

A Little Play about Betrayal, for One Actress

Oleksander Irvanets

Act One

A white room turned diagonally toward the audience, that is, instead of the so-called invisible fourth wall, both the third and the fourth walls are invisible. On the two actual walls, there are a door and a window. The furnishings are minimal: a bed, a table, a chair, a small wardrobe. On a nightstand, a telephone. A tape recorder is on the table.

This room is inhabited by ONA—the stress is on the first syllable—a young woman of 23 or so. And here she is: she is rolling out in her wheelchair. A blanket covers her up to her waist; she is wearing a light-colored blouse. She rolls about rather skillfully. Her movements are precise, with no sign of weakness. But there is the wheelchair. The chair is tidy, comfortable, and compact: still, it'd be better if there were no need for it.

ONA rolls from the bed toward the table. She stops as if wanting to turn on the tape recorder, but changes her mind. Then she lifts the edge of the tablecloth, looks underneath, and even touches something. She puts the tablecloth down, turns around, and moves away from the table toward the window. She approaches the window somewhat sideways, $\frac{3}{4}$ face toward us, and opens the window. The noise of the street bursts in: unintelligible speech, traffic, other noises.

ONA (*looking out the window for someone*): Mrs. Hona-a-a-h! Mrs. Hona-a-a-h! Hello! Come here, please—closer. Everyone has already left for work anyway, and your morning sales are over. No one will show up before lunchtime... Well, once more then—good morning my dear Honah! Is there any stupor left for me? One tiny portion... What kind of sauce do you have? Beetle juice? Spider-dressing? Cockroach drippings? Well, may I have one with the spider dressing... How much? Fifteen? Whoa!... But last week it was twelve or thirteen... All right, I'll take one!... (*She pulls herself away from the window, rapidly rolls over to the table, reaches under the tablecloth where she just looked, pulls out some cash, counts out the necessary amount, and squeezing it in her fist, rolls back to the window. After handing the money through the window, she receives her stupor with spider dressing, and slowly, savoring it, begins to eat.*) Ta-a-sty!... But the portions really have gotten smaller lately. I remember when I was in school, you'd buy one serving and share it with all your friends, and you still couldn't finish it

and would end up throwing away the last scraps... Or maybe it only seems that way... When you're a child, everything seems big... Maybe... Anyway, what's new, Mrs. Honah? What do you mean, nothing?... There must be something new. Me? Now in my case, there really is nothing new. What can happen here, within these four walls... Oh, I got my pension today, the personal one from the Dark-Grays, so I'm treating myself to a little feast now. Yes, the personal one. It's not really very much... Oh, you do have to know everything, don't you! It's eight hundred fifty, clear, no taxes. That's nothing, these days. No, I still have a stipend from the Light-Grays, since I'm supposedly still studying at the university. (*She smiles bitterly.*) It's really ridiculous—a whole four hundred. Well, somehow I make ends meet. (*She savors the stupor, biting off tiny bits.*) M-m-m-m... Not really! Why should I be bored? The same thing that I'm doing now—sitting by the window and looking out at Black Square. Sure, I mean Gray. But no one calls it that, everyone still calls it Black. How long has it been since it was renamed—half a year? You can't expect people to adapt that fast. Do you remember how it was before, Mrs. Honah? Of course you remember, you lived most of your life in those times... I was small then, but even I... At school once, everyone was singing "We march into the black expanse!" and one boy sang "into the gray expanse." You can imagine what happened to him! He was thrown out of the Black Scouts and sent away to a special school, and his parents were dealt with, too. Such idiocy... Well, now it seems all this has passed, gradually. But it was just two or three years ago—do you remember when the first demonstrations against the Blacks took place? When the Gray banners appeared at those demonstrations for the first time? That was something! Now, of course, it seems everybody's used to the Grays and to the demonstrations. Here, at the square, they happen almost every day. The Blacks gather too, sometimes, but there aren't very many of them, just the die-hards. Mostly, it's the Dark-Grays. And yesterday, there was a protest demonstration by the Light-Gray Youth. And that guy, the one I just told you about, my classmate, he's one of their leaders. I watched through the window, and I even wanted to call out, but you can't be heard over that noise...

No, no, it was nothing like that. There was nothing between us. I almost never saw him after he was sent to the special school. The one who walked me home? Oh, no—that was a different guy... Yes, yes, the tall one with black hair. But that's a totally different one, Mrs. Honah. I went to school with him, too, and later to college. Yes, that's right, he's also in the Light-Gray youth now. He wears the pin and the Light-Gray shirt. You really have quite a memory... No, he didn't leave me. We still get together. He comes by here... He used to come here... It's true that he hasn't stopped by for a few weeks, but he called and explained that

he's really busy with the Light-Grays right now. Why shouldn't I believe him? Why would he lie to me?... If he wanted to leave me, he would say so. You think I could stop him? Our relationship is based on complete trust. *(A pause, as ONA listens through the window.)* So what if you saw them together! I know who you mean. That's Mona—we call her Monkey. I went to college with her, too. A brunette—tall, with long legs and big eyes, right? Yes, that's her... What, he's not allowed to walk on the street with another girl?... Especially since they're both activists in the college branch of the Light-Grays. And you're immediately thinking God-knows-what. No... But here's what I'm thinking ... I just might buy one more portion, a tiny one, without any sauce. Can you make one especially for me—for ten, Mrs. Honah? Just a second, I'm getting it. *(She rolls toward the table, takes a bill from under the tablecloth, hands it through the window, and gets a tiny portion of stupor.)* Oh, thank you, Mrs. Honah, dear. *(She begins to eat with relish.)* Yes, we've known each other since school. There's always been competition between us, a rivalry. We were the best three students in the class—him, me, and Monkey. Every year on Black Day we always received honors. In our whole graduating class, only three Black diplomas were awarded: to him, me, and Monkey. Well yeah, in those days everyone was in the Black Scouts and the Black Youth League. No one ever asked whether we wanted to be or not! We were signed up all together, as a group. Don't tell me about your own youth—that was different. The Black ideals were still really sacred then. But with us, do you think anyone still believed in them?... Of course not! The only reason we worked so hard to receive the Black diploma was to get into university. Of course. Do you know where the rest of my class is today? In factories! Only the three of us are students. *(Remembering her situation, she pauses.)* Well, two of us now, actually. And Mrs. Honah, he was top-of-the-class in every way. The most talented, the smartest, and everything. I worked my butt off, excuse the phrase. Sometimes I studied until three or four in the morning, going blind over those books. Then in the morning I'd stumble into class numb. And Monkey, well, her father had connections... need I say more? *(She makes a telling gesture.)* But he—I remember from the first grade—he was like a sponge. He always had the answer to any question. For him, exams were a piece of cake... He was that smart!... And always so honest—he never let anybody copy from him, forget that. And he'd never whisper an answer either. He's still like that in his Light-Grays—he's done okay for himself. He's the head of the college branch, but he doesn't allow himself to go off on vacation-symposiums or youth entertainment conferences. He insists that's only for elected delegates. He's that kind of a guy...

With whom, with them?... Oh no, Mrs. Honah, he's too honest for

that... Well, they were everywhere. In every school, next to the principal's office, there was a Deputy Advisor or even a full Advisor. And at the university, until quite recently, the things going on there!... No, don't you know, they've now taken an oath, it seems—they can't just break it. Him? Well, of course they probably did call him in for questioning. Who wasn't called in then? *(She thinks for a while.)* Mrs. Honah, darling... May I ask you a favor?... See, you figured it out yourself. You'll run and get it? Well, how much... I'll give you two hundred and you keep the change. Yes, I know that the price has gone up, but you can probably still get the cheapest one for a hundred seventy, a hundred eighty. Okay? All right?... Oh, Mrs. Honah, what would I do without you!... *(Happily and quickly she rolls to the table, takes a couple of large bills from under the tablecloth, and hands them through the window.)* I'll wait for you here, Mrs. Honah. Would you please hurry, though?... *(She falls silent. Her eyes follow someone on the other side of the window, and then she silently looks out onto the square.)* Oh, they're gathering. Another demonstration. Wow, the Dark-Grays' banners really got darker. They're almost Black... And the Light-Grays', too—they're almost Dark-Gray now. What will they protest today? Probably against the molva again. They all protest against it, but it keeps getting built. The molvists and molva scientists explain over and over again in all the newspapers that the explosion of the Southern molva was a freak accident—molva explosions are possible, but they don't happen more than once in a hundred thousand years... And they still protest... against... Well, we have to understand them, too. They have to protest... against... well, against something at least. *(Suddenly she loses interest in the demonstration, rolls to the table, and turns on the tape recorder, which this time works as a radio.)*

VOICE OF A NEWSCASTER, *announcing*: And now for the latest news. In the Upper House of the People's Council, the block of the so-called Black minority sent the President a set of demands and propositions outlining decisive and irrevocable measures to repair the economy and overcome hyper-meta-inflation and the imbalance in command and executive discipline. The statement, which calls on the President to take decisive and tough measures in carrying out a severe economic policy, is signed by delegates Blackman and Blacksmith; deputies Black and Schwarzmeister; and senators Blackwell, Inkman, Blackout and Blacken-Decker.

VOICE OF A SECOND NEWSCASTER: Evacuation of the southern regions of Maturasa county to neighboring Tamurasa and Ratumasa counties continues. The workers of Tamurasa are welcoming the refugees from the territory affected by the explosion of the Southern molva with open arms. Collection of donations for the reconstruction of the damaged section of the twelfth terminal of the Southern molva

continues. As of today, the collection total has reached...

(ONA turns off the radio, thinks for a while, and rolls toward the window.)

ONA. Where is she?... Oh, here she comes, finally!... Mrs. Honah! What happened? Give it to me, give it to me quickly... *(She stretches her hand down through the window impatiently.)* What? Damn! You've got to be kidding. Well, yeah, it's my fault, what can I say... But Mrs. Honah, I think it was just some moron who scared you, no way was he an Advisor. Why would an Advisor be hanging out there—as if they don't have more important things to do! And besides, if he really was an Advisor, he wouldn't even have approached you, he just would have whistled, and about ten agents would have run up and grabbed you and the seller... It's just because you're so trusting... So how much did you say you gave him? Fifty? All that was left? You even added some of your own money? *(She thinks for a moment.)* Oh well, Mrs. Honah, I'll reimburse you that fifty. *(Reluctantly she moves toward the table, gets a bill from underneath the tablecloth, and rolls to the window again.)* Here, take it, Mrs. Honah, and forgive me for sending you on such an adventure!... And now, give it to me, quickly, please! *(Impatiently, she reaches through the window and at last receives a bottle with some liquid the color of medium-strength tea.)* Oh, Mrs. Honah, thank you so much, thank you very-very much!... And come back in the afternoon—perhaps there'll be some business closer to evening. And you'll lift my spirits a bit. Okay? Good-bye now...

(ONA presses the bottle to her chest. She sits in her chair, gently rocking the bottle in her arms, like a baby. Then she puts it on her knees, and while holding it with one hand, she shuts the window with the other. She carefully rolls toward the nightstand with the telephone. She opens it and takes a little shot glass. She uncorks the bottle, pours a full glass, and drinks it in one gulp. Immediately, almost without a pause, she tosses back a second glass. Exhausted, she falls back in her chair, holding the glass and the bottle as if they were her most valuable possessions. For a few minutes she sits immobile. Finally, shaking it off, she puts the glass and the bottle inside the nightstand, and closes it. She moves to the middle of the room. Her movements are clear and confident again. She rolls toward the table and clicks the start button of the tape recorder. The folk song «The Blazing Pine in Flames» plays. Moving as if to the rhythm of the song, she rolls her chair to the wardrobe, opens the door, and takes out a white wedding veil. Looking at herself in the mirror on the back of the opened wardrobe door, she puts it on. She closes the wardrobe and rolls to the middle of the room and begins to dance in her little chair. Her dance is frightening. Her dance is beautiful. Her dance is frighteningly beautiful.)

End of Act One.

Act Two

The same room. ONA may have been dancing in her chair only a minute ago, but the song has ended and she turns the tape recorder off. She is out of breath a bit. She wipes her face with her hand, takes off the veil, and hides it in the wardrobe. She fixes her hair. She becomes lost in thought for a moment, but her thoughts are light, since she is tipsy. Then she rolls around the room for a while, finally approaching the window. She opens the window and peeks out.

ONA. Oh, Mrs. Honah, you're here again already? So quickly?... What was I doing? Nothing much, just listening to some music. What, you could hear it outside? Really? I didn't think it was so loud. What? Oh, no, how would I dance?... I live only in my bed and my chair. Yes. No, I can't get up, not at all. Of course, it's too bad. But what can you do? Well, the doctor said that it's impossible, that never, not ... Well, forever, in one word. That's just the way it is. Oh, Mrs. Honah, you ask such things! How can I describe it to you? It's difficult. How long have I lived like this? *(She thinks for a minute, recollecting.)* Well, more than half a year, because it's already four months since I was sent home from the hospital, and I was stuck there for two and a half months. Yes, it's been a long time... since then...

Mrs. Honah, it was during the very first demonstrations against the molva. Right after it exploded, a couple of days. The Light-Grays weren't legal yet, but we all sewed ourselves gray shirts. Mmm... Well, now I can laugh about it, after everything. But then we took it very seriously, as though it were... Well, you know. I remember, sewing myself a very loose shirt, and I didn't tuck it in my pants or skirt; I wore it out... So... We had a demonstration right at the university, in the yard. The Grays decided to get everyone to come, the sympathizers as well as the unaligned of all stripes. Well, to attract them somehow, to influence them—actually he suggested this—I stood by the gate, you know the gate to the university yard, the pretty ornamented ironwork gate... So he asked me to, and when everyone had gathered in the yard, I closed the gate... Well, I mean, I shut the two halves, but we didn't have the lock, the guard had it... So he gave me a pair of police handcuffs, and I locked the gates with one side of the handcuffs and with the other I chained myself to the gate by my arm. *(ONA pauses often in her narrative; it's obviously not easy for her.)* So... The demonstration began, and the Light-Grays are making speeches... And someone, probably from the university, maybe even the president himself, someone called the police. I just barely had time to turn around to see the two black armored vehicles approaching at full-speed from the street. They were heading straight at the gates and they weren't stopping. Of course, the gates crashed down on top of me, and they dragged me... under the gates... crushed, you understand—they pushed

me like that through the whole yard, fifty meters, at least... No, are you kidding? People who were there told me later. I lost consciousness right after the gates fell on me... Well it was a couple of weeks before I came to, in a hospital. And not right away... gradually. I regained consciousness bit by bit. Oh, it was terrible, Mrs. Honah, my whole body hurt so badly... *(She shivers, shaking her shoulders.)* Of course, they chased everyone away, and I was taken to the hospital. Yes... The doctors said that it's amazing I survived... But enough of this, Mrs. Honah, I can't talk about it any more... Enough is enough... *(Depressed, with her head down on her chest, she sits in her chair. Suddenly, the phone on her nightstand rings.)* Oh, excuse me, Mrs. Honah, someone is calling!... *(She quickly closes the window and rolls toward the telephone.)* Hello! Yes, ONA speaking. Who? *(Immediately her voice changes and becomes dry and cold. Even her face changes.)* Ah, it's you. What do you want? If there's something to talk about, well, why not... *(A pause.)* Yes... Yes... Well, that's what you think... So... Huh?... Aha... Yes. That's it. That's it! Enough! And now you listen to me! Do you hear me?! Now I want to tell you something! Listen, girl, and don't interrupt me! You always lived off me like a leech. Even in school, you sucked up to me! And ever since then you cling to me like some parasite!... Copying my homework, cheating off me on a midterm, using my results in the lab! Did you take even one exam without my cheat-sheets? And not only at school, not only in academics—in everything! In our freshmen year when we went hiking in the forest and I made myself a little bouquet of cat rose and pinned it to my jacket, you immediately did the same. And you even came to the university with it the next day! And everyone was surprised, just crazy about it. Oh, that Mona, clever Monkey, what a sense of style, what imagination! But it was my style, my imagination! When I started to smoke, you couldn't start fast enough. And not some other brand, but precisely "Philboroughs"! And then, the time the three of us were in that coffee-shop, you must remember... I was taking a cigarette—it was the last one in the pack and it was broken. So I broke the filter off and smoked it like that, without the filter. And in a minute you took out a pack from your purse, and you twisted off the filter and lit up. You don't deny it, do you? And I thought it was funny—how limited you are, you can't come up with anything on your own. I drank meps without sugar, and you drank meps without sugar. I chewed trick, and you chewed trick. Once in conversation, I happened to mention that I sleep without a pillow because I don't like my head to be elevated. And I bet from that night on you've also slept without a pillow! You stole everything from me—the way I dressed, my tastes, my expressions, my style of living.

And now I'm going to tell you the main thing! I'll tell you why you did it! You thought it would help you steal him from me! But don't think

you succeeded! *(She falls silent, sobs, and puts the phone back. Numbly she sits by the nightstand. After a few seconds, the phone rings again.)* Oh, what's going on? *(She picks up the phone.)* Well? What else do you want? Go ahead... *(She listens.)* You're lying! I don't believe you! *(She is close to tears.)* You're lying, Monkey, you're lying! I don't believe you! I won't believe it until he tells me himself!... You bitch, Monkey!... *(She throws the phone. Hunched over in her chair, she covers her face with her hands and sits like this for a bit longer—for a couple of minutes. The phone rings again. She picks it up as though half-asleep, apathetically, reluctantly.)*

I'm listening. Yes, it's me. Of course I recognized you, why wouldn't I? How am I? Everything's okay. Everything's fine, nothing new... And what about you? Aha... Yes, I understand... And this call—is it your idea, or did Monkey suggest it?... Well, if I asked, then obviously I want to know. I have my reasons. She called me. Not long, a couple of minutes ago... What did she tell me? Different things... Oh, by the way, she said that when they broke up our demonstration, when I was ... when the gates fell on me... She told me... are you listening?... that it was you who called the police! *(Pause.)* Yes. Yes, I hear you very well, and I'm listening very carefully! Yes, I know there's no struggle without bloodshed and victims! *(Again with a voice on the verge of hysterical wailing.)* Yes, victims and bloodshed strengthen our ranks! Your ranks, you understand?! How long did you think about it, did you even hesitate, before you tactfully gave me the handcuffs and asked that I block the gates?... I was the one... Yes, yes, no struggle without victims... Do you know that when I was brought to the hospital, before the doctors started putting me back together, piece by piece, bit by bit, they took it out of me... actually, it came out by itself... What should have been called my baby... Our baby, darling... Yes... it wasn't all for nothing—my daily nausea, and the big gray shirt that I sewed for myself and wore untucked. You laughed—why would I wear such a tent! You really didn't know? You really didn't even suspect, or were you just good at pretending to be such an ignoramus? Because now I can't figure it out... What? What for? What for—here, to my place? What do you want to explain? What can you explain? What? So...

(It's clear that the conversation was interrupted on the other end. After holding the phone in front of her face for a moment, ONA slowly puts it back on its base. She sits silently, concentrating, calmly, with her hands on her knees. The phone rings again. She picks it up quickly.)

ONA. Yes! Yes, it's me, Mr. Advisor! Mr. Senior Advisor!... Yes. Yes, sir. According to your instructions, Mr. Senior Advisor. Everything as planned. He should be at my place any minute, Mr. Senior Advisor! Yes.

Yes, sir. Yes, Mr. Senior Advisor! Your orders will be carried out, Mr. Senior Advisor! Thank you, Mr. Senior Advisor!

(With a precise, clean gesture she hangs up the phone. She rolls to the middle of the room and throws the blanket off her knees. Under the blanket she wears only underwear. She stands up from her chair and shakes out her legs, which most probably have fallen asleep. She walks toward the wardrobe and pulls her blouse off over her head. She puts it into the wardrobe and takes out a dark dress and stockings. Without rushing, she dresses. From some lower drawer she takes out a pair of high-heeled shoes. Just as she steps into them, someone rings the doorbell. Two short rings.)

ONA. Just a minute! Wait just a minute, please!... (She closes the wardrobe door. Calmly, she sits down in her chair, makes herself comfortable, and covers her legs with the blanket. With the whole chair and her whole body, she turns toward the door. Another ring.)

ONA. Yes! It's open! Please, come in!...

CURTAIN.

November, 1992, Irpin'—Rivne—Irpin'.

Translated by Taras Koznarsky with Marta Baziuk

Original publication: Oleksander Irvanets', “Malen'ka piesa pro zradu dlia odniiei aktrysy,” in Iurii Andrukhovych, Oleksander Irvanets', and Viktor Neborak, *Bu-Ba-Bu. T.v.o.[...] ry* (Bu-Ba-Bu. W.o.r.[...]ks), Lviv: Kameniar, 1995, pp. 131–140.

