

Coney Island
A Drama-Operetta

Vasyl Makhno

Players:

Vanya (Sumsy): age 50–55, in the U.S. for fifteen years, an alcoholic

Mykola (Kolya): age 32–35, in the U.S. for two years, a heavy drinker

Pedro: age 25, a Mexican

Zina: age 45–50, in the U.S. for three years

Dana: age 35, in the U.S. for three years

Zhana from Moscow: indeterminate age and length of stay in the U.S.

Dima: a male guest of Zina's and Dana's

Ladies and Gentlemen: appearing in acts 3 and 4

“The Fourth Wave” of recent Ukrainian emigrants: appearing in act 6

The Ukrainian National Women's League of America Choir

A Hasidic choir

The play is set in New York City.

*The choir of the Ukrainian National Women's League of America
is singing their hymn, “O, Sisters, Raise Your Eyes and Spirit.”*

1. Coney Island/Stillwell Avenue, Brooklyn, NY

Subway trains arrive at the last stop, Coney Island/Stillwell Avenue.

From time to time conductors call out:

"Last stop! Last stop! Last stop!"

Three Brooklyn buddies are sitting on the platform: Vanya (Sumsky), Mykola (Kolya), and the Mexican Pedro, whose name has no extension.

Conductors' shouts of "Last Stop" come from all directions.

Vanya stretches out and falls asleep again.

Pedro is wrapped in a size XXXL jacket and is also dozing peacefully.

With his long unwashed dirty hands Mykola is scratching himself where the missing zipper on his pants should be.

Pedro wakes up and watches Mykola.

Pedro: *(grins idiotically)* Mujer.

Mykola: Go to hell, you stupid Mexican. *(smiles at Pedro)*

Vanya finally wakes up.

Vanya: Huh? Ain't the trains runnin'?

Mykola: They said something *(points at the loudspeaker)*, but I don't know.

Vanya: Hey Kolya, know what I used to be? *(with disappointment)* Aw, what the hell do you know... *(turns to Pedro)* Hey Pedro, what were you in Mexico?

Pedro: Pedro, si Pedro.

Vanya: You were Pedro?! Hey Kolya, Pedro used to be Pedro! This fuckin' Mexican probably understands Russian. *(to Pedro)* Did you work for the Russkies in Brighton Beach? Hey Kolya, you ever been to Mexico?

Mykola: Sure.

Vanya: Yeah—when?

Mykola: What do you mean, when? When I came to the States, that's when. We went through Mexico. Almost croaked in the goddam desert. *(pause)*

Listen, me and my wife, we got visas to Mexico, but we were scared as hell. I read somewhere that there wasn't enough air in Mexico, in their capital.

Vanya: Someone stole the air?

Mykola: No, they built the city high above sea level.

Vanya: So they've got problems with air, huh? I mean, look at Pedro. The guy can't do shit.

Mykola: So I started reading about Mexico, everything I could get my hands on. I read this one writer, Joe... Jack... Got it!—Juan, Juan

Rulfo. I read this story he wrote, "The Northern Border," and that's when I lost it. Fuck, he described how they (*points at Pedro*) cross the northern border, at night. The Americans shot them all, except for one guy who goes back home and tells his father the whole story. I don't remember the rest, except they shot them all. So I think, hell, they could shoot us too. So we arrive in Mexico, as tourists you know, and they put us on some domestic flight, and we wind up in some godforsaken town, with mountains all around. They put us in some hotel. Fuck, when I think of it, I feel like puking. This girl, she's about fifteen, she comes to us every day for a week and says not to go anywhere, says we'll be leaving tomorrow. A week and a half goes by. There were seven of us in the hotel, all Ukrainians. One night the girl shows up with two others, and she says to take our things and bring water. By then the nights were freezing. We get to some river. The two other girls start blowing up plastic bags. We had to swim across. One of the Ukrainians was afraid of the water and stayed on the Mexican side. He just stood there, crying.

Two drowned. There was a strong current, their bags floundered, and they slipped off. Only their heads bobbed up from time to time. No one bothered trying to save them. Me and my wife and two others somehow made it to the American side. Act'ally, I found my wife only the next day, in a tree. She was terrified. The American border guards picked us up. Or we wouldn't have survived. My brother in Chicago vouched for us, but we decided not to go there. And here we are—in New York.

Vanya: This Polish guy I know helped me out. Showed me this playground, right next to the New Utrecht station where I'd been sleeping. What a place—a playground and a bakery next to it! After a big night drinkin', I'd wake up thirsty and hungry as hell, and I'd stick 'round till ten. Them Jewish kids, they'd run out of some kind of Jewish school, a yeshiva or somethin'. Kolya, them kids always left stuff behind—a bottle of water, some food. I never had to go through garbage no more. Can't figure them kids out, running 'round the playground like they was on fire.

And then, every Friday before their Sabbath, the bakery'd put out bread and rolls in these big boxes. It was, like, go ahead, take it. So you ain't never gonna die of hunger. Only, you know what sucks? Ain't no one gonna give you no vodka. Still, it ain't so bad...

Mykola: Yeah.

Vanya: So on Sunday, yeah, Sundays, I hung out at the McDonald's. I'd open the door for people and get some dough for a bottle. Remember that whiskey, the one with the horse on the label? Thank McDonald's for that. America's a great country. You'll get by. Only

problem is, I can't work no more. My hands shake. And English is a bitch. Learn it while you're young, Kolya.

Mykola: You know, me and my wife, we got here, sort of settled down, and then she says, "I want to go home." Fuck, I say, wait 'til the spring, we'll pay off our debts, we borrowed ten thousand. And she says, "No way, I'm not staying," and that's that. I got a construction job at first, while she stayed at home smoking cigarettes. Once I caught her with a Puerto Rican. The bitch sicced the Puerto Ricans on me. And I wind up in the hospital, at Maimonides. Some hag shows up and starts asking me when I got here, who invited me. She says some charity will pay for everything, for the hospital. That's when I beat it. I decided not to go back to my wife. I met some Poles—they'd been bumming around about ten years—and joined them. They almost killed me when I said Lviv was ours—me against seven guys! That's when I started sleeping on beaches. The winters are cold on Coney Island. If you make it to the spring, then it's heaven. You can lie on the beach until it gets dark, when the lights go on like Christmas trees, and the ships float by and the ocean roars. Then it's heaven.

Vanya: I just met Pedro, found him in Brighton Beach. You see how he is—he's lost his marbles. Broke his back sellin' vegetables. The Puerto Ricans kicked his ass, paid him no dough—he was freezin', Kolya. He's friendly and a pretty nice guy. Too bad 'bout him. The poor Mexican schmuck.

Mykola: Why'd he come here?

Vanya: Why the hell does anybody come to America? In fifteen years here I've met all kinds, Kolya. Important people—trainers, athletes, artists, academics.

So I'm sittin' in Brighton Beach, near that Millennium thing, taking a breather, y'know. And I sees this six-foot tight-ass comin' at me. I couldn't believe my eyes. It was Yevtushenko. His poems, Kolya—I used to love 'em. Evgeny Aleksandrovich, I says, hello. Know what he says? "If you want my autograph, sure, but no money," he says, 'cause he ain't got none.

Mykola: I heard something about him, too. What's he doing here?

Vanya: Dunno. Heard he's workin' at some university.

Mykola: They're all coming here...

Vanya: Yeah. Fuck, America ain't got room for the whole world. What that president of theirs is thinkin', I ain't gotta clue.

Mykola: You know, when I got to thinking about coming here through Mexico, I had no idea how. We took geography in school, but we never got to Mexico.

Vanya: Maybe 'cause it's a different hemisphere?

Mykola: You can say that again!

2. Borough Park, Brooklyn, NY

An apartment in Brooklyn, where Zina, Dana, and Zhana from Moscow live.

Zina: Look, Dana (*shows her children's clothes*). I bought these at "The Liquidator." I'm gonna send 'em to my granddaughter. Yeah! They'll be perfect for spring.

Dana: Yesterday I done some work for this Jewish lady, a rabbi's wife. I saw the same stuff there. If it's good enough for them, it's gotta be good.

Zina: On the way up I met our neighbor, the girl who lives above us. I think the guy she's living with is her husband.

Dana: Who knows?

Zina: That's what I think... I ain't never heard them fighting.

Dana: Zhana said she heard something, but it sure wasn't no shouting (*laughs*).

Zina: They're together, that's a fact. She ain't got that hungry look...

Dana: That's true (*sighs*). I divorced mine. He drank. The jerk left me with two kids.

Zina: After mine left for America, he used to send me money and stuff. But then zip—no letters, not even a hello. I waited for a while. Then I went to the American consulate in Kyiv. This sweet young thing asks me, "Zina, why are you so set on getting to America?" And I says, I'm gonna go look for my man. He's disappeared somewhere in that America. "Then go, Zina," she says, "go." Her own eyes were *soooo* sad.

Zhana: (*applying make-up without a mirror*) Hello.

A cell phones rings.

Yes, honey, yes, yes. Yes, Eddie... yes, darlin'. I'm on my way. See you later, girls. (*leaves*)

Zina: What a bitch.

Dana: The slut...

3. East Village, Manhattan, NY

The Ukrainian National Home.

A meeting is taking place.

Of the seven people at the meeting, five are dozing off.

Hearing aids are making squeaking sounds.

Sitting behind a table are the chairman and the secretary.

A bottle of Coca-Cola and plastic cups are on the table.

Chairman: Do we have a quorum?

Secretary: We do.

First lady: (*raises her hand*) I have a question.

Chairman: Yes, please.

First lady: When our family escaped to Slovakia in a wagon in 1944, we couldn't foresee that the struggle for our dear Ukraine would take this long. My dear daddy—may he rest in peace—raised my brother and me to be patriots. Last year we sent 127 boxes of books to Ukraine. Our cellar had flooded, and the books began to rot, so we figured somebody might as well get some use out of them.

Our task was to keep up the struggle. And we did. I went to Ukraine the first time in 1973, with a tour. The KGB was everywhere. There was nothing there. People were so poor.

The second time I went with my husband after independence. There was still nothing there. People didn't even have tea.

I didn't go a third time because I retired. Glory to Ukraine!

First gentleman: Ex-cuse me please, but I have to put a quarter in the meter. (*leaves*)

Second gentleman: I have a comment.

Chairman: Yes, please?

Second gentleman: Relating to what the lady just said, we should at some point officially thank all those who haven't forgotten our poor country (*wipes away tears*), and, despite their meager savings, do what they can to support our organization, which supports Ukraine.

The *New York Times* recently ran an article on Ukraine. I believe that our young people's organizations should organize protests against such slandering of Ukraine and march up Fifth Avenue.

Chairman: (*to the recording secretary*) Please make a note of this valuable suggestion of Mister...

Second gentleman: I have an engineering degree. My name is Magister Khokhotsky.

First lady: I'd like to add...

Chairman: Yes, please.

First lady: We, our emigration, are in trouble, and we've got to do something about the newcomers.

Chairman: That, dear lady, is an important issue, but we won't be able to resolve it today.

First lady: I just want, in light of point 3 on the agenda, to direct the meeting's attention to the fact that something has to be done about them. The churches are packed with them.

Chairman: That's why we're meeting.

First man: Ex-cuse me, please, but I have to put a quarter in the meter.
(*leaves*)

First lady: The nationally conscious part of our emigration has long since...

Chairman: Ex-cuse me, but we have little time and so much to talk about.

4. Borough Park, Brooklyn, NY

Zina and Dima. They quickly finish their drinks, undress hurriedly, and have sex. The doorbell rings.

Zina: (*worried*) Who's that? Dana's supposed to still be at work at the rabbi's wife, and Zhana said she's going up to the mountains with her lover. She's supposed to be back tomorrow. So who...

Dima: Don't open the door.

The doorbell keeps on ringing.

Zina: Oh, get dressed—and hurry.

They dress.

Zina: (*speaks into the intercom*) Who's there?

*Dana's voice is heard.
Now, all three are drinking.*

Dana: You wanna spend the night here?

Zina: Hey, wait a second!

Dima: What's the problem? Why not? Zhana's not coming back, is she?

Dana: No...

Zina: Wait a second. There ain't no room here for three.

Dana: Dima baby, you can have Zhana's bed.

Dima: What's the problem? Why not? Zhana ain't comin', is she?

Zina: She said in the morning...

*They get ready to go to bed. Zhana's bed is closer to Dana's.
Dana comes out of the bathroom and flirts with Dima.*

Zina: Dana, quit foolin' around and get to bed. We gotta save electricity.

Dana continues to flirt with Dima.

Zina: Dana, stop shaking your ass and go to bed!

Zina turns off the light. Dana keeps tossing and turning, visibly unable to fall asleep. Zina is awake too. Dima is asleep.

Dana: I can't sleep.

Zina: Sleep!

After a while Dana's hand moves up Dima's bed sheet. Dima wakes up.

Dima: Is she asleep?

Dana: Yeah.

Dima pulls Dana into his bed. They start making love, and the old mattress, which Zhana found on the street, creaks rhythmically.

In the morning Dana lies asleep in Dima's arms. Zina wakes up.

Zina: What the hell!!!

Zina pulls the still sleeping Dana off the bed. She punches the terrified Dima in the back and shoves him out the door, slamming it behind him.

Zina: You little bitch!

Dana: Oh, yeah? Well, you should be ashamed of sleeping with younger men.

Zina: Shut your trap, you witch.

Dana: Well, why do you bring guys home with you? You're not livin' alone, you know. Get yourself your own place. Then you can bring home anybody you like.

Zina starts crying, and Dana does too.

5. East Village, Manhattan, NY

Chairman: We're at the final point of the agenda. Does anyone have questions?

First gentleman: A short one. Don't you realize, gentlemen, that the "Fourth Wave" can take care of itself? We must think of Ukraine.

First lady: Well, I dream of Ukraine like I dream of my mother. When I was in Lviv everyone spoke Ukrainian. But in Kyiv they all spoke Russian.

Maybe we should move the capital to Lviv? In Polish times my dear departed daddy found work there on the railroad. And then...

Chairman: Madame, we'll discuss politics at the end of the meeting. And I suggest we leave the capital alone.

First lady: I only want to make things better.

Chairman: Let's leave well enough alone. Besides, what can we do?

Second gentleman: I've been listening to you, gentlemen, and have no idea what we're talking about.

Chairman: In that case, sir, make a suggestion.

Second gentleman: Maybe we here in the free world, on Second Avenue, don't understand everything about Ukraine, but my children went to Ukrainian school and my grandchildren learned 100 Ukrainian words, and I had to pay them 10 dollars for every word.

I have three grandchildren, gentlemen, so you can figure out how much that language has cost me.

(A pause)

And my son studied the map of Lviv because we were getting ready to liberate it from the Bolsheviks. It's too bad about the speed of the Soviet Union's collapse.

First lady: You're quite right. Soviet rule had a premature climax...

Chairman: Please, let's not pursue this question anymore.

First gentleman: Ex-cuse me, but I have to go. This was quite an interesting discussion. Will there be a meeting next Sunday?

Chairman: Of course—we have much to talk about.

First gentleman: So long, gentlemen.

6. Avenue U, Brooklyn, NY

The "Emigrant's Dream" Restaurant.

A meeting of Fourth-Wave Ukrainians is taking place. The chair and secretary are sitting behind a table. There are fifteen people in the hall.

Chair: Uh, we're here 'cause we have to unite—uh, establish something. Or aren't we able to?

Secretary: As long as it's not with them baniak Ukrainian DPs.

Worried woman: I suggest we establish a club, something that reflects our interests, so that we can get to know each other, have some fun...

Chair: Nah, that's too narrow. It's got to be an organization.

Secretary: Like what?

Lyrical woman: Oh, you know, the sort of place you could come and have coffee and read poetry.

I write, you know, but there's nowhere to get published.

Secretary: A venue—that's what we need.

Worried woman: I've been talking about space all along.

Secretary: But what's that got to do with... We gotta be serious. I was thinking of a newspaper or journal.

Chair: Yeah, we need a journal. "The Voice of Brooklyn," or...

Secretary: Let's worry about the name later.

Lyrical woman: I agree with her. I mean, you come home and there's no one even to read your poetry to.

Worried woman: Why are we talking about poetry?

Chair: We've strayed off topic. We have to think about dividing responsibilities and what we're going to do.

Secretary: I've already made a list. Mishko will take care of the press. He loved to read newspapers back in Ukraine. Vira'll do cultural work with the public and so on—

Here's the list. Take a look at it.

Vira: Back in sixth grade, when I was in the Young Pioneers, my unit was named after the pioneer-hero Valya Kotyk. Remember him?

Anyway, my responsibility was mass culture.

As a first step, I propose that we buy tickets to the Metropolitan Opera and experience the sublime.

Worried woman: Opera—what's that? Does it have dancing?

Lyrical woman: Are you kidding? They've got the world's best singers, performing the world's best operas...

Worried woman: Oh—that kind of opera. Yeah, It played on the radio back in Soviet times. Nah, I'm not interested. Don't care for that stuff. I'm for going to a restaurant in Brighton Beach.

Chair: OK, guys, We'll go to the opera some other time.

Secretary: Yeah. We've got to think of something that'll make everyone so envious they'll do it in their pants.

Styopa: Hey, let's have an off-road motor cross, damn straight, or float down the Delaware in canoes. Something sick and wild. We'll get a whole crowd together.

And I know this one journalist, he's one of us, from our wave, he'll do such a write-up—it'll make 'em all throw up.

The worried woman gasps.

Oh—sorry. Sor-ry. I'm just a simple village boy...

Chair: What kind of motor race were you thinking about?

Styopa: I was just joking around.

Secretary: This is no place for jokes, this is a serious meeting.

Maria: Maybe we should think of some way to help Ukraine and its orphans?

Secretary: You gotta be kidding! We're barely able to collect membership dues and you wanna help Ukraine! Did you just get off the boat? Let the DP Ukrainians help them. We've got other things to do—ain't that so? (*appeals to the Chair*)

Chair: We're not up to that yet. We've got a different problem—how to join forces.

Vira: If we're not going to the opera, then I resign from my post.

Chair: Who said we're not going? Most people here (*points to the hall*) have some higher education. We need culture, but maybe not just yet?

Secretary: Exactly—not just yet.

Maria: You know, there are lots of us in the Ukrainian Women's Union.

Secretary: What's with this union? We all used to be in the Union. Ain't that so? (*turns to the Chair*)

Chair: So, what did we decide? (*to the secretary*)

Secretary: Well, what? Well, that we're moving in the right direction. Ain't that so?

Between the sixth and seventh acts, a year passes.

7. Coney Island/Stillwell Avenue, Brooklyn, NY

Vanya is alone but isn't aware of it.

Vanya: Y'know, Kolya, there's lots of Ukrainians in Manhattan. They got their own bank, clubs, national home, bars.

I used to go to this one bar.

One time some old guy sits down next to me, orders a beer, and when he starts tellin' me his worries, his hands begin to shake, just like mine. So he says, "Why are all of ya comin' to America? Who's gonna build Ukraine?" And I says, there's still lots like me there.

Don't worry, old man, they'll build you your Ukraine.

Yeah...

Women got it the best here. They get their hands on some old fart, bat their eyes, show their tits, and he's done for: straight to the altar. His kids don't like it, but he says he's in love and that's that.

Lots of 'em get their papers that way. They stick 'round 'til they get a green card, and then they tell the poor impotent asshole to fuck off.

Yeah...

I used to live with this babe from Tashkent.

Listen, Kolya, every night she'd tell me 'bout some Kama Sutra guy. That Kama Sutra stuff pissed me off, so I dumped her.

Y'know, Kolya, I think I'm gonna die. I'm pissin' blood. Last winter it was so freezin' cold...

Vanya is standing near the entrance to the Coney Island/Stillwell Avenue subway station.

Hundreds of passengers walk by him.

Some pause and drop a coin into Vanya's timidly extended hand.

Nearby two policemen are leaning against a wall; they ignore Vanya.

As Zina walks by, her cell phone rings.

Zina: Yeah, yeah, I'm here in Coney Island. I'm on my way... Yeah, I bought it, I bought it. Enough questions already. I bought it.

Vanya closes his fingers around some coins and wants to put them in his pocket, but he misses and the coins fall to the floor.

The sound draws the attention of the policemen.

Zina, too, casts a glance at Vanya.

Vanya's lips and hands tremble and he has difficulty speaking. He recognizes Zina.

His throat goes into spasms.

Vanya: (*quietly, almost inaudibly*) Zi-na, Zi-NA, ZI-NA. (*and in an unnaturally loud voice*) Z-I-N-A!!!

Zina stops talking and looks at Vanya.

Vanya: (*hoarsely*) Zina.

Zina: (*into the telephone*) I'll call you later... (*to Vanya*) Vanya?

Vanya: Zi-na—

*Vanya and Zina are sitting on a bench at the Coney Island stop.
The conductors call out, "Last stop! Last stop! Last stop!"*

Vanya: It took you a long time to find me, Zina.

Zina: Too long and too late. (*sighs*) I got married, Vanya, to an old fart—a widower. I should be getting my papers any day now. I gotta take care of him.

Vanya: Our little Tanya—how is she?

Zina: She's OK. She's got a new husband, and he don't drink. I helped 'em buy a new place. She's gonna have his kid. They're OK.

Vanya: Zina, don't go telling her we met.

Zina: Oh—sure. I won't tell.

Vanya: I'm done for, Zina. I can feel it. Ever since last winter...

Zina: Maybe you should go to a hospital?

Vanya: What hospital, Zina? I'm fucked.

Zina: Can't I do something, Vanya?

Vanya: Just go, Zina— go to your old fart.

Zina: You don't mind?

Vanya: Go ahead. You ain't gonna sleep here at the station with me. But next Sunday, come 'round, Zina. You can help me with somethin' then. I think I'm gonna need your help.

Zina: Where will I find you?

Vanya: On Sundays I'm here, or up at the McDonald's. Zina?

Zina: Yes Vanya?

Vanya: Can I ask you for somethin'?

Zina: What?

Vanya: Lemme hold your cell phone. I never did hold one.

Zina: Here—go ahead.

Vanya: Yours?

Zina: Mine.

Vanya: The old fart bought it?

Zina: No, I did.

Vanya: It's nice.

Zina looks at her watch.

Vanya: Time to go?

Zina: Yeah, I gotta go—it's getting late.

Vanya: Zina, come next Sunday.

Zina: I'll try.

Vanya: Come, Zina. Come.

The conductors call out:

"Last stop! Last stop! Last stop!"

Zina enters the subway, the doors close, and it departs.

Vanya is left alone.

A week goes by.

Vanya: Everything sucks. Kolya's disappeared. Pedro's gone. Zina said she'd come, but she ain't here.

*Zina is running toward Vanya along the subway platform,
bumping into people.*

Vanya is sitting hunched over on a bench.

Zina: Vanya! God, forgive me! I couldn't get away sooner. The old man wouldn't let me go.

Vanya: (*weakly*) Thanks for comin'.

Zina: You eat today?

Vanya: Don't wanna. Ain't had nothin' for a week. I'm getting' real weak, Zina.

Zina: Come on now, Vanya.

Vanya: I feel it, Zina. It's the end... I wanted to ask you, about our Pasha...

Zina: There's no Pasha any more, Vanya. (*pause*) They killed him, last year.

Vanya: (*long pause*) I had a bad feelin' about him, Zina. Can't explain it, but I had a bad feelin' about Pasha. I used to dream 'bout him a lot last year.

Zina: By then I was here. Tanya phoned and told me about the murder and the funeral...

(*A pause*)

Vanya: Zina, maybe we shouldn't 've?

Zina: Shouldn't 've what?

Vanya: Come to America (*pause*). Get me to the beach, Zina....

Zina: The beach?

Vanya: Yeah, the beach.

(*A pause*)

I'm gonna die there...

Vanya and Zina leave the Coney Island station. They pass the stands and slowly approach the beach, which is deserted.

Zina tucks in Vanya on an empty bench.

A Hasidic choir begins singing "Hava Nagila" on one side of the subway platform. On the opposite side the Women's League of America choir sings its hymn.

To the accompaniment of the two choirs, Vanya Sumsky's soul says good-bye to America.

Vanya dies quietly on the beach.

Gulls fly above Vanya's limp body. Their cries mourn his wasted life.

The lighthouse lamps are lit. The sun sets. Ships sail by.

But Vanya doesn't see any of this.

The cellphone in Vanya's pocket starts playing the Nautilus Pompilius song, "Good-bye, America! O-o-o-oh..."

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Translated by Alexander J. Motyl

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