Pavlo Arie

Baba Prisca

At the Beginning and End of Time

Translated from Ukrainian with minor adaptations approved by the Author

By Julie-Anne Franko

*For those who could not leave*

**Characters:**

**BABA PRISCA** – Baba (Grandma) Prisca is 86. She has a hardy muscular frame that comes from the stock of village life.

**VOVA** – Baba Prisca’s grandson is more or less 30, but you can’t really tell by looking at him. He is mentally challenged and quite thin.

**SLAVA** – Vova’s mother, Baba Prisca’s daughter is 59 years old. In spite of having her mother’s solid frame, she is sickly looking.

**FATHER** – Slava’s brawny husband and Vova’s father is somewhere between 30 and 40 when he appears in the scenes reflecting earlier times.

**DISTRICT OFFICER** – A round-faced police officer of about 40 years.

**RADIO SHOW HOST** (voice)

**Tamara Denisova Kokhteeva, Radio Guest (voice)**

**Radio** (voice)

The action takes place in 2012, with scenes reflecting times past.

*Place of Action: the 30 kilometer “Zone of Alienation” surrounding the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in Ukraine. More precisely, the end of a road in very small abandoned village* *near the Pripyat River. Beyond the road is a forest and marshes.*

**SCENE 1. The Stalkers**

*The back yard of a small village homestead. Upstage is the back wall to this home, with a door at its center and windows to its left and right. Through the door are doors leading to the rooms that correspond with the windows. What is in the room to the left is not visible to the audience, but to the right is a space that implies a country kitchen. Close to the house are three old rickety wooden chairs around an old wooden table. To the left side of the stage there is a door leading to a shed with a shovel propped up against it. Nearby a pile of wood rests. There is also a plastic barrel with a wooden lid over it—when needed it doubles as a table. On the right side of the stage there is a wooden fence with a high gate made out of all sorts of scrap material. Just over the fence a few pine trees grow. In the yard itself there is a well with its bucket nearby; and a log that has an ax firmly embedded in it. To the far right, in a place of honor, is a six foot high orthodox cross made of iron—the base of which rests in a massive stone. One side of the stone has been polished and bears the inscription “Dear Brethern! Bow down your heads to those who once lived here in joy and sorrow, never to return.” Elsewhere on the stone are the remains of candles burnt out in the memory of their prayers.*

*It’s a sunny day, almost lunchtime. You can hear the sounds of nature calling (birds coo, insects buzz, the wind blows). Slava peels potatoes, at times coughing heavily. She notices that Baba Prisca is standing there, holding up cut snares.*

**BABA PRISCA**

What am I supposed to make of this? Ha?

**SLAVA**

Hmmm.... that you won’t catch any…how shall I put it? Hmm…

**BABA PRISCA**

Mmmmeat. I won’t have any meat.

**SLAVA**

Meat? ‘Diseased carcasses,’ is more like it, Mama.

**BABA PRISCA**

Carcasses?!? —Ha! You can’t get fresher meat anywhere! Scrawny bastard! He cut all my snares. I hope he’s happy!

**SLAVA**

You know we can’t eat our meat—or fish, or mushrooms. It’s the law!

**BABA PRISCA**

The law!?! Whose law!?! Not mine! “We can’t eat meat—or fish, or mushrooms.” Maybe you won’t …but I will!

**SLAVA**

Oy-yoy-yoy. 86 year-old children really know how to throw tantrums, don’t they? Can you hear yourself?

**BABA PRISCA**

Yes, I *am* 86. And lived through enough to know how, when, and what to eat from where. Nobody needs to tell me! Including your son! He should leave my meat alone!

**SLAVA**

So “Baba-knows-best,” and to hell with us if we get sick from your wisdom!?!

**BABA PRISCA**

If you don’t like how I live here, why did you come back? Hmm? Did I ask you to? I was happy out here all on my own. Then you started turning up. First you, henpecking away at my happiness, then that lip-serving district officer. Busybodies preaching away at ME in my own home about how I’m supposed to breathe the air. …And now my scheming grandson is in cahoots with you.

**SLAVA**

It wasn’t him.

**BABA PRISCA**

Ah, so the Holy Spirit came down from Heaven just to cut my snares here on earth. Hmm? Risking its hands and feet getting caught in them just to be in cahoots with you?

**SLAVA**

Maybe the district officer saw you putting them out. Maybe he cut them to get back at you for breaking the law. Eating what you catch from our woods *is* against law now, you know.

**BABA PRISCA**

Ahhh listen to her will you! You suddenly know so much about the law? Hmm?

**SLAVA**

There are signs all over…every few feet. With letters this big (*gesticulates*), just in case you need glasses.

**BABA PRISCA**

So, hunting for food is banned here—and *that* you care about…. But it’s okay by you for you and your mischief-making son *live* here? Hmm? Isn’t that banned too?

**SLAVA**

There is no place else for us to live.

**BABA PRISCA**

No place else to live? But still you play high and mighty with your own mother who took you in. Well that’s just fine and dandy!

**SLAVA**

Good God! What do you want from me?

**BABA PRISCA**

Give him a good whomping; that will teach him a lesson.

**SLAVA**

He’s your grandson, you teach him.

**BABA PRISCA**

Nooo, first and foremost he’s your son.

**SLAVA**

That may be, but how can I give him “a whomping?” He’s all grown up.

**BABA PRISCA**

All grown up. That’s a good one. No one in our family has ever turned out so half-baked.

**SLAVA**

No, never. But he is as he is…and you know why.

*They fall silent. Slava continues to peel potatoes. Prisca scrutinizes the peels.*

**BABA PRISCA**

What are you doing? Why are you peeling so much off? Hmm? Are you some kind of cripple?

**SLAVA**

Shut up, Mother.

**BABA PRISCA**

That’s the way I taught you? What happened? Do you suddenly have two left hands? Can you do anything like a normal human being? Maybe your eyes are on the back of your head? Is that why you can’t see what you are doing? Oh, oh, oh my God, why do you punish me this way?

**SLAVA**

Oooooh. There she goes! Will you stop already!

*Prisca paces and mutters under her breath around the yard, draws a cupful of water and smells it. Her muttering is meant to be loud enough for Slava to hear:*

**BABA PRISCA**

Crippled chicken claws, that’s what you have for hands! The sorry spuds don’t stand a chance! (*Drinks the water, spits it on the ground, then makes more spitting sounds*) ptoo-ptoo on your hands, ptoo! No, they are not good enough to be called hands, God only knows what to call them. Is this the thanks I get for bringing you into this world? Do you wonder why your husband left you? He was in his rights…

**SLAVA**

All right, all right, all right, I’ll talk to him.

**BABA PRISCA**

That’s right, deal with him; give him what’s coming to him. The devil-child.

**SLAVA**

Hold your fowl tongue Mama, lest it dry up. No matter how he may be, Vova is your grandson, THE LINE OF YOUR FLESH AND BLOOD, and this shall be so always, forever and ever.

**BABA PRISCA**

Forever and ever. Look how scared I am! Why should I care…I’ll be dead soon.

**SLAVA**

*(Coughing)* I’ll be dead soon enough too.

*Pause. Baba Prisca throws her snares on the table, sits down on a chair, takes out a bag of tobacco from her pocket, rolls herself a cigarette, smokes it, takes a knife from her belt and uses it to gather the snares. She waits for Slava to stop coughing.*

**BABA PRISCA**

You can’t die. He won’t make it without you...

**SLAVA**

So then you’ll have to teach him how to survive here on his own. You know how to…you know so much…and you’re still strong enough for it.

**BABA PRISCA**

Yeah, I’ve already started taking him to the woods and the marshes. I point out: “this is this” and “that is that.” Or “this place here is safe to go…but don’t go over there.” And for all my troubles (*holds up the snares*) this is the thanks I get. You think I wouldn’t punish Vova for this? I could, but one of us has to be on good terms with him… so that God forbid, things don’t get even worse.

**SLAVA**

Aha. So you get the good terms and leave the bad terms for me?

**BABA PRISCA**

Yeah. So what?

**SLAVA**

(*Coughs*) Good God, mother! The smoke! Phew!

**BABA PRISCA**

(*Surprised, looks at her cigarette*) It’s the same smoke it’s always been.

**SLAVA**

While I’m coughing like this? Why?

*Prisca loudly spits on her finger, puts out the cigarette, and carefully tucks it into her bag of tobacco*.

**BABA PRISCA**

Why? You’re better off not knowing… enough whining… go, go to the city, to a doctor.

**SLAVA**

What’s the point? If I am that sick, I’m better off not knowing, and if not, it’ll pass on its own. *(She begins to cry)*.

**BABA PRISCA**

What’s this stupid talk I’m hearing? Coming from a woman who studied to be a nurse?

**SLAVA**

What’s the point? Even if there was medicine to cure this, what would I buy it with?

**BABA PRISCA**

Yeah…my pension is three weeks late. Maybe they forgot about it. Hmm?

**SLAVA**

No one from the other villages around here has gotten theirs either. Mama help me. My hands hurt something awful.

*Prisca takes some potatoes, sits, carefully places them on the table and begins peeling them artfully with her knife*.

**SLAVA**

They say our government has gone completely corrupt, they’re all so-called “bandits” now.

**BABA PRISCA**

God knows I couldn’t stand the Soviet regime, but at least you knew where you stood with them. Now? What are they doing? Where are they going? I don’t get it.

**SLAVA**

There’s nothing to get! They spit on us and that’s that.

**BABA PRISCA**

Don’t cry, don’t cry. Oh Slava, my Slava. We’ve lived without their money and we can go on living without it. Who needs all those chemicals in their medicine anyway? I’m a whisperer. I’ll make you a potion from real herbs, and whisper prayers over it while it brews… your sickness will pass.

**SLAVA**

Only the devil himself knows where you picked those herbs you’re trying to kill us with. *(Goes into the house)*.

**BABA PRISCA**

*(Towards the door).* Where... in the woods, the fields, the marsh…. Sometimes I have to ask myself, are you really my daughter? The same one I raised? How can you possibly not understand how nature works? Hmm? Our earth is the mother of us all, with only heaven above her—how can we be wiser than she is? Hmm? And Vova needs to learn his lesson about this…I don’t even know what I have in store for him.

**SLAVA**

*(Coming out of the house).* Don’t you lay a finger on him, you know he did what he did because he cares about us!

**BABA PRISCA**

Ha! It’s me who cares about us. I let you back into my house, the stupid old lady that I am, and now nothing can save me from you.

**SLAVA**

He cut your snares because he cares. He worries about you. Maybe God chose to challenge Vova’s brain, but for however lacking it may be, he’s still smart enough to get that the meat is not safe.

**BABA PRISCA**

Oh yeah, he’s really smart.

**SLAVA**

Thank you, tell him that.

*Vova slinks into the yard through the fence. He’s dressed in dirty village-type clothing with well-worn boots made of tarp on his feet.*

**SLAVA**

Where is your hat?

**VOVA**

Here.

**SLAVA**

I gave you a hat to wear on your head, not in your pocket.

**VOVA**

But I’m hot, it feels like summer out.

**SLAVA**

It’s still spring—all it will take is one good breeze and you’ll wind up with a summer cold. Put it on!

*Vova unwillingly puts his hat on.*

**BABA PRISCA**

Vovchyk, my sweet little grandson, come here, here on your Baba’s lap.

**SLAVA**

What are you up to, Mother?

**VOVA**

*(Looks at his mother but addresses Baba).* Mama says I’m too grown up to sit on people’s laps anymore.

**BABA PRISCA**

*(Looks at Slava but talking to Vova).* Mama is right. So then Baba will sit on your lap.

**SLAVA**

Have you lost your mind?

**VOVA**

Noo Baba, you’re grown up too, you shouldn’t be sitting on laps either.

**BABA PRISCA**

Well then, what are we to do?

**VOVA**

Welllll, I’ll sit on your lap, because you’re older than I am. That’s how it’s supposed to be *(sits on Baba’s lap)*.

*Slava flings a potato into the bucket, annoyed.*

**BABA PRISCA**

*(showing him the snares)* Did you do this?

**VOVA**

*(tries to stand up, but Baba won’t let him*) I knew you would yell at me.

**BABA PRISCA**

I’m not yelling, just asking.

**VOVA**

Really?

**BABA PRISCA**

Really.

**VOVA**

Really-really?

**BABA PRISCA**

Really-really.

**VOVA**

*(hugs Baba)* I’m glad you are not going to yell, because Mama said you would curse me.

**BABA PRISCA**

*(casting a hard glance at Slava)* Did she now?

**VOVA**

Yep.

**BABA PRISCA**

So it looks like she knew…she knew that you did this?

**VOVA**

Yeah, I asked if it’s okay. She said you’d yell, but let me do it anyway. But you’re not going to yell? Are you?

**BABA PRISCA**

No, not at you. (*to Slava*) You are a treacherous snake, Slava.

**SLAVA**

Thanks a lot Vova. No pirogies for you tonight…just boiled potatoes …chew on that.

**BABA PRISCA**

Why take it out on him? (*To Vova*) You were just thinking about your grandma, hmm? Come here my purring kitten (*trumpets the back of his neck with her lips*). You were worried that Baba would get sick from the radiation. But here is one thing you didn’t think about: old baba’s are not afraid of radiation, but rather they need radiation very very much.

**VOVA**

Yeah, you’ve said so…again and again.

**BABA PRISCA**

So then why won’t you let your Babusia have a delicious meal that she needs?

**VOVA**

Oh, I wasn’t worrying about Babusia.

**BABA PRISCA**

Really! Then who?

**VOVA**

About the poor little bunnies and deer that Babusia is always eating.

**BABA PRISCA**

Deer and bunnies?

**VOVA**

Yeah, and baby boars, too.

**BABA PRISCA**

Get off me! And go away to a place where devils can tear you apart, you cursed bastard.

*Baba Prisca beats Vova’s back as he runs towards the house.*

**VOVA**

I found the place where you hide their bones. Baba, I think you may be a wolf!

*Chases Vova, throwing a pot at him:*

**BABA PRISCA**

If you are going to spy on me, I will take you to the rusalka. Those water nymphs will beat your head with stones—to death….He feels sorry for the bunnies! But me, an old woman, who feels sorry for me!?!

**SLAVA**

I told you she would curse you!

*The lights on the stage go out as a spotlight comes up on the door. Vova comes out of the house. Slava and Baba Prisca stop their fighting and listen to Vova with full attention.*

**VOVA**

So that’s the way we live. Baba, Mama and me. Once there was a Dad, but he’s not been around for a long time. One day he sneakily packed all his important things—documents and all our money. And ran away. Nobody knows where. Forever. Honestly, life without him got better. But Mama and Babusia don’t see it that way. Mama misses having a man in her life, and Baba, a man in the fields. Because I, according to her, am not and will not ever be useful in this way. But that’s not true. She’s got it drummed it into her head that I’m like an 8 year old child. Why? I’m 28 already. But once Babusia gets something in her head, that’s it. Nobody can convince her otherwise. That’s why things between her and Mama are not always so good.

Sometimes it seems to me they are about to beat the living daylights out of each other, but then out of nowhere poof there’s peace. Mama worries about me all the time, makes me wear a stupid hat, sleep in socks, and always wash my hands because I’m going to grow horns. Why would I grow horns? She gets very nervous when I ask about other places, about people who live in the city, about television, planes, and why we live in the Zone but all other people live out there in “NOT THE ZONE,” and what’s bigger, “the zone” or “not the zone?” Mama only has one answer to all these questions: “Because that’s the way it has to be.” What kind of answer is that? If you ask me, that’s not an answer. Mama keeps the real answers from me…but just the same, sooner or later I will find everything out. I’ve already managed to learn some things: not long ago I became friends with some stalkers who come out here…I showed them around and they took me for a ride in their car and gave me some money. 20 hryvnia. That makes me richer than Baba! The stalkers said that we live in the internet age, but when I asked them to tell me what the internet means, nobody could really say anything that was understandable. Sooner or later I will get out of the Zone and learn about everything on my own. I once was already there for real, in the “not the zone,” when Dad was still with us. That was a long long time ago, when they moved us to Crimea. But I almost don’t remember those times…

**SCENE 2.** **Running in Place**

*April 27, 1986 (the day after the accident)*

*The same place, but the house and people look less aged. Slava holds a one year-old Vova. Father comes out of the house holding a bag and a radio.*

**BABA PRISCA**

You all can go to hell! I’m not going anywhere!

**FATHER**

Listen, mother, no one is asking us…It’s a mandatory evacuation. We’ve got 15 minutes to get ready, that’s it.

**BABA PRISCA**

THAT’S IT! Who are you to—

**SLAVA**

Ma, don’t start up, there’s nothing to discuss—it’s an order.

**BABA PRISCA**

No one can give me orders here!

**SLAVA**

The militia said that we can return in three days, “Don’t take anything except your documents and money.”

**BABA PRISCA**

Well then, why should I go at all?

**SLAVA**

It’s an evacuation drill at the station.

**BABA PRISCA**

What does that have to do with me? I lived here through the war with the Krauts by not going anywhere, and I will live through their drills the same way.

**FATHER**

The radiation alarm has gone off. Soldiers and police are already running around in masks. It’s not a drill—it’s a catastrophe.

**BABA PRISCA**

Damn your radiation! Where is it, your radiation? Show me, where?

**SLAVA**

Whether or not you see it, we have to go.

**BABA PRISCA**

Hello! I have a cow, piglets, a goat, chickens. Who’s going to take care of them? And the house? And the property? I am not going anywhere!

**SLAVA**

Do you understand that it’s not safe? And we’ll get written up because of you!

**FATHER**

The police are searching house by house, through every nook and cranny. So mother, don’t make it a big deal. (*He takes Prisca by the shoulders and pulls her into the house*) The Party gave its orders, we must obey them. We’ll get our things, the most important things, documents, money…

*At first Baba Prisca just gives in, but when it becomes clear to her that she is stronger than he is, she rips herself out of her son-in-law’s grip.*

**BABA PRISCA**

Let go of me, damn you! I am not leaving! And may your last breath be cursed!

**SLAVA**

Just you wait and see Mama. The militia will take you by force, putting the whole village to shame.

**BABA PRISCA**

They can kiss my ass! *(Goes to the fence, turns towards Slava)* I’ll go to the marshes…I have a special place to hide there. *(To her son-in-law)* And you, you miserly devil, if you ever touch me again, I'll cut your head off, I swear to God. *(Goes back towards him and rips the radio out of his hands)* This is mine.

*Baba Prisca takes off through the gate, slamming the door behind her.*

**SLAVA**

Maybe it’s better to let her go.

*Father tenderly embraces his wife and the sleeping baby in her arms.*

**SCENE 3. The Gatekeepers**

*Present day. Slava comes out of the house in an apron.*

**SLAVA**

Where are you!?! Vovka!

*Vova comes out of the shed.*

**VOVA**

I’m coming, I’m coming.

**SLAVA**

You’ve been spending way too much time in that shed lately. What were you doing in there for so long?

**VOVA**

Well, ummm…nothing. You were the one who asked me to look for the dried dill. It was hard to find. Baba has all sorts of different stuff in there. Here (*tosses the dill rolled up in newspaper to Slava*).

**SLAVA**

Look at me. If you shake your willy you will grow horns!

**VOVA**

I didn’t shake anything!

**SLAVA**

Just the same, go wash your hands.

**VOVA**

Why? I wasn’t shaking anything.

**SLAVA**

We’ll have dinner as soon as Baba comes home *(she goes into the house)*.

**VOVA**

*(feeling the top of his head)* Nope. No horns.

*A car motor is heard gradually approaching.*

**VOVA**

Mama! Someone’s coming!

*Slava comes out of the house. “Anybody home?” bellows from beyond the fence. The District Officer enters, dressed in his summer uniform.*

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

Are you all still alive?

**SLAVA**

We’re not dead yet, and don’t hold your breath!

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

I’m just kidding. *(Looking around)* And where is Babka?

**SLAVA**

She’s alive too, don’t worry. She went into the village. The mobile store is in Malyi Klischi today. Hopefully they have something there worth getting… some bread at least.

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

Oh she got something all right… I drove past her a little ways up the road hauling a sack. She’ll be here any minute now.

**SLAVA**

You passed her and didn’t give her a ride?

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

In my clean car? She’s as dirty as a pig.

**SLAVA**

And is that her fault?

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

Well…given that you have no water, no sewer, no electricity, no. You have nothing here at all. Nothing to keep yourself clean with.

**SLAVA**

Yes, we have nothing. But even dirty we’re cleaner than your people.

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

Calm down, she was almost here anyway... And besides I wanted to have the chance to talk to you alone—without all her witch spirits harping on my soul.

**SLAVA**

If you’re here to bring up *that* again, its pointless.

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

Slava, think about—aren’t you tired of living like a wild animal in the woods? No electricity, no stores, no neighbors. No doctor to come here when something happens, no way to get to a doctor. Wouldn’t you rather leave this life behind?

**SLAVA**

No.

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

Do you realize you are the one black spot on my record? My bosses have already handed me my head because you won’t resettle. Don’t you have a conscience?

**SLAVA**

Don’t *we* have a conscience? Do you see this house? My mother has lived her whole life here, I was born here, and so was Vova. It’s been our family’s home for generations. Now you want to force us to move and *we* are the ones without a conscience?

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

Point taken.

**SLAVA**

It wasn’t so bad here once. The mobile store still came. And there was electricity too…until some bastard stole the wires.

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

Yes, once!

**SLAVA**

That’s right. And we’ve lived through two whole winters already without any electricity. Two years, and you have as yet to find new wires or the thieves.

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

Who’s going to bring new lines out here? For just the three of you? Slava, don’t even think about it. Even if there were more of you here, it wouldn’t make a difference because nobody gives a damn. You should just leave here and take Babka and your son with you. You don’t really have a choice and I’m trying to tell this to you as nicely as I can.

*Baba Prisca comes into the yard with a sack on her back.*

**BABA PRISCA**

Oh, the evil one is here and in place.

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

I am not the evil one. Look, I’ve brought you some batteries *(he diplays a pack of batteries)*.

**BABA PRISCA**

Yes, but they are not for free. *(Goes into the shed.)*

**SLAVA**

He didn’t come to give you batteries! He’s here to evict us again.

**BABA PRISCA**

Don’t worry, Slava, I’ll take care of it.

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

Oh, this is just a courtesy call. When they really want to evict you, they’ll be sending people who are not quite as courteous as I am to do it. Those people will be very different.

**SLAVA**

You mean the “bandits?” Yeah, we know about them already. They come here in their big expensive cars with their guns and pistols. Up to no good at all. They shot up the beehives in Malyi Klishchi…that honey was all the old people had to live on.

*Baba comes out of the shed holding a small bottle of dark liquid, gives it to the District Officer.*

**BABA PRISCA**

Mix a teaspoon of this with lard and spread it on your head *(pointing to his head)*, not on this one (*pointing to his penis,)* that one. Keep it on for three hours then clean it with a cloth. You’ll get her pregnant, for sure. Use it all to the end. Then come again, with batteries. Got it?

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

Got it. What’s not to get? And oh boy, if it works, I promised my wife I will quit this job, and we’ll move far away from here.

**BABA PRISCA**

If you have promised, then so it shall be.

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

If it we get pregnant, I’ll never forget you, Babka.

**BABA PRISCA**

Ok fine, but now let’s get down to the real business. You, Vasya, are a policeman. Why can’t you run those bandits out of town? Hmm? Or maybe you want me to take your gun clean up things myself?

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

“Bandits.” Hah.—that’s what they were called ten years ago. You know what they’re called now? AUTHORITIES. Deputies, businessmen, managers of all ranks. And if anyone is going to be running anyone out of here, it’s them who will do it to you and me. They have their interests here. They want to make this a destination vacation for sick bastards from London and Berlin…morbid tourists suddenly want come here in herds from Europe.

**SLAVA**

There’s not enough sickness in the world for them? This is a closed zone—it’s Chornobyl—a tragedy. Why do they want to see our sorrow?

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

One person’s tragedy and sorrow is another’s vacation.

**BABA PRISCA**

There’s nothing here for them to see!

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

It’s already not for you or me to decide, Baba.

**SLAVA**

Aren’t they worried about the radiation?

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

They’ll only come for a day or two, drive around in their expensive cars, shoot at wildlife and then go back home. Nothing will happen to them.

**BABA PRISCA**

I’m telling you, there is no radiation! It was all part of that dirty dog Gorbachev’s plan to get people out of the villages. His plans for these lands were absolutely crazy. …Oh, this was some place before the accident! Beautiful. Gardens, fields—and here along the road by the pines trees (*shaking her finger to make the point*) there was a GROCERY store.

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

I wouldn’t know about that. They sent me here in ’96.

**BABA PRISCA**

I’m talking about the kind of store where you could buy everything.

**SLAVA**  
But there was nothing to buy from that store. The shelves only had sap on them.

**BABA PRISCA**

Oh it was wonderful. (*Gesticulating her fingers with political flare*) Fresh bread, a post office open every day—was it? Yes, it was! How many different tomato sauces there were, halva, the most tasty Turkish delight! Once they even brought in condensed milk, but by the time I got there it was all gone. And we even had a place for our tractors. But then Gorbachev…

**SLAVA**

Mother, don’t start in with your stories again.

**BABA PRISCA**

They are not stories, they’re history, the sacred truth! If you don’t know what you’re talking about, keep your mouth shut!

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

I’ve heard a lot of different “histories” of this place, but in all of them, there’s radiation.

**VOVA**

The history of what, Bab?

**BABA PRISCA**

Of what? Don’t you know?

**VOVA**

Uh-uh.

**BABA PRISCA**

Oh, yeah, it’s very hush-hush. Whoever dares to breathe a word of it will lose his head.

**VOVA**

Wow...

**SLAVA**

Mama, maybe now isn’t the time for your so-called “history.”

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

I love history! Go on, Baba Prisca, tell it.

*Baba Prisca casts a triumphant look at Slava, pushes her aside and becomes the center of attention.*

**BABA PRISCA**

Once, in the most ancient of ancient times, many wonderous nature-bound creatures were born here. Rulsalka—our water nymphs, Mavka—our wood nymphs, field spirits…all sorts of creatures roamed all over these lands. And they lived off our rivers: rivers that have always flown with human blood; blood that has been spilled throughout ages. Spilled by the Tartars who cut and slaughtered us Ukrainians, spilled by the Poles who tortured and murdered us, spilled by Khmelnytskyi who flooded the Podillia with Jewish blood…oh, this was a dark place for those Jews. Spilled by the Moscovites, those “katsap,” who treated us worse than garbage. Then spilled the Reds. On this very land around us, the Soviets tortured 900 young Ukrainian men…and then came the Great Famine… (*she recalls something deeply frightening*) there are no words to describe that. Up to the Famine our enemies were absolutely vile, but not even they would think of starving us to death…by the millions. But Stalin did. The devil’s advocate himself….Then the Germans came—we took care of those Krauts fast enough, but that just brought things back to the Soviets. Normal people don’t live through such horrors. …And then the more recent wars came. ….and that’s when the flying sauce…there were…um…well, flying saucers. All sorts of little blue men and green creatures, all over the place. And what our army wouldn’t do to try to catch them, but they never could. Then suddenly, out of nowhere, the same saucers came back in 1985 and contacted our authorities directly. (*To the District Officer, whose jaw is a bit dropped*) Do you understand what I am getting at here?

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

Oh yeah, aliens and all that kind of stuff.

**BABA PRISCA**

For shit you understand! But Gorbachev understood it, right away; it was his chance to not only catch up to America and Europe, but bypass them. It was he, the viper, who planned everything…but I’m not so sure if he was able to plan it himself. Probably his wife, Raisa Maksymivna, helped him. She was a wise woman, oh very wise *(crosses herself)*, may she rest in peace. So, Gorbachev wanted to build a base for those flying saucers and give them a place to land. And to keep the people from hysteria—and from getting in the way—they decided that all the people within a 30 mile radius would have to be evacuated. So in 1986 they devised the accident at the power plant, which was a sure ruse to get the people out, “for their own wellbeing.” And on that very day, the digging for a secret subway from Kyiv to Chornobyl began. A subway that still functions—to this very day. But then as fate would have it, the USSR collapsed unexpectedly and all Gorbachev’s plans poof went up in flames. The saucers still fly, but only at night now, and with their lights shut off. …There have been rumors that those little blue men have been using the secret subway. And that they’ve disguised themselves as people and have penetrated the government and parliament. *(To the District Officer)* Now do you understand what I am talking about?

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

*(Uneasily)* No, not really...

**BABA PRISCA**

*(Claps her hands loudly)* Don’t you get it? It’s all a ruse! Those little blue men had it all planned long ago (*counting the points on her fingers*): the accident, the people’s evacuation, the subway—it was they who built it—they even planned the collapse of the Soviet Empire. It is all their doing. They kicked Gorbachev out too, and ordered him to keep his mouth shut. And by the way, Raisa Maksymivna, his wife, she herself was the first little blue person on earth--(*Crosses herself*)-- may the earth be her featherbed. In short, they have taken over the Ukrainian government, with the aim of wiping all of us out completely. …But Vasya, do not dare breathe a word of this to anyone. Got it?

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

Uh-huh.

**BABA PRISCA**

Do not “uh-huh” me sonny boy, this is a dangerous secret. If they were to find out that you knew, they would stick straws into your spine and suck the juices right down to the marrow, dry—those juices are delicacy to them. …They haven’t stuck me, so far, because I feed them rabbits and catfish. Oh, how they love them!

**VOVA**

Oh, so that’s what you do with the rabbits?

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

*(with a stupid smile)* I have to go. I have actual work to do.

**SLAVA**

We were just about to have dinner. Would you like to join us?

**BABA PRISCA**

Yeah, stay, we grew this all ourselves, a nice home cooked meal.

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

No, no, that’s okay, you can have your “home-cooked meal” without me.

*The District officer goes to the fence, opens it.*

**BABA PRISCA**

Hey! *(slyly squints while shuffling her shoe on the ground)* Do you know what this is right here under your feet?

*The District Officer bends over to look for something under his feet.*

**BABA PRISCA**

It’s the secret subway line built in 1986 by Gorbachev and the little blue people.

*Baba Prisca points her right index finger towards the sky, with great resolve. The baffled District Officer takes off quickly, as does the sound of his car.*

**SLAVA**

He’ll be back soon enough. The bloodsucker!

**VOVA**

How do you get to the subway?

**SLAVA**

You don’t. There is no subway.

**VOVA**

There is! Baba, how do I get there?

**BABA PRISCA**

It is very easy, Vovchyk, and if you are a good boy I will teach you someday. Hmm? (*Pointing at the sack*). Now bring that into the house!

*Vova and Slava look inside the sack.*

**VOVA**

Oooo! Look at all that bread!

**SLAVA**

That’ll be enough for a while.

**BABA PRISCA**

And at the bottom there’s condensed milk and salo. Half for me and half for you.

**SLAVA**

Don’t you mean a third?

**VOVA**

Yeah!

**BABA PRISCA**

I tell you what: Next month you go hunt down the supply cart and then we’ll divide things by three. Now let’s eat! I’m as hungry as a wolf in the woods.

**VOVA**

And me, I’m as hungry as a plow cutting the fields.

*Vova drags the sack into the house. Slava and Baba Prisca move the table away from the wall, then Slava goes into the house. Baba Prisca pulls out a glowing blue mushroom from her pocket, and looks at it with pure awe. Slava returns, with plates and spoons in hand and sets the table.*

**BABA PRISCA**

Slava! Look! I traded a Mavka a loaf of bread for this!

**SLAVA**

You think you traded with a Wood Spirit? Have you gone crazy?

**BABA PRISCA**

I cut through the forest like I always do on my way home… and I heard her moaning, she was asking for bread. So I left her some by the willows and went on my way. Then lo, there they were, about 100 meters away. The precious mushrooms…

**SLAVA**

You really have gone off your rockers! These are dangerous! They’re glowing!! This can kill us! Why do you bring such things to the house??

*Slava knocks the mushroom from Prisca’s hand and stomps on it, then takes a shovel to throws the remains over the fence.*

**BABA PRISCA**

You are naïve, Slava. My grandmother herself told me about these mushrooms. They only appear once every hundred years and are called “The Gatekeepers”.

**SLAVA**

Don’t ever bring such vile things to this house again! You’re not the only one who lives here! (*She goes into the house*.)

*Baba Prisca pulls out another mushroom from her pocket, breaks off a piece rebelliously giggles, eats it, then tucks away the rest in her pocket. She goes into the house. Slava and Vova come back out, she with a large pot of soup; and he with bread, salo, onions and a knife. Baba returns, carrying an old radio. Slava serves the soup as Vova slices the bread. Prisca inserts the batteries brought to her by the District officer. They sit in silence as they start to eat. Baba, as if by habit, turns the radio dials, trying to find a wave. It hisses and whistles.*

**RADIO HOST**

…a new mandatory organ donation law has been passed by the pro-government majority in Parliament. Clearly more than just a few concerns have raised by this decision. With us now in the studio is Tamara Denisova Kokhteeva, our Public Health and Safety Secretary, with whom we shall try to address these concerns. Tamara Denisova, let’s start with yesterday’s incident—a student in our nation’s capital died suddenly under mysterious circumstances. His parents made a long voyage to Kyiv to bring his body home, only to discover that all of his organs had been removed—his kidneys, his liver, his heart…even his eyeballs…

**SLAVA**

...God Almighty! *(crosses herself).*

**RADIO HOST**

His parents, who were deeply shocked, were told that this is all completely legal now.

**TAMARA DENISOVA KOKHTEEVA**

(*with a Russian accent*) Yes, that is correct: All procedures in this case fully correspond to the recently enacted law. Under this law, transplanting organs and body parts from cadavers no longer requires familial consent...

**BABA PRISCA**

*(throwing a spoon into the soup)* Oh the greed of those werewolves in power!

**TAMARA DENISOVA KOKHTEEVA**

... and this is an enormous breakthrough in the sphere of health and safety...

**BABA PRISCA**

*(to the radio)* May you be cursed three times over you shameless viper!!!

**RADIO HOST**

But the organs of this student were immediately removed after he was killed. Immediately. Was this done to save the lives of others? Or just for money?

*Everyone at the table completely stops eating.*

**TAMARA DENISOVA KOKHTEEVA**

***(laughs)* Of course our primary aim is to save lives. But this law also gives the black market for organ harvesting a hard blow.**

**RADIO HOST**

**So, and please correct me if I’m wrong, the very same doctors who were harvesting organs illegally can now lawfully pick someone’s body to pieces. The only difference is that the money no longer goes into their own pockets?**

**TAMARA DENISOVA KOKHTEEVA**

... yes, instead the money goes to aiding our budget …and therefore encourages the overall improvement of the country...

**SLAVA**

*(hugging her son)* We are better off living here—they won’t try to reach us with their “improvements” in the Zone. Oh my son, you need to be careful with people. Something vile runs through them

**VOVA**

What about us? Aren’t we people?

**SLAVA**

We’re people…good people. But the rest have gone bad.

**VOVA**

The stalkers are good people.

**SLAVA**

The stalkers are lost souls who wander the Zone looking for a place to dump their sick problems. Just keep out of their way. They’re sickness won’t hurt us if we are quiet and out of sight.

**BABA PRISCA**

Oh, if problems are meant to find you, they will. It’s no use hiding. You’re better off to learning how to live with them!

**SLAVA**

That’s awfully brave talk coming from you Mama, considering that you’ve never set foot outside the Zone. You’re as hidden away here as a frog in the mud.

**BABA PRISCA**

Yes, I have always lived here and never been anywhere else. Why would I go anywhere? My forest is here, my mud is here…other than the batteries for my radio, what else do I need? Hmm?

**SLAVA**

Your water nymphs and talking catfish?

**BABA PRISCA**

Of course I need them too!

**RADIO HOST**

…so this ultimately means that a Ukrainian citizen has absolutely no ownership of his body, nor does his family…

**VOVA**

... I want to go to Kyiv, and see the subway there, and go to McDonald’s, and use the Internet, and then I want to try a Coca-Cola.

**SLAVA**

*(covering Vova’s mouth)* No! No! Oh, Vova. Haven’t you been listening to the horrible things they do there? They will cut you up and tear you apart as if you were a pig. How would Mama live without you then?

**BABA PRISCA**

Oh, those of us from Chernobyl don’t have too much to worry about. We’re a little too full of radioactive waste for their tastes….But then again, if they’re desperate enough…

**SLAVA**

There are people all over the world who are desperate for cheap organs.

**BABA PRISCA**

Bless you, Slava, if you think people are willing to buy cheap organs that will devour them.

**TAMARA DENISOVA KOKHTEEVA**

...and by extension, we can use this rationale of putting human material towards the benefit of the economy by taking it to the markets of some European Union countries.

**VOVA**

I don’t care! I’ll walk to Kyiv!

**BABA PRISCA**

Oh, it’s a long long way by foot, and not even the worst bus would pick you up in the disheveled state you’re in. And even if they did, you have no money.

**SLAVA**

Listen to Baba...

**BABA PRISCA**

And if you listen to what Baba says, and don’t try to play anymore tricks on her, maybe one day she’ll wash you up and give you a little money. Hmm?

**VOVA**

Ооооооооооо!

**SLAVA**

*(Bangs her fists on the table)* Mama! Why? Why would you say this?

**TAMARA DENISOVA KOKHTEEVA** (in Russian)

...unfortunately not all material from Ukrainian citizens is suitable for foreign markets. Materials coming from seniors, the small, the sickly, alcoholics, drug addicts and the diseased can only in be used in the domestic market....

*Slava turns the radio off.*

**SLAVA**

*(to Vova)* Take your bowl, let’s go to eat in the house...

*Slava and Vova start into house. Baba Prisca turns the radio back on, not waiting for them to be out of earshot.*

**TAMARA DENISOVA KOKHTEEVA**

...people of means will be granted the official opportunity to skip the waiting list...

**RADIO HOST**

... well with thousands of Ukrainians, it shouldn’t be hard to find a good donor—one with no contraindications. All you need is an accident, and then you can dismember the victim for his organs with no problem.

*Baba Prisca**looks for another radio station.*

**RADIO**

Even though alleged massive fraud is taking place during this election, and its opponents are being harassed, the European Union is still holding talks with the Ukrainian government. The press can say whatever it wants to about this—we do have freedom of speech here—but nobody pays attention to the press anyway. They can bark all they want. The opposition only makes things dirtier for their people.

*Vova runs out of the house, Slava runs after him. He runs towards the fence, but she is faster and intercepts him, blocking the exit.*

**SLAVA**

Where do you think you are you going!

**VOVA**

To the Pripyat, the stalkers will be at the river again today.

**SLAVA**

You’re not going anywhere!

**VOVA**

Yes I am!

**SLAVA**

*(having a coughing fit)* You’re trying to kill me! You know how dangerous it is there! People will tear you apart. Like when you were little and those kids wanted to see what’s inside your special brain. You know what they did to you. And remember what happened to your father? How he was kidnapped by strangers and sold into slavery?

**VOVA**

The stalkers say your stories are full of shit! That almost all people are good!

**SLAVA**

And they said that just like that?

**VOVA**

Yep.

**SLAVA**

Only the filth of the earth would put it that way because they want to fool you. I forbid you to even go near them!

**VOVA**

They also say that I’m not a boy anymore and don’t have to listen to my mommy, and that I should be fucking babes…

*Baba Prisca bursts out laughing, Slava drops her jaw.*

**SLAVA**

*(to Prisca)* Did you hear that? He never talked like that before he met that filth—and there you go!

**BABA PRISCA**

Sonny, where would we find you a babe in this neck of the woods? Hmm?

**VOVA**

When you want something you find it!

**SLAVA**

I am ashamed of you!

**VOVA**

Who cares?! I am a human being too and I want to fuck for real, not just wank off! The stalkers said they would bring me a whore for my birthday and I could fuck her instead of wanking off all the time.

*Slava, as they say, is floored. But Baba, she continues to laugh.*

**SLAVA**

And who is more important to you, your own mother or those foul stalkers?

**VOVA**

To me?... Well, right now the most important person me is the whore that I will FUCK!

*Taking advantage of his mother’s shock, Vova moves one of the wooden planks from the fence and slides out through the space. His mother and grandmother follow him with their astonished gazes.*

**BABA PRISCA**

Well, that was bound to happen. It’s long overdue.

**SLAVA**

Oh God, Mama! He’s sick, what woman would want that?!

*Slava goes into the house in tears.*

**BABA PRISCA**

A normal woman, he’s NORMAL too... Just different, that’s all.

*Baba Prisca takes a bite of her mushroom. The radio turns itself on.*

**RADIO**

Albert Einstein was an unusual child too. Many people considered him to be slow, a failure...

**BABA PRISCA**

Einstein?.. Do I know him? Who is he?

**RADIO**

Baba, take out the batteries…come on, come on! Take them out, damn it!

*Baba Prisca hurriedly takes the batteries out of the radio.*

**RADIO**

They’re out?

**BABA PRISCA**

*(She shows batteries to the radio)* Here!

**RADIO**

You see, I even work without batteries. The theory of relativity—that’s who Albert Einstein is.

**SCENE 4.** **I Have Your Son’s Blood on My Hands.**

*1993, somewhere in the steppes of Crimea.*

*Father comfortably sits in his underwear, eating salo and sauerkraut in between his shots of vodka. It’s clear he’s had quite a bit to drink.*

**SLAVA**

*(showing her husband her bloody hands)* Don’t you care? …No, you don’t! This is your son’s blood on my hands!

*Father clenches his fists and growls like a wild beast.*

**SLAVA**

Beating him up is not enough for them anymore, now they’re throwing rocks at his head. “Just for fun.” And all the while you sit here clinking your vodka glass. Clinking, eating, shitting, sleeping…is that all you can do while they’re trying to kill your son?

**FATHER**

Eeeeeeeh! I recognize that old witch…

**SLAVA**

???

**FATHER**

It’s your mother, Prisca. She’s coming out in you. You gnaw at people’s brains just like she does. ….Tell me, what can I do!?! What?!? Should I rip the heads off those kids? Or kill them and send them to hell? Then what? Won’t other kids just keep on coming and coming? These pricks of children grow up to be prickish teenagers and then worse, prickish adults!

**SLAVA**

Go! Talk to the kids, to their parents, to the police. I don’t know where you should go, but go! Do something!

**FATHER**

Aha, you talked to them. And did how did that go?

**SLAVA**

You are a big man, they’ll listen to you.

**FATHER**

Why? Who are we to them? We’ve lived in this hell-hole for seven years now in all that time they’ve done nothing but shit on us from their perches on high. We are lepers to them. “The Chernobyl’s.” Not Slava, not Vova, not Petya—not even the Savchenkos. Hell, they don’t even know our last name. Shit on us—that’s all they do. All over our feelings, our problems and on your son, whose blood is on your hands.

**SLAVA**

He is your son too...

*She grabs the bottle of vodka, but Father’s reflexes are fast and he grabs it too. A tug of war:*

**SLAVA**

... your son, your son, your son, your son, your son, your son...

*Father wins the bottle from Slava’s hands.*

**FATHER**

Yes, mine.

**SLAVA**

He is only eight! Protect him! Put down the bottle and do something...

**FATHER**

You bore me a freak of nature, I cannot protect that. It’s out of my hands…he’s a freak…

*Father pours himself a shot with trembling hands.*

**SLAVA**

How can you say that about our son? OUR son? He is no freak of nature. He was healthy when he was born. It’s the accident. It’s those children who beat his head against the wall. That’s what’s to blame. THE CHILD THAT I BORE YOU WAS BORN HEALTHY.

*Father throws his shot glass on the floor violently, and weeps. Slava is quick to embrace him, kissing him everywhere, tears streaming down her face.*

**SLAVA**

Let’s leave this place. We’ll go somewhere where nobody will look down on us. I can’t live here anymore...

**FATHER**

Shit stinks no matter where you go.

**SLAVA**

I know. I know. People we be hard on us no matter where…But what about going back home? Maybe? Mama would be there. And I know it’s possible—I’ve heard that others have started going back—they bribe the guards or go through the woods. I think it could work, and no matter what, it’s got to be better than this. We’ve already lived through our dose of radiation and people’s hatred…we have nothing to lose. It can’t get any worse.

*Slava removes herself from her weeping husband and seems to go on into another dimension as if he’s not there.*

**SLAVA**

I honestly believed and still believe that only way out of living a tragic life is to return home. We were in such pain, such pain… it was beginning to kill us. My husband stewed in alcoholic depression; I was drowning in relentless fights with him, and Vova’s life was being blotted out at the hands of other children. It couldn’t get worse.

**SCENE 5. A Sad Sight**

*1996. The Chernobyl zone in their own village, their own home.*

*Father drags a half-naked Slava into the yard by her hair, grabs her face, screams at her, covers her face with a towel and yells at her through it, takes it off and squeezes it around her throat, drags her around like a dog.*

*She looses consciousness. He gets a bucket of water, throws some of it on her and tries to drown her in the rest. Prisca rushes out to defend her daughter. All the while a 12 year old Vova stands in the doorway, sadly observing it all.*

**SLAVA**

It couldn’t get worse.

**SCENE 6.** **A** **Water Nymph’s Dowry**

*Slava washes bowls, plates, cups and other kitchen items in a large bowl, then rinses them in another. Vova is helping her. He dries the dishes and puts them on the table.*

**VOVA**

Ma, there’s nowhere else to put them, don’t wash any more.

**SLAVA**

Homes are cleaned in time for Easter, but I was too sick to do it. And of course it didn’t occur to you or Baba to do it without me. So now that Easter’s long past and it’s almost summer, let me have my clean. You can put the dishes in there *(points to the barrel)*, when it’s full, bring it into the house.

**VOVA**

But it’s finally nice out…almost like summer. I want to go out! Wander around.

**SLAVA**

First things first. We’ll finish doing the dishes, then start the windows. After that we’ll start planting the vegetables.

**VOVA**

Why? They’ve already been planted. We’ve got potatoes, carrots, beans, beets—

**SLAVA**

We’ll plant pumpkins too, they grow well here.

**VOVA**

Where? The garden’s all full.

**SLAVA**

So you’ll dig up a new plot and I’ll seed.

**VOVA**

But if we do all that, when will I have time to go out? The day will be over!

**SLAVA**

You’ll have all summer!

**VOVA**

So it’s okay for Baba to wander around the forest all day long, but Vova can’t because he’s the house servant?

**SLAVA**

Baba is not wandering around the forest. She has her work cut out for her too. How do you think we get the herbs and roots we need, or pine cones for our fire?

**VOVA**

She said I could go with her.

**SLAVA**

And you can once your work gets done…unless you’d rather go hungry next winter.

**VOVA**

We were hungry last winter.

**SLAVA**

Yes, but we weren’t starving either.

**VOVA**

Yes, but we were never full, either.

**SLAVA**

Speaking for myself, I didn’t starve.

**VOVA**

And speaking for myself, I was always hungry.

**SLAVA**

It’s good that you were never full… otherwise you would burst.

**VOVA**

It’s bad I didn’t burst. If I did I could wander off as far as I want, and would go live in Kyiv. It’s bad I didn’t burst, I didn’t burst, I didn’t...

**SLAVA**

Off with you then! Let the devils take you to the hills. Just help me to finish up here, and then you can run off to the four corners of the earth for all I care. We’ll dig the plot tomorrow.

**VOVA**

*(rubbing his hands together)* Оооооо!

*Baba Prisca**muddles through the fence balancing a big bundle on her back, and anxiously plops it onto the ground.*

**VOVA**

Baba had too much of the woods! She’s back early. Maybe she wants to eat again!

**BABA PRISCA**

There’s a whole sea of leeks out there.

**SLAVA**

Did you test it?

**BABA PRISCA**

Of course. *(She takes a portable dosimeter out of her pocket and measures)* Seventy.

**SLAVA**

That’s a lot...

**BABA PRISCA**

It’s the same everywhere! But forget about that; we’ve got more important things to worry about. I saw something—May God have mercy on us! You won’t believe it. *(To Vova)* Hey sweetie, you want to help your grandma? I’ve got some nettles here…can you hang it for me? Hmm? Over there in the sun, so it can dry the right way.

**VOVA**

Sure.

*Vova happily complies with Baba’s request, but stays within earshot.*

**BABA PRISCA**

*(She helps Slava to wash the dishes)* I went to the creek to catch catfish…it was noon. And what I saw there…oh, it is unspeakable.

**SLAVA**

Oy, Mama, why on earth would you go to the creek? The readings are off the charts there, it’s off limits!

**BABA PRISCA**

I know every single bush and ditch in that area…I myself measured everything, so I know where I can go and where I can’t. And by the way I’ve taught this to Vova just in case…because with the way things are, who knows what will happen.

**SLAVA**

No one should ever ever go there, not to the marsh, not to the floodplains. It’s never been safe there, ever.

**BABA PRISCA**

Oh Slava, these very places saved my life during the war. And more than once, I might add. And not just my life. Good people do not fear to tread there. Remember that when I pass away. Vova knows these places well and he knows where he can and cannot pick things. Trust him on this. He’s got intuition about the forest; it’s a gift. He got it from me. And when I die, his gift will get even stronger.

**SLAVA**

Foo. You’ll be buried face down for a better look at hell—your witchcraft is a sin!

**BABA PRISCA**

No way no how is this a sin! It’s ours, we were born into it. Mother Earth herself picked our family and gave it KNOWLEDGE of her workings, and this gift passes to us, from the graves of our parents all the way back to our farthest ancestors. We are herbalists and enchanters, and yes, I admit, there have been witches among us. But how can any of this be a sin if we were born this way? Hmm? Is it something we should hide?

**SLAVA**

This is crazy! I’m not listening!

**BABA PRISCA**

Oh I had had such high hopes for you Slava, but God had other plans. The soul of your whole generation was broken by the Hammer and Sickle; they stripped you of your talents and left you to rot in your discontent. And what came of that? Hmm? Just look at how your generation runs things—you promote instability and encourage mediocrity. That’s it. Nothing more. Now more than ever there’s only one thing that’s truly important to understand—that you’ve been given life to live on an earth that you can till with your own hands. Happily. But your generation can’t do this. You’re broken. Your souls have wasted away….I’m sorry that I’ve had to say this to you. It hurts me. It scares me.

**SLAVA**

Um, if you are serious about this…I don’t understand. I don’t understand what you want. What do you want?

**BABA PRISCA**

Nothing…

**SLAVA**

No, tell me! You want me to throw everything away so I can go frolic around the woods and skip through the waterways?

**BABA PRISCA**

Nothing. NOTHING. Nothing at all.

**SLAVA**

Well that’s good, because getting hammered by your tongue isn’t helping my soul to get this work finished.

**BABA PRISCA**

... Slava, I will die soon....

**SLAVA** (*interrupts*)

Oh, come on. *(Gives Baba a joking push)* Mama you know you’ll outlive all of us.

**BABA PRISCA**

Let me finish! And don’t interrupt! I had a premonition at the creek... I saw a water nymph... though I really shouldn’t call it a premonition, because that rusalka was actually there. What’s natural, what’s supernatural—not everyone knows how to tell the difference. But I do. I’ve lived here my whole life and know all the land’s signs and omens. … Rusalka only come out at night. If you see one during the day it can only mean one thing: she’s warning you that death will come to your home, and very soon.

**SLAVA**

Ma-, again with the stories?! *(she hugs her mother)*

**BABA PRISCA**

You! Don’t you let Vova out of the house! Do you hear me? The Hooded One, she will be coming for me. But you make sure he stays in there…because who knows what she’ll do.

**SLAVA**

Old woman, bite your tongue! You’ve gone completely mad!

**BABA PRISCA**

If you want to believe me, believe me. If you don’t, don’t. But I’m telling you: something will happen. It’s happened before and more than once.

**SLAVA**

Maybe so, maybe not. But Mama, IF someone dies, it’ll probably be me—scared to death by how your stories make my blood run cold!

*Slava carries the cleaned dishes into the house.*

**BABA PRISCA** (*to Slava*)

We have to be ready for everything in life, we can’t bury our heads in the sand. Whether or not we like it, Fate doesn’t pass us by.

**VOVA**

Did the rusalka hit you with stones?

**BABA PRISCA**

Why would she do that?

**VOVA**

They hit people with stones you said so yourself.

**BABA PRISCA**

Rusalka are not bad creatures. Fearsome, yes, but if you sing to them, or bring them wreaths of flowers or embroidered white cloths, not only will they not hurt you, but they will protect you your whole life long. They’ll warn you of trouble, they’ll hide you from your enemies. Nobody knows anything about our rusalka here anymore. I am the last of their friends. I was taught how to be with them by my Baba—Stefania—and now I’m going to teach you. (*And so the lesson begins*) You will be the last person to know about our Polisian rusalka.

**VOVA**

Are there rusalka in other places?

**BABA PRISCA**

Maybe. But here, this is the only place you can actually encounter them—and only if you live the way we do. People whole world over have lived in a straight line for a long time now. They don’t have day or night, they sleep and work when they want to. But our time is round. We get up with the sun and sleep with the moon. We have winter, spring, summer and fall; and God only know what they have…strawberries in winter, Christmas in summer… The whole world is in a rush to get someplace and gets there too late just the same. Because that’s what happens when time is straight. Here there is no need to rush. Here the time is round. Everything has its hour, its day, its year. We live at the beginning and end of times…

**VOVA**

*(after some though)* Why?

**BABA PRISCA**

Why what?

**VOVA**

Why do they have time one way and we have it another?

**BABA PRISCA**

It’s like I said, their time goes a line there...and ours goes a circle here.

**VOVA**

I get it. They are already there, but we’re still here.

**BABA PRISCA**

Well, aren’t you an Albert Einstein!

**VOVA**

What’s an Albert Einstein?

**BABA PRISCA**

Ah, there’s one in the creek there—a talking catfish, a very smart catfish. I’ll show to you later… I want to sneak up on him to catch him.

**VOVA**

Ooooh…Why?

**BABA PRISCA**

To eat and get smart.

**VOVA**

Like Einstein?

**BABA PRISCA**

Aha…

**VOVA**

I also want to become smart. Mama says I’m stupid.

**BABA PRISCA**

(*spits*) You are already smart. She’s the one who’s stupid to talk like that.

**VOVA**

You call me stupid too. Everyday.

**BABA PRISCA**

Who? Me? Maybe I say it, but it’s not what I think. You are smart! Do you hear me?

**VOVA**

I hear you.

**BABA PRISCA**

So, you and I will catch Einstein, and become the smartest people on earth.

**VOVA**

Sure. (*he thinks for a moment*) The rusalka, and talking catfish and all your other creatures—why do they stay here in the Zone? Nobody wants to live here anymore, everyone else has run away.

**BABA PRISCA**

Because there’s no other place they can be.

**VOVA**

And is it true that a rusalka wears a stone around her neck?

**BABA PRISCA**

Foo. It’s not a stone. It’s bread. Once in these lands when a maiden died before marrying, a small loaf of rye bread was placed in her hands. And in her grave, that bread would become stone. These maidens turn into rusalka. They have no stones of any kind. They have bread. It’s the rusalka’s dowry.

*Singing:*

Oy there runs, there runs a little child

After it, a Rusalka smiles

Come here, listen to me, little child

I have three riddles for you to guess

Guess them right – you can go to your mother,

Guess them wrong – you’ll be mine and no other.

What can use its voice to play?

What can cry and shed no tears?

What can run without a race?

What can shine by the light of day?

What can twist around a tree?

What can burn without a flame?

What can grow without a root?

Do you think me such a child

That I cannot guess these things?

A violin plays using its voice.

A falcon cries and sheds no tears.

Time can run without a race.

The Moon shines by the light of day.

Hop can twist around a tree.

The sun can burn without flame.

A stone can grow without a root.

**VOVA**

Baba, I also saw a rusalka—yesterday.

*The plate Prisca is drying falls from her hands.*

**BABA PRISCA**

Don’t joke with grandma like that.

**VOVA**

I’m not joking. I saw her in the creek. Somewhere around noon. She was sitting there in the reeds.

*Prisca begins to falter.*

**BABA PRISCA**

Do you see how much your frightening me? Why do you make up such things?

**VOVA**

I’m not!

**BABA PRISCA**

Tell the truth!

**VOVA**

Why would I lie? She was very beautiful, naked all over, and had very long hair that was white as lilies, and eyes that looked like coal.

*Baba Prisca**grabs onto her grandson’s hands as she wilts to the ground. Vova sits beside her.*

**BABA PRISCA**

I met her too.

**VOVA**

You see, I’m not lying. She talked to me too.

*Baba Prisca**grasps her throat.*

**VOVA**

She said, “bloop-bloop”, and I said “bloop-bloop”, and she said “bloop-bloop, bloop-bloop-bloop”, and I said “bloop-bloop, bloop-bloop-bloop”.

*Slava comes back out of the house.*

**SLAVA**

Why are you sitting there? Do I have to do everything myself?

*Vova quickly gets up to help his mother.*

**BABA PRISCA**

Bloop-bloop, bloop-bloop-bloop... Whosoever shall meet a rusalka in the day and speak to her, Death will soon stalk him and bring him to a violent end. Bloop-bloop, bloop-bloop…

**SCENE 7.** **Death**

*Slava hammers nails into the fence to close the gap through which Vova yesterday fled. Baba Prisca bundles herbs that are spread across the table. Slava stops hammering, and places the hammer on the stone under the cross.*

**BABA PRISCA**

How many times do I have to tell you, that’s not a table! Take it off!

**SLAVA**

Is it my fault that your rock is in the way of everything? Do you really need to have it here?

**BABA PRISCA**

It needs to stand as a Memorial to all of us who have lived here. We’re all that’s left. All the way to Malyi Klishchi.

**SLAVA**

So why does it have to be right here? Why not put it in the village?

**BABA PRISCA**

Why? I wanted to put it there…Once I could have given a little something to the soldiers to move it there—but now there’s no one to ask. Maybe I could carry the cross on my own…but not the rock

**SLAVA**

You’re right. Let it be. Besides, our yard has become the center of our village. We are at the center of all life here.

**BABA PRISCA**

You’ve got that right, Slava…

*Somewhere not too far away a cuckoo coos*.

**SLAVA**

I keep thinking about what you said, Mama. About my generation. I don’t know, maybe you’re right; maybe we are broken. But just the same, I want you to know—I’m very grateful for all you have done for us. I don’t know what would have happened to Vova and me without you.

**BABA PRISCA**

(*spits*) Slava, nothing would have happened.

**SLAVA**

No, we wouldn’t have survived. But here we are, alive. Another summer on its way. This time of year is always kind to me.

*The cuckoo coos again. This time it’s quite close by*.

BABA PRISCA

Aha! A cuckoo! A sign of life, we shall live.

*Slava starts to hammer but suddenly stops. She listens. Shots are heard*.

**BABA PRISCA**

And so they come again to rip the peace out of the forest…Damn poachers! Yesterday they shot a yearling and just threw it to the side of the road to rot. These are not people, they are beasts.

**SLAVA**

…that hopefully will leave us alone. Vovchyk (*showing the loose plank in the* *fence*) has run off again to “wander around.” I don’t know what’s with him.

**BABA PRISCA**

The boy is aching for a girlfriend.

**SLAVA**

From where? Where can I find him a girlfriend?

**BABA PRISCA**

Maybe you need to go someplace where there are more people, hmm? He’s a good boy, some nice girl will snatch him up in no time.

**SLAVA**

Do you ever think before you speak? It’s not in the cards for him. That’s why we’re here now—to be in a place that’s as safe as if in God’s own heart. People out there went to the devil long ago. Vova doesn’t understand this. They’ll chew him up and spit him out.

**BABA PRISCA**

Give me a break! You don’t know what means to witness people going to the devil. You haven’t seen the people in Chernivtsi being burned alive in their churches. You haven’t seen a parent crazed by starvation eat his own child—but I have. You…

**SLAVA**

Oy, Mother, that’s sickening…why are telling me this?

**BABA PRISCA**  
Churches are being rebuilt now. So you could go live in a sanctuary somewhere with Vova, hmm?

**SLAVA**

Do you really think they’ll treat us well there? The people who build those churches—they don’t believe in God, they believe in money.

**BABA PRISCA**

You shouldn’t have come back here. Yeah, if you have stayed out there life would have been hard, but you would have adapted to it. Now there’s no way out for you. No place to go.

**SLAVA**

What’s done is done, we can’t go back in time. Besides, what kind of “life” would there have been for us to adapt to? We are the fallout—the fluff and ashes of a nuclear catastrophe.

**BABA PRISCA**

Oh, Slava, if only you knew how this saddens me.

*Shots are heard again.*

**SLAVA**

What’s going on!?!

**BABA PRISCA**

Last winter they shot at the stars on the tombstones in our graveyard. Now all the stars have scars…

*It’s clear that both women are deeply apprehensive, but neither wants to voice the reason.*

**SLAVA**

Who will make dinner, you or me?

**BABA PRISCA**

You Slava, hmm?

**SLAVA**

You’re getting lazy, mother.

**BABA PRISCA**

Well I’m old. It’s hard for me.

**SLAVA**

And I’m weak.

**BABA PRISCA**

That’s true. I wish we knew from what.

**SLAVA**

Well it’s not from what you have; I don’t suffer from laziness.

*Baba Prisca**concedes. She goes to the fence and looks out to the road.*

**BABA PRISCA**

You want me to go look for him?

**SLAVA**

Where would you look? Sit down already. He’ll come on his own.

*Baba Prisca**sits. Both women wait in silence.*

*Pause — 180 seconds.*

*Suddenly the sound pounding feet are heard, getting closer and closer. Vova bursts into the yard. His left shoulder is a bloody mess, his hands and face are covered in blood.*

**VOVA**

I saw some people out there, so I yelled, “Hey there! Hello!” I think they thought I was a wild animal, maybe an elk or boar or something, and they shot at me. So screamed as loud as I could that I am a person, “I AM A PERSON! Don’t shoot! I AM A PERSON!” But they just laughed and started shooting even more. Just over my head. They were driving in two cars circling around me, shooting at me, just over my head, even though I screamed to them that they shouldn’t shoot because I’m a person. They thought it was very funny…Then I jumped into the bushes to hide, so they started shooting at the bushes. I was so scared… and then felt something warm dripping down my legs and I got up to check. I peed myself….Then pow, something stung me in the shoulder. It was so so hot that it felt like fire fell on me from heaven. And then I fell to the ground. I crawled with all my might to find a hole or crack in the ground to hide in. There was blood all over. Where did it come from? Maybe there really was some animal they were shooting at…so I looked around. But nothing was there…. Oooo, oooo, it’s my blood. MY blood. It’s me, I’m the animal, I’m the wounded creature. I tried to lick my wound, but there was too much blood. TOO much…I couldn’t lick my own wound!..Then I got up and ran, ran like never before. And instead having hands and feet I grew long long hairy paws that swished faster than their cars could go, faster than the bullets flying behind me..and faster than Death. She was chasing after me too.

**SCENE 8.** **The Prayer**

*Slava and Prisca sit as they were in the last scene, but in Vova’s place, the District Officer stands.*

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

Do you think the people in charge here are going to concern themselves with things that don’t matter to them? That they give a crap that you’ve been assaulted? You want to live here, live here. And when something like this happens, that’s your problem to live with…or die by.

**BABA PRISCA**

What do you mean “die by”!?! Hmm? Aren’t you supposed to be our District Officer?!

**SLAVA**

This IS your concern, you are obliged to protect the law!

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

Protect what law? No deputy or prosecutor will go near the people who did this. They are untouchable. They fart at our laws.

**SLAVA**

What are you saying!?! They shot my son! I won’t give up that easily. I’ll go over your head, to your bosses, to Kyiv, to the press.

**BABA PRISCA**

And I’ll go to radio stations! Let the people know that you are in cahoots with the bandit racket.

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

I wouldn’t do that if I were you. It would only make things worse, and not only will nothing come of it, but everyone will get hurt—most of all, you. This zone is under mandatory evacuation. No one has the right to live here. I’ve looked the other way for you. But in the eyes of the law YOU DO NOT EXIST.

**BABA PRISCA**

How can we not exist if we are here?

**SLAVA**

Vasya, could you at least get a doctor?

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

No doctors can come to you. If they did, they’d have to fill out an official incident report—which would cause serious problems with the authorities. No, I can’t let a doctor come here. Slava, didn’t you study to be a nurse? Can’t you take care of him?

**SLAVA**

There are no medical supplies here. Nothing at all.

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

Babka you are well known for being an herbalist. You can heal the both of them. If you sit on this, I’ll quietly bring you the medical supplies you need. But then you have to promise to leave... So that by the fall there’s not a trace of you here.

**BABA PRISCA**

Where? Where would we go?

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

Wherever you want! If you don’t want to leave the zone, you can move to Chernobyl. They’ll even find some abandoned place for you to live. There are people there, medical services, places to shop; all the basic things you need.

**SLAVA**

And the rat-bastards that did this to my son will go on enjoying their lives?

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

They just wanted to scare him. To put pressure on you to make you leave sooner. It was he who attacked them first, he came at them with a knife. They were just trying to defend themselves. Here, (*lifts a bag from the ground, takes some food out*) they gave this to me to bring you –buckwheat grains, canned meat, chocolate for the young man... these people are okay, I’m telling you. Just say the word – and they’ll get you the medical supplies you need.

**SLAVA**

What kind of person are you, Vasya? *(Goes into the house crying).*

**BABA PRISCA**

I can’t remember the last time I ate canned meat. Give me the bag. *(Puts it on her chair and rummages through it).* They could have given us more buckwheat, this isn’t even enough for a month.

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

You’ll have your buckwheat…and salo too.

**BABA PRISCA**

It’s nice to know that they had enough of a conscious to give us a little help. Maybe it’s true that they really just wanted to frighten our Vova.

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

They were drunk. Stupid drunk. They’re sorry now.

**BABA PRISCA**

Do you believe in God, sonny?

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

My wife and I go to church on every Sunday and on every holy day of obligation.

**BABA PRISCA**

Well then that’s good. Let’s pray for our health. Yours and ours.

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

Baba Prisca? You’re supposed to pray in church!

**BABA PRISCA**

*(gets two blessed candles)* Oh, please. You can pray anywhere. Let’s go!

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

But I’m on duty...

**BABA PRISCA**

*(puts a candle in the District Officer’s hand)* And I’m on duty too! Let’s go, sonny boy, you owe me and I have nobody else to pray with.

***BABA PRISCA*** *lights the District officer’s candle with a match, then lights her candle from his.*

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, *(Baba and the District Officer cross themselves)*

Blessed are You, Lord, the Lord, our God, King of the Universe,

Who creates light and guides in darkness,

Who made the world and creates all things.

I beseech you, turn your gaze on us, your unfortunate servants.

Your oppressed orphans,

And at the vile sinners who kill us.

Have mercy on us and protect us from them, the villians.

May those sons of bitches be wrought with your wrath as curse them from your flock,

May your hand rise over and break the bones of those villains… and all who serve them.

*The look on the District Officer’s face changes, with notably sideward glances of fear towards Baba.*

And may those who bore them burn in hell, roasting slowly, and may their graves be dug up by wild animals who scatter their bones the world over

May the skin of those who’ve brought us harm

Be used as bedding by slutty whores.

*The District Officer drops his candle.*

May their eyes and ears flow with blackened blood, and may they choke on that blood and be left unburied.

May their homes be filled with grieving tears, every minute of every day,

May their cars crash and their planes fall.

Let their wives give birth to ashes mixed with worms and poisonous monkeys,

And may the wives of their servants, especially the wives of corrupt cops,

*The District Officer’s face is now fully lopsided. He staggers backwards to the fence.*

give birth to wild, stinky, two-headed dogs-mutants, with horns growing out their eyes and with their asses on their heads.

*The District Officer stumbles through gate and runs off. Baba skillfully throws the gifts and bag on the ground, and with a shovel flings it through the gate behind the District Officer.*

And for the good people, make it be so: That they may live in peace,

That one day they wake up, and where they are is good.

Forgive me, Lord, if Baba said something she shouldn’t have.

My heart is torn apart by weakness.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

**SCENE 9.** **The Sacrifice**

*Baba Prisca scales a catfish. Overhead a helicopter flies. She covers her eyes and looks upwards and deeply sighs. A car can be heard approaching their house. Baba wraps the fish in burdock leaves, wipes the blood off the knife on her skirt and tucks it in her belt behind her. The gate bursts opens wide, the District Officer enters, anxiously carrying a leather binder in his hands*.

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

Where is he? Where is the freak?!

**BABA PRISCA**

You mean you?

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

You have the nerve to joke with me! Your joking ends here, you old bitch!

*The District Officer takes out his gun and runs into the house and runs out almost as fast. He tucks his gun back into his holster.*

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

The young man is not long for this world—the smell is awful.

**BABA PRISCA**

Slavka wasn’t able to protect her son from the world. She hid him away, and for what?

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

There’s no escaping Fate.

**BABA PRISCA**

The world’s filth has found us, even here!

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

*(spits)* What a fool I was to think he’d taken revenge on them. *(Smokes a cigarette.)*

**BABA PRISCA**

Hey, maybe you want to offer Baba one? Hmm?

*The District Officer scowlingly gives Baba Prisca a cigarette and lights it for her. She savors the taste for quite a long time.*

**BABA PRISCA**

Mmmmmmmm. What kind of cigarette is this?

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

Marlboro Gold.

**BABA PRISCA**

(*throwing the cigarette down to the ground and stomping on it.*) That shit! Foooooo!

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

(*sadly looking at the wasted cigarette*) I’ll remember that the next time you ask me for something.

*The District Officer begins to inspect the yard, checking all the nooks and crannies while keeping Baba Prisca in his field of view.*

**BABA PRISCA**

Why have you come back? Did you leave something here?

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

Have you seen the helicopters? They are patrolling over the whole zone today.

**BABA PRISCA**

My head is spinning from them…

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

They found a Hummer this morning by the cross roads. But there were no people in it. So they’re looking for them.

**BABA PRISCA**

Aaaah. There’s lots of woods and marshes to get lost in here…probably they’re just poachers that lost their way.

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

*(discovering the catfish)* Yes, poachers have been coming here lately. Hunting has gotten to be quite the trend in our neck of the woods. But only for the hunt. No one actually eats the radioactive crap.

**BABA PRISCA**

So that means they kill creatures just for fun?

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

For the sport of it. They are bored off their assess in the capital, so they want some kind of adventure.

**BABA PRISCA**

And it’s become a sport to hunt people too?

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

Babka listen…. Your boy... it was his own fault. Why didn’t he stay out of sight?

**BABA PRISCA**

People are not meant to be hunted.

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

You are not people to them. You are dirty, stupid, wild animals.

**BABA PRISCA**

May they be cursed and burn in hell.

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

May they be. But God help us if something happened to those missing people. We’d be in deep shit. It’s the Deputy and his son that are missing. Do you understand that?

**BABA PRISCA**

Why should that matter to me?

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

Stupid old woman! They’re the ones who *(waves at the house).*

**BABA PRISCA**

Who did this to Vovchyk?

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

Well, yeah! And according to sources they were on their way here, to you, to square things off with you.

**BABA PRISCA**

Damned sons of bitches! I don’t need them here! Those bastards can’t bring back the boy’s health.

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

They never made here, it’s hard as hell to find this place! They lost their way.

**BABA PRISCA**

They lost their way. Serves them right.

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

People don’t disappear without a trace, you know, not even here. I’m ashamed to say I got it in my head, that maybe your boy recovered and decided to take revenge. You, Babka, do not suffer sins lightly. And he’s got your genes, follows in your footsteps… I thought maybe he fancied himself a partisan. Not because his mind is slow, but because he’s got a vivid imagination. Oho! What he can come up with! But this is more than mere fancy...where would he get the idea of being a partisan from? Perhaps you know?

**BABA PRISCA**

Nope, no partisans here, not since the war. I forgot about that a long time ago.

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

Not me. I didn’t. I heard they called you the Boss-Lady Partisan, and the people here were all afraid of you—with good cause.

**BABA PRISCA**

Phooey, who could be afraid of me, I’m an old piece of wood! Good God! Oh how you’ve made me laugh. …Of course, everybody was in the war one way or another, but I was just a messenger, nothing mo—

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

(*taking out some yellowed papers from his binder*)

I been to the archives, I’ve done my homework. *(Shoves the papers into Baba’s face)* Fucking aboriginals *(reads from the paper)* “...the Order of the Red Star has been awarded to Efrosinya Gavrilovna Chumak...” That would be you, Baba, it turns out you’re our hero. What was this honor for? *(Searching through the papers)* Here: “...singlehandedly liquidated a Nazi punitive detachment consisting of 10 soldiers and 2 officers on the 28th of October, 1942, in the village of Zvizdal".” The rest I’ll put in my own words: You…you let a group of strong men stop for the night at your house. And while they slept you slit their throats as if you were butchering pigs.

**BABA PRISCA**

Not all. Some of them I hacked with an ax and others I stabbed with a pitchfork…whatever it took. And my shovel, that one there, that came in pretty handy.

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

Yeah. That must have been a hard night.

**BABA PRISCA**

Well what was I supposed to do? Those Krauts came to the woods to take down our partisans…I knew all our boys were out there sitting there in the woods.

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

To this day I’ve not heard of anything that comes close to this level of heroism. But it gets even better, doesn’t it? What did you do with the bodies?

**BABA PRISCA**

Whose bodies?

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

Whose? The Germans…why, are there others?

**BABA PRISCA**

For God’s sake! I cut those krauts to pieces and dumped them in the marsh. And that’s why no one ever found them.

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

See there you go! And now again—people came to your place and also disappeared just like that, without a trace. Oh, if they aren’t found!!! It will be your end, I’ll lock you all inside your house and burn you alive. And end it all in the water. I have nothing whatsoever to lose here.

**BABA PRISCA**

Oh, you ass-wipe. Is this what you think of us?

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

Personally no, not about you, even though everything points to you. But you (*observing Baba’s physique*) you’re an old woman…and they are two healthy bulls with rifles.

**BABA PRISCA**

So here you have it. Vova is sick in bed, I am worn out and feeble. Leave us alone.

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

I don’t know what to think. Maybe it’s true, they got lost someplace. Got drunk and fell asleep. …Where’s his mother?

**BABA PRISCA**

Slava? Slava went into town. Vova is getting worse needs antibiotics and other things. Since the doctors won’t come, we are trying to heal him on our own. But his wounds have gotten infected.

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

Forgive me for saying so Baba, but your house reeks of sickness. I fear it’s too late for the boy.

**BABA PRISCA**

Yes, I know *(covers her face with her hands, bitterly crying)* I know, I know.

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

Forgive me Babka *(embarrassed, he turns his back to her)* Forgive me mother, if you can.

*Baba Prisca draws the knife from her belt.*

**BABA PRISCA**

God forgives...

*With perfect aim, she throws the knife at the District Officer and it pierces his neck. Blood gushes out of his mouth. He grasps his neck, as his bulging eyes look back at the old woman.*

**BABA PRISCA**

... but I do not forgive, ever!

*The District Officer falls to the ground.*

**BABA PRISCA**

May you all burn in hell, you accursed excuses for people. (*spits*)

*She tries to pull the body to the shed, but it’s too heavy for such an old woman. She goes into the shed, and comes back out wearing her cream colored ceremonial Soviet jacket. On it is the Order of the Red Star, Medal of Honor and other medals. She has a saw in her hand and a long handled ax in the other. She pulls the bloody knife from the District Officer’s neck, wipes it on her skirt, and tucks it away into her belt. The District Officer starts coughing and regains consciousness. He stares at Baba Prisca.*

**BABA PRISCA**

That’s right my precious, that’s right.

*Sparks fly from the ax grinder. Black.*

**SCENE 10. You Either Sacrifice Others or Yourself**

*There are candles in every corner of the yard. Baba Prisca is chopping the catfish with an ax. Slava stands by the gate with a small suitcase.*

**BABA PRISCA**

*(continuing to cut the fish)* You’re back awfully fast, Slava.

**SLAVA**

There’s 432 hryvnia in my wallet and a course of antibiotics costs at least 800. And that doesn’t include the syringes and bandages. I don’t know what to do.

**BABA PRISCA**

So you came back empty handed, with nothing at all…

**SLAVA**

(*noticing the yard*) Good God Mother! What’s with all the candles?

**BABA PRISCA**

I will hold a Mass for the health of your son and God’s servant, Volodymyr. Or then again maybe it will be a Mass for the dead, seeing as how entering a house empty-handed brings about misfortune. And you’re doing so again, as always.

**SLAVA**

I went to the post office to get our pension, but it wasn’t there. Payments to all the regions are delayed. And the subsidized pharmacies turned me away because I don’t have a prescription from a doctor. I walked to every single place there was along the river, and even crossed it…I don’t know what else I could have done. I just don’t know.

**BABA PRISCA**

So why did you come back here? You can’t come back with nothing…

**SLAVA**

Where can I find anything without money?

**BABA PRISCA**

Well you’re certainly not going to find money here!

**SLAVA**

(*going towards the house*) How is he?

**BABA PRISCA**

I drained his wounds. Our little boy is sleeping now. Sleeping like a stone at the bottom of a river.

**SLAVA**

(*starts going through the door*) Oh my sonny…

**BABA PRISCA**

Stop! (*pulls Slava away from the house*) You will not go into that house empty-handed. The only thing empty hands bring is misfortune.

**SLAVA**

Enough with your superstitions! Let me go! (*pulls her arm away from Prisca*) I want see my son.

*Prisca forcefully grabs Slava by her clothes and throws her out of the house.*

**BABA PRISCA**

Get out of my house! And don’t come back.

**SLAVA**

Mama, why are you doing this?

**BABA PRISCA**

And why are you doing this? You come back to my house with your empty arms dangling, bringing nothing but misfortune.

*Slava raises her hands in anguish to hair and pulls on it. In a fit of rage she beats herself, screaming.*

**SLAVA**

I hate you….hate…(*throws herself at Prisca’s feet, embracing them*) Oh Mama help me, Mama, I beg you, help…

**BABA PRISCA**

No one can help you Slava. You have to do it yourself.

**SLAVA**

I can’t…

**BABA PRISCA**

You are lying to yourself. You can help yourself. You can.

**SLAVA**  
What? What? What can I do??

**BABA PRISCA**

It’s up to you, he’s your son. Yours. Your one and only son.

**SLAVA**

There’s nothing I can do (*wails thunderously*)

**BABA PRISCA**

(*hitting Slava with the backside of her hand*)

Yes you can! You can! For your son you can do anything. To save your child’s life, you can steal, you can even kill if you have to, or even take your own life. Doing nothing—that’s the most heinous sin.

*Baba Prisca turns to Slava without looking at her*.

**BABA PRISCA**

Go. Go away daughter. And don’t return until you have the drugs.

*Slava silenly gathers her things and goes to the gate*.

**BABA PRISCA**

Wait daughter, your mother has not given you her blessing.

*Prisca takes the Order of the Red Star medal off her jacket; it leaves a white stain in its place. She places the medal in Slava’s hands.*

**BABA PRISCA**

Do not accept anything less than a thousand for it. It’s got 33 grams of silver and 12 German lives in it. Life is an unending sacrifice; you either sacrifice others or yourself. Now go. God will help you. You go daughter. Go. Go. Go. Go.

*Prisca glides Slava away, shutting the gate after her. She stands there for a while with her head by the planks, listening.*

**BABA PRISCA**

Go my daughter, go as far from here as you can.

*Prisca races into the house*.

**SCENE 11. The Psychedelic Trip to the Secret Subway**

*The Yard. It’s early evening and getting dark. A full moon shines.*

*Candles burn everywhere. Everywhere. On the table, the barrels, on clay pots. Everywhere. A small bonfire burns close to the house; a potion brews in a cauldron held by a stake within its flames. On the ground around the bonfire there are rolls of dried herbs, roots and mushrooms. Baba Prisca is handsomely dressed: her hair is combed neatly, a beautiful Ukrainian shawl is draped on her shoulders, over her ceremonial jacket. She rummages through the herbs, sniffing, tasting, spitting, sneezing and cursing the bad parts of the lot, swiftly throwing them far away from the fire. She will crumble what remains into the pot, though some of it she will throw in whole, while whispering spells under her breath and singing shamanistic overtones. Some of what she throws into the pot she also throws into the fire saying*  “Eat, eat red-mouthed, eat, eat red-armed, eat, eat red-eyed, eat, eat red-tongued, eat, eat red-eared – what is ours is yours.” *She stirs the pot with a wooden spoon, apprehensively checking its consistency and color. Suddenly she remembers something and throws the spoon to the ground and looks around. She finds the spot where she had buried her mushrooms, and with her bare hands she digs up the jar wrapped in a cloth and gently opens its lid. She sniffs it, laughs and sneezes then shakes out a few of her miraculous blue mushrooms then resumes whispering spells under her breath as she crumbles mushrooms into the pot. When she gets to the last mushroom she stops, thinks a moment and takes a few bites. The rest she throws into the fire.* "Eat, eat, red-eyed, what we eat, you eat, I’m not greedy." *She covers the cauldron with a pine branch and picks the wooden spoon up. Walking from tree to tree, she knocks their trunks with the wooden spoon, and waits for some kind of response. Finally, one of the trees knocks back. Baba Prisca joyfully knocks the tree again, and it again knocks back in answer. With a child-like abandon Baba Prisca giddily continues this conversation with the forest. Returning to the cauldron, she very carefully removes the pine branch, draws a spoonful, scrutinizes it thoroughly, brings the spoon closer to the fire to get a better look, dunks her finger into the spoon, then smells it. She places the spoon on the ground then takes a bright red lipstick out of her pocket and applies it perfectly. She then draws a star on her jacket with the lipstick where her medal had been. She puts the shawl on her head and ties it under her chin.*

**BABA PRISCA**

*(standing in the center of the yard, she bows to all four corners of the world, crosses herself while saying:)* God forgive me, a sinner, God forgive me, a sinner, God forgive me, a sinner, God forgive me a sinner......

*Prisca goes into the house without breaking her chant “God forgive me, a sinner…” even through the crashing bangs of objects being knocked over and breaking. Baba slowly emerges from the house dragging Vova over her back. He is wrapped in a blanket littered with bloody rags. He is too weak to open his eyes—all that’s left of his consciousness are whimpers of groaning pain. The heaviness of this burden becomes increasingly difficult for Baba. She sighs to stave off the weight and goes on another hard step or two before falling. After picking herself up, she tugs Vova along the ground, eventually getting him the right spot. With great care, she tucks him into his blanket, returns to the house for a big pillow, and places it under the head of her grandson. She draws some potion from the cauldron with an iron cup.*

*Reciting, she places candles in a circle around Vova:*

Heaven and the Earth, Fire and Water,

Open the gate from there to here!

The Red River—living water

The Black River—pain and suffering

Don’t flow here, but flow to the black sea, to the great ocean,

My grandson Volodymyr, of my own flesh and blood, I will not give you.

*Takes the cup of potion, standing in the center of the circle.*

Clear fire, scorching flames!

Burn the accursed wound, warm the red blood.

Deep whirlpool, icy water!

Let the innocent soul live, wash the festering infection.

*As Baba recites her incantations, nature correspondingly begins to wake up: Trees will creak and rustle their leaves; the wind will whistle from the fields; swishes will come from the waters as sucking sounds will come from the marsh. Rusalka will sing the notes of their song “hu,” “ooo,” “oooye,” “eee;” the wolves will howl; the night birds will squeal, and even the radio will turn on.*

Mother Earth!

Father Forest!

Field, the green bosom!

Marsh, the ancient covenant!

Thunderstorm roar!

*Clouds enshroud the moon. Lightening erupts in the sky. Thunder rapturously roars.*

Winds howl!

*Winds mixed with rain pound the earth.*

Arise to bring me help!

Dry my bitter tears.

Help me in this turbulent hour, come up from eternal rest.

*The voices of nature’s elements merge into one great cacophony: all things living and dead that rest on this earth simultaneously wail. To be heard above this, Baba must now scream:*

Serve ye the one who has served you, help Babusia!

By the power of the Holy Resurrection and body of the Savior of the world, in name of all the ancient spirits who placed the stars in the sky and separated day from night.

I summon YOU, I petition YOU, I summon YOU!

Let the iron lady of dreadful death, who harvests us from our fields, stand before my eyes. Let her hear me. Let her hear me…

*In an instant all the calamity stops and there is silence. The sky becomes clear, the moon and stars shine. The earth glows from within.*

..let her hear me

*Baba sits near Vova, drinks from the cup, tries to give the potion to her grandson, but he groans and turns away. She must force it on him. She waits for something, listening.*

**BABA PRISCA**

(*stands up*) I know you’ve come. Are you here?

*A strong breeze passes. The gate, doors and windows open and loudly rattle*.

**BABA PRISCA**

(*overcoming her fear*) Here is my testament:

Listen, unrelenting Death, listen Iron Lady.

Your power is eternal, Death, you are the mighty queen,

You reign over terrible deeds on earth.

I ask of you, I beg of you: to take a death for a death.

Take my death as a sacrifice, amending for death you’ve come for.

Do not take a pure innocent soul into your bosom,

Take my sacrifice in its place.

Let the body and soul (*points to her grandson*) of this child be in peace,

Let it be my eyes that look upon your glory as it stands before me.  
May this be our contract that shall never be put asunder.

*Prisca looks around to all the corners in fear. Behind her Vova sits up, with his head lowered and his face towards the ground.*

**VOVA**

MmmmmmI did not come for you, but for him.

**BABA PRISCA**

Ohohohoh… not good, not good…Well, what then?

**VOVA**

Life, mmmm what’s yours is yours.

**BABA PRISCA**

I will not give him to you…I will not. Leave us then!

**VOVA**

I mmmmyself will take what’s mmmmmmine…WHAT is mine is mine (*throws up on his stomach*).

*Prisca throws herself at her grandson, but he raises his hand and blocks her.*

**BABA PRISCA**

Take me, take me, take me instead of my grandson, I beg you.

**VOVA**

Mmmmmmit shall be that I come for you mmmm very soon.

**BABA PRISCA**

Take me now. Here I am.

**VOVA**

Mmmmmeager-meager-meager-meager-meager-meager-meager-meager-meager-meager-meager-meager-meager…

**BABA PRISCA**

I don’t have anything more to give you—just myself.

**VOVA**

(*laughs*) Do not lie, do NOT lie, mmmmdo not lie, mmmmm…

**BABA PRISCA**

Well what do you want from me? What?

**VOVA**

Everything…everything, mmmm…yes everything, mmmmwhat they tell you, you must do: take your family from here-away-away-away-prepare mmmmm the spirit, so, mmmm not here, mmmm, yours are not. Away!

**BABA PRISCA**

They will go. I will send them away, yes.

**VOVA**

And you? Yoooooooooooooooooou (*throws up*).

**BABA PRISCA**

Take me, take me, let me die here. Better here now than elsewhere later.

**VOVA**

(*his arms flail about as his body fully convulses*) Mmmmmmmmmmmmm…

*It strikes Baba Prisca, and drains her of her strength, her legs refuse to be stood upon, and it would seem that her throat is being strangled. Having fallen she drags her mostly paralyzed body to her grandson and lies beside him. With her remaining strength, she gets on her back and folds her hands neatly. Her breath is heavy, then silent. The scene plunges to darkness. The sound of an electric train gets closer and closer.*

**SCENE 12. Visual Cinema**

*Vova and Baba Prisca find themselves in a moving subway.*

**VOVA**

So there really IS a secret subway line!

**BABA PRISCA**

Of course there is, and it runs right under our house.

**VOVA**

Ooooo…and I looked all around the Zone for it!

**BABA PRISCA**

Well look no further, we’re on it and it’s taking us away.

**VOVA**

Where?

**BABA PRISCA**

Wherever you want.

**VOVA**

I’ll go to Kyiv, before Mama gets home.

**BABA PRISCA**

Go there, my grandson, go see what’s there, you should.

*The doors to subway car open and the District Officer enters the car.*

**DISTRICT OFFICER**

After I disappeared and was never found, my wife discovers she is finally pregnant. She runs to my brother, a gynecologist, to get an abortion. But at the last minute, he is scared. My wife has a boy, Andriko. My business lives.

*The doors to subway car open and a trampish drunk enters. It is Vova’s father*.

**FATHER**

Just so I can live four years longer, I go through three wives, I drink from morning to night, I sleep in God-know-whose apartments, shacks, basements, I debase myself to the level of a railway station tramp and I dump my wife and sick child, I run from them and myself, and from Chernobyl. When I am in the zone, it feels like I live in a cemetery amid thousands upon thousands of graves from the past, present and future. January, on Orthodox Christmas Eve morning, in a hut by a transformer near the railway line - I die from hypothermia ...

*The doors to subway car open and sick looking woman enters and takes out a package of medicine.*

**SLAVA**

I got the drugs, bring them home worrying all the while that I will get there too late…The yard of a village house. It’s morning, 7:32. My mother lies on the ground in her dress uniform, her hair is combed neatly, her jaw and legs are locked, her hands are folded on her chest and hold a burning candle. There are bloody blankets and rags strewn all over. On the bare ground lies my son, my Volodya. His arms and legs are shaped as if he’s running from someone, they are covered in mud and he looks exhausted. I scream, hugging him. “Vovchyk, Vovchyk, Vova!” But his body is in rigor already. Mortified, I slink around the yard like a snake that’s just lost half its body…I eat from the cauldron, all of it down to the last morsel. In 180 seconds, I feel quite good, in an hour I begin to dance. I dance, dance, dance and suddenly in the middle of the yard I find the entrance to the secret station of strategic subway line…My pulse dies, I fly head down into the cold emptiness.

**VOVA**

So there really IS a secret subway line!

**BABA PRISCA**

Of course there is, and it runs right under our house.

**VOVA**

Ooooo…and I looked all around the Zone for it!

**BABA PRISCA**

Well look no further, we’re on it and it’s taking us away.

**VOVA**

Where?

*Black.*

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