ashley Pitts**

Was It a Dream?

A short play

Adapted for the stage by Cory Larsen and Kīra Shaffer

(Based upon the short story by Guy de Maupassant)

Cast of Characters 1F, 2M

MAN — devastated by the death of his lover, 20s to 50s

WOMAN — the Man's dead lover, 20s or 30s

JAQUES OLIVANT — skeleton of a dead man

PLACE: France

TIME: Late 1800s

Scene

Lights up on the MAN and WOMAN. They are onstage together the entire play. Blocking is largely left to the director, but should be based on the narration provided by the Man and Woman.

MAN: I had loved her madly! Why does one love? How queer it is to see only one being in the world, to have only one thought in one's mind.

WOMAN: Only one desire in the heart.

MAN & WOMAN: And only one name upon the lips.

MAN: A name which comes up continually, rising, like the water to a spring, from the depths of the soul to the lips.

WOMAN: A name which repeats over and over again, which one whispers ceaselessly, everywhere, like a prayer.

MAN: I am going to tell you our story, for love only has one, which is always the same. I met her and loved her; that is all. And for a whole year I have lived on her tenderness, on her caresses, in her arms, in her

dresses, on her words, so completely wrapped up, bound, and absorbed in everything which came from her, that I no longer cared whether it was day or night, or whether I was dead or alive, on this old earth of ours.

MAN:

And then she died.

WOMAN:

And then I died.

MAN: How? I do not know. I no longer know anything.

MAN:

But one evening she came home wet,
for it was raining heavily.

WOMAN:

But one evening I came home wet,
for it was raining heavily.

WOMAN: And the next day I coughed, and I coughed for about a week, and took to my bed.

MAN: What happened I do not remember now, but doctors came, wrote, and went away.

WOMAN: Medicines were brought, and some women made me drink them. My hands were hot, my forehead burning.

MAN: And her eyes were bright and sad. When I spoke to her, she answered me but I do not remember what we said. I have forgotten everything, everything, everything!

WOMAN: I died.

MAN: And I very well remember her slight, feeble sigh. The nurse said: "Ah!" and I understood, I understood! I knew nothing more, nothing. I saw a priest, who said: "Your mistress?" and it seemed to me as if he were insulting her. As she was dead, nobody had the right to say that any longer, and I turned him out. Another came who was very kind and tender, and I shed tears when he spoke to me about her. They consulted me about the funeral, but I do not remember anything that they said, though I recollected the coffin, and the sound of the hammer when they nailed her down in it. Oh! She was buried! Buried! She! In that hole!

WOMAN: Some people came—female friends. He made his escape and ran away. He ran, and then walked through the streets, went home and the next day started on a journey.

MAN: Yesterday I returned to Paris, and when I saw my room again—

WOMAN:

Our room, our bed, our furniture,
everything that remains of a
life of a human being after—

MAN:

Our room, our bed, our furniture,
everything that remains of a
life of a human being after death.

I was seized by such a violent attack of fresh grief,
that I felt like opening the window and throwing
myself into the street. I could not remain any longer
among these things, between these walls which had
enclosed and sheltered her, which retained a thousand
atoms of her, of her skin and of her breath, in their
imperceptible crevices. I took up my hat to make my
escape, and just as I reached the door—

WOMAN:

He passed the large glass in the hall,
which I had put there so that I might
look at myself every day from head to foot
as I went out, to see if my toilette looked well,
and was correct and pretty,
from my little boots to my bonnet.

MAN:

I passed the large glass in the hall.

MAN: I stopped short in front of that looking glass in which she had so often been reflected—so often, so often, that it must have retained her reflection. I was standing there, trembling, with my eyes fixed on the glass—on that flat, profound, empty glass—which had contained her entirely, and had possessed her

as much as I, as my passionate looks had. I felt as if I loved that glass. I touched it; it was cold. Oh! The recollection! Sorrowful mirror, burning mirror, horrible mirror, to make men suffer such torments!

WOMAN: Happy is the man whose heart forgets everything that it has contained, everything that has passed before it, everything that has looked at itself in it, or has been reflected in its affection, its love!

MAN: How I suffer! I went out without knowing it, without wishing it, and toward the cemetery. I found her simple grave.

MAN & WOMAN: A white marble cross, with these few words: "*She loved, was loved, and died.*"

MAN: She is there, below, decayed! How horrible!

WOMAN: He sobbed with his forehead on the ground, and he stopped there for a long time, a long time. Then he saw that it was getting dark, and a strange, mad wish, the wish of a despairing lover, seized him. He wished to pass the night, the last night, in weeping on my grave.

MAN: But I should be seen and driven out. How was I to manage? I was cunning, and got up and began to roam about in that city of the dead. I walked and walked. How small this city is, in comparison with the other, the city in which we live.

WOMAN: And yet, how much more numerous the dead are than the living.

MAN: We want high houses, wide streets, and much room for the four generations who see the daylight at the same time, drink water from the same spring, and wine from the vines, and eat bread from the plains.

WOMAN: And for all the generations of the dead, for all that ladder of humanity that has descended down to us, there is scarcely anything, scarcely anything! The earth takes us back, and oblivion effaces us.

THREE MORE PAGES TO THE END OF THIS PLAY

Deserted

A short play
by Kīra Shaffer

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Cast of Characters

ARTHUR WOODROW — male vampire, 20s or 30s in appearance

MAUDE ANDERSON — female human, 25

BRANDON — male vampire, Arthur's friend, 20s or 30s in appearance

PLACE: a desert canyon

TIME: Day, postwar, 1940s

Scene

Lights up: Upstage right, ARTHUR sits holding an unconscious MAUDE under a large umbrella laid on its side. (Note on stage direction: Whenever Arthur and Maude sit, it is always under the umbrella.)

MAUDE wears a nightgown, a dressing gown with the sash tied but the front open, and slippers.

ARTHUR wears dress shirt, pants, and shoes.

ARTHUR: I'm trying, Maudie. I'm really trying. We haven't been here that long. I promise I'll find a way out of this place without...

(sighs)

Who am I fooling? It's hopeless. Brandon thought of everything.

(MAUDE stirs and groans. Arthur supports her as she sits up.)

MAUDE: Oh, my head... Uh, my mouth...

ARTHUR: Maude, are you alright?

MAUDE: Arthur? What are you doing here?

(MAUDE notices her state of deshabelle and yanks her dressing gown closed with a gasp.)

What am I doing here? What's going on? Where are we?

ARTHUR: Tanezrouft Basin, Sahara Desert. Locals call it the land of terror.

MAUDE: Are you kidding me? I don't even have a passport. How did we get here?

ARTHUR: Brandon.

MAUDE: Brandon? Your friend Brandon? The guy I met at your birthday party last summer who beat us at Liverpool rummy?

ARTHUR: Yeah, that guy.

MAUDE: How is he responsible?

ARTHUR: Brandon and I had a game we played. Something we cooked up in the early years of our friendship.

MAUDE: A game.

ARTHUR: (*standing*) We were young. Bored. Wanted something to enliven the endless days and nights.

MAUDE: What game?

ARTHUR: We took turns planning difficult situations to put ourselves into. The challenge, and the thrill, was getting out of them. It was Brandon's turn to plan, only he decided to make you his substitute in the field.

MAUDE: (*standing*) That's the kind of stupidity I'd expect from boys I went to college with, not two sage immortals. What kind of "difficult situations"?

ARTHUR: That's unimportant.

MAUDE: I'd really like to know.

ARTHUR: Dropping into Axis territory, then racing to Allied lines...

MAUDE: Great, so you're a secret adrenaline junkie. And it wasn't enough for Brandon to beat us at cards. No. He had to drop us in the middle of Africa too!

ARTHUR: Actually, Tanezrouft is in northwestern—

(MAUDE cuts him off by placing the palm of her hand over his mouth.)

MAUDE: I didn't ask for a geography lesson! How long have I been out? The last thing I remember is falling asleep in my bed.

ARTHUR: Over a day. Brandon drugged you.

MAUDE: How...? I don't want to know. What a creep. Ugh, I'm hot.

(MAUDE sits.)

ARTHUR: I'm as cold as ever.

MAUDE: Then cool me off.

(ARTHUR sits beside Maude. MAUDE drapes an arm over his legs to rest her back against his chest.)

As much as I would love to just sit here and enjoy our surprise getaway, courtesy of your crazy friend, what's the plan? Why aren't you throwing me on your back and scaling the canyon walls already?

ARTHUR: I'm not strong enough.

MAUDE: *(sitting up)* What are you talking about? Of course you are. You're a vampire.

ARTHUR: I didn't know Brandon would drag you into this. He asked for me and him to do a prolonged fast before the game this time, "to give ourselves a disadvantage," he said. I'm too weak to carry you out of here in time. We have no food, no water, no map. And that's not our only problem.

(standing)

When the sun sets, who knows how much the temperature will drop, and all we have to keep you warm are the clothes we're wearing, because I run cold, as we've just established.

(MAUDE stands.)

MAUDE: Why would Brandon do this to us?

(Lights down. MAUDE freezes in place. Flashback. Party music plays. Lights up on BRANDON's stage left entrance. BRANDON holds a drinking glass filled with blood in each hand. He wears

dress pants and shoes, and a dress shirt under a cardigan sweater. ARTHUR joins him, now wearing a blazer.)

BRANDON: Happy birthday, Arthur!

(BRANDON hands him a glass. They clink their glasses together.)

Two centuries looks good on you.

ARTHUR: Thanks, Brandon. I'm glad you could make it.

BRANDON: Of course.

(THEY take a drink, then look at the fourth wall as if observing the party guests.)

This must be the girl you've been telling me about.

ARTHUR: Yep, that's her.

BRANDON: She is darling. I'm happy for you.

ARTHUR: It's not like that.

(ARTHUR raises his glass to his lips.)

BRANDON: Isn't it, though?

(ARTHUR lowers his glass without drinking. BRANDON takes a drink.)

You know, Cecily died a long time ago.

(ARTHUR remains silent.)

BRANDON: Oh, you're too wrapped up in these humans. I know a few vampettes I could introduce you to.

ARTHUR: Still not interested. Thanks.

BRANDON: Suit yourself.

(THEY raise their glasses to their lips. Lights down. Party music stops. Another flashback, more recent than the last. Lights up on ARTHUR and BRANDON. ARTHUR is no longer wearing the blazer. BRANDON wears a scarf instead of a cardigan sweater.)

I understand if you cut me off or come after me for this. But just know, Arthur, I am your truest friend. Your guilt for the past has held you back long enough. You deserve to be happy. I hope you take the chance I'm giving you with this girl.

ARTHUR: You bastard! I trusted you! You're throwing away a hundred and ninety-six years of friendship if you go through with this. Substitutes aren't part of the rules.

BRANDON: They're not against the rules.

ARTHUR: Why bring her into this? Why not just change her yourself if that's the outcome you're betting on?

BRANDON: Oh, that would be poor sportsmanship. The choice is for you and her alone.

ARTHUR: It's not much of a choice if you're forcing my hand.

BRANDON: A choice nonetheless.

ARTHUR: It's too dangerous. I'm starving, and I've never changed someone before. I could kill her.

BRANDON: The game has always been about testing our limits. I have faith in you.

ARTHUR: No, Brandon, no. Don't do this. Don't make me—!

BRANDON: I hope you'll remember the good times we've had, and that you'll forgive me, someday.
Goodbye, old friend.

(BRANDON walks away and ARTHUR turns his back on him. BRANDON walks back and sticks Arthur in the neck with a syringe. Lights down. Back to present. Lights up.)

MAUDE: I can't believe I thought he was nice!

ARTHUR: Maude.

MAUDE: He did look at me kinda funny.

ARTHUR: Maude...

MAUDE: It's so hot here!

5 MORE PAGES TO THE END OF THIS PLAY

The Ghostly Chaperone

A short play

by

Kīra Shaffer and Cory Larsen

© 2022

Cast of Characters:

HANK — an amiable young man, 20s or 30s

ARIA — Hank's girlfriend who can see ghosts, 20s or 30s

GWENDOLYN — a well-dressed ghost, Hank's dead mother

PLACE: An American living room

TIME: Halloween night, 1950s

Scene

Lights up: A love seat center stage, a chair right of the love seat, and a console table with a lamp and radio upstage from the chair. A door upstage left. HANK, wearing an apron, enters by the table and crosses to open the front door, letting in Aria.

HANK: Aria! I'm really sorry, dinner's not ready yet. It's been a day.

(HANK starts to help Aria out of her coat.)

My neighbor's car had to go into the shop unexpectedly for repairs, so he asked me for a ride to the airport because he didn't want to pay for a taxi, so I started late—

ARIA: Hank, Hank, it's fine. Really. Go back to the kitchen. I keep a book in my bag. I'll just sit, relax, and read while you finish.

(ARIA sits on the love seat.)

HANK: Righto.

(HANK starts to leave. He turns back.)

By the way, with the porch light off and a sign on the door, we shouldn't have any trick-or-treaters interrupting us tonight.

ARIA: No interruptions? Sounds perfect.

HANK: Yes it does.

(HANK gives Aria a peck on the cheek and exits. As ARIA takes a book out of her purse and starts to read, GWENDOLYN enters where Hank exited. She eyes Aria. ARIA startles when she notices Gwendolyn.)

ARIA: Who are you?!

GWENDOLYN: You can see me?

ARIA: Yes, perfectly.

GWENDOLYN: That is a surprise. Oh, and I'm Henry's mother.

ARIA: His mother? So much for a night of no interruptions.

(ARIA puts her book away.)

GWENDOLYN: My thoughts exactly. The name's Gwendolyn. And you're Aria... at least that's what I overheard. Such a pretty name. Are your parents opera lovers?

ARIA: How could you tell?

GWENDOLYN: Just a lucky guess. Do you come here often?

ARIA: Do *you* come here often?

GWENDOLYN: Often enough. However, my haunting habits aren't any of your business.

ARIA: As my dating habits aren't any of yours.

GWENDOLYN: Ohhh, aren't we the spunky one? Does Henry know about your gift?

ARIA: Not yet. And right now it feels more like a curse than a gift.

GWENDOLYN: You wound me, Aria.

ARIA: Do I?

GWENDOLYN: No, not really. But there's always next time. May I show you out?

ARIA: No. Thank you. Hank and I are on a date, and I'm sorry to say—

GWENDOLYN: Clearly, not sorry enough.

ARIA: As I was saying—

GWENDOLYN: Yes, please continue. This conversation is riveting.

ARIA: Hank and I are on a date.

GWENDOLYN: Yes, we've established that. I'm dead, not deaf. No need to repeat oneself now, is there?

ARIA: Now's not a good time for you to be here. To be frank, you're interrupting our evening. Did you come to scare me, or did you have your heart set on being a third wheel tonight?

GWENDOLYN: A third wheel? Not at all. However, as we're being frank, I was merely feeling nostalgic for my old home, and my only child. So I decided to drop in. I was looking through some of Henry's old school things, when I heard the doorbell ring, followed by a sound I had never in my life—or death—heard before. Then I realized it was your cloying voice. What good mother wouldn't wanted to see who her son's lady caller is? And how was I to know she would be some kind of witch?

ARIA: I am not a witch!

GWENDOLYN: I suppose that all depends on who's defining it.

(HANK enters.)

HANK: Are you trying to talk to me?

ARIA: Oh! No. I was reading out loud. I remember things better that way. I hope you don't mind.

GWENDOLYN: From what I can see, it would behoove you to read aloud more often.

HANK: Not at all.

(HANK kisses Aria's cheek)

Carry on.

(HANK turns to leave.)

ARIA: Why don't I join you in the kitchen? I can help, we can talk.

GWENDOLYN: Oh yes, more riveting conversation. How exciting.

(HANK leads Aria back to the love seat.)

HANK: I promised you wouldn't have to lift a finger tonight. I'm making you dinner, and that's what you're going to get. So just sit, keep reading, and relax. There'll be plenty of time to talk over dinner.

ARIA: I'm not sure how much reading and relaxing I'll be doing.

GWENDOLYN: Not much, if I have any say in the matter. Oh, yes, I do.

HANK: There's a good girl. I need to get back to the potatoes. They're not gonna mash themselves, ya know?

(HANK gives Aria a kiss on the cheek and exits.)

GWENDOLYN: A kiss. How quaint.

ARIA: What, Gwendolyn? Your son and I are dating. I know Hank brought girls around while you were alive. I'm not a jackalope. And I don't appreciate your disdain for me. Was it your fault none of the others stuck around?

GWENDOLYN: I resent that baseless insinuation. The fault was theirs, not mine, as I'm sure you are acutely aware.

ARIA: What?

GWENDOLYN: Oh, I'm sorry. Should I have put that in writing for you to read out loud?

ARIA: *(standing)* I beg your pardon!

GWENDOLYN: There's no need to beg, dear girl. It's most unbecoming of a lady. I see you two are alone in the house.

ARIA: Only in the corporeal sense, unfortunately.

GWENDOLYN: Unfortunately, indeed. It appears you are in need of a chaperone.

ARIA: Excuse me?

GWENDOLYN: A chaperone. I'm quite sure you've heard of it. Ah, but don't mind me, Aria. I'll just be scowling—I mean, standing in the background.

ARIA: We'll leave if you won't. Would you rather we go down to the drive-in cinema and play backseat bingo?

GWENDOLYN: You play bingo? How very matronly of you.

ARIA: Yes! I mean... anyway... There's a ghost story playing tonight. I'd rather watch one than star in one.

GWENDOLYN: For shame, Aria. You would ruin my son's plan for a romantic evening in? He would be so disappointed if you said you wanted to go out when he's put in all this work and forethought into a cozy Halloween at home.

ARIA: You're ruining his plans by being here. And a ghostly chaperone is not at all cozy.

GWENDOLYN: You're right, Aria. Three definitely is a crowd. Perhaps if you take a little ride—

(HANK enters holding two open bottles of soda. As he talks, he hands a bottle to Aria.)

HANK: Chicken is in the oven, and dinner will be ready in less than half an hour.

(HANK leans in to kiss Aria on the lips. ARIA turns away distractedly.)

ARIA: Oh, sounds fine.

HANK: Aria, is everything alright?

ARIA: Huh? Oh! Yes. Just dandy.

(HANK raises his bottle for a toast.)

HANK: Happy Halloween.

ARIA: *(raising her bottle)* Happy Halloween.

(THEY clink their bottles together and take a drink.)

GWENDOLYN: Yes. It's turning out to be quite the happy Halloween.

(ARIA looks at Gwendolyn.)

HANK: So, how was your day?

ARIA: *(distracted)* My day?

(ARIA returns her attention to Hank and hands him her soda. While she talks, she sits on the love seat and HANK sets the bottles on the table and joins her.)

ARIA: Business as usual at the bank: Mr. Banger is still a wet rag. He made Mary take off the spider brooch she wore specially for today. She'd hoped he wouldn't notice. A fool's hope.

GWENDOLYN: There seems to be a fair amount of that in this very room.

(ARIA glares at Gwendolyn.)

HANK: Your boss is a terror.

ARIA: *(eyes still on Gwendolyn)* What?

(ARIA returns her attention to Hank.)

I mean, yes, he is. He retires at the end of the year, though, so he won't be my problem anymore. But enough about me—

GWENDOLYN: I'd say more than enough.

(GWENDOLYN sits in the chair and ARIA glares at her.)

ARIA: *(to Hank)* How was your day? Apart from the last-minute ride you gave your neighbor.

(While HANK answers, he and ARIA cozy up and ARIA shoots smug looks at Gwendolyn.)

HANK: I went through some old school papers of mine. Fittingly, one was about the history of Halloween. Folklorists think some Halloween traditions were influenced by a Gaelic festival called Samhain. People believed the souls of the departed would revisit their homes seeking hospitality during Samhain. Wild, right? Anyway, I got to thinking about the fact that this was my mother's house, and that she died here... And... Well, now it's my place. A perk of being an only child: inheritance was one more thing I didn't have to share. Wait! Wouldn't it be crazy if my mother came here tonight?

(GWENDOLYN laughs.)

7 MORE PAGES TO THE END OF THIS PLAY

A Long Waltz Too Short

A short play
by Kira Shaffer

Cast of Characters:

DMITRI PETROV: an official in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, 20s to 30s

ELENA PETROVNA: Dmitri's new wife, 21 a pretty but indecorous

SVETLANA KARATAEVA: single woman, 20s to 30s

GIBEL SMERTOV: a mysterious man, 20s to 50s

PLACE: a ballroom

TIME: Evening, 1960s

Scene

At rise: A cushioned chair upstage right. DMITRI enters escorting Elena.

DMITRI: You are as graceful as ever: the star of the ball. My comrades wonder how I ever managed to catch you.

ELENA: It's no great mystery. You are more dashing than all of them.

DMITRI: Will you dance the next one with me?

ELENA: You're incorrigible. We just danced together twice in a row. If you are this eager, perhaps we should take a second honeymoon, hm? A trip to the Black Sea?

DMITRI: You know I can't get away from work again so soon. Indulge me now, please?

ELENA: Stop. Look there. Svetlana Karataeva needs a partner.

(THEY look to SVETLANA, who is trying to attract a partner.)

DMITRI: Oh no.

ELENA: Oh yes. Tis a happy duty. This is a ballroom, not a bedroom: you cannot have me all to yourself.

DMITRI: If you say so, tishka.

ELENA: (*shooing him away*) Kysh kysh!

DMITRI: Woman, I go!

(DMITRI goes to Svetlana and offers his hand. SVETLANA accepts it and they exit. A waltz begins to play. ELENA feels a sudden, sharp pain in her head. She gasps.)

ELENA: Sch-toe! Not now!

(SMERTOV enters and crosses to Elena. ELENA sits.)

SMERTOV: No lady should be left sitting when a perfectly good waltz is playing. Come, you must dance. He proffers his hand to Elena.

ELENA: I'm sorry, sir, but I'm indisposed at the moment. You may save a dance with me for later, if I feel better.

SMERTOV: No matter. Take my hand.

ELENA: I tell you I shan't.

SMERTOV: Elena Petrovna, stand up with me.

(ELENA must obey. She takes his hand and rises. At his touch, her headache disappears.)

ELENA: My headache—it's gone!

SMERTOV: How fortunate.

ELENA: So it seems...

(ELENA pulls her hand from Smertov's.)

Do you know me, sir? I don't know you. You didn't introduce yourself. Where are your manners?

SMERTOV: Do you ever apologize for your bluntness?

ELENA: Never. Though perhaps I would if I were not so pretty.

SMERTOV You do look ravishing tonight.

ELENA: Then my time in front of the mirror was well spent. But you should know I am married.

SMERTOV: Until death do you part.

ELENA: Are you always this morbid?

SMERTOV: You have no idea.

ELENA: Tell me your name.

SMERTOV: Gibel Smertov.

ELENA: You're teasing me.

SMERTOV: I would not be so cavalier.

ELENA: You must be teasing.

SMERTOV: Why?

ELENA: Because that's not a real name.

SMERTOV: It is mine.

ELENA: It can't be. No one is called—no one has the name of Death.

SMERTOV: Except Death himself?

ELENA: I don't believe you.

SMERTOV: Typical. Nevertheless, I am he. Believe what you will.

ELENA: I believe we're through here.

(She walks past him and he grabs her hand.)

SMERTOV: The dance is not over, Elena.

ELENA: It's halfway done.

SMERTOV: Ah, but this is your last, so I shall make it last, as a parting gift.

ELENA: You're mad.

(ELENA tries to pull away again but SMERTOV holds her fast.)

Very well, Smertov, I'll play along.

(THEY begin to waltz.)

What brings Death to a State Ball in Soviet Russia?

SMERTOV: You, my dear.

ELENA: Oh really?

SMERTOV: You are coming home with me tonight.

ELENA: My husband would be unhappy to hear you say that.

SMERTOV: All the same.

ELENA: And to what do I owe your attention?

SMERTOV: Think no further than your consuming headaches.

(ELENA breaks away and SMERTOV lets her go.)

You have not always been thus afflicted. Did you never dread they portended something dire?

ELENA: Plenty of people live out their lives with bad headaches.

SMERTOV: The doctor you saw said as much, said your pain was just migraines. You should have asked for a second opinion, I am sorry to say. I might not be here if you had.

ELENA: Why? What did the doctor miss?

SMERTOV: A large aneurysm of the brain, my dear.

ELENA: But I'm only twenty-one.

SMERTOV: That just makes it unlikely.

ELENA: How do you know all this? My headaches, the doctor...

SMERTOV: Well, I am either Death or an informant for the State. And there are plenty of the latter here in your part of the world.

ELENA: If you are Death, can I do something, anything, to change your errand?

SMERTOV: No.

ELENA: But you've been swayed in stories before. I could weave a tale to intrigue you utterly, and refuse to tell the ending till tomorrow. You'd let me live one more day just to hear it.

FOUR MORE PAGES TO THE END