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The Red Dress

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Nora let out a deep sigh, reached out her hand so carefully, touching it timidly, as if it were an untamed animal that could bite. Her fingers ran over the red cloth, which sparkled and felt as cool as the skin of a snake; it was embroidered in silver and golden thread, multicolored glass beads, spangles, and small greenish feathers.

Elegija had disappeared only a week ago, no one knew where, leaving for some reason or other this fantastic dress tossed on the ladies' room floor. Now the role and costume of Salome belonged to her, Nora. She took the dress, still on its hanger, and held it up to herself. She glanced at the mirror, leaning back and turning her head so as to look as much as possible like Maria Callas. Autumn sunbeams fell directly onto the dress, and the red spangles splashed patterns of light on the greenish walls, vibrant yellow maple leaves, a little white vase and the mud-green carpet.

Nora, admiring her own reflection, which rippled on the surface of the sunlit mirror, like on the water of a flowing river, suddenly gave thought to Elegija. She remembered how Elegija, on the eve of her disappearance, had refused to join the others for the regular performance, announcing that she needed instead to learn how to wear Salome's gown for the opening night. Elegija had completely rejected the costume designer's choice, and had found and bought the dress in vintage shop herself. No one challenged the actress's choice because the dress she had found was truly and exceptionally beautiful and unusual. All day Elegija went about in this extravagant gown, up and down the corridors of the theater, stopping only now and then at the buffet for a cup of coffee. She smoked continuously, speaking to no one, only staring at a single point, her eyes glassy, at times looking almost cataleptic. Nobody was much surprised by her behavior, since various forms of hysteria often manifested themselves before premieres. And then, Elegija vanished. No one was alarmed, except the director, who started hitting the bottle on the third day after Elegija's disappearance. Everyone was used to her sudden oddities, schemes and tantrums. Nobody was in a hurry to call the police or to inform her parents, living somewhere in a secluded village, about their daughter's disappearance. Everyone was satisfied when Elegija's friend, Raimis, who had the keys to her flat, checked the empty apartment and found nothing suspicious or any reason for anxiety. The strongest reaction to her disappearance was the severe reprimand posted on the notice board, and the thick, black line that crossed Elegija's name from every playbill of *Salome*.

This is how Nora fell into the classical situation of Cinderella. Many stars of the stage, according to theater critics, got their start this way. Needless to say, Nora was anxious and paced back and forth in Elegija's dressing room. She walked up to the window many times and looked out into the yard, where children were noisily chasing a bright-red ball through yellow leaves. Snapping her fingers rhythmically, she would then go back to the closet, where the dress hung on a door handle, and caress it with the palm of her hand before returning to the window.

Eventually, Nora sat down in the swivel chair, upholstered in yellow plush. She looked around to see if anyone was watching and began to rummage through Elegija's dressing table drawers. She took out the *Salome* script; it was stained with something red. Sniffing it, Nora decided against it being wine. She thumbed through the pages, of which several had cigarette burns. Elegija's comments, question marks and exclamation points, made with felt markers of varying colors, filled the text. In the other drawer, Nora found a small book covered in newspaper. She opened it to where a candy wrapper marked the page and read aloud, unconsciously imitating Elegija's intonations, a paragraph underlined in red pencil:

—"I am the Alpha and the Omega, the very first and the very last, the beginning and the end. Blessed are those who wash their clothes in the Blood of the Lamb to gain power from the tree of life and pass through the gates into the city. Outside there are scoundrels, sorcerers, shameless cretins, murderers, idolaters and all who love and live by lies..."

She closed the book, irritated and dissatisfied because the underlined phrase was full of meaning, but just as equally senseless. Even though Nora had secretly expected the book to explain the mystery of Elegija's disappearance, it was no help at all. She opened another drawer and smiled, catching herself looking for one more clue to Elegija's disappearance. In the drawer was a desiccated plant with a note tied to it with a red ribbon. Nora, of course, read it: "To Elegija—the Touch-Me-Not (cf. The Soviet Lithuanian Encyclopedia)—from the 21st Graduating Class of the Donelaitis School." In the same drawer, several tubes of lipstick rolled about and Nora painted her lips with one of them. She looked at the mirror, first puckering her lips, then stretching them wide, and finally smiling. At last she frowned because the color was so unbearably bloody. She darted a glance at the dress and realized at once that the lipstick was the same color and Elegija had bought it especially for the performance.

Nora suddenly jumped up, locked the door and, throwing off the violet sweater and green skirt resolutely, grabbed the red dress and froze for an instant. Then, in a frenzy—as if someone were impatiently yelling at her to hurry—she began to dress, rushing, staggering, having difficulty getting into the sleeves. Getting into the fiery garb was not so simple, even though Nora was smaller than Elegija. The dress clung to her and outlined her body, emphasizing her breasts, pulling tight on her hips and thighs. It fell from her knees in tiny pleats, which spread on the floor like sharp tentacles. Nora looked at herself in the mirror, pulling back her black hair. It used to have a blue sheen, but now it became chestnut-colored because of the intensity of the red dress. She narrowed her eyes and smiled with satisfaction.

The inside of the dress was the opposite of its silky exterior. It was coarse and chafed her in a strange way. Nora thought it felt like a facial masque of egg whites and yeast that tightens on one's face. She began to walk around the room, a trifle dissatisfied that the dress restricted her steps. She imagined Salome floating across the stage—not shuffling like Cho-Cho-San. Fortunately, she had another costume for the dance scene.

Suddenly, somebody knocked at the door. Nora started and rushed to take off the dress. But it was so tight it seemed almost impossible to pull off—the dress kept catching on her shoulders.

"Yes, my shoulders really are broader than Elegija's," Nora uttered, wriggling, squirming and crying out. The dress did not yield.

Someone was now persistently knocking at the door.

"Hey, Nor, open the door," rang Vilija's deep voice. "Stop fooling around."

"Quick, Nora, or I'm going to bust. I can't hold it any more. Some Georgians lugged this huge box here for Elegija," Laimis shouted, kicking the door.

Nora grabbed the ice-blue dressing gown from the back of the chair and threw it over the red dress. She, contrary to Elegija, was strangely superstitious. She did not like being seen in costume offstage.

When she unlocked the door, Vilija and Laimis nosily burst into the room. Laimis brought in the bulky veneered box with a broken cover.

"Now we'll see what sorts of things sunny sister republic Georgia is sending our dear, lost Elegija," Laimis said in a singsong, as he took packets wrapped in newspaper out of the box.

"Sunny sister Georgia!" Vilija giggled, jumping up on the window sill and swinging her green-stockinged legs back and forth. "Listen, are these guys going to take you to a film shoot?"

"No. My nose doesn't fit on the screen," Nora joked rather gloomily and immediately changed the subject: "Why are you unpacking this box? That's up to Elegija, isn't it?!"

Nora felt guilty about Elegija all the time. Elegija had been dreaming about this role since high school and had prepared for it fanatically. It seemed the role was destined for her pale, decadent beauty, for her ever-frenetic psyche. And now this fantastic role fell to Nora. She had already begun to have dreams of her girlfriend slapping her face furiously, after realizing that her name had been crossed from the playbills.

"It's Miss Elegija's problem if she disappeared at the wrong time," Laimis said, while examining the packets. "There are all kinds of sweets here; we'll leave them for Elegija." He opened a drawer and threw the packets into it. "We'll snack on the cheese and split the spices into equal parts amongst ourselves. And here," twisting off the cap of the bottle—he sniffed it and began to sing: "And here, girls, here it is—Georgian chichi*! We'll try it at once. There's nothing better in the whole world than chichi. I wonder where Elegija hides the sacred stock?" He began opening drawers and found three greenish shot glasses at once. "Maybe, in spite of everything, we should take some precautions. Nora, lock the door!"

Nora locked the door. Laimis, all the while sniffing at the bottle, blinking and smacking his lips, filled the glasses to the brim.

"So, girls, cheers!" he cried, downing one and switching on the radio. "Excerpts from the Nutcracker ballet" he said, putting stress on every syllable and swinging his hands in a funny way.

"You're a nutcracker yourself," Nora uttered and switched off the radio.

Vilija took a little sip and made a terrible face.

"Yuck!" She began to talk, staring at Nora: "Oh, you've donned the costume of Salome already? Fantastic! Jeez, what kind of schizo would dump such a dress at a thrift store? Who would have thought to design it? And who took the time to make it?!"

"It must have been an extraordinary character," Laimis mocked. "A magician or a juggler."

"Mmm, what?" Nora asked disinterested. She sniffed at the chichi, but could not bring herself to try it.

"Some kind of Meta Berthold..."

"Who is she?" Vilija asked, breaking off some Georgian cheese for herself.

"Why, the fortuneteller from Egypt." Laimis lifted his forefinger and, after an intriguing pause, finished: "she toured in Vilnius in 1874, and she could describe the biography of every spectator in exhaustive detail. That's how it was!" and he poured himself another shot glass.

"Go away now..." Nora waved him away with her hand.

"Or—Louisa Ebihauzen. She lived in the London Hotel," Laimis continued.

"In Vilnius?"

"Of course in Vilnius. In 1871. She had no arms, but she could thread a needle, comb her hair, eat and even write with her feet. I can just see her in this dress..."

"Away with you," Nora cowered. "You yourself said that she had no arms. So what about these gorgeous embroidered sleeves?.."

"So, perhaps it was the miraculous electromagnetic maiden, Maranela, who wore this gown." Laimis clapped his hands, gave a shout and sprang to his feet: "I've got it! It belongs to one of the two sisters—Aurora or Amelia. Just imagine how well it went with their red eyes and silver hair... But it's hard to imagine that this gown is more than a hundred years old!"

"What are you raving about?" Nora said with irritation.

"I am not raving. I am simply interested in the history of our native city. I bet you believe that a hundred years ago Vilnius was a miserable hole, forsaken by man and beast."

"Hole or no hole, but all those 'London' hotels and electromagnetic maidens sound a bit strange..."

"Ah, but there's more," Laimis's eyes sparkled. "For example, in 1885 the first person ever to have tackled Niagara Falls walked a tightrope over the place where the Youth Garden is now. His name was, oh, what was it now..." Laimis closed his eyes and snapped his fingers, trying to remember. "It seems, it was Bolden, or maybe Blonden. And then there were fakirs and snake charmers from India who appeared on the Summer Stage of the Botanical Gardens! Just listen carefully to every phrase: Botanical Gardens, Summer Stage, fakirs from India, snake charmers..."

"Yeah yeah, right," Vilija twiddled her metal bracelet and watched how the reflected sunbeams were jumping on the walls.

"Or the magician Beker in the Garden of Arcadia!" Laimis cried out and clapped his hands. "Just think about it—the Garden of Arcadia. During performances pigeons flew around with gifts tied to their legs, and spectators could catch them! Or Beker made a big cage with a canary in it disappear in midair. Even people were disappearing on stage, in front of the audience... And the big stationary circus stood in what is now Lenin Square.** Oh, Nora, I've remembered a few more women who could have owned your dress. Bell Irena, for example. More than four hundred drawings were tattooed on her body; just think—a million pricks of the needle!"

"I think she showed off those tattoos without any dress," Nora said. All these stories were irritating her for some reason.

"Nora, Nora, you're so boring. The least you could do is ask where Bell Irena exhibited her tattoos." Sincere disappointment sounded in Laimis's voice.

"So, where?" Vilija asked.

"Why, in the Panopticum! Just imagine it, the Panopticum was in Vilnius! And do you know where? Where Pilies Street is now. A certain Pupkin's house stood there... Ha ha, Nor, and maybe the bearded lady from the Saxony Hotel wore this dress? Of course, the biggest giantess in the world, Jelizaveta Lyska, wouldn't be able to squeeze her little toe into this gown..."

"The biggest giantess in the world..." Vilija drawled dreamily. "That's Fellini, not the history of Vilnius."

"What history is this?" Nora became somewhat angry. "It's just the satisfaction of pathological curiosity. In our days too we have Lilliputian circus tours and even the rock opera *Three Musketeers* performed by deaf-mutes. I've seen them myself.."

"And in my opinion, to be unaware of such things in the history of one's native city is simply mankurtism," [***](#) Laimis said, lighting a cigarette.

Nora said nothing more, but sipped some chichi. She stood in the middle of the room for a while, keeping the scorching liquid in her mouth. She observed the rainbow colored reflection, which fell from the mirror and rippled on the wall. Her entire countenance indicated that it was high time for her uninvited guests to clear out. Nora desired just one thing—to take off this furiously tight dress, which kept choking her, restricting the smallest of her movements, and irritating her skin. She ran to the sink, spat out the chichi— calories, in any event—and decided to keep the most rigorous of hunger diets next week.

"I'll leave you for a second," Nora whispered. Breaking into a sticky sweat, she whisked into the shower room. She once more tried to pull off the accursed dress, but this time it caught on her chest. "Aurora and Amelia... It's some kind of nightmare," Nora mumbled, tearing at the scarlet gown with all her strength. Her efforts were absolutely fruitless. Nora inhaled deeply, bit her lip, clasped the material tightly in her hand and tried to tear it slightly, but the fabric turned out to be very strong. Nora even ground her teeth and repeated: "Aurora and Amelia, let them go to hell..." Suddenly the idea of cutting through the material flashed through her mind. She returned to her friends and said in an artificially apologetic tone; "Listen, I have to step out for a moment. The hem of this dress has come ripped out a little bit; maybe Alina will mend it..."

"Go on," Vilija said as she waved her off. "Elegija couldn't tear herself out of this paranoid dress, and now— you..."

"What do you mean—couldn't tear herself out of?" Nora froze in the doorway, feeling her heart beating wildly.

"Yeah! She found it, bought it, put it on and hung around in it all day and all night, like an idiot..."

"Ahh..." Nora heaved a sigh of relief. "It seemed to me, that you wanted to say something else... like, like this dress really grew on her..."

"Yeah, that's exactly what I wanted to say..."

"How's that?" Nora leaned back against the door jamb.

"I meant what I said. Like my sweater, for example." Vilija spread her arms, showing off her faded and formless orange sweater. "My mother brought it from London six years ago, and I still can't tear myself from it..."

Nora said nothing, threw on her dressing gown, and shuffled, as if she were hobbled, to the costumer, Alina.

Alina was standing by the window, sunlit like in a Vermeer painting. She was humming while ironing some piece of clothing. There were two rows of various costumes in the room; they were decorated with lace, ribbons, fringe, and spangles. Bowler hats, white, blue and black top hats, wide-brimmed hats, decorated with plumes, paper flowers and fruit were lined up on the shelves. Entire armies of shoes paraded across the floor: from the simplest sandals to Cinderella's most intricate slippers. The smell of dust and mothballs hung in the room, but moths flew around in flocks.

"Ale," Nora said so suddenly that the woman standing by the window startled. "This dress is too tight for me. I can't get myself out of it. you have to cut through it in the back and sew in a zipper." She arched her back and passed her hand over it.

Alina spat on the iron and ran it over the dark blue clothes, which rippled in the sun like oil; then she turned to Nora and stammered:

"Wha-at are you ta-ta-talking ab-bout?" She approached her and patted Nora's back backhandedly. Then she tried to grab the material with her fingers, unsuccessfully. "Ge-ee. It's lli-ike it's gro-own on. No-oo, my dear, it's immm-poss-sible to cut thro-ough it, all the emmbroi-dering will bre-ak... Let's t-try the t-two of us, my-maybe we'll pu-pull it off... Ha-hands up!"

Nora raised her hands obediently, pulled in her stomach as much as possible and held her breath. Alina took the hem of the dress and pulled it up energetically the gown caught on Nora's hips this time.

"You see, nothing doing, I told you..." whined Nora.

"O-Oh, my d-dear, you've gro-grown a big butt". Alina nodded her head. "When had y-you the ti-ime? You were al-always thin-nner than Elegi-gija. Even the costumes had to be ma-made diffff-ferent sizes fff-or you both. Ssso, my d-dear, you'll have to go on a d-diet!" Alina obviously was pleased and paid no attention to the fact that Nora was listening to her tortured, jerky speech scowling. "You kno-know, Mm-Maria Ccc-Callas wanted to ge-gett her weight do-down, so, she swall-lowed a t-tap-ppeworm! She could eat all kkkinds of food then, be-because the tapeworm ddd-digested every-rything!" Alina was raising her voice and even squak-ing oddly at the end of the sentences, as if surmounting an obstacle. "She got thinn-ner and thinn-ner, so th-thin, that this tt-tap-ppeworm had to be d-driven out... But it was found im-mposs-ssible to drive it out... Th-they say, she di-died be-because of this... Be-because of the tt-tap-ppeworm..."

"Oh, Ale, it's nonsense." Nora waved her hand impatiently, glanced at her reflection in the mirror carefully and it suddenly occurred to her that she could be pregnant. She laughed at herself at the same moment because of the absurdity of such an idea.

"What should I do, Ale?"

"I dd-don't know, my dd-dear... G-go see the seams-sstress-sses; may-maybe S-stasele will ha-have an idea...Stasele-she could mend th-things much mo-more complica-cated than this, and I my-myself am afff-fraid to ss-start in on this work... Afff-fter all, it's not my job. I am her-herding moths..." She giggled, and Nora used the pause to scamper through the door as fast as possible.

There wasn't a living soul in Stasele's room. Dust was swirling in the sunbeams, and Nora remembered that, as a child, she had thought they were atoms. She took a cigarette from the pack that lay on the table, lit it, caressed an emerald notebook tacked with white threads, and read the notice lying on the floor. "Urgent! Today immediately: twelve pairs of shoelaces, eyeholes for Ophelia's underwear, narrow Laertes' clam diggers..."

The door banged and Nora turned around, but instead of Stasele, Iveta came in. She was a delicate forty-year-old woman, who still acted in travesty roles. She carried a white suit in her arms.

"Oh, Nora, there you are, hi!" She chattered in a sweet voice, like a character in an animated film. "Look, what an enchanting outfit I've grabbed! Bronius is writing off old costumes today. There's so much stuff... You know, you can always remake almost anything into the latest fashion. Stasele has golden hands for this. Go on, you'll find something for yourself! You won't be disappointed! Just look at this—real English crepe! White crepe!" She waved the suit like the dispatcher of a ship with a signal flag, and tore the label from the skirt.

"*A Streetcar Named Desire*. Blanche." Nora read.

"It's a little too wide for me, but it's child's play for Stasele to make it narrower, I swear! And you, I see, have Salome's gown already. So, show, show." Iveta ran to Nora and pulled her dressing gown off. "Oh, you know, it fits like a glove! Perfect! So, turn around." Nora did not move a bit, so Iveta began to go around her herself. "Really, it's enchanting. Only Elegija could find such a thing on consignment!"

"In a vintage shop" Nora corrected her snappishly. Iveta's vivacity, which bordered on hysteria, always irritated her.

"Fine, in a vintage shop; that's not important! Hey, walk around a bit! I want to see how the material moves with you!" Iveta gave Nora a slight push forward.

Nora took a few involuntary steps, and felt with horror how the dress pressed her, clutching at her knees, smarting on her calves.

"Oh, my dear," Iveta clapped her hands. "You're as clumsy as a bear... !" she giggled. "You know what I saw on TV yesterday? Parrots! parrots in dresses, skirts, dress-coats, even—jeans! Ha, ha! And the commentator says: 'Ladies and gentlemen, decide for yourselves what mankind evolved from: an ape or a parrot?' Ha, ha!" Iveta ran to Nora, grabbed her nose suddenly and warbled sweetly: "Oh, you're my little parrot, my little long-beaked parrot..."

Nora shrugged her shoulders and, barely controlling herself, replied: „And I read yesterday that hardened neurasthenics are exceptionally skilled at, and enjoy, digging into people's weak spots..."

"What are you saying?!" Iveta cried, completely missing the hint. "You know, I don't know any neurasthenics!"

Iveta began to undress. Nora examined her critically, with a titillating malevolence—the skin of this woman's belly was limp and pigmented, her breasts tiny like drooping flowers, her stockings full of runs, and her rose-colored panties unbelievably shabby. "It seems, that once upon a time Gerard Phillip arranged an exhibition of panties like that, when he returned to Paris from Moscow," Nora thought, and smiled with contempt.

That same moment three more women burst into the room with basketfuls of 'written off clothes. Stasele herself, dragged in an armless dummy its legs straddled and bandaged.

"Oh, our Norita. Hello, do you need anything?" Stasele asked, standing the dummy in the corner.

Suddenly, it occurred to Nora that the women were staring at her with too much attention.

"I need some red thread," she said, taking a spool of red thread from the table and going towards the door. "I'll return it in half an hour."

After shutting the door, she leaned against the uneven wall, which sparkled with little flakes of mica. She was almost crying. After some delay, Nora decided to try the men's costumer. A photograph, cut from a foreign magazine was stuck on the costumer's door—a man in a perfectly tailored suit. There was a note as well: "J. Razinkovichius. Tailor." Nora tapped at the door and hearing someone croak "Come in!" She entered.

"Good afternoon, Joseph K." Nora said.

"Hi, Miss Nora! Why 'Joseph K.'? Why 'K'?" The tailor mumbled because his mouth was full of pins.

"I meant K with a little circle," Nora made a circle with her fingers, although she had meant something completely different. "Company..."[*** **](#)

She looked around the room, its walls upholstered in black fabric and covered with numerous sketches. The room was like an overdone sorcerer's cave. The hunchbacked Joseph wore only his shirt and green riding pants. When Nora came in, he threw aside a brown remnant, ran to the radio and turned the switch.

"...and in the prepackaged cereal division, the annual potential reached four thousand tons," an obliging female voice uttered.

Joseph swore and, turning the dial of his antique prewar radio, found an eerie melody, played by a duet of accordion players.

"How can I help you, Miss Nora? How are we? Are we still wearing the flannel pants with butterflies that we designed last year?"

"We're wearing them, Joseph, and everyone is jealous," Nora uttered, adopting his playful tone. Then, suddenly taking off her dressing gown, she said in an upset voice: "I need your help again. This dress needs to be widened. Cut it open and then... I don't know, look at it yourself..." She froze in front of Joseph with her arms spread and her head dropped—as if crucified.

"Oh, oh, what a dress... A fine dress," Joseph even clucked his tongue. "It's a sin to cut it. Oh, oh, look at the embroidery... We must split along the seams... Where are our little seams?"

"Joseph, you're a genius!" Nora shouted. Somehow she had not realized that the simplest thing would be to cut it along the seams.

"Every trade has its secrets, Miss Nora," Joseph took the compliment as if it went without saying. "So, where are our seams?" Joseph explored the dress closely and from all sides. At times he dropped his horn-rimmed glasses with their extremely thick lenses to his nose, at times he pushed them up on his forehead. At last he began to feel about Nora with his yellow, tobacco-stained fingers. "Damn it, I don't understand. There's not a single seam..."

"What should I do?" Nora gasped.

"No need to get discouraged, Miss Nora. Take the dress off and leave it with us—we'll think of something. It'll be done by evening, I promise!"

"Joseph, I can't take this dress off..."

"Why, Miss Nora? Nobody will take it from here."

"No, Joseph, do something now. I beg you... I'll pay you back," Nora clasped her hands to her chest.

"O.K., Miss Nora, we'll do it now! Take off your dress, you glance through *Burda*, and we'll think of something this minute."

"Joseph, I can't take it off," Nora whispered, feeling her nose beginning to itch and her eyes filling with tears.

"Really, Miss Nora, don't be so stubborn! I know how all you artists are, you all have a screw loose! But do as you like, Miss Nora! I can't do anything while the dress is on you!"

"Joseph, I can't! I'm not being capricious. Joseph, this is a nightmare! It's like this cursed dress has grown on me! Understand, Joseph! Help me to take it off, I beg you! Split it with scissors, with a knife, tear it through, do something at last, only don't look at me that way! Why are you waiting, Joseph!..." Nora shouted, wringing her hands and stamping her feet.

"I see we've gained some weight, Miss Nora?"

"Yes, we've gained some weight, Joseph, we've gained some weight, just help me!"

Joseph said nothing, but took the enormous scissors from the table.

"We'll cut through the side, so it won't be so obvious," he said and marked a line with chalk from Nora's armpit to her hips. "If we cut you, Miss Nora, holler." He nipped Nora's side a couple times, then cursed. "Damn it, these scissors won't cut. It's like iron. I don't get it." He grabbed a tiny pair, almost like manicure scissors, from the table. "Brace yourself, Miss Nora. We'll prick you for sure now!"

He stopped, and, puffing, gave some pokes to Nora's frozen side—the little scissors slipped along the red material like it was glass. Sadly, Nora looked at the fine gray hairs in Joseph's ears, sighed deeply, and uttered:

"You see Joseph? And you said: 'stubborn'..."

"No need for panic, Miss Nora! We're not licked yet! I've still a razor blade left. Go ahead, Miss Nora!" But the blade could not pierce the dress either. "I don't know this material, Miss Nora. Some sort of devilry..."

Nora sobbed, covered her face with her hands and, bent over, burst from Joseph's room.

"Where are we going now, Miss Nora!?" Joseph sprang after her. "Don't be disheartened. We'll think of something! Where there's a will, there's a way, Miss Nora."

A monstrous panic seized her and, hardly able to control herself, she shouted back:

"Well, when you think of something, come to my makeup room."

At that moment, the elevator door opened. Nora jumped into it and burst into loud sobs. The elevator reached the ground floor near the office cloakroom rather quickly, where the door opened with a clank, immediately exposing Nora to a host of curious faces. Shading her eyes with her hand, and without responding to the various greetings, conversational openings and taunts, she limped with difficulty along the dark corridor to the spectators' hall. A slight joy arose in Nora at the thought that it would be dark and empty there. She opened the heavy, creaking door, entered the dusty plush-soft darkness, and plopped herself into the aisle seat of the last row. The stage was without any decorations, backdrops—not even a horizon and, because of this, it looked as if it were very large, with its damp yellow brick walls. A faint white light fell from somewhere and hung there, like the light that can sometimes be seen at sea just before dawn. It seemed to Nora as if the stage itself was emanating this tinkling radiance. Watching the empty, naked, immaculate stage, now breathing with something primal, Nora began to tremble—as if in ecstasy. This stage radiated something extremely seductive and intoxicatingly alluring, like boundless waters beckoning a man, hanging over the railings of a bridge, into their depths, like the city at night whispering murderously, rippling beneath the feet of a man walking its rooftops. Nora prayed that this moment would never end, but suddenly creaking bridges began to descend from the ceiling, yellow, red, and green projectors lit up, cursing stagehands burst in, the backdrops came down. A painted yellow feeling of loss pierced Nora. When an unmerciful bright light flooded the hall, she stood up quickly. The stagehands noticed her, hooting their barbarous salutes, but to Nora, who had always replied wittily and stingingly, this time it felt as if they were showering stones at her. She plodded to her makeup room, feeling her ankles hobbled by her dress, threw on a raincoat, grabbed her purse, and phoned for a cab. As luck would have it, the cab did not come for a long time. Nora stood outside, hiding behind a cheap old decoration, an imitation of a Doric column.

"Where is the party, darling?" the taxi driver asked, opening the front door for her.

But Nora sat down in the back, and icily pronouncing the address, cut off the conversation.

When Nora climbed out of the cab, she realized that further movement would be extremely difficult. Nora waited until the cab had gone, then, leaning against trees, benches, trash cans and fences, she somehow reached the landing. Luckily, it was dark. Nonetheless, a passing child triumphantly shouted:

"Mommy, look, a drunk!"

"Miserable wretch," his mother answered, looking at Nora.

Leaning against walls and railings, at times stopping to rest like an invalid or a half-dead granny, with her last ounce of strength, Nora barely crept up to the second floor. Her whole body ached and was suffused with a prickling sensation, as if

she were submerged in icy water.

Marius opened the door. Nora flew into the room, casting off her purse and coat, and firmly embraced Marius's neck, holding him as close as possible, with all her body, which was hurting more and more.

"Hello, my dearest," she whispered in a weepy voice. "I missed you so much... I love you so much... Why are you standing there, why are you waiting," she said, kissing and cuddling Marius, urgently trying to escape from her inborn modesty, consciously adopting an unpleasant, randy tone like the maidens in porno films. "Your wife's on stage now, and won't be back for three hours. We have loads of time, my dear, my sweet, love me, undress me..."

"Nora, darling, whe - what's come over you..." Marius stammered, taking Nora in his arms and carrying her to the bedroom.

In the bedroom, both of them fell on the bed and Nora began to unbutton his shirt with trembling fingers. Suddenly, roughly, with unusual strength, she pushed him away, jumped up, lost her balance and fell to the ground, stood up and, leaning against the wall, trembling all over, with her eyes sparkling with tears, and mopping away the hair stuck to her sweaty forehead, she whispered thickly:

"Undress me, please, undress me, my darling." Her lips mockingly distorted. "Can't you do anything..."

Marius stood up and looked incomprehendingly at Nora in her blind fury. He touched her shoulder gingerly.

"Your gown is so strange," he stammered.

Nora took some steps and stood in the middle of the room.

"So, are you going to undress me or not," she spat out through clenched teeth. "Do something, release me, tear this damned gown off... Not even you, you, who swore to love me, even you can't help me! You're a loser. Totally helpless. I hate you..."

Nora turned towards the door decisively, fell on the floor again, jumped up and staggered into the hall. Marius, tongue-tied, followed her. She was screaming:

"Don't even think of following me! I'll scream. I'll call for help... Everybody, just everybody will be able to hear that you are harassing me... I'll call the police..." In the doorway, Nora turned her now unfamiliar face, distorted with suffering, to him. "If you only knew, if you had any idea how you disgust me..."

She slammed the door so hard that pieces of plaster scattered, whirring like dragonflies. Nora managed to hail a cab and, with great difficulty, got to the dormitory. Her roommate had gone to a show.

Nora was in a sweat; a red mist fogged her eyes. Her body burned, as if a boiling liquid were pouring over it. Without even knowing how, Nora reached the bathroom. She took a cold shower and began to moan. She opened her mouth and caught the refreshing icy streams of water, drank them with her palms and bare feet, but her body, choked by the dress, was still burning. Nora got out of the shower, fell on the floor and crawled to her room, as her legs, constricted by the red gown, had become like a mermaid's tail.

"Žalgiris!!! Žalgiris!!! Žalgiris!!!!***** the rhythmical chant was heard from the TV room on the ground floor.

Moaning, Nora rolled on the floor, dulling the pain a bit. She felt as if a million needles were pricking her body. Suddenly, in the depths of her darkening consciousness Nora saw a red note shining, as if written in illuminated bulbs: Bell Irena. She could neither remember nor understand what these words meant. The red dress was eating away her body like sulphuric acid. And suddenly, drowning in the red sticky mist of death, Nora realized where Elegija had disappeared to. Rallying her fast-fading strength, Nora crawled to the mirror. Her helpless hand grabbed the lipstick tube and scribbled on the glass: "Gerda, don't wear this dress..." An enormous wave of pain swallowed her from head to toe, poured over her eyes and mouth, deafened, stunned, choked and swept her to the black tingling depths.

Late in the evening, Gerda returned home and found the red dress thrown on the floor. She hurriedly closed the door. Giggling as she took off her jeans and flowery shirt, reeling impatiently, she pulled on the red gown, and, glancing at her reflection, distorted by the illegible note, raised her arms, reciting:

"Princess Salome is so beautiful tonight!"

It was the remark of the Young Sire, whose role Gerda played.

**Chichi*: Georgian vodka made from the skins of grapes, a byproduct from the wine making process.

** Lenin Square: now Independence Square.

* * * *Mankurtism*: This term from the novel *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years* by the Kirghiz writer Chingiz Aitmatov. He recalled an ancient Kirghiz legend about a tribe torturing captured enemies so that they could no longer remember their names or their origins. They were called *mankurts*, speechless creatures, subdued and harmless, not realizing they were human beings.

* * **In Europe, the abbreviation for "Company" is a special sign: K°.

**** *Žalgiris*: the most popular basketball team in Lithuania.



Artwork of Jurga Ivanauskaitė