[Александр Штрайхер](http://www.proza.ru/avtor/ashtraykher)

Up The Ramp

Translated by Anatoliy Goltser, MD

Cast of Characters:

* Victor Pavlovich Inin
* Michelle Korsh
* Eugene Frein
* Professor Hesselbrandt

Voices (Offstage):

* Supervisor: Victor’s supervisor
* Number 2
* Number 3 Agents with the counterintelligence
* Number 7

 **Scene 1**

The curtain is closed. Victor appears downstage. He doesn’t hurry, carefully examining the imaginary paintings “hanging” on the side of the auditorium.

 VICTOR (VOICE)

Understand, if not for you, if not for our conversations… I could hang myself from boredom. I’m a … I’m a sociable person, an extrovert, so to speak. I don’t seem to suffer from extreme shyness. But I’m already here for four months, and I still can’t get used to it.

 SUPERVISOR (VOICE)

A foreign country, my friend; different customs. Tell you the truth, I didn’t take to it right away either. Well, not right away… And your preparation, Victor Pavlovich, is a little shabby.

 VICTOR (VOICE)

In what way?

 SUPERVISOR (VOICE)

In the most obvious way. It’s sloppy. Dear Lucas, you don’t have to be shy in front of me.

 VICTOR (VOICE)

Well finally! Why for so long! I…

 SUPERVISOR (VOICE)

Don’t worry. I should’ve been more perceptive. More sensitive. The mission isn’t simple, and you, my

dear - if you’ll excuse me - are a classic dilettante. Well, all right, don’t worry. Everything’s going good.

 VICTOR (VOICE)

But, tell you the truth, I have this feeling…

 SUPERVISOR (VOICE)

You can trust me - it’s going good. They think you’re nothing but an amateur, a protege. But a good-looking fellow nonetheless, and that’s about it. In Moscow they decided you’ll do. However, the mission is mine. I have the last word… And I agree.

 VICTOR (VOICE)

I’m flattered. But I would still like to know…

 SUPERVISOR (VOICE)

The aim of the mission?

 VICTOR (VOICE)

That too.

 SUPERVISOR (VOICE)
The aim - obtaining certain documents regarding the workings… Doesn’t matter of what.

 VICTOR (VOICE)

Extorting information!

 SUPERVISOR (VOICE)

In a way. Well, regardless. The subject is Professor Hesselbrandt: smart, well-mannered, willing to give us the information, and in return for nothing. His motive: balance of powers as insurance of global security. A difficult case. Your goal: get to the professor, get him to like you, get him to trust you. In other words, make it so he’ll want to give you the information. Understood?

 VICTOR (VOICE)

Kind of. You seem confident that he… that this professor… I don’t know what he does… That he’s ready to hand me the information.

 SUPERVISOR (VOICE)

That’s right. I am.

 VICTOR (VOICE)

That means you have people…

 SUPERVISOR (VOICE)
Who we can not risk. Not in the least. This professor is tightly watched.

 (Michelle appears, observing Victor.)

 VICTOR (VOICE)

But how do I…

 SUPERVISOR (VOICE)
It’s all been thought out. Our subject likes art. The modern kind. He goes around to art shows, studios. Especially to this one studio of a certain Michelle Korsh. Twenty seven years old, divorced, granddaughter of a Russian emigrant. Good-looking. Friendly. In love with everything Russian…

 VICTOR

*(Without turning.)* Do you like it?

 MICHELLE

Some of it. You?

 VICTOR

I do not understand all of it.

 MICHELLE

You mean - you don’t understand it at all?

 VICTOR

If you want to say it like that.

 (Pause.)

 MICHELLE

Where are you from?

 VICTOR

Soviet Union.

 MICHELLE

From Russia!

 VICTOR

From Moscow.

 MICHELLE
But you’re not a tourist - you’re alone.

 VICTOR

No. Not a tourist. Diplomat. And you?

 MICHELLE

I’m an artist.

 VICTOR

And for how long?

 MICHELLE

Since I was little.

 VICTOR

You have considerable knack.

 MICHELLE

Do I look that bad?

 VICTOR

Not at all. Listen, they are showing some of your works also?

 MICHELLE

Only one. In the other room, where you were just now. “Spring Again”.

 VICTOR

Me?

 SUPERVISOR (VOICE)

We did a good job learning what she likes.

 VICTOR

Err… It’s the one… Drenched in green and orange. So you are Michelle Korsh?

 MICHELLE

Wow! You’ve the memory of a spy.

 VICTOR

I am a diplomat. Very brave of you to take such risks - green and orange.

 MICHELLE

You also paint?

 VICTOR

Little bit. Amateur.

 MICHELLE
Wow. I’m curious to have a look.

 VICTOR

Oh no. I am shy and sensitive.

 MICHELLE

Afraid? Some say you are not permitted to speak with Aborigines.

 VICTOR

You were misinformed.

 SUPERVISOR (VOICE)

You must make yourself “a part of” in her gallery.

 VICTOR (VOICE)

And for her?

 SUPERVISOR (VOICE)

That is your decision.

 VICTOR

Interesting last name—-Korsh. Polish?

 MICHELLE

Russian. Kohinoor. My granddad was… how do you say it… a “white emigrant”. So, you didn’t change you’re mind?

 VICTOR

No.

 MICHELLE

Then let me to invite you into my studio.

 **Scene 2**

Michelle’s studio. Far back center stage is a large window; under it is a small table with three chairs. Corner stage right is the door, corner stage left is the worktable and shelves. At the sides of the stage stand two easels. On one of them sits an unfinished canvas, on the other is a blank canvas. During the play Michelle finishes the first canvas and starts on the second one. There are finished paintings hanging on the walls. At left from the window are the figurines.

Enter Michelle and Victor.

 MICHELLE

After you.

 VICTOR

Wow, a wonderful studio!

 MICHELLE

Like it?

 VICTOR
Very! I dreamed of a studio like this since I was little. With a big window. And the smells… *(Walks to the figurines.)* All of them Russian?

 MICHELLE

All of them Russian.

 VICTOR

*(Stretches out his hand to touch one.)* May I?

 MICHELLE

You’re an expert in these too?

 VICTOR

*(Carefully takes one down.)* Little bit. Where, Michelle, did you get these wonders?

 MICHELLE

My granddad brought them here. Back then… after your revolution… In winter. For him, Russia was always linked with winter. Sleds, horses. I liked to listen… You resemble him in a way… The eyes. Do you like winter? Victor?

 VICTOR

Yes.

 MICHELLE

Do you like Moscow winter?

 VICTOR

Winter? Why not? I like it. But I like spring more.

 MICHELLE

Well he liked winter. He probably was forced to leave in winter, and that’s how he remembered her – Russia - cold, snowy… All that’s left are these family relics and the figurines. Fourteenth century.

 VICTOR
Fifteenth. “Yaroslavskoe pismo”… You know, I also have some figurines at home. My father used to collect.

 MICHELLE

Really! We’ve so much in common. And just in general…

 VICTOR

What “in general”?

 MICHELLE

Nothing. Coffee?

 VICTOR

Please!

(Michelle runs off. Victor, having made a few steps with the figurine, as with an imaginary dance partner, puts it back on the shelf. Blackout.)

 SUPERVISOR

A young soviet diplomat, an accidental fan of art, by complete accident meets the professor, who then must - absolutely must - want to give exactly to this young diplomat, the papers in question.

 VICTOR (VOICE)

And then?

 SUPERVISOR

Get them over here. And if you do, if you’re lucky - and rookies are always lucky - and they don’t grab you with the papers in your hand, or eliminate you quietly, then we’ll move you out of the country in 24 hours.

 VICTOR (VOICE)

What a great position!

 SUPERVISOR

What do you care.

 **Scene 3**

Same place. On stage: the professor and Victor.

 PROFESSOR

So. A Russian diplomat?

 VICTOR
Soviet.

 PROFESSOR

Soviet? Interesting. Like it?

 VICTOR

Very much.

 PROFESSOR

And your missions? Your missions as well? Wonderful. And how long are you a diplomat?

 VICTOR

Already four months.

 PROFESSOR

And before that?

 VICTOR

I studied.

 PROFESSOR

I wonder, how do you teach something like that?

 VICTOR

You can. Everyone is taught. It is, of course, better if a person has certain natural predispositions…

 PROFESSOR

Bull. Excuse me, you’re still young, but, trust me, it’s never too early to smarten up.

 VICTOR

You meant to say - never too late.

 PROFESSOR

Never too early. This is the very root of our troubles: we don’t care to look at simple things with open eyes.

 VICTOR

But what is the connection?

 PROFESSOR

Elementary.

 (Michelle rolls in a table set up for 3.)

 MICHELLE

Oh, professor, relax. Give the boy a chance to enjoy his position.

 PROFESSOR

Dear boy. Dear, dear boy. Do you like coffee, Mr. Inin? Maybe tea? In your country, I heard, people prefer tea. Coffee there implies pseudo-aristocracy or a false bohemians.

 VICTOR

I like coffee, Mister…

 PROFESSOR

It’s hard to get it the first time. Hesselbrandt. If you want I can spell it.

 VICTOR

Thank you, not necessary.

 (Michelle looks in wonder at Victor)

 PROFESSOR

There’s a “dt” at the end. That’s bad for a diplomat, but for a spy, unforgivable. But then… Don’t be upset, there’s nothing unconscionable in the spying profession. Except maybe some of the methods.

 MICELLE

Professor!

 PROFESSOR

It’s all right, Michelle. Everything’s all right. Every diplomat has a little bit of a spy in him. It’s always been that way.

(Michelle gets up and goes over to the canvas, looking over the unfinished piece.)

 VICTOR

It doesn’t make a difference what way it’s always been.

 PROFESSOR

Ah, honest diplomacy? Bull. Or sham. Fraud. I don’t know. I haven’t given it much thought. Only one thing’s clear…

 MICHELLE

Your lack of tact.

 VICTOR

Exactly. Wrong time, wrong place.

 PROFESSOR

Wrong time, but the place… The place is just fine.

 VICTOR

After all, we are the guests of a wonderful painter and a charming…

 MICHELLE

I’m not Dali yet.

 VICTOR

You certainly will be, I guarantee!

 MICHELLE

Why? God help me just to become myself. Myself and not a molding of someone else’s opinions.

 VICTOR

Life is short; too many things must be taken on faith.

 PROFESSOR

Be careful that out of necessity this doesn’t become a habit.

 MICHELLE

Why don’t our men ever grow up? Gray, bearded, bald kids. It’s disgusting. Instead of enlightening, they dumb with old age.

 VICTOR

But the women smarten catastrophically.

 MICHELLE

Compensation. That’s nature defending itself. Defending us from our own selves. And if not? Give you all free will?

 PROFESSOR

*(Stands up.)* As always, you’re right. Nature has its hands full with us. Admit it, we have to help her.

 VICTOR

I completely agree.

 (Professor exits. Blackout.)

 **Scene 4**

Lights on downstage left. The curtain is drawn. Victor and Michelle appear. Victor is cheerful, hyper, and laughing.

 SUPERVISOR (VOICE)

How’re things, my friend?

 VICTOR (VOICE)

No great accomplishments yet.

 SUPERVISOR (VOICE)

Don’t humble yourself. That’s unnecessary. The first round you performed more than successfully. Now, now, don’t blush, like a bride, leaving her guests! Everything’s good, just don’t get ahead of yourself.

 VICTOR (VOICE)

In what sense?

 SUPERVISOR (VOICE)

Don’t forget what’s important.

 MICHELLE

Victor, do you have anyone back in Moscow?

 VICTOR

Of course! Mom, dad.

(Michelle stops. Victor looks around, then looks towards the audience and becomes still, looking with difficulty at something deep inside himself.)

 VICTOR

There was.

(Michelle, having gone up to Victor, with her gaze tries to get through to that same remoteness. Victor remembers himself.)

 VICTOR

Come. Let’s go.

 (Escorts Michelle behind the curtain.)

 SUPERVISOR (VOICE)

You, Vitya, as far as I understand, are very impressionable. I repeat, don’t get ahead of yourself.

 VICTOR (VOICE)

I’m trying.

 SUPERVISOR (VOICE)

Well, well. And keep me posted. I’ll be glad to give you advice.

(The curtain opens. The interior of a bar. Michelle and Victor sit behind a table.)

 MICHELLE

I’m sorry.

 VICTOR

It is empty. Everything dead must fall off. But strange… Since recently, I have that feeling, that all those things did not happen with me. I remember - the hurt, but why - I cannot imagine. Incredible, right?

 MICHELLE

That means it wasn’t yours.

 VICTOR

Oh no, it was mine… mine. It had yesterday and tomorrow.

 MICHELLE

So let it! Let’s have only today, but ours.

 VICTOR

Let it. But can that be?

 MICHELLE

It has to be. On the other hand, you know, I have a lack

of realness. Fragile, like a mirage.

 VICTOR

In this life, regretfully, everything is a mirage. Illusions! Pretty illusions. Except death.

 MICHELLE

Again death! Why death? *(Walks up to Victor, hugs him.)* I can see, you’re constantly afraid of something. It’s your fears, they make us... What are you afraid of?

 VICTOR

Everything and everybody!

 MICHELLE

And me?

 VICTOR

And you! *(Michelle steps back.)* And for you. And do you want to know what I am most afraid of? Should I tell you? Even more than losing you? Should I tell you? Losing my own self.

 MICHELLE

Is that even possible?

 VICTOR
Of course!

 MICHELLE

Can you tell me…?

 VICTOR

No! No. You wouldn’t understand most of it.

 MICHELLE

Why not?

 VICTOR

We’re from two different worlds. Understand, not

countries - worlds!

 MICHELLE

Really, so if I’m able to love you, I wouldn’t be able to understand you?

 VICTOR

I doubt it… After all, all this isn’t mine… That’s too bad.

 (They gaze at the audience. Pause.)

 MICHELLE

We can’t be for long, can we.

 (Victor nods. Blackout.)

 **Scene 5**

Michelle’s studio. Lights on center stage. In the chairs behind the table sit Victor and the Professor.

 PROFESSOR

Mr. Inin, tell me, if you were faced with the actual dilemma: the interests of your country or the interests of the world.

 VICTOR

Impossible. The interests of my country have never yet contradicted the interests of other people.

 PROFESSOR

Oh really!

 VICTOR

I mean the Soviet Union.

 PROFESSOR

Fairy tales. Can’t be.

 VICTOR

And most of the time, my country’s interests fully coincide with the interests of other people.

 PROFESSOR

For example?

 VICTOR

For example, the issues with global security, security of local territories…

 PROFESSOR

Hold on. Either you didn’t understand me, or you’re not being completely honest. Most Americans didn’t exactly care for Vietnam…

 VICTOR

That is because the war was in Vietnam.

 PROFESSOR

All right. Suppose. The majority, let’s say, of Italians couldn’t give a damn about Venezuelans, don’t get anything out of the Persian Gulf, and so on. Hold on. Therefore, the world and the entire world - they’re by far not the same thing.

 VICTOR

Only a small group of oil tycoons get something, not all the Venezuelan people.

 PROFESSOR

You don’t say.

 VICTOR

But that is not even the root. Can’t you understand that every local war becomes a global event?

 PROFESSOR

Why’s that?

 VICTOR

Alliances! Both of our superpowers are tied together by tons of different contracts. Remember Sarajevo?

 PROFESSOR

Back then everyone needed the war, but only for imperialists is aggression something of a habit, right? Socialism’s a peaceful society. It’s pacifist. Why did you then bind yourself with agreements to half of the world, automatically turning any local event into a global war?

 VICTOR

International obligation…

 PROFESSOR

Let’s do without demagogy.

 VICTOR

We’re protecting our way of life!

 PROFESSOR

But the West is also protecting its way of life.

 VICTOR

From who?

 PROFESSOR

From you.

 VICTOR

Are we really intent on someone else’s enslavement? In any form? No. Busy ourselves with exporting revolution? Interfering in the business of others?

 PROFESSOR

And vigorously! Even your Lenin taught, that possible peaceful coexistence does not mean an end to ideological warfare. After all, note, your war on ideology with the west has long grown into a frontier of indispensable defense. Even the lone fact of your being, your successes in any kind of activity, are weapons of ideological warfare.

 VICTOR

But that is the only possible way of going from the old to the new in a peaceful fashion: through person, through group, through country.

 PROFESSOR

Through continent.

 VICTOR

Possibly.

 PROFESSOR

An interesting choice you leave us with: either we all slowly become socialists, or we perish.

 VICTOR

We don’t want death.

 PROFESSOR

We don’t want socialism.

 VICTOR

There will come a time—-no one will ask you.

 PROFESSOR

We don’t want that time to come.

 VICTOR

War? But no one can win. In my opinion, the smartest thing is to wait until that time comes, when war will cease to make any more sense.

 PROFESSOR

For you or for us?

 VICTOR

For everyone.

 PROFESSOR

Well, Mr. Inin, you are certainly well prepared, and your head’s in the right place. Just picture, once I was supposed to meet with a certain person of stature and I became interested, is he a decent person. Just picture! And they told: a politician. The everyday measures of human ethics are inapplicable here. A person with knack for politics can make a career in any country under any system.

(Lights up on the entire down stage. Standing in front of her canvas, Michelle finishes up her painting.)

 VICTOR

I don’t know. I probably could not in your country.

 PROFESSOR

That means, in your country also. While it’s not too late, change your profession. *(Michelle looks over her work.)* Michelle, how long can two wise men force themselves to wait? *(Michelle goes back to her work, signs it.)* We already talked about everything.

 MICHELLE

The signature’s the most important. *(Flops into the chair just the way she is, with her paint-stained blouse and brushes in her hand.)* Finished!

(Professor and Victor get up and look over the completed work. Blackout.)

 **Scene 6**

Same place. Victor is on stage. We hear a loud, manly laugh. Enter Michelle and Eugene.

 MICHELLE

I want you to meet someone - Victor Inin. Russian diplomat. Likes paintings.

(Eugene, with quick, light steps, moves in close to Victor. Michelle stays at the door, eyeing Eugene’s well-built figure.)

 EUGENE

So you like paintings! *(They shake. Victor’s hand drowns in Eugene’s huge tanned palm.)* Eugene Frein.

 MICHELLE

He’ll tell you everything about himself on his own. Even more than you wanna know.

 EUGENE

Mademoiselle, why say that. Mr. Inin might think I’m some clown, but that’s not true. Believe me, nothing close to it, and even the opposite. *(To Michelle.)* And if I talk too much around you, that’s just a sign of my shyness.

 MICHELLE

Oh no. Another shy one!

 EUGENE

So I’m not the first?

 MICHELLE

No. Not the first.

 EUGENE

Again! Well this is too much. See, there you have it - I made a joke. I’m sorry, Michelle, it’s just that your beauty stifles me. I start spurting this drivel. Victor, you agree?

 VICTOR

*(Stunned.)* Absolutely.

(Eugene turns around giving Victor the chance to slip unnoticed into a more “open” place on the stage.)

 VICTOR

You too like paintings, Mr. Frein?

 EUGENE

Oh yeah! This is my second day liking them!

(Eugene’s laugh is so contagious that Victor, not wanting to, joins in without realizing it.)

 MICHELLE

I’ll go fix us something.

 EUGENE

I’ll go with you! *(Not stirring from his seat.)* I’m a specialist on coffee. I learned in Greece. That’s where they know how! I love the East. Just give me a minute and I’ll make it - I guarantee you never tasted anything like this before. Michelle. Michelle!

 (He runs after her.)

 SUPERVISOR (VOICE)

Victor Pavlovich, my dear, what is with you? You have become melancholy of late. Can I help you with anything?

 VICTOR (VOICE)

I doubt that.

 SUPERVISOR (VOICE)

I’m older than you, more experienced. Remember, “only idiots learn from their mistakes”?

 VICTOR (VOICE)

“Don’t take others’ advice lest you wish, instead of your own mistakes, to commit someone else’s.”

 SUPERVISOR (VOICE)

All right, but keep in mind, your right to “your own mistakes” is limited within the constraints of the mission.

 (Michelle enters trying to hide a smile.)

 MICHELLE

He talks nonstop. He’s so funny.

 VICTOR

He does not tire you?

 MICHELLE

No.

 VICTOR

Of course. He’s a Superman.

 MICHELLE

He’s a regular guy. We met by accident yesterday. *(She hugs Victor.)* He was so entertaining…

 VICTOR

Met by accident?

 MICHELLE

Yeah. I have great luck lately with accidental meetings.

 VICTOR

Are you referring about me?

 MICHELLE

Well there you go. You’re hurt again. Victor, you’ve become this paranoid, agitated person.

 VICTOR

Agitated?!

(Eugene sets the table humming a happy march.)

 EUGENE

It’s ready. The official drink. Only here. The highest quality for the lowest price. Why so glum?

 MICHELLE

*(Sags into a chair.)* I don’t know. Everything’s fine.

 VICTOR

Exactly. Fine. *(He drinks.)* Hmm. It really is one of a kind. *(He sits.)* You didn’t waste your time in Greece for nothing. You were there long?

 EUGENE

It’s a wonderful country. *(He marches around the stage, motioning with his cup.)* The food there! After Greece, our stuff was like synthetic macaroni that’s been recycled.

 MICHELLE

*(Choking on her food,)* Eugene!

 (The men laugh.)

 VICTOR

Official business in Greece?

 EUGENE

See, I’m a big exporter specialist. If you believe it, I’m actually appreciated. Optimism, the human spirit - they’re my greeting cards, if you will. But, believe me, I’m very serious and, I repeat, very shy.

 VICTOR

*(Gets up.)* I am sorry Michelle, but I have to go.

 MICHELLE

Already?

 EUGENE

Don’t worry. I won’t leave you here all alone.

 MICHELLE

I’m sorry, Eugene. I’m very tired and I wanted to get to bed early. If you don’t mind.

 EUGENE

All right then, later! I tired you out with all my talking. All right, I’ll call tomorrow. Don’t thank me. Well, Mr. Inin, let’s go. *(Leads Victor to the door.)* The lady wants to sleep. Good night, mademoiselle.

 VICTOR

*(Peeking from behind Eugene’s shoulder,)* Good night, Michelle…

 **Scene 7**

The interior of the familiar bar. Center stage, behind a coffee table, sit Victor and Eugene. Eugene is lively, looking around as if he owned the place.

 SUPERVISOR (VOICE)

Any good news, Victor Pavlovich?

 VICTOR (VOICE)

None, except to say, I have new competition.

 EUGENE

Nice place, huh? Hey, what’s a matter? You don’t like our bars? They got better ones in Moscow?

 VICTOR

No, it’s just I have already been here.

 EUGENE

All right. I won’t ask with who. Eugene Frein is tactful. But listen, we could’ve gone to another place around here. *(Looks in disbelief at Victor, crouching in his chair.)* You’re a funny guy, Victor.

 SUPERVISOR (VOICE)

Competition? No. Opponent! Enemy! Do away with your illusions: your new friend met Korsh just as “accidentally” as you. You still don’t get it?

 VICTOR (VOICE)

Who is he then?

 SUPERVISOR (VOICE)

Counterintelligence. And unlike you, he is a specialist!

 EUGENE

So what’d you think of the gallery show?

 VICTOR

Complete nonsense. A dead end.

 EUGENE

That’s possible. That’s possible. Art often leads us into dead ends. But it’s the movement that counts. And not by the masses. But there’s a way out of every dead end.

 VICTOR

For them, I doubt it.

 EUGENE

That doesn’t matter. Even what we saw wasn’t a dead end. More like the acknowledgment of that dead end.

 VICTOR

That is too complicated for me, but I don’t sense any art in here. Maybe it is original to show your self to the public. But what does it have to do with art?

 EUGENE

My friend, this is a long and pointless argument. It’s old as time. But I love arguing! All right, for starters, I think we should take a position on the subject.

 SUPERVISOR (VOICE)

Be careful. Don’t overplay it. I hope he still thinks of you a romantically-oriented diplomat.

 VICTOR (VOICE)

I’m sure of it.

 SUPERVISOR (VOICE)

God willing. To speak honestly, you seem to have more romance than you know what to do with. You see him often?

 VICTOR (VOICE)

I see him all too much. We are inseparable. Just like in O’Henry; friends-rivals.

 SUPERVISOR often

Just keep your composure.

 EUGENE

Art, right? Art… It is anything stemming from the consciousness. That’s all.

 VICTOR

I think, that art is something that teaches, enlightens, adorns, and in the end, betters the person and the world around them.

 EUGENE

Scandalizes, unearths, frightens, and turns the whole world and the human existence into one big farce. *(He laughs.)* You know the old story? These two debaters come up to an old sage, parading in front of his students. They ask him: “Tell us who’s right, old sage.” So the old sage asks one of them to tell him their side of the argument, and then the old sage says, “You’re right, my son” and lets him go. Then he asks the other guy to tell him his side of the argument. So the old sage listens to the other guy and says, “You’re right, my son” and also lets him go. So one of the students ask the old sage: “Teacher, you told both of them that they were right, but that can’t be!” And the old sage answered, “You too are right, my son.”

 VICTOR

So any argument is useless?

 EUGENE

You too are right, my son! A friend once told me, “Don’t ever argue - just spit back what you know.”

 VICTOR

And nobody admits the other one is right.

 EUGENE

Wait a minute, you seriously believe that by arguing with a person you can get them to change their opinion? Wow. A utopia you got going there!

 VICTOR

Then why do we… Then why argue at all? To pass time?

 EUGENE

Just to talk with someone. Arguing’s the best kind of talking. Well, with guys anyway. *(Stands up lazily.)* Listen, why don’t we go someplace else?

 VICTOR

Another showing?

 EUGENE

You won’t see these in Moscow.

 VICTOR

*(Standing up.)* Maybe that is because I don’t need to see these?

(The two move towards the exit. Eugene moves his hand on Victor’s shoulder and speaks to him prudently from above.)

 EUGENE

You gotta eat an orange to know what it tastes like.

 VICTOR

But you don’t have to drink the entire sea to know what *it* tastes like.

(Eugene laughs. The exit. Lights dim. Curtain draws.)

 **Scene 8**

Front stage, in front of the drawn curtain. Victor moves anxiously back and forth.

 SUPERVISOR

It’s almost over. Homesick yet?

(Michelle appears. She’s in a hurry. Victor rushes to greet her.)

 MICHELLE

Victor? You’ve been waiting long?

 VICTOR

No. Not really. I thought you were in the studio. You used to work during this time. Your favorite light.

 MICHELLE

Something came up in the city.

 VICTOR

Important things, I bet.

 MICHELLE

Please, Victor. Not now.

 VICTOR

Right. Eugene! Rich, cheerful, handsome!

 MICHELLE

Oh God! Handsomeness is not a guy’s main quality. It’s just easier with him, can you understand that? No. You can’t. I don’t even see him that often. Well, not as often as you.

 VICTOR

You’re jealous!

 MICHELLE

Stop it! Get a hold of yourself.

 VICTOR

And there he is. Incoming.

 MICHELLE

You coming in?

 VICTOR

At another time.

(Michelle exits. His eyes follow her in, then he turns briskly, and taking a few steps, bumps into the professor.)

 PROFESSOR

Wow there! Open your eyes, young man!

 VICTOR

I’m sorry. Good evening, professor. I lost myself in my thoughts.

 PROFESSOR

You’re thinking! I don’t believe it!

 VICTOR

I thought it’s about time to start.

 PROFESSOR

I think your time’s long overdue.

 VICTOR

What do you mean.

 PROFESSOR

Me? I mean, about life. About Michelle. Well, how’s thinking working out for you? Not analyzing, but thinking. With your eyes open. It’s easier when they’re closed, I know. You stick out your arms, someone picks you up by the armpits, and just carries you. Just like that. Smack your forehead into something - it’s not your fault. Hell, you don’t even see the obstacles. A little wooden board or a fence - you don’t know, you don’t care. Just stick out your arms farther and they keep on carrying you. Just like that, until your grave. And some open their eyes, they get scared and squint. Real snug over there.

 VICTOR

I don’t understand. I don’t understand anything.

 PROFESSOR

That’s a shame. Let me ask you, why do you think I’m so drawn to Michelle?

 VICTOR

Modern art…

 PROFESSOR

Emptiness.

 VICTOR

So you love her.

 PROFESSOR

Can you love or not love, say, flowers, grass, the sun? You can either live with them in harmony, or not live at all. I doubt Michelle herself knows this. But how much can a person know about himself? While you and Eugene, you’re both idiots. We probably feel the same emptiness, but you blame it on the world around you, your life, your circumstance. *(Pats Victor on the arm. Starts past him. Looks back.)* Open your eyes, young man.

 VICTOR

And that will make it easier?

 PROFESSOR

No, to stick out your arms is easier.

 (Lights fade.)

 **Scene 9**

Michelle’s studio. Victor, holding back his agitation, walks back and forth in front of the window. Michelle is painting, standing in front of her canvas.

 SUPERVISOR (VOICE)

Now then, is the handover getting near?

 VICTOR (VOICE)

I think so. The professor may bring the documents any day.

 SUPERVISOR (VOICE)

Great. The why are you so worried?

 MICHELLE

Victor, stop flickering back and forth!

 VICTOR (VOICE)

It’s not obvious? It’s not some small piece of tape; it is a huge envelope at best. And what if my see-all friend Eugene happens to catch us?

 SUPERVISOR (VOICE)

That is not probable.

 VICTOR (VOICE)

“Why are you so worried.” They’ll grab me before I can even reach the car. And the professor too.

 SUPERVISOR (VOICE)

No, my friend. They’ll grab you sooner. On the stair landing, probably.

 VICTOR (VOICE)

It’s not funny! What do I do?

 SUPERVISOR (VOICE)

Don’t get agitated. Just do as you were instructed. Signal out the window - but only after you receive the documents. And then what?

 VICTOR (VOICE)

After ten minutes, I open the front door into the studio.

 SUPERVISOR (VOICE)

At which time two of our associates will ring into the seemingly empty apartment. And after another ten minutes, you exit unnoticed. Change your clothing in the elevator… After three blocks you change cars. And that’s it. The mission has a good chance of succeeding, but it is possible to do only once. Understood?

 VICTOR (VOICE)

Understood.

 SUPERVISOR (VOICE)

I repeat, signal only after you receive the documents.

 MICHELLE

Daydreaming?

 VICTOR

Yes. About you.

 MICHELLE

*(Humming,)* About you, always about you… That left corner’s giving a headache.

 SUPERVISOR (VOICE)

Calmness and composure. Precision! Want to go home yet?

 VICTOR (VOICE)

Yes, I do. I guess I do.

 (Enter Professor and Eugene.)

 EUGENE

Your guest is here! Your biggest fan!

 PROFESSOR

It’s cruel to make jokes at an older man. How can I compete with you or Mr. Inin? Young, handsome.

 EUGENE

And you’re a scientist known world-wide. Women like notoriety. Professor, where d’you stand on our discussion: is the theater dying out. I think, film tripped it up, television knocked it down, and stereo television is the last nail in the coffin.

 VICTOR

*(Stubbornly.)* Even stereo cannot replace the interaction with a live actor.

 PROFESSOR

Michelle, I came to ask for a moment of your time.

(Michelle puts down her paint brushes and wiping her hands, moves away from the canvas.)

 MICHELLE

Sorry, I was working. And these two over here - dying, not dying. Eugene, the coffee is your department.

 EUGENE

There you have it. Intellectual relaxation for some, hard labor for others.

 MICHELLE

Don’t whine, I’ll keep you company. We’ll be quick.

 EUGENE

I’m joking! I got it.

 MICHELLE

*(Pushing from behind.)* All right, all right. Let’s go.

 EUGENE

Michelle, you have guests.

 MICHELLE

You don’t want my company? Or maybe you’re afraid I’ll give away your secret recipe?

 EUGENE

No. *(Looks back at the two remaining behind.)* That secret doesn’t worry me all that much.

(They exit. The professor, vigilant and alert, quickly moves towards Victor. In a manner that is not characteristically his, he looks rather entertained.)

 PROFESSOR

Mr. Inin, I need a small favor from you.

 VICTOR

Everything that’s in my power…

 PROFESSOR

Take it. Pass it on to your embassy. Trust me, it’s incredibly important.

(The professor jumps back to the canvas. Michelle runs in.)

 MICHELLE

Can you believe it, he threw a fit. “Leaving your guests unattended”. Nice, huh?

 PROFESSOR

Right. As always. Attendance is most important. Attendance and surveillance. Well, I’m sorry but I must leave you. Plans, plans, and nothing but. But next time I will definitely try that wonderful coffee of his.

 MICHELLE

I’ll see you out.

(They exit. Victor walks to the window, adjusts his tie, and, looking at the clock, moves away. Eugene rolls in the table, eyeing the room carefully.)

 EUGENE

This is just great. I’m in there busting my hump! Where’d everybody go?

 VICTOR

The professor left. Some important plans. Michelle…

 MICHELLE

I’m right here! *(She appears.)* I didn’t go anywhere.

 EUGENE

As if the professor wasn’t enough. Even Victor’s in a hurry somewhere.

 VICTOR

You’re imagining things.

 EUGENE

I’m trying…

 MICHELLE

Oh God, more complaining! What kind of men are you? Don’t worry, we’ll give your unearthly nectar its due praise.

 VICTOR

And if you had also made sandwiches - you would be simply priceless.

 EUGENE

You’re mocking me? No, no, this kind of exploitation, not even a labor union can take.

 MICHELLE

Don’t. We can do it themselves. Will you help me?

 VICTOR

My pleasure!

(Victor and Michelle exit. Eugene takes out his communicative device.)

 EUGENE

Number three, Number three.

 NUMBER 3 (VOICE)

Here, chief.

 EUGENE

Get ready.

 NUMBER 3 (VOICE)

We’re ready, chief.

 EUGENE

Number two, Number two.

 NUMBER 2 (VOICE)

Number two, here.

 EUGENE

Who went after the professor?

 NUMBER 2 (VOICE)

Number 7, chief.

 EUGENE

Number seven.

 NUMBER 7 (VOICE)

Listening.

 EUGENE

Don’t let him out of your sight, watch him tightly. Move in only when I say so.

(Eugene quickly hides his device. Michelle, almost from the door, jumps on his lap.)

 MICHELLE

Here’s me! Did you miss me?

 EUGENE

Very! Where’s Victor?

 MICHELLE

Victor, Victor! Like Siamese twins. Making sandwiches, your Victor. Turns out he’s a natural around the house.

 EUGENE

Exactly.

 MICHELLE

Not like you. Nothing but coffee.

 EUGENE

Instead, I have a lot of other good qualities.

 MICHELLE

Wait. He’s coming.

(She jumps into the neighboring chair. Victor enters with plates stacked to his nose.)

 VICTOR

Lunch is served.

 EUGENE

First time I’m being served by a diplomat. Wow. I don’t believe it. Tell me, Victor, you have all these things in Moscow?

 VICTOR

In Moscow? In Moscow a wife cooks dinner! A first course, a second, even a third. Eh, you can’t even imagine what home-cooked soup tastes like. And borscht! And here… *(Choking from excitement.)* A kingdom of sandwiches!

 EUGENE

*(Stunned by Victor’s sudden metamorphosis.)* It’s a matter of taste.

 VICTOR

It is true, especially when made by such wonderful hands.

(Kisses Michelle’s hand. Looks her in the eyes.)

 MICHELLE

What’s with you? You’re in tears, even!

 VICTOR

*(Turning away.)* Memories… *(Jumps to his feet.)* Oh devil. I forgot juice!

 EUGENE

I’ll get it.

 VICTOR

Relax, mister coffee. *(Lightly putting him back in his seat and messes up his hair with his hand.)* Today is my day.

 (Victor exits, slightly shaking. Pause.)

 MICHELLE

He’s so strange today.

 EUGENE

*(To himself.)* Yeah. Today.

 MICHELLE

I think I like him better this way.

 EUGENE

That’s too bad. *(Sighing.)* Eh, Victor…

 MICHELLE

Eugene, are you listening?

 EUGENE

As always, my dear, with utmost attention.

 MICHELLE

I’m saying, I think he was real just now, whole… He always had this kind of duality about him. I thought, it was organic… and now I get it - he was just afraid…

 EUGENE

And now he stopped?

 MICHELLE

He stopped. Probably had a breakdown.

 EUGENE

*(Flying out of his seat,)* Maybe this “breakdown” is what’s keeping him. I’ll help you!

(He runs out. We hear the shatter of silverware, the door slamming. Michelle gets up.)

 MICHELLE

What’s *with* everyone!

 (Eugene rushes in.)

 EUGENE

He’s gone!

 MICHELLE

Can’t be. He left and didn’t say goodbye?

 EUGENE

Idiot! He did! Number three! Number three! Three, Goddamn it! Number two!

 NUMBER 2 (VOICE)

Number two here.

 EUGENE

What’s with Number three?

 NUMBER 2 (VOICE)

Don’t know, chief.

 EUGENE

Did he leave?

 NUMBER 2 (VOICE)

No, chief.

 EUGENE

Three! Three! Two!

 NUMBER 2 (VOICE)

What, chief?

 EUGENE

Did anybody leave?

 NUMBER 2 (VOICE)

Ten minutes ago some two guys came up in this fancy car. They rang apartment 17, someone opened. Just now they left.

 EUGENE

Catch them! Idiots! Catch them!

 MICHELLE

*(Pleading.)* What’s going on?

 (EUGENE runs off.)

 MICHELLE

I don’t get it… Why did Victor… Why… Eugene… *(Eugene enters.)* Who is he?

 EUGENE

Who is he! Number two, number two!

 NUMBER TWO (VOICE)

Number four and number five are after him.

 EUGENE

Get everybody! Block roads and check every Goddamn car.

 NUMBER 2 (VOICE)

Even the diplomatic ones?

 EUGENE

Goddamn it, especially the diplomatic ones! Idiots! Search the Goddamn house, find me the bastard! I’ll make a mattress out of him! Number three’s completely lost. *(To Michelle.)* Who is he? A Bolshevik agent, that’s who. God help me. Afraid! Of course! Fooled us like Goddamn children! And your professor’s a piece of work!

 MICHELLE

Get out! Get out! Now! You’re all the same. *(Eugene, carelessly throwing his hand, exits.)* You’re all the same.

 (She cries. Lights dim. Curtain draws.)

 **Scene 10**

The curtain is drawn. Downstage center, in a ray of light, stands Victor.

 ANNOUNCER (VOICE)

Flight IL-62, Washington-Paris-Moscow, now boarding at gate number nine. I repeat, flight…

 VICTOR

So this is it… The mission completed… perfectly. Nobody needs me anymore. Michelle… already knows. Eugene didn’t shy from telling her who I really am. At the embassy, I was never a part of. *(Next to him appears Eugene. He’s uncharacteristically serious. Both look into the audience.)* Yeah… Nobody needs me. Not even myself.

 EUGENE

Not true. I need you.

 VICTOR

*(Shaking.)* Eugene! Err… How did you…?

 EUGENE

You know.

 VICTOR

Not really. I’m not a professional.

 EUGENE

That I knew. *(Smiling, but not cheerfully.)* A weekend painter, and still fooled me.

 VICTOR
It happens. Plus I had people behind me.

 EUGENE

I know. I even know who. Don’t look at me like that. I’m off duty. I’m seeing off a friend. Forever. We won’t see each other again.

 VICTOR
Not again.

 EUGENE

You’ll be thanked, you’ll be a made man… Oh by the way, if it’s no secret, what’s your profession? Your real profession.

 VICTOR

I am art critic.

 EUGENE

What?! *(Only now turning to face Victor.)* No, you don’t! *(Laughs.)* Wow!

 ANNOUNCER (VOICE)

Flight IL-62, now boarding...

 EUGENE

Yeah, you play your cards well. You won. Victor won!

 VICTOR

Eugene!

 EUGENE

Everything just like it should be. Now the winner, with his head held up high, goes up the ramp. Up the ramp!

 VICTOR

A brilliantly played part of a marionette. (He stick out his arms and *closes his eyes.)* And they lead you. Well, they lead me right, dragged me by the meat, and we won. *(Lowers his arms, opens his eyes.)* And I lost. Michelle, you… and myself.

 EUGENE

Eh. The world of the seeing is not for us.

 VICTOR

I don’t know…

 EUGENE

Michelle... She threw me out. Some scene that was.

 VICTOR

Don’t tell me.

 EUGENE

Really?

 VICTOR
You still have your chances.

 (Pause.)

 ANNOUNCER (VOICE)

Last call for boarding flight IL-62; Washington-Paris-Moscow. Last call for boarding…

 EUGENE

Well… *(He offers his hand.)* I won’t forget you.

 VICTOR

Me too.

(Their handshake is as if a bond, and something of importance. And not only for them alone.)

 EUGENE

Goodbye.

(Eugene vanishes. Only Victor’s face remains in that spotlight.)

 VICTOR

Goodbye… This is it… I’m on the ramp. Feel as if someone is looking. Michelle? Too late. Too late...

 (Blackout.)

**The End**