

# LITUANUS

LITHUANIAN QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Volume 13, No.3 - Fall 1967

Editor of this issue: Bronius Vaškeelis

ISSN 0024-5089

Copyright © 1967 LITUANUS Foundation, Inc.



**LITUANUS**

[www.lituanus.org](http://www.lituanus.org)

## A CHRISTMAS SKIT

ANTANAS ŠKĖMA

ANTANAS ŠKĖMA was born in Lodge (Poland) of Lithuanian parents in 1911. In 1921, he returned with his parents to Lithuania; he studied medicine and law at the University of Kaunas where he also attended the drama studio. Between 1936 and 1944 Škėma was an actor and directed several plays. Living in displaced persons camps (Germany) and later in the United States, he participated in various amateur theatrical groups as an actor and a director. He died in a highway accident in 1961.

A playwright and a prose writer, Škėma made his literary debut with the play *Julijana* (1943). His other dramatic works are: *Živilė* (1948), *The Awakening* (*Prisikėlimas*, 1956), *The Candlestick* (*Žvakidė*, 1957) and *A Christmas Skit* (*Kalėdų vaizdelis*, 1961). The plays *One and Others* (*Vienas ir kiti*) and *Ataraxia* are still in manuscript form.

Škėma also published three collections of short stories and sketches, *Charred Wood and Sparks* (*Nuodėguliai ir kibirkštys*, 1947), *Saint Inga* (*Šventoji Inga*, 1952) and *Čelesta* (1960). He wrote a novel, *The White Shroud* (*Baltoji drobulė*, 1958), and several articles dealing with the theater and literature.



## A CHRISTMAS SKIT

One act play by

**ANTANAS ŠKĖMA**

Translated by Robert and Aldona Page

### CHARACTERS:

STEVENS  
SKAIDRA  
PERSONAGE  
MAGDALENE  
ANGELA  
SIMILAR  
SUPERVISOR

*Interior of a small bar in Brooklyn. A semicircular bar counter behind which are bottles and mirrors. Hanging from the ceiling is a garland of Santa Claus masks adorned with Christmas ornaments (tinsel, balls, stars, etc.). High bar stools covered with red oilcloth and a few tables covered with red plaid cloths. A large clock with Roman numerals hangs on the wall. A jukebox stands in one corner. Two doors with LADIES and GENTLEMEN signs. A door to the street.*

*Morning. A workday just before Christmas. STEVENS stands behind bar reading newspaper with his head in his hand. He is about sixty years old and overweight, and he wears a satisfied expression. After silently reading for a while, he shakes and smoothes the paper. The clock strikes ten. STEVENS listens with almost pious attention to the chimes. SKAIDRA*

*enters through street door. He is a man of forty, still retaining something of his youthful good-looks and athletic build, but just beginning to stoop.*

SKAIDRA. Morning, Stevens.

STEVENS. Good morning, Mr. Skaidra. Long time no see.

SKAIDRA. Yeah, about two weeks.

STEVENS. Just about.

*(SKAIDRA sits at the bar and STEVENS reaches for a bottle of Four Roses.)*

SKAIDRA. I didn't come to smell Roses. I'm allergic to flowers today.

*(STEVENS replaces bottle on shelf and looks at him inquisitively.)*

SKAIDRA. Something stronger. Say, a White Horse? STEVENS *(pouring the drink.)* Must be good news that calls for Scotch. Want it mixed?

SKAIDRA. Good news? Yeah, mix it. Could be.

*(He drinks slowly. STEVENS rustles newspaper again.)*

STEVENS. Well — some woman's smothered her three-year-old kid and jumped out of a fourth-floor window. Up in the Bronx.

SKAIDRA. That's still quite a ways from here. Here nobody jumps from a window on any floor.

*(STEVENS looks at him with a puzzled expression.)*

SKAIDRA. I mean, from the building across the street. They've got bars over the windows. Impossible.

STEVENS *(leans closer to SKAIDRA and speaks cautiously.)* You've been there?

SKAIDRA. About two weeks. They let me go. Not dangerous, they said.

STEVENS *(with a sigh of relief.)* Oh!

SKAIDRA *(chuckles.)* Did I scare you?

STEVENS *(composed)* .Well — I've had some customers from there...

SKAIDRA. I know...

STEVENS. So, you understand, I have to be careful.

*(Makes a sweeping gesture with his hand to indicate his property. SKAIDRA pulls out his wallet, removes a bill and places it on the counter. STEVENS goes to the cash register, rings it up and brings back the change.)*

STEVENS. One tried to hang himself in our men's room.

SKAIDRA. Didn't it work?

STEVENS. He must've been a nut. The ceiling in there is much too low.

SKAIDRA *(after taking a big gulp of his drink.)* I'm waiting here for a customer. Said they'd come between ten and eleven.

STEVENS. Is it your wife?

SKAIDRA. How did you know?

STEVENS *(becomes absorbed in polishing the glasses.)* Well — I just figured.

SKAIDRA. Don't lie. Angela doesn't hang around bars for no reason. When was she here?

STEVENS. Well — I don't remember exactly. I think it was last week.

SKAIDRA. She visited me last Thursday. So it was Thursday, wasn't it?

STEVENS (*wiping the glasses with great care.*) Yeah — Thursday.

SKAIDRA. Who with?

(*STEVENS turns away and moves to one side.*)

SKAIDRA. Okay, listen, Stevens, and I'll tell you. He's got broad shoulders, dark hair and blue eyes. Usually wears gray suits and sport shirts, has short uncombed hair and a chin that sticks out. (*Smiles to himself.*) Just like a centaur — hair all over him. He's got hair climbing out over his collar.

STEVENS. Did you say cen-tower?

SKAIDRA. Centaur — an imaginary animal that was supposed to roam the meadows of ancient Greece. But this one's a real animal — excuse me, an engineer, who roams the meadows of America. So — what did the two of them . talk about ? (*STEVENS busies himself behind the bar.*) Come on, I know you, Stevens. Your sense of hearing is fantastic. (*He points to the jukebox.*) That box can howl for all it's worth and you can still hear every word your customers are saying. Well— ?

STEVENS. Mr. Skaidra! I like you even if you were over there. (*Nods across the street.*) You come in the daytime when things are slow. You don't shout and you don't brag about what a great guy you are. When you tell me your troubles, at least I know it's not so you can weasel a free drink out of me. You don't spit on the floor. You put out your cigarette butts in the ashtrays. You piss straight into the urinal, and you understand that life isn't easy for me either. But — what's none of my business is none of my business.

SKAIDRA. Pour me another. (*Pause while SKAIDRA studies his drink.*) Once I believed they really existed. (*Nods towards the hanging Santa Claus masks.*) How long since you came from the old country, Stevens?

STEVENS. Uh? I don't know. I was just a snot-nosed kid when my folks brought me over. I guess I was about ten.

SKAIDRA. I remember them. Or I should say, him — Santa Claus. Even after I knew he was a fake I believed in him. It didn't take me long to find out that parents buy all those expensive trifles — a new sweater, a fairy tale book. But I waited for him all the same. It's hard for me to explain to you. For me Santa Claus was still a kind of painted go-between. For example, the town postman asks you: "Have you been a good boy?" and you say, "Yes." But you're a little nervous, because you know you're lying a little. And yet behind all those cheap whiskers and that rosy nose was that other, the true one, who is born again on every Christmas. And when I tried to change my childhood fairy tales into the poems of an adult, I could never completely forget that other, the one for whom — I can't find a word for him, Stevens. Don't you feel somehow more joyful? Maybe — brighter, before Christmas?

STEVENS. Well — there is something. Sometimes I find myself wiping the counter for no reason or polishing the glasses when they're already shiny.

SKAIDRA. That's it! Shining. Like these paper stars here. They're only paper, but they shine brighter than the real ones. Listen, Stevens. I'm waiting for what will never happen. But I want to believe that — that perhaps on the last Christmas, maybe before my death, maybe once — just once — you understand, Stevens.

STEVENS. You write that — poetry. Sure — I understand.

SKAIDRA. Thank you, Stevens. (*Drinks.*) But this Christmas we'll talk about divorce. Angela and divorce. Somehow they don't seem to go together.

(*The street door opens. PERSONAGE enters, unshaven and bundled up in tatters. He stops by the jukebox and spends a long time reading the list of record titles, then reaches into his pocket and takes out a handful of coins, looks for the right one and slips it into the slot. The latest hit tune, known to millions of popular song fans, begins to play. PERSONAGE listens for a while, then breaks into a smile revealing his few teeth. His whole body moves to the rhythm of the music. Finally he walks over to the bar and throws down a handful of small change.*)

PERSONAGE. Beer.

(*STEVENS fills a glass. PERSONAGE holds the full glass before him for a moment and sings along with the record in a hoarse voice; then he hungrily sucks down the beer.*)

STEVENS (*astonished.*) What's wrong with you?

PERSONAGE. It don't hurt so much, Stevens. Want to forget it. . . forget it all.

SKAIDRA. Who's he? Never saw him before.

STEVENS. Just a poor colored bum. Got a bad case of rheumatism. Gets his pension and drinks. To tell you the truth, he got it from coming here. Now he's got it and comes back to forget.

SKAIDRA. Pour me another. A double.

*(STEVENS mixes the drink precisely but with the elegance of a bear. SKAIDRA almost tears the glass from his hand and swallows a good three quarters of it in one gulp. Then he sits open-mouthed, with the blank expression of a cataleptic.)*

SKAIDRA. Listen, Stevens. . . *(He stops short.)*

STEVENS. I'm listening, Mr. Skaidra.

SKAIDRA. What was I talking about? Oh yeah, about whiskers. Do you know what they did to me over there ? *(Gestures across the street.)*

STEVENS. Well — I've heard. They jab a needle like this *(measures with his hands)* into your rear-end, stuff you in a jacket, strap you up, and leave you like a fart to the will of God.

SKAIDRA. No, you don't know what they did to me. They — did nothing to me. They gave me some ragged pyjamas, handed my an army blanket, and then I had to walk in a circle for hours and hours until they drove me to bed. You're right, Stevens, they strapped up the others and they jabbed them and sometimes they punched them under the ribs in the diaphragm where it wouldn't leave a mark. But to me — to me they did nothing. *(The record ends. In the sudden silence PERSONAGE lets out a groan of defeat.)* I crept around and around in a circle, Stevens. Hours, days, years, a million years, for two weeks I crept, Stevens. Then they let me go. I'm not dangerous, they said. I can walk the streets, work — they say physical work is all I need —, I can make love, and drink. And I think — I'm almost positive, if a blank sheet of paper were placed here in front of me, I could write it full, Stevens.

STEVENS *(warmly.)* Everybody goes nuts in his own way. I'm glad they let you go.

*(PERSONAGE now holds out his empty beer glass. STEVENS fills it and returns it to him. PERSONAGE drinks. They do this with ceremony and precision, as though it were an important and well-rehearsed ritual. MAGDALENE enters. She is a rather attractive prostitute, somewhat elegantly dressed and mannered, around thirty years old with a heavily made-up, sensual face and an alluring figure.)*

MAGDALENE, Hi, everybody.

STEVENS. Good morning, honey.

MAGDALENE. Give me some vitamins. I'll be right back.

*(She goes into the ladies' room. STEVENS mixes orange juice and vodka.)*

STEVENS. That's funny. I haven't seen her for months.

SKAIDRA. Who is she?

STEVENS. Ask and you'll find out. *(He puts her drink beside SKAIDRA's.)* I like you, Mr. Skaidra. And I know-just what you need to settle your nerves. *(Points to the ladies' room).* Okay, I'll tell you. Your wife was here Thursday. With that — cent-hour. Well —

SKAIDRA. What did they talk about?

STEVENS. They were drinking a lot. You know what a woman says to the other man. She's miserable, husband's crazy, doesn't understand her, tortures her. And the engineer held her hand and mumbled something into her ear I couldn't catch. I swear!

*(The noise of flushing water comes from the ladies' room. MAGDALENE appears.)*

MAGDALENE. You should get that Niagara Falls fixed.

STEVENS. I know, but I can't get a hold of the plumber before Christmas. *(He chuckles.)*

*(MAGDALENE sits down next to SKAIDRA without noticing him. She drinks in small sips, protruding her sensual lips.)*

MAGDALENE. I haven't paid you a visit for a long time, Stevens.

STEVENS. Yeah. Last summer, wasn't it?

MAGDALENE. Last summer. I came by in a brand new Buick, and Mr. Riesenthal didn't want me to come in. That joint's too crummy for you, honey, said Mr. Riesenthal. But I told him: Listen, baldy dear, the owner of this bar is Mr. Stevens, a friend from my childhood. We both used to participate in the church processions. He was so magnificent when he carried the lantern, and I ran ahead throwing flowers on the carpet under the ' feet of the priest himself. Just remember that, Mr. Riesenthal, I told him. I looked like a little angel, that's how I looked. *(Digs into her purse and pulls out a Christmas card which she shows to STEVENS.)* Wasn't I like a little angel, Stevens? *(While STEVENS is looking. PERSONAGE takes a peek too.)*

PERSONAGE. I dream about angels like that. Pinkish-black. *(He smiles with all his charm.)*

MAGDALENE. Why are you drinking beer, Mister? Pour him something warmer. *(STEVENS looks questioningly at PERSONAGE.)*

PERSONAGE. Give me a shot of Roses, Stevens. *(STEVENS pours. PERSONAGE turns to MAGDALENE.)* Thank you, my little doll.

MAGDALENE. It's nothing. *(Puts away the Christmas card.)* Every Christmas I send beautiful cards to all my friends. And when I write them I remember when I was small, in a white dress, with big blue eyes, as blue as heaven. *(To STEVENS and PERSONAGE..)* That's nice of me, isn't it? *(PERSONAGE wants to say something but is overcome by a fit of coughing.)* Ah, not even Roses can help you. Pour him another, Stevens. *(STEVENS pours.)*

STEVENS. And where is Mr. Riesenthal now?

MAGDALENE. Mr. Riesenthal still dreams about me. He hung my portrait on his wall. A big technicolor photo, worth plenty, from the waist up, and with a plunging neckline. *(She pulls down the neckline of her dress exposing the separation of her breasts.)* My hair falls in waves, my cheeks are pink, and my eyes glisten like the evening stars. That's nice of me, isn't it, Stevens?

STEVENS. And where is Mr. Riesenthal now?

MAGDALENE. In bed. Has been for two months already. Paralyzed. *(Raises her glass but finds it empty.)*

SKAIDRA. May I buy you a drink?

MAGDALENE *(turns to SKAIDRA and coldly looks him over.)* That's awfully nice of you, Mister. . .

SKAIDRA. Skaidra.

MAGDALENE. That's a funny name. I'm Magdalene. Sure, buy me a drink. *(STEVENS pours.)* To your health, Skaidra. To everybody's health.

PERSONAGE. Health, my little doll.

MAGDALENE. I've had a couple of colored friends. Of course, none of them were like you. They drove in shiny cars and had very white teeth. Only it was hard to get used to their smell. Otherwise it was fine. They were pretty damn happy when I — *(Laughs drily.)* — you know what I mean. *(Suddenly turns to SKAIDRA.)* And you, why do you drink in the morning?

SKAIDRA. I'm waiting for my wife.

MAGDALENE. Waiting for your wife in a bar?

STEVENS. They're going to talk about a divorce.

MAGDALENE. Good luck. I was divorced twice and both times I lost in court. Maybe your wife will lose too. *(STEVENS comes from behind the bar, yanks off one of the tablecloths, crumples it up and throws it in the corner. No one pays attention to him. He quietly returns behind the bar.)* Do you know why I stopped by, Stevens? To visit old friends, what

else? And old places. I stopped by the old church, Stevens. The churchyard was empty. *(Slides off the stool and leans against the bar.)* And I tried to be like the little girl, the little angel. *(She walks back and forth throwing imaginary flowers.)* And the priest walked in front of me. *(She walks like the priest.)* And right behind the priest, you — Stevens. *(She walks like STEVENS with an imaginary lantern.)* And then I went to the park where the grocer's idiot gave me my first baby. *(She walks in the imaginary park, sits on a chair as though on a park bench by the table without a tablecloth, becomes the grocer's idiot and kisses her imaginary self.)* And finally I went to the funeral parlor to visit the corpse. *(She passes between the two tables as through a door, notices the dead body and stands there looking at it.)*

STEVENS. Who's the deceased?

MAGDALENE. Don't you know? Me, Stevens. I'll be beautiful in my long pink dress. *(She supports herself against the jukebox, crosses her hands on her chest and assumes what she believes to be a beautiful and majestic facial expression. She speaks in low, muffled tones, moving only her lips, in the manner of a stereotype corpse.)* Soft music will play, my friends will crowd around me in their dark suits, shiny Cadillacs will wait in the street, and Mr. Riesenthal will weep in his wheelchair. *(Suddenly she drops this improvisation, weaves over to the bar and takes a gulp of her drink.)* Crap! After Christmas I'll go into the hospital for an operation, and when I get out I'll go away. I don't know where yet, but I'll go away.

SKAIDRA. You don't look like you need an operation.

MAGDALENE. It doesn't show. They're going to cut off one of my breasts. I'll have to change professions.

PERSONAGE. I came to say goodbye too. I'm going away.

STEVENS. You're going no place.

PERSONAGE. Oh yeah, I am going away. To California. They'll send me my pension there too, you know. It's warm there — easier on my bones, you know. I'm leaving right after Christmas. With a partner. It'll be more fun with the two of us. Right after Christmas, believe me! *(He speaks these words on the way to the men's room and disappears with the last sentence.)*

SKAIDRA. I don't know whether I'll go away. But this is the last time I'll be stopping by here, Stevens. I can't explain why I arranged to meet my wife in a bar, this bar. Maybe because I can see the red brick building with the barred windows across the street. I won't be coming back to the places I went when I was married. I'm touchy about those things. Maybe I'm too sensitive after being over there for two weeks. I've got to find new places, new people. I need to write new poems. I'd like to run away. Of course, I'm not foolish enough to believe anyone can run away. But I'll try. Maybe I'll just go in a circle, like a delirious ant, round and round. I'll end up where I started, but then I may forget some things so that I'll be able to see them again with new eyes. Do you know who I think was the happiest spirit in the world? The Wandering Jew. *(The water is flushed in the men's room, louder than before. Frightened, SKAIDRA slides off his stool. PERSONAGE returns.)* No, it's all so crazy! I do want to go back, and at the same time, I don't — I really don't. And I don't want to walk around in a circle. That's what I did over there. *(Motions across the street.)* Over there I imagined I was the Wandering Jew. *(To MAGDALENE.)* My dearest! They did nothing to me, and yet they have done something to me.

*(MAGDALENE, like a mother, holds SKAIDRA to her closely and strokes his hair. STEVENS pours himself a glass of Scotch and drinks it down.)*

PERSONAGE. What's happened to you, Stevens? You don't drink whiskey.

STEVENS. Well — there's something funny going on around here. You'd think we'd all come here to say goodbye, as if we were invited. . . I'm planning to sell the bar after Christmas.

*(A long pause. MAGDALENE takes SKAIDRA gently by the arm and leads him over to the jukebox. She picks out a record. An old, sentimental fox-trot is heard. They dance close together like lovers. ANGELA enters. She is thirty years old, petite and well-proportioned, with thin lips that she keeps so tightly closed that her facial muscles stand out. She notices the dancers, stops for a moment in the doorway, then walks straight to a table and sits down.)*

STEVENS. What'll it be?

ANGELA. Club soda. *(The dancers notice ANGELA. She pretends not to know SKAIDRA. STEVENS brings her drink.)*

MAGDALENE. Now what?

SKAIDRA. Thanks for the dance. *(He takes his drink and sits down at ANGELA'S table. MAGDALENE goes to the bar.)*

ANGELA. Drinking again?

SKAIDRA. Does it matter to you?

ANGELA. Do you really want to come back? (*She looks out the window.*)

SKAIDRA. You — we made a bad start.

ANGELA. I'm just waiting to make a start. By the way, why did you want to meet me in this filthy bar? What are you trying to prove now?

SKAIDRA. Nothing. And this place isn't filthy. You must have liked it when you sat here with your engineer.

ANGELA. We had to discuss certain matters. Surely I don't need to tell you that I still maintain my property. He'll enter my apartment after we're married, and not before.

SKAIDRA. Don't forget to re-arrange the furniture. Switch around the pictures too. Buy yourself a new nightgown. Put the pillows at the foot of the bed. Begin life over again; begin it upside down, for all I care.

ANGELA. Why do you persist in trying to impress me? I've heard this theme and variations a thousand times.

SKAIDRA. When you go to bed with that engineer it'll be variation one thousand and one.

ANGELA. I have — gone to bed with "that engineer." I've forgotten the first thousand — crossed them off the list.

SKAIDRA. When did it happen?

ANGELA. What's it to you?

SKAIDRA. I hope your engineer is bursting with health and virility.

ANGELA. You guessed right.

SKAIDRA. But I don't know where it happened — at his place or outdoors. Ah, it's too cold outdoors. I bet — no, I'm sure: he sleeps with his mouth open and snores to wake the dead. Covered with all that centaur hair you admire so much, Angela, with your angelic look.

ANGELA (*gets up.*) Listen here —

SKAIDRA. Sit down, Angela.

ANGELA. Only if you stick to the point.

SKAIDRA. I'll stick to the point.

(*ANGELA sits down.*)

ANGELA. I'm listening.

SKAIDRA. Can you hear?

ANGELA. What?

SKAIDRA. No, you can't hear anything. (*It is now quiet in the bar. MAGDALENE and PERSONAGE sit without moving, holding their drinks. STEVENS occasionally rustles the newspaper. A few sounds come from the street.*) Kind of quiet, isn't it? Just listen how quiet. But you're deaf — what can you hear?

(*ANGELA takes a drink of her club soda.*)

SKAIDRA. You can't even hear how the bubbles whisper inside your glass. And what about everything else? There: the rustle of Stevens' newspaper. In it can be heard the small body of a child from the Bronx held in those big clumsy hands. He'll throw the child in the garbage can when he's done. All newspaper readers will throw that child into the garbage can. And take a look at those idiotic Santa Claus masks. Listen closely, you'll hear how they count with their painted lips. They're counting in all of the big stores where you go to buy presents, where you count how many dollars you should spend to make yourself prettier than you know you really are. Christmas — what is Christmas? Open your ears now and listen: imagine that into a store — no, into this bar — Christ suddenly walks. He has the right to walk in; after all, it's his holiday. Would you be able to hear him? Hell, you wouldn't hear a thing. You were determined not even to hear the music.

Sure, it was sentimental and scratchy — but it drew two people together. Do you see that unhappy woman over there? Isn't she pretty? And she's healthy too. If you heard her story maybe you'd ask why misery seeps into healthy bodies. Can you hear what that shabby negro is thinking? Okay, I'll tell you. He's dreaming about the sunny sand in California and the sunny oranges that fall straight into his hands from the trees. And not even Stevens is happy; all he knows is how to caress his bottles, but after Christmas they'll slip from his fingers. *(Pause.)* I've tried so many times, I've hoped again and again — to succeed. Angela, I've begged you so many times to listen closely.

ANGELA *(beginning calmly.)* You are a sentimental fool. You don't even know how to make use of your poetry. Wasn't I patient when you changed jobs every three months? What's that you just said about music and what it does to two people? Your sensitive soul would push you into the arms of any common bitch; but did you . ever try to get close to me? I can remind you of a few details from your "thousand." Your dirty underwear, for example. Dirty because you refuse to acknowledge the toilet paper. Your dandruff, for example. Whenever you used to sit down to write a poem — right where I could see you, of course — you'd start scratching away at your dandruff, then you'd brush it off your collar onto the floor. When you got tired of scratching your dandruff, you'd start picking your nose. I can see — oh, no, I can hear, yes I can hear those little ritulas of yours. Perhaps you'd like to demonstrate them to us so we could all hear. *(ANGELA has been speaking with increasing violence, and those at the bar, who had pretended not to hear her, are now listening.)* But I tried to forget all that. For ten long years. I didn't miss one day at work. Take a look at my fingers. *(She shows her hands.)* They're twisted with arthritis. By the way — I've even managed to forget what you required of me in bed. Would you like to demonstrate that to us? And to top it all off —

SKAIDRA *(cuts her short.)* — And to top it off, you had me locked up in that place so you wouldn't have to see my dandruff and my nose, so you could sleep with someone else. It's a shame it didn't work. They let me out. I'm not dangerous, they said.

ANGELA. You're more dangerous than the ones still in there. You're incurable. *(SKAIDRA stands, picks up ANGELA'S glass and seems on the point of throwing it into her face. But he thinks it over and pours the club soda on his own head.)* I didn't know you were John the Baptist. Sit down and we'll talk about the divorce.

MAGDALENE. Pardon me, most gracious lady, please excuse the interruption, but I think you had me in mind a minute ago when you referred to 'any common bitch'. I have nothing personal against it, mind you, even if it's a little vulgar with respect to my profession. However that may be, I shall permit myself to protest. I'm not any 'common' bitch.

PERSONAGE *(unnaturally loud.)* And I protest too. You know, there's nothing funny about me and California. *(Points at SKAIDRA.)* He's right about the climate and the oranges.

ANGELA *(gets up. To SKAIDRA.)* Let's get out of here!

MAGDALENE *(standing in ANGELA'S way.)* I'd still appreciate an answer. More precisely, I'd appreciate a definition. What's a 'common' bitch?

STEVENS. Pipe down, girls! *(PERSONAGE approaches ANGELA and MAGDALENE.)*

PERSONAGE. Just a minute. Don't fight, you two. It'll be Christmas soon. It's almost here now. Why fight? What's the point of it? Wait — I'll be right back, you know. *(PERSONAGE goes to the jukebox. SIMILAR enters the bar. He is in his thirties, tall, lean, fair, with long hair, a short beard, and an effeminate face. He wears a thick, light-colored turtle-neck sweater, light-colored trousers and high-ankle shoes. He speaks melodiously and with exact enunciation, but he seems to have difficulty in remembering some words. He observes people and things with a quiet and warm uneasiness, as though he were seeing them for the first time. PERSONAGE has already put a coin into the jukebox. Pergolesi's "Stabat Mater" is heard. SIMILAR takes out a cigarette and walks to the bar.)*

SIMILAR. May I have a light?

STEVENS. Sure thing. *(He strikes a match.)*

SIMILAR. Thank you. *(He takes a couple of puffs and regards the smoke and the taste with amused astonishment.)*

PERSONAGE. I never heard this music before.

STEVENS. That record wasn't in the jukebox.

SIMILAR. Pergolesi. Stabat Mater. He finished composing it during his illness. He died at twenty-six. *(Pause.)* They sing beautifully.

ANGELA *(to SKAIDRA.)* I think we'd better go.



SKAIDRA. Just a minute. ... Listen. Why, it really is Pergolesi !

ANGELA (*frightened.*) Let's go.

SIMILAR. Isn't it wonderful when two women sing together, Angela? (*He stretches out his arms towards both women.*)

MAGDALENE (*approaching SIMILAR.*) You a beatnik?

SIMILAR. I don't think so. I never learned how to tie a tie. (*He smiles helplessly.*) Oh, yes! (*He searches through ' his pockets and pulls out several bills. Showing them to MAGDALENE.*) I hope they're good.

MAGDALENE. I hope you didn't make them yourself.

SIMILAR. No, Magdalene. (*Catching sight of the money, PERSONAGE comes over.*)

MAGDALENE. How did you know my name? I don't know you.

SIMILAR. We've met.

PERSONAGE (*fingering the bills.*) They're good, Mister, they're perfectly good. For buying drinks, I mean. (*Cackles.*)

SIMILAR. What will you have?

PERSONAGE. I'm not particular. You know — I like anything when somebody else is buying.

SIMILAR. Do you like good wine?

PERSONAGE (*disappointed.*) Wine is good too.

SIMILAR (*to STEVENS.*) Do you have good wine?

STEVENS. To tell you the truth, nobody calls for good wine here. All I have is American.

SIMILAR (*he places one bill on the counter and puts the others back in his pocket.*) Give us two glasses of water, please.

STEVENS. Water?

PERSONAGE. I don't drink water. Not even the cops can make me drink water. (*Cackles.*)

SIMILAR. Go ahead, pour. (*STEVENS pours out two glasses of water. SIMILAR hands a glass to PERSONAGE.*)

PERSONAGE (*waving both hands.*) I don't want water!

SIMILAR. Just try it, my friend. If you don't like it, I'll buy you anything, just as you said.

(*PERSONAGE accepts the glass with a sour face and takes a sip. He jerks it away from his mouth and gapes at it for a moment in astonishment, then empties the glass in one gulp.*)

PERSONAGE. Lord!

(*Here the record comes to an end. Pause.*)

SIMILAR. Why's everybody acting so strangely. I understood that people came to bars to enjoy themselves. Stevens, my friend, pour drinks for everyone. The same water. (*STEVENS fills the glasses and SIMILAR, smiling, hands them around.*) Happy holidays! (*Everyone except ANGELA drinks.*)

STEVENS. Who are you? A magician?

MAGDALENE. I doubt if you'd find a rabbit up his sleeve.

PERSONAGE (*cheerful after emptying his second glass.*) Oh, Lord!

SKAIDRA. It's water, yet it tastes as thick as blood. (*Quickly.*) You know, it's funny. I was just now saying to my wife: imagine that into this bar walked — no, it's impossible!

SIMILAR. I'm sorry, but my wounds are a little different. You can't feel them with your fingers. Does color or taste make the difference between water, wine and blood? (*He goes to ANGELA.*) Why don't you join us? You have a beautiful name. Drink to your name, Angela. (*She drinks, and for the first time her face softens.*) Thank you.

SKAIDRA. What is your name?

SIMILAR. You have said it. (*He gestures to prevent SKAIDRA from speaking.*) As I said before, my wounds — my situation is different. The same and different. I'm very tired. And I came here to rest. I've heard that people go to bars to relax. I came on foot. Verily I say unto you, I have seen many of the dead. They are propped and hung up in grandiose edifices. People kneel before them; people look up at them with reverence. (*To PERSONAGE.*) But I cannot buy a single one for you; they are not for sale. (*To all.*) Many books have been written about them. In their name people suffer, love, implore, grieve, and are joyous; confessions of too many words and of no words are entrusted to them — through books, paintings, statues, vessels, furniture and clothing. What unbearable despair, what overwhelming humility is in those miraculous idols. How many frozen miracles there are in this city! Where is the living hand that touches and consoles? Where is the water that is thick like wine, like blood, like faith in the unexplainable truth? Why is he forgotten who weeps over his own corpse? Because he sees himself rotted already. Why is he tortured slowest who wants to be tortured longest? Because he imagines that once he has perished he will awake in eternal, icy darkness. Why are the same persuasive words always pronounced whenever there is killing? Why are there so many whys? And where is the living hand? The simple man who spoke in the simplest Aramaic words? (*MAGDALENE leans against SIMILAR, embraces him and slowly slides down until she is embracing his knees.*)

MAGDALENE. Beloved! I've found you at last! (*SIMILAR raises her up and gently kisses her on the lips.*)

SIMILAR. Have you loved many?

MAGDALENE. I don't know if I've loved. I never even tried to find out. (*Laughs drily to herself.*) If you think —

SIMILAR. I do not think so.

MAGDALENE. Ever since I was small I've wanted to dance. My whole body, my whole soul wanted to dance. When I threw the flowers, then I was dancing. And after I grew up I tried — but I only learned how to shimmy. Even now, everytime I'm in bed I imagine I'm dancing a beautiful and elegant dance. I know that's my sin, my failure; and I know if I could really dance, I could really love. (*From one of the bottles she takes a Santa Claus mask with the expression of a dancer, puts it on, and begins slowly to improvise a dance, pausing from time to time, then resuming the dance.*)

ANGELA. I wanted so much to smile. That's all. I don't know why. Of course, there would have to be a reason. A new piece of furniture, for instance, or my husband bringing home a larger check than I expected. Then I would sit there on a long, luxurious sofa and smile. I hear the check rustle in my fingers and I smile. I believe happiness and love come from little things. (*She takes a smiling Santa Claus mask from a bottle.*) But nobody would let me smile. (*She puts the mask on and sits down.*)

PERSONAGE. Me too — you know, like I said. I always wanted to fly. You know — lying in California with the oranges and blue sky up above. You lie there like that and it seems you're flying. You understand — love — you understand. (*He takes a black Santa Claus mask from a bottle. It has pink cheeks and an angelic expression. He puts it on and lies down on the floor.*)

STEVENS. Well — I always wanted to drink my own best drinks. When I drink, I glow inside. Then I love all my customers and give drinks away on the house. But suppose I really began to drink. I'd drink up the whole place, and then I'd have nothing left to sell. (*He takes a drunken Santa Claus mask from a bottle, puts it on, takes a bottle, and sits down at a table where he occasionally takes a drink.*)

SKAIDRA. All these years I've been waiting. I wanted to wait. One bright Christmas day a blank sheet of paper will lie before me, and beside me will stand the one who is to be born on that bright Christmas day, he who is immortal and eternal. He'll speak to me and at last I'll hear what must be written down. They will be very simple, very important, very lyrical words. And when people read my poem they'll feel that for the first and last time they can look into the black abyss and understand what it is. And they'll understand everything: what is unknown and what is known, the comprehensible as well as the incomprehensible, that tears and laughter, suffering and joy, happiness and tears are all the same; and that laughter is suffering; that flowers are fish; stones, butterflies; and ecstasy, death; and hell is heaven. . . People will realize that all these 'ands' go into one big, black 'and', and they'll understand that the black 'and' is not black, and what is not black is black. Maybe then they'll know what love is. (*Pause.*)

SIMILAR. You forgot one proverb, Skaidra. (*SKAIDRA is silent.*) Why don't you speak? (*SKAIDRA is silent.*) All right then, I'll tell you. "And death is love." To use your words, Skaidra.

(*The others, masked, gather in a group and turn their faces to SKAIDRA.*)

SKAIDRA. Why are you all staring at me? I didn't say those words! He thought them up! *(Pause. The masks and SIMILAR continue to look at SKAIDRA.)* All right, all of you know what I want — who I am. *(He takes a Santa Claus mask from a bottle. It resembles SIMILAR. He puts it on.)* There. *(Silence.)* Find your own mask. *(Silence.)* I tell you: find your own mask!

SIMILAR. You know perfectly well. Skaidra, no mask is left for me.

*(SKAIDRA now advances on SIMILAR, who retreats upstage. The maskers follow SKAIDRA. Suddenly a black curtain drops behind them, hiding all of the stage set from view except for the jukebox and the garland of identical Santa Claus masks, high overhead. The maskers surround SIMILAR in a semicircle.)*

SKAIDRA. You're the only one without a mask.

SIMILAR *(pointing to SKAIDRA'S mask.)* There it is.

SKAIDRA. It's mine, since you didn't want it.

SIMILAR. One of us had to take it. And you took it first. Your nerves didn't hold out, Skaidra.

SKAIDRA. Why talk of nerves here? You knew what was in store for you, just as you knew what was in store for me.

SIMILAR. And you knew what you'd do once you put on the mask. Do what you must, Skaidra. Go ahead.

SKAIDRA. You ask, you want — you know yourself what you want.

SIMILAR. You cannot take off the mask, Skaidra. You don't have the courage; that's why you talk so much. As you said, I have no mask. I never had one, and no one ever gave me his. You were the last one, Skaidra. You had the last opportunity. All of you have talked about love, but only in terms of yourselves, for your own benefit. You've said what love could be if you could dance, smile, fly, drink, or write. But you forgot what love might be if you could love. Only Magdalene said to me: „Beloved. At last I've found you." She said that not because she found love in me, but because for a moment she caught a glimpse of the love she could find in me. At least she glimpsed it. Take heed, Skaidra: she glimpsed that love in which you and all others are included. And I kissed her chaste lips; she has always been a maiden; she has always thrown flowers under the feet of the priest, Skaidra.

SKAIDRA. I wasn't just saying what I lack. I was telling what all of us lack. I spoke of a bright Christmas. *(Silence.)* Why don't you speak? Answer me!

SIMILAR. Are death and love the same? You took the wrong mask, Skaidra.

SKAIDRA. It was the only one left, and it looks like you.

SIMILAR. And that was why you took it.

*(MAGDALENE steps out of the semicircle and approaches SIMILAR.)*

MAGDALENE. I have always dreamt of you; it was for you that I threw the flowers; it was with you I slept; it was for you that I wanted to dance. I want to stay with you forever. I want to ride the subways with you and hold your hand. We could walk where there are many trees and I would look into your eyes. I want to lie with you near the river and kiss your lips. I would go and go and go with you through winds and rains and blizzards and the mud. The wind would toss your hair, your lips would grow white, the mud would cling to your feet. I would breathe with you, cry, laugh, and work with you. And I would like very much to die with you. Because you are my beloved, my found one. *(She embraces SIMILAR, then suddenly steps back.)* But I can't take off my mask. *(Returns to the semicircle.)*

SIMILAR. Do your job, Skaidra.

*(SKAIDRA advances on SIMILAR and, with his back to the audience, seizes him by the throat with both hands. The maskers encircle the two men. A long, silent pause. The thud of a falling body is heard. The circle opens to reveal SIMILAR lying on the floor with arms outstretched as though crucified. Another long, silent pause. Suddenly MAGDALENE tears off her mask and falls at SIMILAR'S feet. She screams like an animal. The scream subsides to a spasmodic sobbing.)*

SUPERVISOR *(from the audience.)* Stop that, Magdalene! Stop it at once! I command you! *(He comes up on stage. He wears a white smock. MAGDALENE obediently gets up, puts on her mask again, and joins the others.)* Ladies and gentlemen! I am very sorry; all of us are sorry about this unexpected outburst of emotion, and also for the disruption of this

little scene. Our script did not call for Magdalene to rip off her mask and scream in such an unpleasant way. She was supposed to collapse at Similar's feet with a certain suppleness and grace. With that the play would have ended. Yet perhaps it's not too surprising that Magdalene's nerves didn't hold out. I hope that you'll bear with us, since it's only too obvious with what sort of actors we have to deal. I do not usually pay compliments, but I feel I simply must acknowledge the generous support and assistance given by the staff of this institution. Looked at from a purely therapeutic point of view, actors disciplined even to this degree are evidence of the dedication and deep-seated sense of duty of the supervisor and his entire staff. The more so since actors, like people in general, are exceptionally capricious, as you have just seen. Furthermore, the parts in this little skit had to be assigned according to personalities, because these actors can only play themselves, or rather their illusions. We must admit, to their credit, that they performed their roles fairly conscientiously. I don't think it's necessary to explain the case history of each participant and all the risks we took in putting this on. It should be obvious. You're already familiar with the relevant terminology, from lectures, best-sellers, movies and television. Here we might speak of the Oedipus complex and guilt feelings and existentialist despair, self-conceit, self-abasement, innocence, complexes, religious anomalies, and so forth; and... *(He laughs to himself.)* As you see, I too use those 'ands' mentioned earlier in our skit. I might just add here that all these participants are bound together by one big 'and' that has led them to end up in our establishment. Well — in any case, let us remember that self-expression is a great help and guide for everyone in our sick and confused world. This play was put on with that in mind. Ladies and gentlemen ! You were invited here to appraise our attempts at therapy, and also to let them *(pointing at the actors)* know the outside world has not forgotten them. *(To the actors.)* Remove your masks. *(They do so.)* I now have the honor of introducing the cast. Oh, yes ! I believe it would be nice if we tried to recapture the theatrical atmosphere, even if only in part. Music would not be inappropriate. *(He goes to the jukebox, puts in a coin, and Pergolesi's "Stabat Mater" is heard. He returns to his place.)* We'll start with the authors. By the way, two of the participants are also the authors. Suppose you've already guessed which ones. Skaidra and Similar, please step forward. *(SKAIDRA steps forward. SIMILAR does not move.)* Get up, Similar! The play's over! *(SIMILAR does not move. SUPERVISOR bends over him and whispers.)* Stop fooling around, get up! *(SIMILAR does not move. SUPERVISOR smiles at the audience.)* Please excuse us. Another small mishap. He's probably fallen asleep. Just a moment. *(Kneels beside SIMILAR. Shakes him. Tries to raise him, then takes his wrist to feel for the pulse. Puts his ear over his heart. Listens.)* My God! He is dead! *(He jumps up and runs into the wings shouting.)* Help! Help!

SKAIDRA. I really killed him. I killed Similar. But I had to do it. So he could rise again from the dead.

*(Backstage the clock strikes eleven.)*

CURTAIN