

THE GUIDE OF THE HERMITAGE*

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* Original title: El Guía del Hermitage. This play won the XIV edition of “San Sebastian Theatre Prize”, Spain, 2003. Francisca Gonzalez-Arias made the translation.

Characters:

-The Guide of the Museum, Pavel Filipovich (Pasha), is elderly and his strength comes and goes. Despite the cold he is not very warmly dressed.

-Igor Igorovich (Igoriók), the Museum guard, lame and around fifty, although he looks older. He wears an old coat with medals, a scarf and military cap. A rifle with fixed bayonet is strapped across his chest.

-Sonia Filipovich, Pavel's wife, is forty-five. She is tall, agile and energetic. Her clothes though worn are of good quality.

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Inside the Hermitage Museum. A large space in semi-darkness. On one side is a large closed double door that contains a small door with cross-bars. One can make out some windows with their shutters closed high up on the empty walls. On the side are two camp-beds next to rough packing crates, which serve as tables and chairs. Oil lamps. The rest evokes empty rooms. A samovar stands out near a rather useless stove.

Igor is sweeping the area while shell bursts from the German artillery can be heard nearby. Suddenly there is a knocking on the small door. Igor, startled, carefully picks up a painting wrapped in cloth, which is leaning on the wall, kisses it, crosses himself, and hides it under his bed. The knocks on the door become more frequent.

IGOR- Is that you, Dimitri? Son, is it you? (*Silence, except for the German cannon shots that are more spaced out, while the knocks on the door are more frequent*). I'm coming, son. I'm coming. Wait, wait, I've got to look for the key.

SONIA – (*From outside*) Comrade Igor Igorovich, open up quickly. Open the door. I'm freezing!

IGOR – (*Shouting*) Aren't you Dimitri? Dimitri, Dimitri, are you there? (*sarcastically*) You see, you see, the Germans got tired of bombing us tonight. Those cowards can't fight our soviet cold, ha, ha. They can't stand it any more, ha ha. They can't stand it . . .

SONIA- Comrade Igorovich, stop that nonsense and open up quickly. Hurry up. I'm freezing to death.

IGOR – (*Raises the two crossbars and unlocks the door with difficulty*). Wait, wait. Ah . . ., it's you, Comrade Filipovich. (*Looking outside*) Where is Dimitri? Have you seen my son?

SONIA – (*full of meaning*) You know where he is, Comrade. (*Pause*) This is the worst winter I've ever seen; I wouldn't be surprised if it's 40 below zero.

IGOR – Of course I know where he is. He's there, like always, brandishing his rifle in the trench on Glavniy Shtab. Dimitri is strong and courageous; he takes after his father who received these medals for . . .

SONIA – (*Taking packages out of a large bag that she was carrying under her coat*) Comrade Igorovich, here are your bread and dried fish rations and your card. There's no sugar left. (*Pause*) Listen, how's my husband? Does he still have heart palpitations? Where is he?

IGOR – (*Examining the packages*). He's around here someplace. He's not going to get lost. So there's no sugar; I don't even remember what it tastes like any more. They must be giving it to our young men and that's as it should be. We old people know how to do without (*attentive to the silence outside*). The cannon shots have stopped, Comrade.

SONIA – Where is my husband, Comrade Igorovich?

IGOR – How should I know? I used to follow him but it wore me out. He knows the Museum better than anyone. He doesn't need any light. (*Pause*) The truth is, Sonia, I need to have a talk with you.

SONIA – Is something wrong?

IGOR – Look, the truth is I understand Pavel Filipovoch less and less. He himself helped to pack the museum's paintings and he still goes on describing them as if they were hanging on the walls. Oh. . . and do you know what he's doing now? I'm not even going to tell you. It's better you see it with your own eyes.

SONIA – What's wrong with him now?

IGOR – How long has it been since you were last here? A month?

SONIA – I don't think it's been that long. (*Reading a ration card*). Exactly 18 days. I wasn't able to come before, comrade. At night we Committee members meet and there's a curfew during the day. We have to avoid more casualties. Tonight I asked for a few hours leave. (*Pause*). Oh . . . ! And if you knew how much I miss my husband! He's so intelligent, kind and affectionate (*Pause*), but Leningrad is our first priority, and if we surrender the whole country will fall and with it, Pavel, you and I.

IGOR – Stop your chatter. You have to take Pavel with you, he's lost his mind.

SONIA – His mind?

IGOR – Yes, his mind, he's mad. And furthermore, I, as Commissar of this museum, refuse to be held responsible if he has an attack and drops dead in one of the galleries. That man needs medicines and care. His head and heart are failing, and as if that weren't enough, he doesn't even dress warmly against the cold . . .

SONIA – (*taking off her coat*) You have no idea what you're saying, Comrade, it's not that cold here. (*Pause*) I would like nothing better than to take him with me, but where? Tell me. Do you remember our apartment?

IGOR (*Author's note: evoking a happier time that contrasts with the present situation*) Of course. What great parties you used to give! . . . Both of you, always on your honeymoon. . . , who would have thought . . . the old guide and the young art restorer . . . I envied you. . . (*Pause*) Me, a widower and lame . . . My favorite spot was the kitchen, small but cozy, nobody could budge me from there.

SONIA – Look, our apartment has disappeared; it was bombed three times and there are no traces left of it or the building. There are no shelters for the elderly; hospitals are overflowing. There's no more heart medicine. (*Pause*). As you know, we haven't been able to bury our dead for months; we leave them on the street where they freeze. No, Comrade, Pavel is better off here. After all, he always spent more time in the Hermitage than at home. This museum is the safer place in Leningrad.

IGOR – As a member of the Defense Committee you shouldn't say those things. Have you lost confidence in Stalin?

SONIA – Never. You're talking rubbish!

IGOR – Then watch your tongue, Sonia Filipovich, you could get into trouble. We'll soon defeat the Germans.

SONIA – I have no doubt about that, but I don't think it's going to happen overnight. Since you've been shut up here, you can't imagine what we're going through outside. There are no cats or dogs left. But it's true too that

nobody's complaining. *(Pause)* We all have to cooperate, Comrade Igorovich, and you've been lucky enough to be required to do very little: you only have to take care of my husband.

IGOR – No way. Not so. I'm the museum Commissar, not a nurse. *(Pause)* Sonia Filipovich, I order you to take your husband with you tonight.

SONIA – And that I carry him over ditches, trenches, and sewers, until we reach a shelter? Do you know how long it took me to get here from Saint Nicholas cathedral? Two hours. I'm not joking. Two hours, and only because everyone in the checkpoints knows me.

IGOR –As the authority, as Commissar of the State Museum, I . . .

SONIA – Shut up, Igor Igorovich, you're not the authority or the Commissar of anything. They haven't bombed the Hermitage yet because the Germans think they can take the paintings. And you are its only guard because since you're lame you can't climb into a trench. So stop your babbling. Go find my husband so I can give him his rations. I want to see him. *(Pause)* Poor man. *(Pause)* Hurry up. I have to get back to the Committee before dawn. Go look for him, I say.

IGOR – Comrade, What a way to treat an old man! Well, I'm not going. You go, if you want. All I need is for someone to order around the Commissar of the State Museum of the Hermitage.

PAVEL – *(Enters speaking grandiosely to a group of imaginary visitors while his wife watches astonished and Igor puts away his provisions in one of the crates)*. I hope that my esteemed Comrades have enjoyed our tour. I'm sorry that the visit lasted only two hours, but it has served to give

you an idea of the marvelous contents of the Hermitage. Imagine that if we had stopped only one minute in front of each work of art, the visit would have lasted twelve years. Yes, twelve years. Come back again. You shall learn much and marvel. Before leaving do not forget to retrieve your belongings from the checkroom, and bundle up because it must be horribly cold outside. I wish you a good night. And once again, thank you for coming. No, no, the Hermitage guides do not accept tips, many thanks. Good night, comrades.

(Long silence) (On becoming aware of his wife's presence he is alarmed).
What's happened, Sonia? Why that face? Is it bad news? Did they bomb the Hermitage train?

SONIA – No, my dear. The train is safe. It was the last one to leave before they destroyed the station. Now indeed we are completely surrounded.

PAVEL – What does that matter, dear! Art is safe! *(Jumping for joy and trying to dance with Sonia and Igor who do not join in)* Bravo! Bravo! Let's dance, Sonia! Let's dance, Sonia! Let's dance, Igor! Let's dance, Igor! Come on, Sonia, cheer up!

SONIA – Stop, Pavel, stop, stop.

PAVEL – What's wrong? You seem different, Sonia. What's worrying you?

IGOR – She's worried about you, Pavel. Don't you realize? You were talking to yourself.

PAVEL – Me, talking to myself? I'm speaking to my wife, idiot.

IGOR – *(To Sonia)* It's useless arguing with him. Take him with you, Sonia. He's getting worse every day.

PAVEL – Who's worse? Tell me. Why is that when you're alone you climb the ladder and open the window? Isn't it forbidden to open the windows? Whom are you speaking to?

IGOR – You're going too far, Pavel Filipovich. Our thirty-year friendship could end right now.

SONIA – Come now, don't fight. (*Pause*) Pasha, I've longed so much to give you a hug. . . I've been so afraid, not for you, of course, but for me; you never know when a Nazi bomb is going to fall on you. (*Separating herself from her husband*). But let's not get tragic, right? Here are your rations. I'll keep your card. They say there won't be any more sugar. I managed to get a bottle of vodka so you can share it with your friend Igor. Open it now if you wish. But tell me, dear, whom were you talking to when you came in?

PAVEL – What do you mean whom? Don't you know I'm the Museum guide?

SONIA – Yes, but there's no one here.

PAVEL – Of course, everyone left already. (*Pause*) Except you, my love, and this fellow who thinks he's the Museum Commissar. Ha, ha, ha, Commissar. The only thing he does is spy on me with that rifle of his that doesn't fire.

IGOR – (*Aiming the rifle*) What do you mean it doesn't fire?

PAVEL – Bah . . . get that out of here, you clown. Dear Sonia, since I'm the only guide I have to give all the tours. All of them.

SONIA – And whom do you give the tours to, dear? What do you show them?

PAVEL – Well, the usual. The Archeology galleries, then the paintings, that is to say, a bit of the great Velázquez, and something of Rembrandt, Renoir, Picasso. But what am I doing telling you who knows very well what I do. Oh . . . Have you seen the Repin exhibition? I don't think you've seen it. I can show it to you if you wish. It's very comprehensive. Imagine, we've brought paintings from the Russian Museum and from the Tretyakov Gallery. We're commemorating the first centenary of his birth. Do you want me to show you?

SONIA – And do you see those paintings, dear Pasha? Do you see them?

PAVEL – My sight is failing but I'm not blind yet. Try me if you want. (*Raising his arm without looking*). There above our beds is Stalin's picture. Do you see it?

SONIA – There's nothing on the wall, dear.

PAVEL – (*Looking at the wall*) Whaaat? Indeed. It's not there. It's not there! What happened to the photograph, Igor?

IGOR - Well, I don't know. I myself just realized that it's not there. Could the soldiers have packed it thinking it was a valuable painting?

PAVEL – Of course not. There was a wooden crate for each painting. Not one more, not one less. At the end just two crates were left. One was for the Archangel Saint Gabriel, called "The Angel of the Golden Hair," by an anonymous artist of the twelfth century; the other was for "The Miracle of

St. George” of the Novogorod school, probably from around 1475. Those icons are the most representative works of their time.

SONIA – Your mind is so lucid, my dear! And why did they leave them for the end if they are so valuable, Pavel?

PAVEL – Human nature is so mysterious, dear. A mystery. The colonel in charge of the move ordered it so. Perhaps he believed that icons work miracles and that they would protect us from the Germans. Don't you agree with me, you second rate watchman?

IGOR – Like all madmen you sometimes tell the truth, but you don't have to insult me.

SONIA – Admit it, Igor Igorovich. My husband is in great form. Isn't it true, dear, that you haven't changed?

IGOR – You're as crazy as Pavel. There's no worse blind man than one who doesn't want to see.

PAVEL – I see what I see, little watchman. (*Pause*). I don't see what I don't see: that's logical. (*Pause*) And of course, I see what I don't see. (*Pause*) And so you understand the latter, you fool: I see that Stalin's picture isn't there.

SONIA – But what does it matter, dear? (*To Igor*) Was it valuable?

IGOR – It wasn't catalogued, if that's what you mean. It was one of those large photographs that they used to send to all institutions. The soldiers made a mistake taking Stalin, but this is still a state museum even if it's empty.

SONIA – Comrade Igorovich, you have to admit that my husband is in a better state than you. You don't even know what's happening right under your nose. I leave Pavel under your protection.

IGOR. But didn't you yourself see him talk to phantom visitors? He speaks to ghosts, Sonia.

PAVEL - What crazy ideas, you ignorant watchman. Me, someone who doesn't even believe in God, believes in ghosts. That's your thing; I've seen you crossing yourself several times.

IGOR – He's slandered me, Sonia, and I won't stand for it any more. That's the last straw, calling me religious. How can he say that to me who's been a communist, an atheist, and a materialist all his life? Take him away unless you want me to have him arrested for insulting an official.

SONIA – Come now, you're acting like children. Serve the vodka, dear, and let's make a toast to Leningrad.

PAVEL – All right, let's toast to Leningrad and to you, my dear. And also to Igor, and excuse me if I've offended you. It wasn't my intention; forgive me. (*He shakes hands with Igor*).

IGOR - (*Reserved*) You're forgiven, but let this be the last time, eh?

SONIA – To your health. To friendship.

IGOR AND PAVEL – To your health.

IGOR – This vodka is so good! Mmm, I haven't had a drink for so long. Tell me, Comrade Filipovich, for you are so intelligent and have a high position in the Committee. Do you think that one should worry about the future, or just wait for things to happen when they ought to happen?

PAVEL – It seems that vodka turns mules into philosophers.

IGOR – (*To Sonia*) Do you think that we should wait until one is on one's deathbed to . . .

SONIA (*Interrupting him*). Are you returning to our earlier conversation? I thought that discussion was over.

IGOR – Well, no. I, as the authority . . .

PAVEL – Shut your trap, authority, and drink.

IGOR – Not as an authority, but as an old friend, I think that you are out of your mind, Pavel Filipovich. Look, we all talk to ourselves from time to time, but describing paintings that are not hanging on the walls is serious . . .

PAVEL – I, you fool, you colossal fool...

IGOR – (*Interrupting him*). Let me finish for once!

SONIA – Pasha, dear, let Igor speak.

PAVEL – Fine, finish what you have to say.

IGOR – I was saying that I don't see anything wrong that you talk to yourself. The odd thing is that you describe paintings that aren't there, and, worse, pour me a little more, thank you. The worst thing is that you talk to ghost visitors.

PAVEL – Ghosts?

IGOR – The museum has been closed for eighteen months, Pavel.

PAVEL – And what does that have to do with it?

IGOR – And what's more, there's nothing here. Today we finished six months of work. The train with the last cargo will be in the Urals, or who knows where, in a few days. There's nothing left here.

PAVEL – Nothing?

IGOR – Nothing.

SONIA – There's nothing here anymore, dear.

(Silence)

PAVEL – Nothing, eh? Well let's see, you can't deny that the three of us are here.

SONIA AND PAVEL – Yes.

PAVEL – Very good. That's a beginning. And you can't deny either that we're in the Hermitage?

SONIA – I don't deny it, dear. We are in the Hermitage museum.

IGOR. I don't deny it either. Pour me some more.

PAVEL – *(giving him the bottle)* Drink whatever you want, wise protector of art. Very well, on the other side of this wall is the Neva River, true or false?

IGOR and SONIA – True, true.

PAVEL – We're doing well, very well. That is to say that although the Neva isn't visible, we can describe that marvelous river; we know that it's frozen, that we can walk on it without fear of falling in. Furthermore, we can feel the current that flows below the solid layer of ice.

SONIA – You're right, dear, but I don't know what your point is.

PAVEL – That you agree . . . *(he feels heart palpitations and places his hand on his chest)*

SONIA – Are you all right?

PAVEL – Absolutely. I was saying that I would like you to agree that always, always, the things, the persons we are fond of, that we love, are visible to us.

IGOR – Even though they aren't?

PAVEL – Who cares if you can see or feel what you love? Close your eyes and tell me: Can you see, feel, the Neva?

IGOR – You're mixing us up because you think the vodka has gone to our heads, but you're mistaken. I could drink five bottles and still know if you're trying to trick me. *(Pause)* No, Pavel, a hundred times no. The Neva is one thing, and the paintings are another, and worse than that is talking to people who aren't there.

PAVEL – Stupid, rigid watchman. Tell me, with whom were you speaking this morning from the window? Dear Sonia, didn't we, who haven't slept together for three months, agree to speak to each other about what happened to us during the day every night before falling asleep? I do it, do you?

SONIA – Of course, and I feel your voice and your guidance, dear. But I think that this isn't the same. I've seen you talking to people as if they had just come from a guided tour, and that seems to me to . . . *(Pavel feels a pain in his heart, places his two hands on his chest, and falls to his knees)* MY DEAR! MY DEAR! Igor, help me! Let's put him on the bed. *(With great difficulty they lay him down)*. Not like that; he should be reclining with his head up. That's better. *(She unfastens his collar)*.

PAVEL *(in a low voice)*. Don't worry, dear, this won't last long. My time hasn't come yet.

IGOR – You see, Sonia, you see. This is what I meant. Pavel is very ill.

PAVEL – *(recovering)*. I'll bury you, second-rate watchman.

IGOR *(happy)* I wouldn't be surprised, you recover very quickly, you old rascal.

PAVEL – Uhh ... I think it's over. Yes, it's over. Another small scare. Don't be alarmed, Sonia. It comes like lightning, and it goes like lightning. Did you bring any cigarettes, dear?

SONIA – You shouldn't smoke, Pasha. The doctor forbade it.

IGOR – (*To Sonia*) I can do it for him; cigarettes don't affect my leg.

SONIA – Both of you will have to wait. There are no cigarettes left in Leningrad.

PAVEL – That is unfortunate indeed.

IGOR – It's true, very unfortunate.

PAVEL – Don't repeat what I say, Igork. (*To Sonia*) Let's continue the conversation. Let's see. Where were we? Ah . . ., yes; you were saying, dear, that I was speaking to ghosts . . .

SONIA – Let it go, dear, it doesn't matter now.

PAVEL – But yes, it does matter, Sonia. It matters a lot.

SONIA – The only thing that matters is that you rest now. There will be time to speak about whatever you want.

PAVEL – No, Sonia, we don't have time. I don't have much time.

IGOR – Didn't you say you were going to bury me?

PAVEL – Sonia, let's get on with this conversation. It's important, very important for me. If you don't see what I see it means I'm crazy and I've been crazy all my life. That's very sad, Sonia; so sad.

IGOR – What drivel, you know-it-all. (*To Sonia*) Can I give him a drink?

PAVEL – And two and three, yes, we don't have to be thrifty any more, eminent Commissar. (*To Sonia*) Let's finish this conversation, Sonia. (*Drinking from the bottle*) I want to convince you that I'm not crazy. I see those paintings, Sonia. I see them. And I see the people, Sonia, and speak, and explain things to them; I answer their questions. I'm a tour guide on active duty. Do you believe me, dear? Do you?

SONIA – Yes, I believe you, my dear Pavel. I believe everything you tell me.

PAVEL – No, Sonia. You're just saying that because you want to make an old madman happy. No, you don't believe me. You would make me happier if you said you don't believe me because then I could . . .

IGOR – (*Interrupting*). If the truth makes you happy you can count on me. I don't believe you. There aren't any paintings or visitors here. Now cheer up and pass me the bottle because you're going to finish it off.

PAVEL – Drink up, Igor. I can't convince you of anything. You think that the moon comes out only at night, and the sun only during the day. That's really being completely crazy. (*To Sonia*) How long have we been together, dear? Twenty years?

SONIA – Twenty-three, Pasha, twenty-three.

PAVEL – Well, then, I swear to you that this is the most serious conversation we've had in our twenty-three years.

SONIA – The vodka has gone to your head, dear Pasha.

IGOR – Not really, the guy speaks like that with or without vodka.

PAVEL – Sonia, dear, this is crucial. I see those paintings and I talk to those people.

SONIA- Well, dear, I believe you. You see those paintings and talk to those people. Now rest, sleep a little. We're all tired. We shall speak about this again tomorrow.

IGOR – Good idea, Comrade. Let's rest.

PAVEL – (*To Sonia*) Can you rest when you suddenly discover that your wife thinks you're crazy? (*Pointing to Igor*). This fellow praises me with his opinion. Imagine, if Igor thought I was as sane as he that would make me believe I'm hopelessly lost. But you, dear, I want to convince you that I am not. (*Pause*) Let's do this. (*He gets up with difficulty*). Let's go see the paintings.

IGOR – I forbid you to get up, Pavel Filipovich.

SONIA – Your friend Igor is right. It's better you rest, dear.

PAVEL – I'll rest when I die. Come, Sonia, I'm going to show you some paintings. Let's go. What do you want to begin with? The icons?

SONIA – But dear, didn't you yourself say that they took the last icons?

PAVEL – Bah, woman, that's an unimportant detail. I'll show them to you. They're magnificent.

IGOR – (*To himself*) He's stark raving mad. My God, how is this all going to end?

SONIA – Do you feel well, dear?

PAVEL – Never better.

SONIA – Are you strong enough to walk?

PAVEL – To the Urals. Or farther.

IGOR – (*To himself*) That man is going to drop dead right in front of me.

SONIA – Do you really want to show me the paintings?

IGOR – (*To himself*) My God, she's gone crazy on me too. What am I to do?

PAVEL – What are you mumbling, diligent Commissar? Are you going to accompany us on a tour of the Hermitage State Museum?

SONIA – (*Animated*) Come on, Comrade Igorovich, we'll have our own private tour guide. What a luxury!

IGOR – What's wrong with you, Sonia Filipovich, have you gone crazy? Or don't you know that there's nothing here any more?

SONIA – Come on. Come with us, Igor. As my husband's best friend, you shouldn't miss this.

PAVEL – Come, coward. Don't be afraid of reality.

IGOR – What reality? It's fantasy, madness, delirium.

PAVEL – Reality, fantasy, madness, delirium are synonyms. Come, I'll make it a short tour so your leg won't hurt. A short but select tour, eh? What do you fancy seeing, my dear friend. (*To Sonia*) This fellow knows more about painting than you could imagine; he's learned by osmosis, ha, ha.

IGOR. Don't make fun. I understand a bit. Yes sir.

SONIA – Well then, come with us. We'll speak about art and discuss the paintings.

IGOR- But, what paintings? There's nothing there.

PAVEL – Come, dear Igoriok.

SONIA – Come on, dear Igor Igorovich.

IGOR – (*Taking an oil lamp and extinguishing the others*). Well, well, I'll go with you, but let it be understood that it's not because I believe. I'm doing so out of friendship. Ah, and because I'm the museum Commissar and am responsible for the security of the building and its contents.

All prepare to exit

PAVEL -- Did I hear correctly? Did you say, strict Commissar, that you are responsible for the Hermitage's contents?

IGOR --Don't start, Pasha. . . Don't start . . .

DARK

2

The three characters enter a large gallery in semi-darkness. Igor carries the oil lamp.

PAVEL – Generally we begin the tours in the archeology galleries. . .

SONIA – (*Impatient*) You said you were going to show us the paintings.

PAVEL – All right, dear, let's go to the painting galleries and skip over the archeology. I only mentioned archeology because it's a part of the museum that interests many visitors. We have more than 700,000 pieces.

IGOR – (*Sarcastically*). Oh, and you wanted to show us all of them? Look, don't exaggerate your craziness, Pavel.

PAVEL – Igor, don't be a fool. As your private guide I wanted to let you know your options.

IGOR – Options? (*Reflecting*) Well, all right, I want to begin with the numismatics galleries.

PAVEL – We have many, many coins and medals, more than a million. Do you want me to show you all of them?

IGOR – No, (*Reflecting*) I only want to see the ones from the time of Ivan, Ivan the Terrible.

SONIA – How dull, Igorovich. The coins and medals are the most boring things in the museum.

IGOR - Esteemed Sonia, Comrade Filipovich has told us that we should choose what we want to see. Good, so I want to see the coins and medals.

PAVEL – Well I'm not going to show them to you, Igor. So there.

IGOR – You're a liar.

PAVEL – You're the liar. There are no coins or medals here. We sent them to the Urals.

IGOR – Whaaaat . . . ?

PAVEL – What are you so surprised about, second-rate watchman? You must be crazy to want to see some medals.

IGOR – I think I'm going to have a stroke. Dear God, now it seems that I'm the crazy one!

PAVEL – Well of course. You ask to see things that aren't here. Didn't you yourself help pack them and put them in the truck?

IGOR – (*Very nervous*) That man is going to be the death of me.

SONIA – Come on now, Igor Igorovich. Don't be like that. It's just a joke.

PAVEL – It's no joke, dear. There's not one coin or medal left in the museum.

SONIA – I know it, dear. I know it. But there aren't any paintings either, and yet, you were taking us to see them.

IGOR – Very well put, Comrade Filipovich. I was afraid you too were a little . . . you know what I mean.

PAVEL – The paintings are another matter. Those paintings . . . those paintings. . . but why go on talking about the same thing? We're going to see them. You can verify it with your own eyes. We'll begin with the icons. (*Igor is startled*). And so this cripple doesn't get tired we'll view just one: the Archangel Saint Gabriel, better known as "The Angel of the Golden Hair".

IGOR – That isn't a painting; it's an icon.

PAVEL – All icons are paintings, ignoramus.

IGOR – They're more than paintings. Everyone knows that.

PAVEL – Let's begin with Saint Gabriel.

IGOR (*Very nervous*) Saint Gabriel, no, no. I said no.

SONIA – (*Annoyed*) Enough! I'm losing my patience. If you keep on arguing, we'll get nowhere. You're acting like schoolchildren. (*Pause*) Pavel, dear, show us whatever you like, but do it soon. Don't forget that I have to get back to the Committee before dawn. And you, Igor, just come with us and keep your mouth shut.

IGOR – Don't speak to me like that. Don't forget that I'm the Commiss . . .

SONIA – Be quiet! I've had it up to here! Don't open your mouth again, I said!

PAVEL – My dear Sonia, I beg you not to treat Igor like that. He's stupid but he's a good person. Let him say what he wants.

SONIA – I don't understand you, Pavel. I don't see how you can defend this . . . this . . .

PAVEL – This ignoramus? Well yes, Sonia, I have to protect him. Friends are an endangered species. One has to look after them as if they were pure gold, and, oh . . . put up with them. Yes, put up with them . . .

IGOR – Thank you, Pavel.

PAVEL – You're welcome, Igor. You're welcome.

SONIA – All right. All right. I'm sorry, but let's finish this right now. If you continue to fight I shall leave immediately.

PAVEL – Fine. No more fights, Igor.

IGOR – No more fights, Pavel.

PAVEL – Good, good. So we shall also skip over the icons and go directly to my favorite painters.

IGOR – Yes, that's fine.

PAVEL. We shall begin with the Spaniard Velázquez. Come this way; follow me. On our way there, I will speak to you a little bit about the Hermitage. (*Pavel goes in front, passing through the galleries, gesticulating and speaking about the building with his customary grandiloquence. Igor and Sonia follow a few steps behind.*) This museum was the Winter Palace of the Czars. It was built by the Italian architect Bartolomeo Rastrelli and it was finished in the year . . . (*Pavel continues to talk to himself. It is hard to make out what he is saying*¹. *He pays no attention to the dialogues between Igor and Sonia.*)

IGOR – (*To Sonia*) Do you think we'll see the paintings?

SONIA – I don't know. I don't know.

IGOR – What do you mean you don't know? There aren't any paintings left here.

SONIA. I know. I know.

IGOR – So . . . ?

SONIA – I want to see what my husband is going to do.

IGOR – Oh, . . . I understand. You want to see if your husband is really crazy.

¹ **Continuation of Pavel's explanation:** 1762. Catherine the Great was the first occupant of this imposing palace of 460 rooms. It contains immense salons; majestic stairways; even a large church and a theatre. The official rooms are decorated in the purest Russian Baroque style of the eighteenth century. On the occasion of its inauguration, Catherine the Great purchased 225 valuable canvases and paintings from an art dealer from Berlin. That was the nucleus of the art that in time expanded to become what the Hermitage is today: the largest museum in the world.

SONIA – I'm not so sure that he's crazy, Comrade. He says very coherent things.

IGOR – But how are we going to see the paintings if they aren't there?

SONIA – Not so loud.

IGOR – This is unbelievable. I think you're crazy too.

SONIA – Possibly, but in any case that would be because I'm crazy about my husband.

PAVEL – (*With his customary grandiloquence*) Well, my dear visitors, we have arrived at the first of the galleries we are to visit today. As you can see it is devoted to Spanish painting and to the painter Diego Velázquez in particular. Velázquez was born in 1599 and died in 1660. His reputation as a portrait painter was well deserved. He painted kings, popes, and the leaders of his time. He also depicted drunks, beggars and the deformed. In all his portraits he managed to show that behind the person's physical characteristics there was a being who was capable of loving, hating, mistrusting, hurting or making fun of himself. In sum, he portrayed human beings with all the weaknesses and virtues inherent to our race. Here I will show you an example of his magnificent art. (*Clearing his throat*) Ahem, Ahem. . . The Hermitage is privileged to own the portrait of the Count-Duke of Olivares. It was painted about 1630 when Olivares was the strong man of Spain and Spain was one of the most powerful countries in the world. Notice, my friends, the austerity of the portrait (*Pavel continues to speak² as if he were showing a painting hanging on the wall without heed-*

² **Continuation of Pavel's explanation:** of Gaspar de Guzmán y Pimentel, Count-Duke of Olivares, who was the principal minister and favorite of Philip IV of Spain. (*Pause*) That King, who was of weak character, soon left the government and the life of the Court in the hands of this man who was educated to rule. Olivares placed his friends in the highest positions of the realm, passing

ing his guests. While Pavel gesticulates and speaks without being clearly heard, Sonia pays close attention to him and Igor shakes his head)

IGOR – *(To Sonia in a low voice)* I don't see anything, do you?

SONIA – Let me hear the explanation.

IGOR – Sonia, Sonia. Are you convinced yet? Your husband has lost his mind.

SONIA – *(Looking at the wall to which Pavel is pointing)* Hmmmm.

IGOR – Sonia, this man is crazy. I don't see anything. And you don't either. Isn't it true that you don't see anything? Isn't it true? Isn't it?

SONIA – *(Without taking her eyes off the wall)* Don't be impertinent, Igrovich.

IGOR – Tell me the truth, Sonia Filipovich. Do you see anything? Do you?

SONIA – Don't be such a pest, Igor.

PAVEL *(continuing with his explanation)* . . . it is surprising, of course, that Velázquez depicted this rich and immensely powerful man dressed austere without any lace or adornment. Perhaps reasons of state prevailed. However, the dark and sober attire harmonizes with his dark hair and beard, and at the same time renders the features of his face more luminous and evident *(he continues to speak³ without being heard)*

over and exiling all those who got in his way. His government lasted twenty long years during which he garnered both the respect and the fear of the Spanish nobility.

³ **Continuation of Pavel's explanation:** Notice the warm light that shines on his broad and spacious forehead enhancing it.

IGOR – Sonia, Sonia, what are you looking at?

PAVEL – *(Continuing his explanation)* . . . our first impression is that of an affable man, understanding, tender even. This could be a portrait of a good father *(He continues to speak⁴ without being heard. At this moment Sonia trembles thinking she has seen the portrait flash on the wall where it is indeed projected)*

IGOR – Did you see something, Sonia? Sonia, Sonia, answer me.

SONIA – *Without taking her eyes off the all, she makes a gesture with her hand to Igor to leave her alone.*

PAVEL – *(Continuing his explanation)* . . . but if you look closely you can see that behind his smile and gentle expression there is the gaze of a man who can be hard, perhaps cruel, undoubtedly reserved. In sum: a person who cannot be trusted. Intelligent, yes; clever as well; but above all, astute and dangerous; dangerous to the point of being perverse. In effect, Velázquez, the master, did not let himself be deceived by appearances and showed us the Count of Olivares's true personality. *(Pause)* Concentrate your attention once again on his gaze, his gaze only, and you will see *(he continues⁵ to speak without being heard)*

(Sonia trembles once again. She has seen a pair of eyes that are projected on the wall for a brief period, but longer than the previous image)

IGOR – Sonia, Sonia, what's wrong?

⁴ **Pavel's explanation continues:** or of a sympathetic grandfather who adores his grandchildren.

⁵ **Pavel's explanation continues:** that his power makes us tremble, and knocks the breath out of us.

PAVEL – (*Finishing his explanation and turning to his guests*) Yes, dear friends, this portrait was one of the major achievements of the great Velázquez. It is simply magnificent. (*Pause*) Did you like it?

IGOR – I didn't see anything.

PAVEL – Nothing, not a thing?

IGOR – Nothing.

PAVEL – Perhaps your eyes are failing, dear Commissar. It's your age. But don't worry. When the siege is over we'll have them make you a good pair of eyeglasses.

IGOR – My eyesight is very good, Pavel. There's nothing on that wall.

PAVEL – Don't be alarmed, Igor. When you have what you need you shall see everything in a different way. (*Pause*) And you, Sonia, what did you think of the painting?

SONIA – What I liked the best was the way you explained the expression of the eyes. There really is something perverse in them.

IGOR – But, Comrade Filipovich, don't tell me that you have . . .

PAVEL – Oh, Igor, Igor, you need glasses.

IGOR – I need glasses? . . . It's the two of you who need a little bit of sanity.

PAVEL – Your blindness can be remedied by a good pair of glasses. Did you know, demanding watchman, that there was a famous artist who produced marvelous paintings when he was almost blind?

IGOR – I've heard that before but never believed it. Don't forget that I've been a guard all my life and I've heard thousands of crazy explanations. I don't believe that a blind man can paint.

SONIA – I don't either.

IGOR – Finally, Sonia!

PAVEL – Well, that's what happened to Monet. In my view, he produced his best paintings when he was blind.

SONIA – That can't be, dear.

IGOR – We're not that stupid, Pavel.

PAVEL – I swear it. It's been written about. If Beethoven composed his ninth symphony when he was deaf, why couldn't Monet paint when he was blind?

IGOR – Well, because.

PAVEL – Let's go see the paintings he painted when he was blind. How about it?

SONIA – I'd love to.

IGOR – You're taking us from one place to the other to see nothing. Anyway, I know his paintings by heart.

PAVEL – *(To Sonia)* Didn't I tell you? Even though he doesn't look it, he knows a lot about painting. *(To Igor)* Make an effort, my friend, let's go see Monet. Remember that he has a lot of meaning for us. He did his best paintings while France was fighting against Germany in the First World War.

SONIA – Tell me about that, dear.

(Distant cannon shots are heard once again; they will continue until the end of this scene)

PAVEL – Indeed. Old and suffering from cataracts, Monet fought for his country by shutting himself up to paint an immense work in order to present it to his compatriots when France triumphed. *(Pause)* What he painted was marvelous. He created a dazzling symphony of colors that shows water lilies and flowers and hanging plants gliding on a placid multitude of ponds. He created a marvelous hymn to peace. *(Pause)* His countrymen appreciated his determination; thus, in the midst of the suffering and pain of war, everyone was aware of the progress of his work. Even President Clemenceau . . .

IGOR – *(Interrupting)* Who? Who?

PAVEL – Clemenceau. Even President Clemenceau would visit him at great risk *(While he was speaking, some paintings by Monet appeared for a few brief moments on the walls. Sonia looked at them enthralled, and Igor, unable to believe what was happening, rubbed his eyes)* Well, are you up to seeing Monet?

IGOR – (*Still disconcerted*) No, no. Furthermore, I . . . I . . .

PAVEL – Are you tired? If you want we can go later.

IGOR – Yes, it would be better later.

PAVEL – You're right. I don't know why I mentioned Monet. His paintings are far away and your leg . . .

IGOR – Don't worry about my leg. I can walk to the Urals too.

SONIA – Dear Pasha, Monet's story is beautiful. I think we should tell our comrades about it. It would help keep up our spirit of resistance. And besides, those marvelous colors are so optimistic, so full of life and hope.

IGOR – Don't tell me you saw them now? Monet is on the second floor.

PAVEL – That's right. Monet is upstairs. I think that we should see other painters first. The next gallery is devoted to Rembrandt.

SONIA – All right, let's go to Rembrandt's gallery if you wish, but don't forget to take us to see Monet tonight.

IGOR – Do we have to see Rembrandt? I was in his gallery for six years.

PAVEL – Rembrandt is a painter one never tires of seeing.

SONIA- Wonderful. Take us there.

(*Pavel goes in front while the others follow*)

IGOR – *(To Sonia)* Comrade, Comrade. Did you see Monet's paintings back there?

SONIA – And you?

IGOR – I must confess that your husband has confused me. I don't know, I don't know.

SONIA – What is it that you don't know, Commissair? *(To Pavel, who stops suddenly and places his hands on his chest)* Dear, dear. What's wrong? What's wrong?

PAVEL – Just a moment, one moment. Uhh, let's wait a moment. *(Pause)*
One moment . . . *(Igor brings him a crate so he can sit down)*

SONIA – I think we should stop the tour. You've won, dear. You're right. The paintings are still here.

PAVEL – Uhh, uhh. Dear, I think, I think it has passed. This obstruction is almost gone; almost.

IGOR – Let's stop now, Pavel.

IGOR – Come on, let's stop the tour. Sonia is right. You've convinced us. I saw Velázquez's painting too.

PAVEL – Fools don't know how to lie, Igor.

IGOR – I swear I saw it. I also saw Monet's paintings. Isn't that so, Sonia?

PAVEL – Monet is upstairs, idiot.

IGOR – Yes, but I saw them here. Somebody must have brought them down.

PAVEL – (*Getting up*) You're absurd, Igor. Now you want me to believe that you see more things than me. (*Pause*) I'm fine now. Just fine. Let's go see Rembrandt. Keep your eyes wide open, Igor, and don't lie to me again. You should never lie to friends. Promise me.

IGOR – I promise, Pavel.

PAVEL – Igor, if you don't see anything tell me. I won't be upset. (*To Sonia*) And that goes for you too, dear. Tell me the truth so I don't go to my grave doubting you.

SONIA – Don't talk to me about dying, Pavel dear. Let's go see your Rembrandts.

PAVEL (*Going into an adjoining gallery*) Here we have twenty-four marvelous paintings by Rembrandt. My favorite one is Danae. Come this way (*he walks a short distance toward the wall*). Look at it carefully.

IGOR – (*A few steps away from Pavel*) It's not there. It's over here, right in front of me.

PAVEL – Whaaat . . . ?

IGOR – Are you blind? Danae isn't there. It's here.

PAVEL – What does it matter, here or there?

IGOR – Yes, it matters. If you want to give a guided tour, you must do it right. This has always been Danae's place. Two meters/six feet away from the door, and next to the guard's chair. This is its place. This one and no other.

PAVEL – You don't have to go on about it. It's all the same.

SONIA – (*Irritated*) Please don't start playing games again. (*To Pavel*) Please, dear, go to where Igor Igorovich said and begin.

PAVEL – (*Gets a little closer to Igor*) Is this all right?

IGOR – Not here either. Danae is exactly in front of me.

PAVEL – (*Going to where Igor indicated*) All right, All right. Are you happy now? Very well. As I was saying, Danae is my favorite painting by Rembrandt. It's based on a very interesting story.

IGOR – You can skip the story. We know it already.

PAVEL – Really? Well then, why don't you tell it to us?

IGOR – Me? Come on, my friend, I know it but I don't want to bore Comrade Filipovich.

SONIA – It won't bore me. Tell the story, Comrade Igorovich, to refresh my memory.

PAVEL – Tell it, Commissair, or forever hold your peace.

IGOR – Oh, so you think you can intimidate me, eh? I'll tell it then. Take my rifle carefully so it won't go off. (*Igor gives his rifle to Pavel, and the lamp to Sonia. He then imitates the guide's pose and his grandiloquence*)
Ahem, Ahem . . . esteemed friends, the Hermitage Museum is proud to have in its valuable collection the most representative paintings of the Dutch artist Hamerzonn Van Rijn, better known as Rembrandt. This painting is based on a story from mythology. It happened that the King of Argos was warned by the oracle that his daughter Danae would have a son who would kill him. Fearful of this prophecy, the king locked his beautiful daughter in a dark room that was kept under the strictest watch. Except for an old servant, no one was allowed to see her. However, all these measures were not enough to prevent the all powerful Zeus, who knew of Danae's beauty, from desiring to possess her. It was thus that the astute and easily infatuated god decided to enter that unbreachable chamber disguised as a golden rain. Other famous artists, like Titian, depicted the same story. In Titian's case, Zeus became a rain of golden coins in order to bribe the servant and seduce the young woman. One hundred years later, a Swedish painter named Ulrik Wrthmuller painted a Danae that was so . . . let us say . . . so erotic, that he paraded her throughout the United States charging admission since no museum dared exhibit her. Rembrandt's painting, as you will see in a moment, is more romantic and subtle. (*Bowing low*) Esteemed Comrades, I have the honor of introducing you to Rembrandt's Danae. (*To Pavel*) Well, you can continue . . .

PAVEL AND SONIA – (*Applauding*) Bravo, bravo. That was great, Igor. Congratulations.

SONIA – I have to say I'm really impressed, Comrade Igorovich. I had no idea that you possessed such acting skill.

PAVEL - I always suspected you were a big hypocrite, Igor. A damned hypocrite.

IGOR – Nothing of the sort. It's just that as a guard I've had to swallow your explanations for many years. Come on now; give me back my rifle.

PAVEL – You're really terrific, yes sir. A terrific liar.

IGOR – Not a liar. I never lie, except in the event of unforeseeable circumstances.

PAVEL – Like when you told me that you had seen Velázquez's painting?

IGOR – That's a good example of unforeseeable circumstances, thank you. The truth is that there are no paintings on the walls, Pavel.

PAVEL – Not even Danae?

IGOR – If you don't want me to lie to you, I'll tell you that neither Danae, nor any other painting is here.

PAVEL – Focus, blind man, and keep quiet while I describe it. (*To Sonia*)
Would you like me to explain the painting to you, dear?

SONIA – Of course, my dear. I can't wait.

PAVEL – Here, as you can see, is Danae. The beautiful young virgin, Danae, sweet, but at the same time sensual, voluptuous almost. Does she seem a little overweight to you? Well, yes, Danae is a majestic and handsome young woman, as the standards of feminine beauty of that time dictated. But, careful, our Danae is far from being a cellulite-laden obesity like

Rubens's "Graces". Look closely: she displays firm and sensual arms and thighs. Her small, youthful, turgid breasts are characteristic of the woman who has never given birth. She has not yet lain with a man. What is she doing naked in bed? It's clear that she has no intention of resting or sleeping. Notice her hair, coquettishly arranged as if she were going to a ball. Her only jewels are beautiful bracelets of pearl and coral, recalling Venus's nautical origins. *(During the explanation Sonia begins to see the projection of the painting, while Igor looks at the floor, at the ceiling, as if he wants to show that he isn't interested)* *(To Igor)* Do you see it, second-rate Commissair?

IGOR – See what? That you've cast a spell on your wife? What a joke.

SONIA – Go on, Pasha, please, go on. You left off at "her bracelets of pearls and corals evoke Venus's nautical origins".

PAVEL – But Igoriok isn't cooperating.

SONIA – Do it for me, Pasha. Continue: "her bracelets evoke Venus". What else, what else?

PAVEL *(To Igor)*. Whatever you say, Commissair. *(Returning to his position)* Let's concentrate our attention on her pose. Danae reclines on her fluffy bed leaving room for the imminent arrival of her lover. Everything in her is inviting; we can even smell the fragrance of her exotic perfumes.

IGOR – *(Stamping his foot)* Perfumes! How can you say that!

PAVEL – Look closely, Igor Igorovich. Observe the room full of plush oriental carpets and elaborately decorated curtains. Note the beautiful slippers, undoubtedly Persian, strewn carelessly on the rug in the haste of

desire. (*Igor begins to see the painting on the wall*) Everything in that room is exotic. The cozy semi-darkness of the ambiance suggests the libidinous, the forbidden, the erotic. In sum, the shadows incite and stimulate lust. And it is at this precise moment that the rain of gold arrives, the golden beam that Zeus has become. Danae raises her yearning hand towards him; impatient, unable to wait any longer, she wishes to bridge the distance. See how at the head of the bed a mischievous and implacable Cupid rapturously observes the scene. Rembrandt's Danae is not the story of a rape perpetrated by an unscrupulous and sagacious god. On the contrary, it is the long-awaited moment of love that moves us by its romanticism and tenderness.

SONIA – What a lovely explanation, Pasha. Thank you, thank you. It's a beautiful painting.

IGOR – You haven't finished. And the old woman?

PAVEL – You're right, excuse me. I don't know how I could have forgotten your colleague. Ahem, Ahem . . . behind the curtain you can see the old guardian who carries a large and useless bunch of keys. She is paralyzed, motionless, devoid of expression; perhaps Zeus has immobilized her. In any case, the woman will be the silent witness of the happy event. Satisfied, Igor Igorovich?

IGOR – Not bad, Pavel Filipovich. Not bad.

PAVEL – So, you admit you saw the painting.

SONIA – (*Interrupting*) Dear, I think that what you're doing merits the re-opening of the museum. I shall suggest to the Defense Committee that we

send groups of comrades every night so that you can offer all the guided tours you see fit.

IGOR – That's impossible, Comrade Filipovich. We don't have check-rooms, the ticket counter is closed, and the toilets don't work. Listen, there's no electricity.

SONIA – As my husband would say, those are unimportant details. If the Committee orders the reopening of the museum, you will just have to open it. What do you think, my dear? (*Silence*)

PAVEL – (*Meditating, pacing nervously in a circle*)

SONIA – What's wrong, dear. Aren't you happy? Real people of flesh and blood will come.

PAVEL – Real people?

SONIA – Yes, flesh and blood people.

PAVEL – And you want me to give those people a guided tour?

SONIA – A tour just like the one you gave us.

PAVEL – I don't know. I don't know. You and Igor are family, you're like a part of me.

IGOR – Pavel, don't be difficult. You've been giving guided tours to people that only you saw.

SONIA – Exactly. Didn't I see you saying good-bye to a group of visitors when I arrived tonight? Well, the only thing you have to do is give the same tour to the people the Committee sends.

PAVEL (*Circling nervously*) Those visitors, . . . those visitors were . . . No, it's not the same. Those were my . . . well, what you're asking is different.

SONIA – Dear Pasha, I don't understand you.

PAVEL – I'm not surprised you don't understand me. I don't understand myself either, but that's normal. I've never made a real effort to understand myself.

SONIA – Come on, Pasha, courage! A lot of people will come.

IGOR – This man is very odd, Sonia. Very odd.

PAVEL – We're all of us odd and complex; even you, Igor. Even you, you inordinate simpleton.

SONIA – Perhaps you don't want to give tours because you're not well?

PAVEL - My health can stand it.

SONIA – Well then, Pavel, what's wrong with you? Don't you realize that you could cheer up so many comrades? The Committee has run out of ideas to keep up our compatriots' morale. We all have to cooperate.

IGOR – Depend on me, Comrade Filipovich. I shall welcome all those people sent by the Defense Committee as best I can.

SONIA – Thank you, Igor Igorovich. You're a model citizen. *(To Pavel)*
Well, dear, can we count on you?

PAVEL – *(Circling nervously)* I don't think you understand me; you don't understand me.

SONIA – *(Firmly)* You're so exasperating, Pavel. *(Silence)* I'm very sorry but it's not the time for shilly-shallying. You're the Guide of the Hermitage and you must do what the Committee orders.

PAVEL – So that's it, eh? In the end you don't care a hoot about your husband.

SONIA – That's unfair, Pavel. You know I've adored you ever since we met.

PAVEL – Yes, but at the moment of truth . . .

SONIA – I wouldn't want it to come to this, dear, but Leningrad comes before anything else. It comes first. *(Pause)* You've demonstrated that you can give guided tours of the museum and you shall give them if the Committee orders it.

PAVEL *(Silence)* So, it's not definite. Then, it's possible that the Committee will not approve it.

SONIA – It's possible, but not probable. I don't think they will oppose my recommendation.

PAVEL – Well, well. And if I were to become seriously ill?

SONIA – You've shown me that you recuperate rapidly, dear. (*The bomb blasts sound closer*) Let's not talk any more about it (*looks at the time*). I have to run, dear. Take care of yourself, my love. I'll come back soon with news.

PAVEL – Be careful, Sonia, be very careful. If something were to happen to you . . .

SONIA – Don't think about that, dear. Rather, take good care of yourself for I know that while you are alive I am protected by your love.

When Sonia kisses her husband goodbye, the scene goes dark.

3

Same setting as scene 1. Pavel is lying on his cot. He soaks a handkerchief in a bowl of water (which is on the crate that serves as a night table), and wrings and places it on his forehead. Igor prepares an infusion in the samovar. Spaced out cannon shots are heard in the distance.

IGOR – This infusion will help you. (*Silence*) Do you feel better? (*Pause*) A little better? (*Silence*) You must be very ill not to talk.

PAVEL – I think I'm not long for this world, dear Igoriok. I begin to feel a certain kind of cold that seems familiar after having expected it for so long.

IGOR – (*Leaves the preparation of the infusion and covers Pavel's legs with some blankets he takes from his cot*). Come on; this will warm you up. You'll feel better when you have your infusion.

PAVEL – There are no magical brews or potions that are any good for this journey. (*In a loud voice*) I'm not afraid of you, death, my friend. (*He throws off the blankets, gets up, and speaks deliriously*) Take me with you but do it soon. Don't waste your time with a defender of Leningrad; take me in his place. I'm ready. I'm more than ready, I'm behind schedule/I'm late. Just one thing, don't confuse me with the Germans. Let them go with their Valkyries, and take me with friendly people, with painters and sculptors; take me with Monet, with Velázquez, or Repin, or with that crazy Van Gogh, or deaf Goya. Take me with Rodin, or Michaelangelo. I'd like finally to talk to Leonardo and Raphael, and amuse myself with Renoir and Pissarro. After all, old friend, you're a wise woman. Take me with whomever you want. It doesn't matter if they're in hell itself; that's where I'll go. It's

true I'd rather go heaven to continue serving my favorite artists. *(Pause)*
What are you waiting for, deaf woman! What are you waiting for! With whom do you dally? Here is your old comrade, your virtual lover. *(Falls exhausted)*

IGOR – *(Takes Pavel with difficulty back to his cot where he sits him down and wraps him warmly)*. Pavel, Pavel settle down; calm yourself. What am I going to do without you, friend? You mustn't leave me all alone. *(He goes to the samovar and brings the tea)*. Drink a little bit, it'll do you good. Drink, that's it, just one more sip, Pavel, one more sip. Do you have a headache? *(Pavel shakes his head)* Do you have heart palpitations again? *(He shakes his head)* Your heart? *(He shakes his head)*.

PAVEL *(Weak)* Do you know, Igor? It's something worse; I feel a weight on my chest. I think it's the last effort of this decrepit body of mine to suffocate my spirit. Damned husk, let go of me; let me be free.

IGOR – I think you have a bit of a fever, that's all.

PAVEL – Igor, my friend. My imminent departure has opened my eyes.

IGOR – There's nothing new to see, Pavel, everything is the same. We've resisted the Germans for almost two years now and we're still going strong. In any case, you should be happy. Sonia shall bring good news, and you'll be able to give your guided tours again, real tours.

PAVEL – That's precisely what's killing me, Igor. I can't be anybody's guide any more on this miserable earth.

IGOR – Not now, of course. We'll wait until you've recovered.

PAVEL – Come, my dear imbecile, make an effort. The problem is not my health, the problem is that . . . that . . . Look, dreams or fantasies can't be shared; they are private property whatever Stalin may say.

IGOR – Don't bring Stalin into it, Pavel Filipovich!

PAVEL – What an ass you are. What I'm saying is that dreams and fantasies exist only for oneself. Now that I'm on the way out, I realize that you take your dreams with you while the world's reality continues on its inexorable course.

IGOR – But didn't you tell me that reality, dreams, fantasies, were synonymous?

PAVEL – And I reiterate it; they're synonyms, but for each one of us. There are things that you cannot and should not share. Don't you understand? (*Pause*) We all have our fantasies, even you, Igor.

IGOR – Me, fantasies?

PAVEL – Yes, you second-rate materialist. You have hopes, dreams, fantasies, which despite our long friendship and closeness you've never told me.

IGOR – You know everything about me.

PAVEL – Yes, but I keep quiet about a lot of things, and I don't tell you. I act as if I didn't know them.

IGOR – Finish your tea.

PAVEL – It's disgusting. What is it made from?

IGOR – (*Laughing*) Herbs from heaven.

PAVEL – Well heaven must be rotting, Igor. Perhaps a brew from hell would agree with me better. (*Pause*) Listen, kind caretaker, I can't be a guide because I cannot share my reality. The people who come won't see the paintings.

IGOR – They'll see them, just as I did.

PAVEL - (*Silence*) You shall forgive me, my dear friend, if I ask you a cruel personal question? I'm not doing it to offend you, but so that you understand my situation.

IGOR - Ask whatever you want. You shall always be my friend.

PAVEL - Let it be noted that you've given me your permission.

IGOR – It is noted.

PAVEL – Well, then, here goes: isn't it true that you speak with your son whom you believe to be alive in the trench in the square? (*Silence*). Confess, yes or no?

IGOR – You're more than cruel; you're heartless. I didn't expect this of you.

PAVEL – I'm really sorry, but you authorized me to ask you. (*Silence*) Hopes and realities are personal, my dear Igor. But don't resent a dying man who is on the verge of joining your son Dimitri. (*Pause*) I want to ask

you to do me the honor of placing my body in his trench, and next spring, when the Germans have gone, take us to the cemetery before the warm weather comes. (*Silence*). Will you promise me? Will you promise?

IGOR – Yes, yes. I promise. (*Silence*) It's true, I speak to my son from the window.

PAVEL – I know, I know, and you're right to do that because as long as you believe your son is alive, he is alive. And what's more, I think he hears you.

IGOR – Really, Pavel. Do you think he hears me?

PAVEL – Just like two and two are four.

IGOR – So then there are realities, fantasies and dreams that you can share.

PAVEL – Of course, among friends everything can be shared, especially dreams.

IGOR – And why can't you show your paintings to the comrades who will come?

PAVEL – (*Pause*) That's a good question. In the end, you're going to turn out to be so very intelligent. Let's see; let me see. (*Pause*) Your question has gotten rid of my fever. Let's see . . . Let's (*Pause*) I cannot give guided tours because our comrades know that all the paintings have been taken away. That is, they know that they're not here, and they'll make fun of me. They'll think that I'm deceiving them, that I'm a clown, a clown

that's not funny any more. It will be pathetic, Igor, pathetic. (*Pavel places his hand on his chest*).

IGOR – More heart palpitations? (*Pavel shakes his head*) Does your chest hurt? (*Pavel nods and writhes in pain*). A lot? (*Pavel nods*) An awful lot? (*Pavel nods*) If only your wife were here! Well, sit down, like that, good, now breathe deeply and exhale slowly, very slowly, good, very good. (*It seems as if the pain is decreasing little by little. Pavel makes a gesture with his hand to Igor to leave him alone and lies down on his cot*) Do you feel ill? (*Pavel nods*) Very ill? (*Pavel nods*) So ill that you're going to die? (*Pavel nods*) You're not fooling me, are you? (*Pavel shakes his head*) Well, before you go, I would like to show you something that will make your trip a happier one. (*Igor takes a painting wrapped in cloth from under his bed*) Do you know what this is? (*Pavel shakes his head*). Guess, come on, guess.

PAVEL – (*Turning toward the other side*) Damned communist, do you want me to die looking at Stalin? Well, I don't want to, that's the last thing I need.

IGOR – It's not Stalin's photograph. Guess again. What is it?

PAVEL (*Pause. Sitting up*) Don't tell me you hid a painting!

IGOR – Well, yes, here you have the "Angel of the Golden Hair".

PAVEL – You ass, you stupid ass! What have you done!

IGOR – I exchanged him for Stalin. I knew we would need the angel here.

PAVEL – I can't believe it, I can't believe it. You deserve to be shot. I'll have to report you. Do you know the value of that painting?

IGOR – For you and for me, it's worth a lot.

PAVEL – That painting ought to be in the Urals by now.

IGOR – This painting works miracles.

PAVEL - What miracles? You've committed a crime, blockhead, fool, ass, ignoramus!

IGOR – See how he works miracles? A moment ago you were on your deathbed, and now you are your old self. The angel came to your rescue.

PAVEL – He didn't rescue me. It's you who are going to be the death of me, idiot! (*Taking the painting*) What a marvelous painting! Note his lovely eyes, Igor; it's the most beautiful icon I know. Look how well defined his mouth is. If angels existed, they would certainly be like this one.

IGOR – So, Pavel, you're not going to report me.

PAVEL – No, of course not, Igor, of course not. The only thing I can do is kill you with my bare hands, but I shall wait until the right moment. Let me contemplate this beauty.

IGOR – I have some more surprises, Pavel.

PAVEL – If you take out another painting, I'll disembowel you this very minute.

IGOR – Don't be alarmed; I don't have any more paintings. I was waiting for a miracle to smoke the cigar a tourist gave me a long time ago.

PAVEL – You, a cigar? And you've kept it all this time?

IGOR – I swore I would smoke it the day my son returned.

PAVEL – Well then, save it.

IGOR – No, I feel that Dimitri is with me. You've made me feel that way.

PAVEL – Me? I don't recall having said anything about your son. But if you want us to have a smoke in his honor, I'm ready. Hey, you wouldn't happen to have some vodka stashed away some place?

IGOR – Well, actually, I do. There's still some left in the bottle Sonia brought.

PAVEL – Come on, then. Bring out the vodka and the cigar. Long live the Angel of the Golden Hair!

IGOR – Long live the Angel and long live my son Dimitri.

PAVEL – May he live forever and ever, amen.

Igor and Pavel share the cigar and drink the vodka, laughing and dancing. In the middle of the celebration there is a knocking at the door that they do not hear at first. Then Sonia's voice asking them to open is heard. Igor and Pavel nervously wrap the painting and place it under Igor's cot. They also wave the air with their hands and blow away the tobacco smoke in order to clear the air. Pavel lies down on his cot. Igor opens the door.

SONIA – Why did it take you an eternity to open, Comrade Igorovich? (*Sniffing*) What's that smell? What were you two doing? Are you well, my dear? (*She goes to the cot and kisses Pavel*) Have you been smoking, Pavel? What madness! It's madness. You smell of tobacco and vodka.

IGOR – We were having a little party, Comrade Filipovich. We were celebrating . . . What was it that we were celebrating, Pasha?

PAVEL – We were celebrating my death.

SONIA – Are you drunk?

IGOR – No, no, the truth is that we were celebrating my secret.

SONIA – What secret?

IGOR – I had hidden . . .

PAVEL – That idiot had hidden a cigar some tourist gave him, and he hid it away so well that he couldn't find it. That's the truth, ah . . . and we drank a little of the vodka that was left over from the bottle you brought. There's no more left.

SONIA – Comrade Igorovich, aren't you ashamed to be giving my husband tobacco?

IGOR – It was only to cheer him up, but I have no more cigars left so you can rest easy. (*Pause*) The truth is that you're really grouchy today. Isn't that so, Pasha?

PAVEL – What's wrong, dear? What happened with the matter of the guided tours?

SONIA – They've been approved. The first group to come will be the entire Defense Committee. If everything goes well, they shall be here in a couple of hours.

IGOR – Well you can start letting them know that they shouldn't come. Pavel doesn't want to share his realities, or fantasies, or whatever you want to call them.

SONIA – I'm not in the mood for joking today.

PAVEL – Igor doesn't know how to express himself, dear. Just a few minutes ago I was at death's door.

SONIA – Stop kidding around, my love. Just a few moments ago you were laughing, smoking, and drinking.

IGOR – Yes, Comrade, but before that he was ready to kick the bucket.

SONIA – Well, all right already. I've told you I'm in a really bad mood. Things are going very badly on the outside.

PAVEL – Have those wretches gotten in?

SONIA – Thankfully, no. But now they're not only bombing us with explosives, they're also doing so with propaganda on the radio, and leaflets they throw out of their planes. And do you want to know the latest? (*Taking out a leaflet*) Here Hitler announces his imminent entry into Leningrad at the front of a triumphal parade along Nevsky Prospect. Then it says that

he will preside over a banquet in the Hotel Astoria where he has ordered a menu of roast goose in bilberry sauce. Ah, and Rhine wines will be served. In sum, they're announcing all the details about how they will celebrate the fall of Leningrad. They say that Hitler has even chosen the music that will be played during the banquet.

PAVEL – Wagner, certainly.

SONIA – No, Liszt. Here, read it.

PAVEL – (*Reads the leaflet*). That's so, Liszt. That damned monster must have had a sensitivity attack. (*Pause*) How are we going to respond to this barrage?

SONIA – We always think of something. Until now morale has been very high, but you can see that everybody has a worried look.

PAVEL – I think you would appreciate seeing a painting by Repin.

IGOR and SONIA – What has Repin got to do with all this?

PAVEL – Look at it and you shall tell me. It's in the exhibition hall. We're celebrating the centenary of his birth.

IGOR – What painting is it? I've seen all of them.

PAVEL – I'm sure. (*To Sonia*) You must know it, too, dear. It's "The Letter of the Zpaorozhian Cossacks to the Sultan of Turkey"

SONIA – Yes, I think so. But what does that have to do with Hitler?

PAVEL – It would be a great idea to counter Nazi propaganda by asking all residents of Leningrad to send a letter to Hitler saying what they think of him.

SONIA - That's a very good idea, Pavel, a very good idea.

PAVEL - Shall we go see it?

SONIA – Of course, refresh our memories.

PAVEL – Not another word, let's go. (*Takes the cigar butt and lights it*).

SONIA – Dear, get rid of that, it's bad for your heart.

PAVEL – Tobacco is the luxury afforded those condemned to death, dear Sonia. Let's not argue any more; the Cossacks await us.

(Igor takes the oil lamp and follows Pavel and Sonia as they walk through imaginary galleries)

IGOR – Speak a little louder, Pavel; I can hardly hear you.

PAVEL – Didn't you say you know everything?

IGOR – I like to hear you because you always change something.

PAVEL – All right, all right, useless watchman. (*With grandiloquence and histrionically*) I was saying that every century has its very own scoundrel. Hitler is the indisputable representative of the most debased humanity in the twentieth century, but in the eighteenth it was a man as cruel as he was powerful, the Sultan of Turkey, the scourge of Asia and Europe. His

territories extended to the threshold of Vienna; he was in control of the Black Sea and a large part of the Mediterranean. The Turks were the lords of the Crimean; they seized the Ukraine, and, in sum, their cruel armies knew no rival except for the . . .

IGOR – The Zaporozhian Cossacks.

PAVEL – Exactly.

SONIA – Of course, I remember the name, the Zaporozhians.

PAVEL – And surely you'll also remember this painting. Well, here we are.

IGOR – I don't see anything.

PAVEL – Same old tune again? You're so irritating; I haven't even begun yet.

SONIA – Come on, Pavel; hurry up.

PAVEL – Very well, as we were saying, the all-powerful army of the Sultan had invaded the Ukraine. All of it, except the Zaporozhians' fortress which put up a heroic defense. Those Cossacks were huge and rough men, ferocious in battle, and tender in peace. They had many failings: they drank to excess; they were passionate and foolhardy, but they were also daring and courageous.

IGOR – Stop your babble and get on with the painting. Come on; I can't see anything.

PAVEL – Ahem, Ahem, dear friends, as part of the celebration of the first centenary of the birth of Ilya Repin, the Hermitage Museum has the great honor of presenting to you one of his most representative works: “The Letter of the Zaporozhian Cossacks to the Sultan of Turkey”. As you can see, it is an enormous painting for enormous men. This painting measures two meters by three and a half meters/six feet by ten and a half feet.

IGOR – It’s big, but I still don’t see anything.

PAVEL – Make an effort, Igor. Here it is. (*The painting is slowly projected on the wall*) First, let’s look at the entire scene. We see a great celebration of warriors. What are these fierce Cossacks laughing about? In the background their fortress is smoldering; they have just defended it against the Turks whom they’ve defeated. The indomitable Zaporozhians have fought valiantly and have seized the powerful cannons of their enemy. Probably, this is the first Ottoman defeat; undoubtedly, it is the most sensational. However, the war is far from over. From Istanbul, the Sultan threatens to send his elite force, the Janizaries, to finish them off. He swears he will erase them from the map if they do not surrender immediately. Rather than terrorizing them, his words embolden the Zaporozhians, and they decide to send a letter to the Sultan. Look, look carefully at that man with bangs who in the middle of the field writes on a crude table what his rough companions dictate to him. Seeing the happy and carefree faces of the Zaporozhians, we can easily surmise what they are saying.

IGOR – Can we read the letter?

PAVEL – Well, of course. Note the laughter of the Cossack standing at the right of the table.

IGOR – There are a lot of them.

PAVEL – (*The image of the Cossack is projected*) Note that tall fellow who is wearing a white cap and showing his enormous chest and voluminous abdomen.

IGOR – The one who's holding his belly with his two hands?

PAVEL – That's the one. Now look at the man on his left (*That Cossack's image is projected*) Note that he looks more like a Tartar than a Cossack. Well, that fellow who's laughing so hard that he's gasping for breath is on the verge of collapse.

SONIA – The truth is that they all have a contagious laugh. What else, Pavel, what else? Go on; go on.

PAVEL – Well, let's look at the center, at the fellow who's standing over the scribe. By his attire, we know that he's one of the leaders; he holds his pipe, and isn't laughing, but we can be sure that his mind is miles away. He's imagining that proud Sultan's face when he reads that the arrogant Zaporozhians are sending him to hell. (*All laugh loudly*)

IGOR – That other fellow (*The image of the Cossack is projected*) tells the sultan that they're going to cut off the balls of all the Janizaries he dares to send. (*All laugh loudly*)

SONIA – And if he continues to bother them they'll all go to Istanbul to pull him kicking and screaming out of his harem. (*All laugh loudly*)

PAVEL – And they'll castrate and send him to the court of the Czar of Russia as a eunuch. . (*All laugh loudly*)

SONIA – Look at that one over there who's blue in the face from laughing so hard. (*The image of the Cossack is projected*)

IGOR – And that one has just dictated to the scribe to write that if the Sultan doesn't want the Cossacks to invade Turkey, he should send his little sisters. Yes, his little sisters. (*All laugh loudly*)

PAVEL – And look at that one . . .

SONIA – I can't go on any more Pavel, I can't go on. I think I'm going to pee right here. (*All laugh loudly*) That's enough please, please.

IGOR – I haven't had such a good laugh in years.

SONIA – Nor I.

PAVEL – Me neither. (*Pause*) It feels so good to laugh with all that's going on around us.

SONIA – Thank you, dear. I'm sure that the Committee will be very happy to see this painting. Oh . . . , listen, the Committee will be here at any moment. Let's go to the door. We can't let them freeze out there.

IGOR – But, Comrade, remember that Pavel said he will not be anybody's tour guide.

PAVEL – I said that?

IGOR – Yes, you. Don't you remember that dreams and realities cannot be shared?

PAVEL – In cases of national emergency you can and should share everything.

IGOR – You're not being coherent, Pavel.

PAVEL – Igor Igorovich, admit, at least, that I am very coherent with my incoherence.

IGOR – So then, are you going to give the tours, Pavel?

PAVEL - Of course I'll give them, Mr. Commissair. While I still have some breath left in me, I shall give as many tours as possible.

IGOR – No! You'll give the tours your health allows.

SONIA – Igor is right; you mustn't overdo it, dear.

Pavel – But my love, don't you realize that I've never been in better shape?

DARK

4

Same as scene 1. The small door opens and Igor and Sonia enter shivering with cold. Distant cannon shots are heard.

SONIA – Thank you, Igor. I think you chose the best spot for my husband.

IGOR – From that trench he can see the museum he loved so much.

SONIA – It's true. The Hermitage was his first love; I was only his occasional lover.

IGOR – Don't say that. Pavel loved you very much.

SONIA – Yes, but he loved the Hermitage more. I don't know what we're going to do without him. His tours . . . how many did he give? Let's see: two or three tours a night during four months . . . Yes, they would have been a lot for anyone, and more so for someone like him who was ill. *(Pause)* Now, he can rest in peace, and toward the end of spring when we get rid of the Germans, we shall give him the burial he deserves. *(Pause)* Well, Igor, I must go. Take care of yourself; take good care. You can be sure that I'll visit you as often as I can.

IGOR – Thank you, Sonia, thank you. Do you want to know something? . . . no. . . no . . . you're going to tell me I'm crazy.

SONIA – Tell me, Igor. Feel free to tell me whatever you want.

IGOR – Well, I don't know if I should. No, let me think about it and I'll tell you some other time.

SONIA – Whatever you wish. I have to go quickly now to cancel the tours. Those poor people have to drag themselves through ditches and sewers to get here. It wouldn't be fair to make them do that for nothing.

IGOR – As a matter of fact, Sonia, that's what I wanted to talk to you about.

SONIA – Really? Well, go on, I'm listening.

IGOR – It's that I don't know how to say it. I'm a little embarrassed.

SONIA. Come on now. Speak plainly, as if you were talking to Pavel.

IGOR – Well, I'll tell you, but turn toward the wall.

SONIA – You really are a child, Igor.

IGOR – If you don't turn around, I won't tell you.

SONIA – (*Turning around*) Well, are you happy now? Come on, tell me what you're thinking.

IGOR – Don't laugh, eh? Promise me you're not going to laugh.

SONIA – I promise, but say it already!

IGOR – You know, Sonia, you know . . . You promised you weren't going to laugh, eh? Well, I'll say it, Sonia . . . (*Pause*) I'd like to be the Guide of the Hermitage.

SONIA – (*Turning towards Igor*) You, Igor?

IGOR – Yes, me. I really think that I can give tours of this museum. Of course, they won't be like the ones Pavel used to give, but I swear to you that I know I can do it. I know what Pavel used to say, word for word. (*Showing her a notebook he takes out from his coat*) Look, I've taken notes here. Do you want me to show you? Look (*He puts down his rifle and imitates Pavel's pose and grandiloquence*) Ahem, Ahem, esteemed visitors it is an honor for the Hermitage State Museum to present to you at this time . . .

SONIA – You don't have to go on, dear Igor. I know you can do it. Of course you can! Forgive me for not having thought of it before, forgive me, Igor.

IGOR – I won't do it as well as your husband, but . . .

SONIA – My husband is irreplaceable, but I believe that you are qualified to give very good tours. This is wonderful, wonderful. Well, I must run to the Committee to tell them that Igor Igorovich is the new Guide of the Hermitage.

IGOR – You'll really tell them that?

SONIA – Certainly. Get ready for tonight's tours, Igor; now I have to go. (*Sonia takes Pavel's leather gloves out of her coat pocket and puts them on Igor, and then gives him a deeply felt hug*). Good-bye.

IGOR – Good-bye, dear Sonia. (*When she leaves, Igor places the two cross-bars on the small door, takes out the painting of "The Angel of the Golden Hair", removes the cloth in which it is wrapped, crosses himself, prays, and climbs the folding ladder and opens the window*) Pasha, Pa-

sha, do you hear me? Do you hear me? Excuse me for talking to you so soon. I know, I know; you want to be left in peace, but listen, Pasha, don't you think that an atheist can believe in miracles? Don't you? Thanks. I knew you'd say yes. Well, imagine, our "Angel of the Golden Hair" has worked a miracle. Yes, for me who besides being an atheist, has been a Communist all his life. When? Just a moment ago. Yes, you were barely settled in your trench. Anyway, the thing is I'm going to be the new Guide of the Hermitage. Yes, me, me. *(Pause)* How? How come? Yes, I know, according to you I'm a blockhead and an ignoramus. Anyway, call me whatever you want, but I think that I can help Leningrad by saying the same things you used to say and in the same way. I shall imitate you, Pavel; I'll imitate you. *(Pause)*. You're not annoyed, are you? Well, if you get mad it's too bad because you can't do anything about it. After all, you have no one to blame for dying except yourself. Who gave tours until he was exhausted? Eh? Eh? Sure, it was nobody's fault except your own, and now I have no choice but to replace you. *(Pause)* You're not mad, are you? Are you? Well, my dear Pasha, I have to do a few things before the visitors arrive, but first of all I have a question *(Takes out the notebook)*. Let's see, Pasha, I don't remember the name of the French president who used to visit Monet. *(Pause)* What? What? Clement? No? Not Clement. Clemence? Not Clemence either. Come on, Pasha, tell me; they're going to arrive any minute. What? Clemency? Clemency? A little louder. Clemensan? No? Oh . . . Yes! CLEMENCEAU! Thank you, dear Pasha, thank you. I have to go now, but I'll come back soon. I send you a big hug. *(Igor hurries down the ladder, goes to Pavel's cot and opens the crate next to it; he takes out several articles of clothing, and tries on two jackets and some caps)* I think this jacket looks good on me, let's see, let's see. No, no. This one's better. I don't know; it's a little tight on me, but I won't button it and problem solved. This cap looks better on me. That's awesome! Awesome! *(Satisfied with his new clothes, he puts away his old military uniform with Pavel's clothes and closes the crate. He struts about a little and begins to*

walk trying uselessly to hide his limp. He stops in front of the icon). Divine angel, I'm not asking you to take away my limp because I don't want to take advantage of our friendship. But I look pretty good, don't I? Thank you. *(Going to the entrance and imitating Pavel, Igor speaks as if he were addressing real people)* Ladies and gentlemen, The Hermitage State Museum is proud to be able to welcome you *(annoyed)*. No, not like that. *(Pause)* Esteemed visitors, the Hermitage State Museum is proud to welcome you *(annoyed)*. You're so stupid, Igor, not like that. Think carefully, don't be nervous. *(Silence)* Oh . . . yes, yes. *(With the same firmness and charm as Pavel)* Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to the Hermitage State Museum. I am sure that this will be a memorable visit for you, but come closer and that way all of you will be able to hear me; a little more, please. Very good, thank you, thank you. *(While Igor speaks in a very clear voice, the light will dim very slowly and outlines of the paintings commented on earlier will gradually appear)* Well, in a few moments we shall view masterpieces by the most famous painters in the world; we shall see, among others, the portrait of the Count-Duke of Olivares by Velázquez, Monet's Water Lilies, and Rembrandt's Danae. *(Pause)* We will end the tour with the special exhibition devoted to our compatriot Ilia Repin on the occasion of the centenary of his birth where the magnificent painting Letter of the Zaporozhian Cossacks to the Sultan of Turkey is displayed. *(Pause)* Very well, I sense that you are anxious to enter into the exciting world of art, so let's begin our tour. Come this way; follow me. *(While Igor starts to disappear and his voice sounds more distant, though still audible, the paintings will come into sharper focus. Before the final curtain falls, they will be seen clearly)* On our way there, I shall take the opportunity to tell you a little bit about the Hermitage. This museum was the Winter Palace of the Czars. It was built by the Italian architect Bartolomeo Rastrelli at the end of the seventeenth century. Catherine the Great was the first occupant of this imposing palace of 460 rooms. It contains immense salons; majestic stairways; even a large church and a theatre. The official rooms are deco-

rated in the purest Russian Baroque style of the eighteenth century. The Hermitage is the largest museum in the world.

THE CURTAIN FALLS