

TAKE THE RUBBISH OUT, SASHA

Natal'ya Vorozhbit

Translated by Sasha Dugdale

Characters

KATYA, *aged fifty-five. Owns two food stalls by a metro station* OKSANA, *aged thirty. Katya's daughter. Worked as a manager in a shop in central Kyiv selling window blinds until she was seven months pregnant*
SASHA, *aged fifty-five. Katya's husband and Oksana's stepfather. Colonel in the Ukrainian army. Until his death he was in charge of physical training department at the Military Academy*

Also:

MAN

Take The Rubbish Out, Sasha was first performed on 23 March 2015 at Òran Mór, Glasgow, in association with the National Theatre of Scotland and the Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh.

1.

Katya's house, just outside Kyiv.

KATYA and OKSANA, both dressed in black, are making the filling for pies.

OKSANA is seven months pregnant.

Sasha's portrait on the windowsill – he is in military uniform.

A gas hob with all four burners alight.

A pan full of pie dough.

KATYA. You pour sunflower oil into the pan. And you chop the onion and the bacon fat, but finely, mind. By then the oil will be hot enough, spitting... Drop the onion and the fat in and fry them till transparent, then add a little bit of flour and brown it. Pinch of salt. You want it mixed in well. And that's it. Ready for whatever you're making.

OKSANA. Mmm... Remember it from when I was a kid. Can we have those tomorrow?

KATYA. No. For tomorrow we'll have the plain ones, no fancy stuff. Meat and cabbage.

OKSANA. How many will there be?

KATYA. About sixty I'd say.

OKSANA. What if more people come?

KATYA. I've done a good few more. There's plenty.

OKSANA. I'll have a bit more herring.

KATYA. It won't make you sick?

OKSANA. I'm dying of hunger.

KATYA. Go on then.

Eight different sorts of sweets are lying on the table.

A deep bowl of minced meat.

Batteries.

Chopped cabbage, a candlestick and a loaf of black bread.

A basket of biscuits, Sellotape, a vase.

An old onion, quartered.

Scissors.

A plate of roughly sliced herring.

A bill for household charges.

OKSANA *eats herring, onion and bread hungrily.*

I can't even look at food.

OKSANA. The saddest thing is that he won't see Kolya. He really wanted to see Kolya.

KATYA. If he'd wanted that, he wouldn't have left us.

OKSANA. Oh Mum...

KATYA (*provoking*). If he'd wanted to see his grandson, he wouldn't have left us.

OKSANA. I remember his reaction. When he found out. That it was a boy. That's it, he said. No more women ruling the roost. It'll be equal now.

KATYA. Well it won't, it won't be equal now.

OKSANA. Kolya won't have a grandad. Not a dad, nor a grandad.

KATYA. He's got a dad.

OKSANA. Hardly much of one.

KATYA. Why don't you talk to him? Maybe he'll come back. You're the only one he'll listen to.

OKSANA. What, Oleg?!

KATYA. No, Sasha. Talk to him.

OKSANA (*to SASHA*). She's right, you know. We really need you. Was there something missing for you?

SASHA. No, nothing like that. Things were fine.

KATYA. You wouldn't have done it if things had been fine.

SASHA. Done what?

OKSANA. How can he ask.

KATYA. I heard him getting up. Five-thirty, same as always, I wasn't planning on getting up, I'd put his clothes out the night before. I hear him go into the bathroom, and from there there's an almighty crash. I go in and he's just lying there on the ground. His head like this... And he's whispering something.

SASHA. Now I don't remember that...

KATYA. He's whispering something. He was still whispering. And I can't bother *her* – (*Meaning OKSANA.*) Who am I going to ring? Even now makes me feel... The lot from the morgue turned up, they wrapped him in a carpet to carry him out. Never gave that carpet back... (*To OKSANA.*) Put that fish away. It smells. Can't stand it. (*To SASHA.*) How could you do it to me?

OKSANA. Shhh. You'll spoil the dough.

They look at the rising dough and lower their voices.

KATYA. We weren't even having a row before it happened. It was all quiet. We went to bed.

OKSANA. You two had a row every day.

KATYA. Oh, so I'm to blame, am I?

OKSANA. You were always both to blame.

SASHA. True.

KATYA. You were always on his side.

SASHA. She understood me.

KATYA. Well no one understood me... Not you, not her.

OKSANA. Don't involve me in this, alright.

KATYA. Who's involving you? You relax, you're supposed to be keeping calm.

OKSANA (*finishes chopping cabbage*). The cabbage is ready. What now?

KATYA. Put the sweets in those favour bags. Sixty bags. Put one of each in. There's eight different sorts.

OKSANA *begins dividing up the eight different sorts of sweets: little toffees, boiled sweets, jellied fruit, soft-centred chocolates...*

SASHA. Toffees, jellied fruit, boiled sweets...

OKSANA (*begins crying without warning*). You always used to hide them from him. The sweets.

KATYA. He used to eat them all. He never used to leave any, behaved like he was the only one in the house. Didn't matter how many you'd put out. He'd work his way through them. Drove me crazy.

OKSANA. He was welcome to them.

KATYA (*to SASHA*). There you go! You come back, you can eat till you choke.

SASHA. What's that supposed to mean?!

OKSANA. He loved those plain toffees.

SASHA. Didn't I earn enough to have myself a few toffees.

KATYA. That's all you did earn enough for. You weren't wrong there. Paid in toffees you were.

SASHA. Well now you'll get my pension. Two thousand.

KATYA. You should've dropped dead long ago. I'd be a rich woman by now.

SASHA. That's not fair.

OKSANA. You were curing him of the drink. Sweets were all he was allowed.

KATYA. Stop howling and keep calm.

OKSANA. The soup went off, and instead of chucking it out you boiled it and gave it to him for lunch.

KATYA. You've got a nerve. Sitting here and saying that.

SASHA. Is that true?

KATYA. It's not true.

OKSANA. We'd get the fresh meat, he'd get the day before yesterday's.

KATYA. Well was I supposed to throw it out?

SASHA. Oh, Katya. You treated me like a dog. Was there ever any love?

KATYA (to OKSANA). Oh marvellous, he'll be back before you can say the word!

OKSANA. Sasha. Come back.

SASHA. Come back where? To my dog kennel?

OKSANA. I was joking about the soup. She hasn't eaten anything for nine days now.

SASHA. Katya, you must eat.

KATYA. I can't. I feel sick.

SASHA. Katya, sweetheart.

KATYA. My Sasha.

SASHA. I can't.

KATYA. Bastard. Selfish all his born days.

OKSANA. Mum. The dough.

They look at the dough and fall silent.

KATYA. Hobby, that's what it was. Not a real job. Never earned anything in that army. Went off on trips to see his mates. Had his fun.

OKSANA. He was a soldier. An officer. A colonel.

SASHA (*timid*). An officer.

KATYA (*mockingly*). 'An officer'... I was the bloody officer! My whole life was a battle. I fought for this place, for the Toyota, my two kiosks... So you could eat nice food and wear smart clothes... And what did I get? Fights with the tax people, the fire officers, competitors... Who's the officer round here?!

SASHA. Me. I was an officer in the Ukrainian army!

KATYA. What army?! Why? There hasn't been a war since anyone can remember. Just a bunch of big men all pretending to do something. Lazy so-and-sos. No money, no glory – spoonfed by your wives like little babies... No wonder they all laughed at you, you deserved it.

SASHA. Who?

KATYA. Oh, everyone. The ones in charge. You're useless.

SASHA. It's at home they laugh at me, no one laughs at me like you do.

KATYA. Well... Go to your work then... You go and live at your work and they can...

OKSANA. Mum...

KATYA remembers he won't be going to work again and stops in mid-flow.

SASHA. What?! What?!

KATYA. Be quiet. You're dead, aren't you, so be quiet.

SASHA. Alright. I won't say another word. That's it.

KATYA (to OKSANA). Let's move the table.

OKSANA. What for?

KATYA. Look where it is.

They begin moving the heavy table. SASHA feels guilty.

SASHA. Girls, you shouldn't.

KATYA (to OKSANA). Don't go straining yourself. Just drag it.

OKSANA (*grabs her belly*). Ow!

KATYA. That's enough. (To SASHA.) See that?

SASHA. Well what can I do?

KATYA. Well that's obvious. You can't do anything. You never could. Never. Even your teeth, I paid for...

SASHA. That's not fair.

KATYA. Not fair on who? What good was there in it? First ten years you drank. The next ten you were miserable. You never had a life. There's nothing to look back on.

SASHA. Our holiday in Crimea?

KATYA brushes this off.

KATYA. Never went abroad because you weren't allowed.

SASHA. I was the USSR freestyle wrestling champion. You might be proud of that.

KATYA. Proud of what? Couple of bent ears was all you got.

SASHA. All I got? You never could say a nice word about me.

OKSANA. Sasha, I'll say a nice word about you – is that allowed?

KATYA. No! You were always his favourite anyway.

OKSANA. We haven't got enough for sixty favour bags.

KATYA. Well don't put eight in each then. Put in six.

OKSANA. Maybe we could buy some more?

KATYA. I'm cleaned out as it is. Twenty-two thousand. And then there's the gravestone.

SASHA. Oh don't bother with a stone. Put a cross there.

KATYA. Oh right. Right away. Did we forget to ask you?

OKSANA. It would only be a couple of kilos of sweets.

KATYA. Put six in each. That's enough.

OKSANA. Oh, it's all the same to me...

SASHA. Where did you put my medals?

KATYA. Where do you think I put them?! Who the hell wants medals for Soviet champions? The champions are gone and all we're left with is the medals. Even the country's disappeared. But the medals are still here. A fine inheritance I've been left by my officer-husband! Where can I sell scrap metal? How much is it going for? Nothing? I might have known...

OKSANA. They're in the wardrobe. Don't worry.

KATYA. You barely had a life, Sasha. Come back and finish it off. Get your pension and you won't have to go to that bloody work. I won't nag you. Have as many sweets as you can eat. We'll take holidays in the country. And Egypt in the winter. The only reason I was worried about you retiring was that you'd get bored and start drinking. At work you had the illusion that you were serving someone, that there was some point to you. You kept yourself off the drink. But if you want you can have a drink. Just a little bit. Cheer you up. Bit of wine. Or whatever you want to drink. Even that home-made stuff Nina makes.

SASHA. What use am I to you?

KATYA. Well what am I without you.

SASHA. No one to irritate you.

KATYA. You never irritated me.

SASHA begins laughing.

SASHA. You'd say anything when you need something.

KATYA. What did I just say?

SASHA. I do understand. That I was the wrong man for you.

KATYA. Oh no. You were the right man. I just didn't see it.

SASHA. There's no way back from here, don't you see?

KATYA. Well I don't believe it. It just suits you to say that.

SASHA. It's not a work trip, Katya.

KATYA. I see it all now.

SASHA. What? What do you see?

KATYA. Tanya said you would leave me. And now it's happened.

They fall silent, sniffing. In the silence the dough is rising and it swells over the top of the pan. The women go to 'catch' it.

Ooh, that's worked a treat. Sasha used to love my pies.

OKSANA. When was the last time you baked pie?

KATYA. When did I have the time? Either we were doing the place up, or paying off the loan, and the whole lot fell on me. The wife of an officer. Eh, Sash?

But SASHA doesn't answer.

I just can't get used to him not being there. I keep thinking he's still here with us. I talk to him. Nag at him.

OKSANA. Me too.

KATYA. How am I going to get through tomorrow? Nine days it'll have been, and then forty days and then a year. And each time they'll be here watching, talking about us, judging us. How much food I put on the table, how many people came, what we wore... Have you got something to wear?

OKSANA. That black dress... that I wore at the birthday party.

KATYA. It's a bit short.

OKSANA. So what would happen if we didn't do it?

KATYA. Didn't do what?

OKSANA. Didn't do anything tomorrow... For the ninth day. What would happen?

KATYA (*looks at* OKSANA). What do you mean? No peace for the soul.

OKSANA. Your soul?

KATYA. Sasha's.

OKSANA. Oh.

KATYA. What do you think, should we book the taxi today?

OKSANA. No. Tomorrow is fine. Half an hour before. And we'll pick up Grandma on the way.

KATYA. Tolik is bringing Grandma to the cemetery.

OKSANA. Oh right.

KATYA picks up some dough which has fallen onto the floor and throws it away.

KATYA. The damn bin is full.

KATYA and OKSANA (*together*). Take the rubbish out, Sasha.

But SASHA is gone.

Epitaphs to suit any taste:

WOMEN.

You took so much of us with you
So much of you is left with us.

How hard to find the words to say
How pain leaves us bereft and sore
We can't believe you've gone away
You'll be with us forever more.

You laboured on with many a care
And now you sleep for eternity
So sleep without those heavy cares
Always with you – your family.

Standing, weeping over your grave
My bitter tears water the turf
I can't believe my beloved lays
Below in the cold dark earth.

SASHA.

The sun is shining, but not for me.
I lie in the earth and I cannot see.

Forgive us that we carry flowers

Under starry skies to your grave

WOMEN.

Forgive us that we breathe the air
That you can never breathe again.

You loved angels and a child's laughter
Never plucked the lilac sprays
You might have wished to overthrow the master
But you were a child with innocent ways.
And so forgive him, Lord.

2.

A year has passed.

KATYA and OKSANA are at the cemetery. OKSANA is no longer pregnant. The cemetery is to the north of the city, a new cemetery. There are many sorts of cemeteries: old mysterious ones, happy ones and sad ones, but this is a brand-new honest cemetery – one in which you realise that death is not the lot of a chosen few, but the careful reaper of all, and will, without doubt, come for you as well.

A new stone memorial on the grave, and on it an enamel portrait of Sasha, the portrait which had been standing on the windowsill in the kitchen. Under the portrait is an epitaph – pick any of the ones above.

Alongside the grave is a space for Katya.

Flowers, wreaths from his friends, relations and colleagues.

KATYA and OKSANA are unpacking a bag. They unload food onto a little table. KATYA heaps pies, sliced meat, sweets, salo fat, cheese and vegetables on a plastic plate. She pours a glass of vodka and places all this on the grave, by the enamel portrait.

KATYA. There you are, Sasha, eat up.

OKSANA. Have you put the sweets out?

KATYA. Of course I did.

She lights the little icon lamp by the memorial stone.

They had a shock when they saw the memorial.

OKSANA. I bet they did.

KATYA. And then I told them how much I paid. They had a shock. Didn't expect that. I'm really happy. God, you cannot imagine. Like a load's been lifted. First time in a year I feel like a load's been lifted.

KATYA crosses herself. OKSANA looks around – the cemetery has expanded significantly in a year.

OKSANA. A year ago we were right on the edge of the cemetery. It's just crazy how many people have died in a year. There's a girl over there, really young. And a child. Christ, born in 2010... That's terrible...

KATYA. Yes... They're dying very young... I'm always wondering why Sasha left us... so early...

OKSANA. Heart disease.

KATYA. He was murdered.

OKSANA. Christ, Mum...

KATYA. His spirit was killed.

OKSANA. What? By us?

KATYA. Us?! At work. The command, putting pressure on him all the time, always making more demands on him. And that boss of his was a *shit*. As soon as something went wrong he was threatening them. And they were all so scared of being let go. It's not like he wouldn't have found himself work. He'd have been in demand wherever. Doesn't matter, God sees everything. It'll be payback time soon.

OKSANA. For who?

KATYA. All of them.

OKSANA's mobile rings.

OKSANA. Nanny. (*Answering.*) Yes, hallo, doesn't matter, just put in another one. Whatever. He's spitting it out? Don't give it to him, please... I did tell you... I told you before I left... It'll be okay... Espumisan... Give him Espumisan.

She ends the call.

KATYA (*automatically speaking in baby talk*). How's my little sweetie pie?

OKSANA. He's spitting out his dummy. Colic.

KATYA. Espumisan is what he needs.

OKSANA. That's what I told her.

KATYA. She doesn't know how to handle babies.

OKSANA. Not this again...

KATYA. If his grandad was alive then everything would be different. And Oleg wouldn't have gone off.

OKSANA. How are those things connected?

KATYA. When I was learning to drive I met this widow. And she said that after her husband died her daughter's husband immediately walked out on her. Like male solidarity or something.

OKSANA. I should have called Kolya Sasha. Now I'm sorry I didn't.

KATYA. Well call the next one Sasha.

OKSANA. What if it's a girl?

KATYA. Doesn't matter.

OKSANA. Yeah, that's true. I'll call her Sasha.

OKSANA pours wine. They stand with plastic cups and look at the portrait of SASHA.

KATYA. Sasha. My own sweet husband. A year has passed since that terrible day... When you left without saying goodbye. Well, if that's what you decided to do, it must be you knew something, like God must have called you up into his heavenly army. Lie in peace.

OKSANA. Rest in peace.

KATYA. Rest in peace. That's right. Can't speak straight. All this year we've been thinking of you and grieving every moment. Baby Kolya is the only reason I haven't died of grief. Your grandson. Funny little thing. He looks like you. Next year we'll all come. We left him with his nanny today, because it's damp here. Look what a memorial you've got. I hope you're happy with it, I tried my best. And this bit here is for me. God will let me know when we're due to meet again. But for the time being, I'm working. I've got another stall. I can hardly cope. Oleg isn't helping. But let's not talk about sad things. It's very hard without you. Not a day has passed when Oksana and I haven't thought about you. But we have to carry on. You rest in peace, but we're still here for the time being.

She kisses the enamel portrait on the lips and they drink without clinking cups. They eat.

Oh, I didn't put any caviar in Sasha's sandwich!

OKSANA *rushes to pass KATYA a slice of bread and caviar, KATYA puts it on the plastic plate.*

OKSANA. I'm going to change his name.

KATYA. Which one?

OKSANA. I'll reregister him as Aleksandrovich in honour of Sasha.

KATYA. Will you leave Oleg's surname?

OKSANA. I don't want to. I'll give him mine.

KATYA. Give him Sasha's.

OKSANA. No that would be a bit odd. He's not the father.

KATYA *shrugs.*

KATYA. I suppose.

OKSANA. That grave over there hasn't been looked after at all. We could at least throw the old flowers away.

They collect up the old flowers on Sasha's grave and the other one.

KATYA. Although not that odd really, actually. A boy's got to be proud of his name. His dad's name isn't going to add much. What good can you tell him about his dad? But Sasha. You can tell him a lot about his grandad. You can show him his medals and tell him how he defended you when Uncle Yura shouted at you.

OKSANA. I don't remember.

KATYA. Uncle Yura was shouting at you because you were thirteen and smoking. He was shouting that you'd started too early. And Sasha told him to mind his own business and sort out his own kids. We'll sort out our own. And Uncle Yura said, 'But she's not yours.' And Sasha took you by the hand like this and said: 'She's mine, alright.' And Uncle Yura was apologetic right up to when we moved.

OKSANA. Let's have some more wine.

They pour more.

KATYA. You going to say a speech?

OKSANA. In my head.

She looks at Sasha's portrait silently.

(*Very quietly – not heard by KATYA.*) Sasha, you know... A month before you died I didn't stand up for you when you wanted that glass of champagne at the New Year and Mum wouldn't give it you... I was scared you'd go back on the drink, too. Because when you went on the drink it was funny at first – I'll never forget when you took me to the circus – but by the fourth day of drinking you'd have turned into an animal... I can see that glass of champagne even now. I don't suppose I'll ever drink champagne again. And I remember how cross I was with you when you chased off all my admirers... You were right though, they all turned out to be shits. That Oleg, the one you called a bastard, disappeared off to Russia to work and never came back... And I've got to confess something... Just after you married Mum I spat in your soup. I was a stupid teenager, but all the same I'm sorry for it now. Poor, poor Sasha, I don't know how you put up with us or why. Why people live with each other, and put up with each other. Especially Mum. All her jealousy and hysterics. She was always putting you down. Sometimes I wanted to just grab a chair and swing it at her head. Forgive her, and forgive me. After you died I began to think that you were the only man in my life. Neither a lover nor a father. Just a man. I don't know how to explain it... You should have left us for Eleanora.

KATYA. If you've got nothing to say to him then tell us one of your memories.

OKSANA. Oh I can only think of stupid stuff. Like when a beetle climbed in your ear and Sasha washed it out with home-made vodka.

KATYA. Yeah. (*Pause.*) Remember when a pack of dogs attacked some woman in the town centre and Sasha saved her.

OKSANA. And then the woman gave him a knife.

KATYA. Valya, she was, from Balzac Street.

OKSANA. Valya, that was it.

KATYA. He was a man. Remember how he used to turn heads. An officer! Don't make them like that any more.

OKSANA. And his students adored him.

KATYA. And his subordinates. He could be strict. But they respected him.

OKSANA. Because he had a sense of humour.

KATYA. He loved playing jokes on people.

They smile.

He never refused me anything. I'd say, Sasha, I need to go somewhere. He'd get up without saying a word and go. Like when Grandma was ill or you were. No questions, any time of the day or night.

OKSANA. Really miss him.

KATYA. In Crimea he got into a fight with some men from Moscow. You know how they behave down there. So he 'fought', I mean he ripped them to shreds. That was it, they vanished. He brought them down. One against three. I thought he'd kill them.

OKSANA. He was a champion sportsman.

KATYA. And he died... with dignity. Not in his bed, no soiling himself.

OKSANA. I had this dream. I didn't want to tell you about it.

KATYA. What?

OKSANA. That he hadn't actually died. His death had been faked, like one of those secret military operations. Instead of him there was another man's body, looked like him. And then a year later he comes back and says, I'm so sorry girls, I had my orders. I had to do it. I couldn't get out of it. So I started yelling at him, how could you? We were in hell! but at the same time I'm crying with happiness. I woke up in tears, and it was all a dream. I burst into tears again. So unfair.

KATYA. Imagine if it had been true.

OKSANA. It happens in films.

KATYA daydreams for a moment.

KATYA. Ah no. I helped dress him at the morgue... It couldn't have happened.

A MAN comes past, he probably works there as a guard or a gravedigger.

Hallo there. Come and drink to the departed.

The MAN approaches. He nods at the memorial. KATYA pours him vodka and offers it to him. She prepares sandwiches, sweets.

MAN. God rest the soul of...

KATYA. Alexander.

MAN. Alexander.

He crosses himself and drinks.

Still young.

KATYA. His heart went. Thank you. Here, help yourself.

MAN. God give you good health.

He eats, then moves a little way away.

OKSANA. Reminds me a bit of Sasha.

KATYA. Really. You look at Sasha. And him. *(She makes a dismissive gesture.)* Only the weaklings survive.

OKSANA. Shall we pack up?

The women collect up all the food, they add a little to Sasha's plate and relight the icon light. They take it in turns to kiss the portrait on the lips.

KATYA. I've only ever dreamed about him once. He said move the pension into another bank. I moved it of course. But I was really upset, I says, what, is that all you've got to say to me?

They set off for the bus stop, slightly staggering under the weight of the bags and the wine they've drunk. The MAN who looks like Sasha comes back and takes the plastic cup of vodka, caviar on bread and sweets. He sits down by Sasha's memorial and eats and drinks.

Together with the MAN who looks like Sasha we see a fresco of Sasha's life. In all the pictures Sasha is wearing a military uniform and medals.

Sasha is winning his fight with the drunken arrogant men from Moscow who were trying it on with his girl, Katya. One lies defeated on the shore, another runs away, a third begs for mercy.

Sasha is wringing the neck of a mad dog, the pack of dogs is dispersing. The woman who was bitten by the mad dog has a shopping trolley in which she has bones to make stock for her family. She reaches out to her saviour. Blood trickles from her leg.

Sasha carries the young Oksana on his shoulders into the circus. Elephants and tigers step aside respectfully.

Sasha is carrying his elderly mother-in-law into the hospital. The Grim Reaper steps aside respectfully, flying angels part, doctors and nurses rush to greet them with stretchers.

Sasha is pouring a bottle of vodka into the ear of the screaming Katya. Black beetles run away from her in different directions.

Twelve pupils listen carefully to Sasha in the sports hall of the academy where he taught.

Sasha has a tragic fall in the bathroom, clutching his heart. You could even indicate it was a bullet wound. Although it wasn't. It was his heart. But the MAN who looks like Sasha wants to believe it was a bullet.

3.

September 2014.

KATYA's house outside Kyiv.

In the middle of the kitchen is a new solid fuel stove.

Sacks of potatoes, onions. Tins and jars of food, grain.

OKSANA enters. She is pregnant again. She looks in amazement at the stove.

KATYA enters after her, carrying firewood. She looks in surprise at OKSANA.

KATYA. Why didn't you call?

OKSANA. I did.

KATYA looks at her mobile.

KATYA. Oh yeah. Missed calls.

OKSANA. What's that?

KATYA. A stove.

OKSANA. Why?

KATYA. Look I'll show you.

KATYA throws firewood into the stove. She lights the wood.

If there's a power cut or if there's no gas you can heat the place with wood. It heats the whole house, plus it does hot water, plus you can cook whatever you want on it.

OKSANA. Amazing.

KATYA. All the neighbours have had them put in. You wouldn't believe the waiting list there is on these stoves.

OKSANA. It's just people panicking, Mum.

KATYA. Panicking? With Russian tanks on the border and the gas supply about to be switched off and with winter ahead we'll all freeze. (*Strokes the stove.*) Cost me six thousand, together with the set-up. But it was a weight off my mind getting it put in. Thank God.

KATYA *crosses herself.*

I took all the money out of the bank. When the crisis hits. We'll lose everything. I bought dollars. I ordered another carload of wood. It'll be here tomorrow.

OKSANA. You're amazing.

KATYA. And I called out the man who clears wells.

OKSANA. I'd forgotten we had a well.

KATYA. I've bought in four sacks of potatoes, two of onion. So we're fine. You can move in with Kolya. We can spend the winter here.

OKSANA. Okay.

KATYA. And a hundred litres of petrol. Enough to get us to Warsaw if needs be.

OKSANA. If what?

KATYA. Well if there's no petrol and we have to flee.

OKSANA. How about if there are no hospitals and I have to give birth?

KATYA. I've worked it all out. Auntie Galya who sells the candles in the church, she used to be a midwife. She'll take you.

OKSANA. What about if there are air raids?

KATYA. Well, if that happens...

OKSANA. Then all this will be for nothing.

KATYA. Don't be silly. There's the cellar. We can hide down there.

OKSANA. And then?

KATYA. Well maybe there won't be any air raids. Let's keep positive.

OKSANA. Alright. Have you got any herring?

KATYA. I have.

KATYA *gets out herring.* OKSANA *eats.* Suddenly she begins crying.

What's wrong?

OKSANA. Nothing.

KATYA. Have you been watching the news again, for goodness' sakes? The doctor told you not to.

OKSANA. I haven't been watching anything.

KATYA (*cheerful and consoling, down to earth*). Shhh, sshhh, don't be frightened. Look how the wood's caught. Remember Grandma's stove. When you were a child. You used to sleep up above the stove. 'Hush, hush, hush-a-baby, don't sleep at the edge of the stove, little lady.' Hush, hush. And the stove was hot. It smelt of hot seeds, and the whitewash on it came off on your clothes. Grandma used to get the hot pies out and make the borsch. Our grandma, she went through things so terrible we can't even imagine them.

KATYA *throws more firewood into the stove. It burns brighter, redder, the logs crackle cheerfully.*
OKSANA *calms down.*

SASHA *enters. He stands by them and looks at the fire, too. OKSANA and KATYA stiffen and for a time they pretend they don't see him, although they can see him perfectly.*

So what is the news? I haven't watched television all day.

OKSANA. The doctor told me not to watch television.

KATYA. Oh, yes. Quite right, too.

OKSANA. He's worried about me again... He told me I need to keep calm.

KATYA. Well keep calm then. Are you taking vitamins?

OKSANA. Yes.

KATYA. My blood pressure is up. I measured it today, and I can't even bear to say...

OKSANA. Mum...

Nods at SASHA.

KATYA (*irritated*). I know.

OKSANA. How long?

KATYA. Since this morning.

OKSANA. Why?

KATYA. He wants to come back.

OKSANA. What?

KATYA. You tell her, Sash. Why have I always got to.

SASHA. Well, you've got this... war... The men and me, we discussed it and we need to be back here.

OKSANA. In order to do what?

KATYA. That's what I said.

SASHA. What? I'm an officer. I can't just lie there.

KATYA. How come that didn't occur to you before, officer?

SASHA. Well I didn't know. If I'd known.

KATYA (*wearily mocking*). 'If I'd known'...

OKSANA. Mum's right. You should have thought of it before now.

KATYA. And who said there was no coming back from over there?

SASHA. Well, you know.

KATYA. I do know. If I ask then of course it can't be done.

SASHA. Well it can't really be done. But if there's a sixth call for mobilisation then it can.

KATYA. What sixth call for mobilisation?

SASHA. Well, they've mobilised all the living now, the fifth call took the last of the living. But the war keeps on. So high command asked us.

OKSANA. But how do you think it's going to happen?! What are we supposed to tell people... like, woo and he's back again. What am I supposed to tell Kolya? Oh look, here's your grandad back. And where's he been?

SASHA. It's fine. Lots of us are coming back. Lyosha's coming back. And Sergei. And Vova. All the officers are. Wasn't worth it before, but it's a different matter now.

KATYA (*worked up*). Who the hell needs you?!

SASHA. My country. My family.

KATYA *throws wood in the stove*.

OKSANA. I'm against it. I'll be straight with you.

SASHA. Why?

OKSANA. Well... I don't want you to get killed.

SASHA. What difference would that make now?

KATYA. Exactly.

OKSANA (*to KATYA*). Is that what you want?!

KATYA. Me? What?

OKSANA. To send him off to war?

KATYA. You need a bit of money for that. Boots, uniform, Kevlar helmet – they're supposed to cost about five hundred dollars if you buy them from a trader – we were collecting for one. We couldn't afford that, Sasha. And if we had to bury you again? I couldn't afford it. Oksana's right. Discussion over.

SASHA. What are you talking about, you two?! I made an oath. Me, Vova, Sergei, Lyosha, you remember Lyosha? I watched him dying of cancer before my eyes... When we went into the army we made a solemn oath to the people of Ukraine to be loyal and true to them always and carry out our military duties and the commands of our superior officers conscientiously and honourably, and to support the legal constitution of Ukraine, and keep any state or military secrets. Me and Vova, Vova took to the drink before he died, Sergei, Lyosha, we swore an oath to defend the Ukrainian state and guard her freedom and independence. Me, Vova and Sergei, he was colonel as well, and he died of a heart attack as well, and Lyosha, we all swore that we wouldn't betray the Ukrainian people. That's you, my girls. Have you gone mad?!

KATYA. Well if that's how it is, off you go to the recruiting office. What use are us girls to you?

SASHA. Without girls there's no point. I want a send-off from you.

KATYA. We already sent you off... Have a heart.

SASHA. For this sixth wave of mobilisation they need to obtain permission from living relatives.

KATYA. Well I won't give it.

SASHA. I'll write to you. I'll send you texts from the front line. You can send me pictures by the grandchildren, parcels, you can worry about me... And I'll defend you.

KATYA. We'll do it ourselves, Sasha... We've been managing by ourselves. You just rest. Let other people go...

OKSANA. You've got a good excuse.

SASHA. The sixth wave of mobilisation. There are no excuses.

KATYA. I'm not giving my permission.

SASHA. Alright. Well I'll go and ask Eleanora then.

KATYA. Who?

SASHA. A woman.

KATYA. From work?

SASHA. What difference does it make?

KATYA. Who is she?! Do I know her?

SASHA. Definitely not.

OKSANA. Sasha, I'm shocked. Do we need to know this?

KATYA. Is she your lover or something? I saw someone was bringing you flowers.

SASHA. You think what you like. But if you don't need me. Then she can be the widow of a hero. And you're nothing.

KATYA. Sasha... Is this blackmail...?

SASHA. I'll be off.

KATYA. Stop! Did you cheat on me then?

SASHA. Ah no. No. I didn't cheat on you. Well, nothing like that.

KATYA. You just really hurt me. That really hurt. So who's this Eleonora?

OKSANA. Mum, I saw her. Forget about it!

SASHA. She worked in the literature department. She loved me.

OKSANA. She's the size of a bus.

KATYA (to OKSANA). Why didn't you tell me?

SASHA. Nothing happened. I just said it to upset you. So you let me come home. I've not settled there... Let me go to war...

KATYA. You're in a good place. You rest. We'll do the fighting ourselves.

SASHA. Good grief. 'Come back,' she says. Come back... Women, eh.

KATYA. Don't get in a state. Do you need anything to take with you?

SASHA. No. Have you got money and visas, just in case?

KATYA. We'll cope.

SASHA. Put our song on. To say goodbye to.

KATYA and OKSANA exchange glances. OKSANA finds their song on her mobile. She turns it on.

Their song starts.

The song gives rise to memories of that summer in the Crimea.

Around the barbecue with his work comrades.

Swimming naked at night.

She has big breasts and long hair.

She is leading him, drunk, into a hotel room.

He is leading her, drunk, into a hotel room.

A young Oksana is jumping on the iron bed.

He is talking about 'Deep Purple'.

'Black Doctor' wine for breakfast.

Jacuzzi baths.

Spa health forms.

Jellyfish thrown up onto the sand.

Soup made of tinned vegetables and corn porridge.

And in a café, a song – grotesque and sublime.

The electric mosquito repellent is invented.

For a long while KATYA and OKSANA are afraid to turn around. At last OKSANA looks around.

SASHA is gone.

OKSANA (with relief). He's gone.

KATYA. Oh, I don't feel good... I didn't say anything positive to him again.

OKSANA. If you want you can go and catch up with him.

KATYA. I don't want. (Calling.) Sasha!

SASHA doesn't answer. KATYA runs out of the house. She can be heard calling 'Sasha! Sasha!' She returns alone, worn out.

OKSANA throws more wood in the stove.

OKSANA. Why don't you feel how hot the radiators are.

They touch the radiators. They are hot.

KATYA. Such a good thing we've got this solid fuel stove.

OKSANA. A very good thing.

KATYA. And an old well.

OKSANA. Where will we put Kolya's little table?

KATYA. Over here. Away from the stove.

OKSANA. It won't fit there.

KATYA. Here then, maybe, if we move the sideboard.

KATYA and OKSANA move the sideboard. They find a plastic bag behind it.

Look. What's this here.

They open it and the sweets inside fall all over the floor. Toffees, creams, fudge pieces, boiled sweets...

OKSANA. Someone hid the sweets.

KATYA. Strange.

OKSANA. Very strange.

KATYA. Not me.

OKSANA. I don't even eat sweets. These are well past their sell-by. Give them here, I'll throw them away.

KATYA. The bin's full.

OKSANA. I'll take it out.

KATYA. I'll take the potatoes down to the cellar.

KATYA heaves the sack, OKSANA takes the bin, the wood crackles and the fire burns.

But somewhere far off, somewhere out there, a new old army is training. Just in case Katya and Oksana

let Sasha go to war.

Commands are issued:

Line up!

At ease! Caps off!

Tkachenko! About-face!

Lift your chests, bellies in, shoulders back and one and two and three...

Attention.

Order arms, and one and two and three.

Machine guns to the ready.

And fire.

Retreat.

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