

DEVIL'S NAIL

A hell mystery- in 13 circles

By

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For Ivan Andonov

CHARACTERS

Ivan, husband, about forty

Emma, his wife, a couple of years younger

Arsen, a Mediterranean type, older than Ivan

The Girl, young, olive complexion, scrawny

Time: Now

Setting:

A town by the sea. A two-bedroom condominium in an old neighborhood near the beaches. The living room of a middle-class family. Stage left- kitchen. Mid-stage- the living room. Up-stage against the background of a large photo wall paper (forest) are the three main doors: the bedroom door (solid), the bathroom door (matted glass), and the balcony door (open). its beautiful ornaments of a metal railing, roof tops, and the sky. The stage set is completely arbitrary. The stairs leading to the apartment are close to the right wing. There is a door bell. Next to it is another door with an identical one. The space separating the audience from the stage marks the street in front of the building.

FIRST CIRCLE

Saturday noon, the town clock tower tolls twelve times. The living room is vacant. It is messy like after... It cannot quite be determined after what, but there are empty glasses, unfinished bottle of wine and female clothes scattered on the chairs in front of the bedroom.

*A tired woman (**Emma**) climbs up the stairs, dragging a suitcase on wheels. She rings the door bell continuously. Her attempts to unlock the front door are futile- there's a key on the inside. She keeps on ringing until a man (**Ivan**) in his underwear tiptoes out of the bedroom. He peeks in the peephole (actually, there is only a door frame perpendicular to the stage so that the audience can see the actors' faces almost touching each other), then he frantically starts getting dressed, tidying up and concealing the evidence.*

Ivan: *(Buying time.)* Who is it?... Just a moment! *(Opens the door.)* Emma?!...

Emma: Can't you hear me? Why have you locked the door! *(Looks around.)* Where are the kids?

Ivan: *(confused)* At your mother's... You said you'd be back on Sunday and I...sort of...*(He dashes toward the drafting table in the living room, picks up something from it.)* ...decided to get some work done!

Emma: *(worried)* What's happened?

Ivan: Nothing...

Emma: Is there anyone here! *(She takes a small red hand bag from his hands; looks at it completely perplexed.)* Ivan?!

Ivan: *(whispers)* There's no one...

Emma: Who is here?!

Ivan: *(Doesn't answer, his head bent down.)*

Emma: *(her voice breaking)* Honey!

Ivan: A...woman.

Emma: A woman?!

(She drops the suitcase and leans against the wall. They look at each other in silence. Emma collects her self first; she attempts to push him aside so she can go in the bedroom.)

Ivan: I... Wait! She's not alone!...

Emma: She isn't?

Ivan: No! She is with a... friend! From out of town! He...went out to... (*He wrings his hands nervously.*) And she...is sleeping! Emma! (*He embraces her unexpectedly and shakes her.*)

Emma: Where?

Ivan: It's just a joke! It's not like this! I mean...She's not alone!

Emma: Leave me alone! What kind of joke is this?... Stupid, idiotic joke!

Ivan: Yes-yes, a joke. Here, I'll go find him. He might have gotten lost or something...

(He rushes out in his slippers and the top of his pajamas down the stairs.)

Emma: Who are these people? And what are they doing in our bedroom?!

Ivan: *(from the stairs)* You'll see!...

(Emma is alone. She is about to kick her shoes angrily but refrains, pulls off her dress over her head, and enters the bathroom. Noise of a running shower.)

(In the street, in front of the building, Ivan stumbles over the feet of the audience, tosses himself back and forth, frantically and desperately looking for something.)

Ivan: *(Stops in the middle of the street.)* Hell! God damn it! I'm dead meat!!! *(to the audience)* A man! I need a man!

(A moment later, the left wing door opens and a very short, dark-eyed, middle-aged man appears.)

Arsen: *(helpfully, with obvious interest)* What did you say you needed?

(With the physique of a military guy, pitch-black eyes, a goatee, shiny pointed shoes, un-matching his slightly-worn out green sports pants, and a solid golden chain on his neck, Arsen slides through the door like a slime.)

Ivan: *(slightly embarrassed)* I will explain...

Arsen: Go ahead, tell me your troubles...

Ivan: *(looks around)* I'm looking for a man!

(He bends forward and explains whispering. Arsen listens attentively and nods in understanding.)

Arsen: No problem! So let's go!...

Ivan: *(whispering)* So, we got a deal...

Arsen: Piece of cake!...

Ivan: And... What do I call you?

Arsen: Arsen. You can call me Arsen.

Ivan: I am Ivan.

Arsen: Ivan who?

Ivan: That doesn't matter.

Arsen: Okay... And how did this whole thing happen, Ivan?

Ivan: Aagh! Everything started so innocently! She called on the phone, looking for someone. Not me, someone else!

Arsen: A student in distress?

Ivan: Yes, how did you know?

Arsen: Well, I've read the ads. And?

Ivan: I took her out to eat.

Arsen: *(sympathetically)* I understand. Out of town?

Ivan: No, she was very hungry... Across the street, at the train station's restaurant...

Arsen: I see. How about the little miss? *(At the door, he lets her go in first.)* What's her name?

Ivan: She? *(thinking hard)* Good God! I can't remember it for the life of me!... This way, this is our entrance.

Arsen: *(nods obligingly)* Well, I'll ask her...

Ivan: The most important thing is to keep her quiet! To not speak in front of my wife! To say nothing! If you need money, there is money!... There, in the closet!

Arsen: Piece of cake. Don't worry about it at all!

Ivan: *(silently, only with lips)* To say no-thing!

Arsen: She'll say nothing, she'll say nothing at all!

Ivan: I don't know... but if Emma suspects something... *(looks around)*, even God won't help us! *(He leans on the door, closes his eyes.)*

Arsen: Me, me! *(Points his finger confidently to his chest.)* You can count on me!

*(Ivan rings the bell. No one answers, he rings again.
At the same time Arsen slaps himself on the forehead and dashes back down.)*

Ivan: *(horrified)* What are you doing man! Where are you going!... *(He rushes after him but already hears Emma's voice on the inside. He turns back, disconcerted.)*

Emma: A moment, pleeeeeease!! *(Angry)* Where's the fire?!

Arsen: *(To Ivan, desperately waving at him to get in.)* You go! I'll be back in a minute!... I forgot something important!

(He disappears down the stairs.)

SECOND CIRCLE

Emma: Ivan, is that you? *(She gets out of the bathroom with a towel on her head. Opens the door. Sneaks a quick, suspicious look.)* Where's the guest?

Ivan: What guest?

Emma: *(even more suspicious)* You...Didn't you go somewhere?

Ivan: I did.

Emma: And?...

Ivan: U-u-uh...I don't know. He went back for something!

Emma: Went back?... Where?

Ivan: I said- I don't know.

Emma: What don't you know!

Ivan: Well...He hadn't paid his bill. *(motions to go downstairs)*

Emma: The bill? Did you take him to a restaurant or something?

Ivan: Yes. But he was buying...

(The door of the bedroom starts opening with a slight squeak. Emma, whose attention doesn't let anything slip, stops her eyes on it.)

Emma: *(decisively toward the bedroom, the door closes quickly.)* I'll find out everything now! *(Knocks on the door nervously.)* Is there anybody in there?

(At this moment, the telephone starts ringing.)

Emma: *(Picks up.)* Hello? *(Hands it to Ivan wondering.)* It's for you.

Ivan: For me?

Emma: I don't know a person with that name... Arsenic? Arsenal?
Something military.

Ivan: Oh, Arsen? *(Grabs the receiver.)* Hello? *(His face lightens up.)* Arsy! Come back right away, you hear me!... My wife here has been talking my ears off about you...What? *(his enthusiasm deflated)* Isn't it better at the end?... Well, if it's necessary...*(To Emma,*

placing his hand over the speaker.) He's asking for some money. (Shrugs his shoulders, listens again.) Okay, okay, I'm coming down! (To Emma, worriedly.) The bill, it turns out, has been quite hefty...

Emma: I can picture you two!...Pffff, I got a headache. Where can I lie down, huh? I haven't slept all night. Where can I change!

Ivan: Lie down on the couch. And keep it quiet, ok! *(Sets off toward the door.)*

Emma: And why do you have to give your telephone number to anyone you meet? Normal people don't do that!

Ivan: I haven't given it to him; he's got it from the telephone book. Don't you worry, Arsen is...the last person to misuse it!

(He changes, and then exits a lot more confidently than before; he runs joyfully directly through the left door where Arsen had initially entered and disappears.

While Emma changes into clothes she takes out of her suitcase, the bedroom door cracks open again ever so slightly. A long, thin, snake-like arm slithers out, groping and trying to reach for the chair with the handbag where Emma has placed her suitcase. There's no way for the eyeless arm to see that but whatever it does, there is always about a two inch distance to the chair's back. The arm pulls back in angrily.

Then, the arm comes up with another trick. With the handle of an umbrella, it starts tilting the chair carefully toward the bedroom door. With the help of its four fingers- long, thin, dexterous fingers- it pulls the umbrella and tilts the chair with it as it tries to reach the handbag with its pinky finger, but Emma's suitcase is heavy and whenever the chair tilts back enough for the pinky to catch the bag, the rest of the fingers cannot hold the weight any longer, the umbrella slips out and the chair returns to its vertical position again.

At last, the umbrella cleverly crawls out on the floor, the arm follows pointing it skillfully, hooks on the chair's leg and starts dragging it toward the bedroom, until Emma's suitcase finally falls down. Emma startles, looks at the chair, the umbrella handle disappears in the bedroom in a split second, and she jumps on the couch scared. She suspiciously looks down at the floor, then up at the bedroom door, but it is now tightly closed.)

THIRD CIRCLE

*(That's how **Ivan** and **Arsen** find her. They have hurried back the familiar way with **Ivan** supporting **Arsen** up the stairs, and **Arsen** hiding something behind his back.)*

Ivan: Emma?! What are you doing up there?

Emma: *(noticing the guest)* Oh, sorry... I got so scared!

Arsen: Good afternoon! Good afternoon... Very pleased to meet you -- I am Arsen!

*(He kisses the back of her hand without paying much attention to the fact that she is still up on the couch. To **Ivan**'s surprise, he pulls out a blooming twig from behind his back and offers it to **Emma** with a slight bow. **Arsen** clicks his heels, slightly losing his balance- just so that the audience realizes that he, while waiting for **Ivan**, has taken the chance, to have a drink or two- just to take the edge off so to speak.)*

Emma: Em-ma. Thank you, please come in. *(Steps down with dignity.)* Please excuse me, but I thought I saw a mouse here!

Ivan: A mouse?... The rascal slipped off to the barber's, can you imagine, and forgot to pay!

Arsen: *(a little offended)* Nonsense! I went down to the fitness club to warm up a little and then went to buy some flowers! Has anything happened while I was gone? *(Sniffs the air.)* Is something burning? Don't you feel like something's burning?

Ivan: *(Shrugs his shoulders.)* N-no. I don't feel anything...

Emma: On the contrary! *(Lifts the twig to her face.)* M-m-m, smells so good! Honeysuckle. I love it!

Arsen: *(proudly)* Of course you do! I'm glad! *(laughs)* I have connections, you know. In my country it has a different name...

Emma: What name, where are you from?

Arsen: Well, it's called *devil's nail*. Look at its petals- just like tiny fingers, ready to tickle you!

Emma: Oh! Please don't talk like this about my lovely little flower! Where did you find it this time of the year?

Ivan: *(listening for noises from the bedroom)* The weather's still warm, isn't it? So it's blooming... What difference does it make?

Arsen: *(to him, expertly)* Well, it doesn't blossom *everywhere*. There are special places where they grow it. It's the flower of love, they say. Medicinal.

Emma: *(Laughs whole-heartedly.)* I didn't know! Thank you so much!

Arsen: *(also laughing)* Pardon me, this way right?! *(He runs into Ivan on his way to the bedroom.)*

Emma: It's a little messy in here but I just came back from a business trip. Ivan...He didn't tell me he was expecting company? *(Looks at Arsen attentively.)*

Arsen: Don't worry! If you only knew how messy he was before!...

Emma: *(wondering)* Before when?

Arsen: Well...The last time we saw each other, before the military.

Emma: Be-foore?

Arsen: I meant after. *(He looks around with curiosity, touches the furniture, takes a cookie from the cookie jar, eats it, then spits it out secretly. Overall, he behaves normally but it is still obvious that he's had a couple of drinks.)* Well, now it is different, quite different! Once a man gets married...The family comes first!

Ivan: He, Emma, didn't I tell you? Me and him...From the military. *(To Arsen, looking at him furiously, behind Emma's back.)* You've forgotten- this is the apartment of Emma's parents...

Arsen: Yes? *(Hiccups discretely.)* Well, this one is not bad, not bad either! Not at all! Pardon, where was the bathroom?

Emma: *(ever more surprised)* Over there.

Arsen: Thank you. Well, I'll go see how little miss is doing, he-he, and we'll introduce ourselves properly! *(He staggers a little again but it could be because he trips over a pair of shoes, bends down and carries them to the bedroom with dignity.)* Once again, so sorry to bother you!

Emma: I'm sorry too, but I think these are mine...*(Points at the chair.)* I suppose you are looking for this.

Arsen: Excuse me.

(He places the shoes back neatly next to each other. He takes the red skirt from the chair (leaving the hand bag at its place), but notices something on the skirt, spits on his finger, cleans it, shakes it, and carefully hangs it on the clothes line on the balcony.)

Arsen: *(To Emma, while she's following his actions with curiosity.)* Will this bother you?...

Emma: I don't think so... Will you have coffee with us, or...

Ivan: Emma, they might be in a hurry...

Arsen: *(acting offended)* Ivan, we haven't even seen each other yet and you want us to go! What's the rush? You haven't changed at all! *(to Emma)* No sugar for me, please. *(Opens the door and sticks his head into the bedroom.)* Hellooooooo! Pussy caaaaat! Guess who's baaaack?... *(Seaks in quickly and closes the door behind.)*

Ivan: Arsen...

(He motions to follow him but holds back. He coughs theatrically. The door-handle moves downward and stops there. A click. Silence.)

Emma: It's been awhile since I've gotten flowers! *(breathes in the flowers' scent deeply.)* Since our wedding. *(Exhales loudly and heads toward the dirty dishes in the kitchen sink; starts washing them passionately.)*

Ivan: Oh, he's always been very well-mannered in this respect.

Emma: Yes, unlike some other people! *(quickly changing the subject)* Who, who does he remind me of, Gosh? With this face? With this goatee?...

Ivan: *(suspiciously)* Who does he remind you of?...

Emma: I don't know... An opera singer! Where did you find him, so funny! *(Sings, imitating opera.)* "Le labadon e toujur " de bou!..."

Ivan: He looks Armenian, what else! It's true that he used to sing all the time, but...

Emma: But he drank too, didn't he?

Ivan: *(not too convinced)* Nonsense! Me and him in the service, e-heeeyyy!...

Emma: Ooooh, please! You know I don't like your army stories... Tell me the truth, they... they are not married, are they?

Ivan: Emma, they are here just for one night! Not a word for more. And... after all... He is my guest from out of town!

(He sits at the table showing that he is the head of the house and, seemingly more relaxed, starts reading the newspaper. Emma washes the dishes and hums under her

breath. At this moment, some kind of clatter comes from the bedroom. Emma stops and listens, Ivan hides behind the newspaper. Someone groans. Heavy breathing.)

Emma: Did you hear anything?

Ivan: No. You were going to make coffee, weren't you?

(Pause. While Emma washes the dishes fiercely and Ivan keeps hiding behind the paper, Arsen slides out of the bedroom wrapped in bed sheets, wearing his pointy shoes on his bare feet. He trips to the bathroom, flushes the toilet, and gets back in the same manner. Flabbergasted, Emma follows his appearances and drops and breaks a plate in her surprise. This little scene happens behind Ivan's back and remains hidden from him. He startles.)

Ivan: Oh!... What is it now!

Emma: Listen! What coffee are you talking about! What kind of people have you brought here?

(She takes off her apron and firmly heads toward the bedroom. She stops in front of the bedroom door and listens for a moment. From the inside- again noises and stifled woman's cry.)

(Male voice. Stop whining! Where are my socks?...)

Emma: *(Utterly upset, in an unnaturally polite tone to her voice.)* Arseeeen! Coffee is ready!

(The noise stops. Somebody coughs theatrically on the other side. Shuffling slippers approaching the door. The key clicks.)

(The male voice.) Just a moment, Madam! *(low grumble)* Cover up your self I said!... Come in, come in...

Emma: Excuse me?!...

(A slap on the face from the inside. A scream, muffled immediately with a hand. Emma rushes to the kitchen and pulls the newspaper from Ivan's hands.)

Emma: Do you know what I heard?!

Ivan: No.

Emma: Well, he slapped her. Can you imagine!?

Ivan: What?!...

Emma: He was hitting her...

(Ivan dashes toward the bedroom. From behind the door now comes moaning and very distinctive noises, definitely not from a battery but from something else entirely!)

Ivan: *(Hisses in the key hole.)* Arsen! What are you doing!? Arsen! Are you out of your mind!... When did you manage to get so trashed, you!

(Shakes the door handle- it's locked! Emma runs to him, misinterpreting his concern, pulls him by the sleeve.)

Emma: Ivan! Please, stay out of this! Please!...

Ivan: *(Speaks loudly so they can hear him.)* I thought he was an intelligent person, but he...! She could be his daughter!

(The door opens. Arsen comes out, still wrapped in the sheet. Shakes his head, rolls his eyes.)

Arsen: A daughter? What daughter! I didn't know! Who's getting married to his daughter nowadays! Oh, come-on!...

Emma: Ivan? Really, what's gotten into you?...

Ivan: Oh!...I feel sick!

Arsen: *(to Emma)* What is he whining about! Is he getting married or am I, right? *(Putting on a nice white shirt now, he was wearing a sports top earlier.)* But he can't because he has you, Emma!!!

Emma: *(Strictly but also on the verge of bursting into laughter by looking at the guest who is twisting around, pointing at his friend offended, jumps on one foot, trying to put on his shoes.)* What's going on here? Could you explain?

Ivan: Emma...I...Forgive me, I got drunk...For the first time I decided to...you know... *(He gradually drops down on his knees, searches for her hand.)* Emma!!!...

Emma: *(quietly and with reproof)* And you let them stay over, right?... That's fine, but what is this circus all about? I'm not that old to understand now, am I?

Arsen: I'll explain everything! *(He shows up again, obviously refreshed, this time tying a tie which he didn't have before.)* I'll tell you the whole truth! Do you want to hear it?

Ivan: *(Jumps up, desperate.)* No, not you!... No!

Arsen: What do you mean No! I might have had a shot to get in the mood, but you- what did you do all night, huh? Stop nagging! *(then mildly)* Why don't you go get something to eat. (He looks at his watch, which he didn't have before.) It's late for lunch already, it seems we'll stay for dinner... *(toward the bedroom)* Pussy caaaat! Come oooon! These good people are waiting for us!...

(Ivan, hypnotized, catches the empty grocery bag which Arsen pushes in his hands, walks, staggering, out of the front door, then down the stairs, and gets out on the street through the right wing.)

Arsen: *(Taking Emma carefully under the arm.)* Come on, show me the apartment while she's getting ready. *(He's looking around in awe.)* Heeey, it's a little paradise you got in here! Did you really see a mouse? Here? Impossible! Is that the sea over there? Such power! And this forest? Such silence!

Emma: *(with renewed interest)* You are not a sailor, are you? On a cruise ship, I mean...

Arsen: No, I prefer the pleasures of the land. Volcanoes, deserts, earthquakes...I love the raw nature! *(Improvises something about volcanoes in Sachmo's style.)*

(Together, they go out on the balcony. Arsen explains something to Emma animatedly, talking with his hands. Emma laughs. The guest turns out to be quite funny...)

FOURTH CIRCLE

*(At that time, a half naked, scrawny girl tiptoes out of the bedroom. With shoes in hand, messed up orange-violet hair, wearing an extremely short T-shirt, which barely covers her scanty anatomy, she motions toward the chair and when she doesn't find her short red skirt, she starts looking for it in the living room. Shivering, pulling down on the t-shirt and looking around, she finds her blouse, strewn at the other end of the room. She takes a peek in the bathroom, then the balcony and just now notices the red skirt hanging like a flag on the clothes line. On the balcony, **Arsen** is walking with **Emma** back and forth. His voice inflection gets louder and quieter depending on his distance from the open door. The audience cannot see **Arsen** and **Emma** but follows **The Girl's** reactions. Every time **The Girl** ventures out of the living room and tries to retrieve her little skirt, the voice changes its direction and she is forced to hide back inside. At the same time, **Ivan** shows up through the right wing, carrying groceries, green onions and lettuce, fresh from the market. He hovers at the door for a long moment, trying to guess what's going on inside. He crosses his heart, spits in his shirt, and opens the door. The first thing he sees is **The Girl**, who has finally took possession of her precious skirt and is trying to put it on.)*

The Girl: *(Takes a step back, whispers, slightly bent over as if in pain.)* Don't, don't! Don't come any closer...I'll...I'll scream!

Ivan: Sshhh! Be quiet, it's me! Didn't you recognize me?!

*(Scared, he closes the front door. The click gives him out. On the balcony, **Emma** and **Arsen** turn around. **Emma** runs towards Ivan, not noticing **The Girl** at first.)*

Emma: *(from the balcony)* Ivan! Your friends are waiting for you. What took you so long? *(enters, to him)* He turns out to be very amusing! A great singer too! *(She notices **The Girl**.)* Oh! You startled me! Pardon me...please come in, please come in... *(To **Ivan** who is trying to sneak out in the kitchen.)* Honey?

Ivan: Y-y-es?

Emma: You...Didn't you notice somebody?

*(**The Girl**, still in shock, nods unevenly, takes a step back, but runs into **Arsen**, who comes in. She tries to slide down to the floor, sensing his presence behind her back, but his hairy arm powerfully holds her up. From the side it all looks like a hug.)*

Ivan: Who? O-o, yes –yes...I'm sorry.

Arsen: *(joyful)* Well, at last! Wait, let me introduce you now! *(To **The Girl**, proudly.)*

This is Ivan, my best friend, from the military!

Ivan: U-u-h...you introduced us last night, didn't you?

Arsen: Doesn't matter! Last night was last night, today is today. In broad daylight!

Emma: *(laughing)* Oh, Ivan is so absent-minded, I won't be surprised if he's simply forgotten with all his work. I can only imagine when he becomes a full professor! *(to **The Girl**)* Come in, come in sweetie, pardon the mess I welcome you in...What are you studying, if you don't mind?

*(She studies **The Girl** thoroughly, **The Girl** nods convulsively; looks at **Arsen** with fear. He raises an eyebrow and snaps his fingers.)*

The Girl: *(Hypnotized, with raspy, almost masculine voice; her arm outstretched as a beggar's.)* Give, in God's name! Give to the poor orphan. To the little streetwalker!

Arsen: *(with pride and affection)* Acting. O-o-o! She is the best in class!

Emma: Wow! I got goose bumps! What was that?

Arsen: Ventriloquism 101!

Emma: *(laughing)* Well, there is no such major, stop teasing me! But I can see that you've had a pretty good time yesterday!

The Girl: *(Echoes, still in the same state.)* Yesterday?...Yesterday?...Yesterday?

Arsen: Some things did happen yesterday, oh well...But you, Emma, you, what took you so long! What did you dream about last night? What dreams did you have while we here...?

Emma: Who, me? I was in a hurry to get back home. And those contract negotiations! With those obnoxious providers, and those foreigners, flirting all the time!... Crazy things have been happening lately! Drinking, dancing, one of our girls almost got rapped! I heard that the company was thinking about giving us something for protection, some weapons, I don't know... Wow! What time is it? *(Takes the groceries from **Ivan**.)* What did you decide, are you staying, or leave...

Arsen: *(to **The Girl**)* Go ahead, take it, take the bag from her...Enough acting already! Make yourself useful, would you!

The Girl: *(repeats.)* I'm le... le... le...e...Le...Le...

Emma: Lilly? You are Lilly?_ But, please, no! Don't worry about it...

Arsen: (*authoritatively*) Lilly-silly, today I am in charge of cooking! (*examines the groceries*) But, Ivan, what have you bought?!

Ivan: What?

Arsen: Pork Chops! Didn't they have any fillet-mignon? This here is pure cholesterol! (*To **The Girl**, playfully pushing her toward the kitchen.*) Go, go now and peel some potatoes! Come on, what kind of housewife will you be if you can't peel some potatoes! (*Browsing through the refrigerator and the cupboards.*) Do you have any rice? You do. Butter? Here it is. How about cooking gas? (*Looks around.*)

Emma: Ga-as?

Arsen: Yes, I'll make a flambé...Ivan?

Ivan: What is it now!

Arsen: You've forgotten the beer, brother! Wait a minute, do you have money? (*Goes to the bedroom, comes back with a half-empty bottle of scotch, which he holds with two fingers and holds money with the rest.*) Take it, take it! Buy a 24-pack, ok?**?**...

Emma: (*Looks at the scotch, then at Ivan.*) A 24 pack?!...

Arsen: At least! Today is a big holiday! (*to **the Girl***) Bring some glasses, what are you waiting for?

(***The Girl** heads to the kitchen like a robot. Noise from broken dishes. **Emma** cuts in front of her and rushes to the china cabinet in the living room.*)

Emma: Watch out, watch out, they are not there!... (*To **Arsen**, with suspicion.*) What holiday?

Ivan: (*foolishly*) The Solstice?

Arsen: That too, yes! The longest day, the shortest night. Yes. But, while I was looking in the closet for something to put on (*Pours everyone a drink.*), I accidentally came upon this ...Ha! Where did it go? (*Checks his pockets and pulls out a marriage certificate; dollar bills fall out, he pushes them back into his pockets, waves the certificate.*) No one remembers? What-what-what?...What happened twelve, pardon, thirteen years ago in this home, huh?...Come on!

Emma: (*enlightened*) My Goodnes!

Arsen: (*frowns*) I-I-I! I will give you a hint!

Emma: Ivan! (*Claps her hands.*) But of course! What a shame!

Ivan: What happened on this day, please tell me!

*(He's interrupted in the very moment he manages to sneak in the kitchen in an attempt to get in touch with **The Girl**. **Arsen** approaches and separates them, waving his finger jokingly; **Emma** grabs the flowers and breathes in their scent thirstily, her eyes closed.)*

Arsen: (*To **The Girl**, snapping his fingers.*) What date is today? What day is it? Let's see if we learned our lesson. Pussy c-a-a-at! Where are you?

The Girl: (*Her eyes rolled up repeats like a broken robot with her mechanical voice.*) Twenty-third of Ju... Twenty-third of ju...

Arsen: That's right! Bravo to the good student! On June twenty-third, thirteen years ago (*waves the document*) after a night similar to the last (*Throws a meaningful look to **Ivan**.*) an high school blond girl you know well (*reads*) became a lawful wife of a freshly-minted little highbrow engineer named...named... What was the name of the lucky boy? (*with joyful yell*) Ivan. Ivan the Good. Ivan the Trustful! Bingo! Congratulations!

Ivan: (*Swinging back and forth, his eyes closed.*) Today?

Arsen: Yes-yes.

Ivan: Today is...?

Arsen: An anniversary!

(Ivan drops down in a chair. Attempt to pour himself a drink.)

Emma: (*hurt*) I worked it out. I worked it out a while ago that you've decided to play some kind of a stupid army joke on me...Ivan! Stop pretending! That's why you've invited them, right? You are so not good at lying! (*to **The Girl***) Lily, I am right, aren't I?

*(Pulls the marriage certificate out from **Arsen**'s hands and shuts it closed without even looking at it.)*

Arsen: (*Shakes his head toward the girl jokingly and is quick to pour her a drink before she could say anything.*) Not true, not true that he's not good! Should we tell her?

Emma: (*angrily*) Thank you but no, thank you! For your information, I knew it too! Why do you think I came back home early? I haven't forgotten at all!

*(Insulted, she tosses her apron in the arms of the stunned **Ivan**, demonstratively turns her back to everybody and walks out on the balcony. She waves her marriage certificate like a fan.)*

Arsen: *(quietly, with reproof to **Ivan**)* See what you did! I told you, didn't I? Go get some beer now! Wait! *(Pulls out a fistful of money, **Ivan** looks at him fiercely and tries to take it from him, **Arsen** manages to pull it back and hands him a 50 dollar bill generously.)* And a bottle of champagne! It's a big anniversary! We should celebrate!

*(Pushes **Ivan** gently out of the door. **Ivan** takes the familiar way through the theater; **Arsen** goes out on the balcony, takes **Emma** by her shoulders in fatherly manner and brings her back to the living room. Wipes her tears with his handkerchief.)*

Arsen: *(Still embracing **Emma** at arm's length)* Em-ma!... All is vanity, and... how did the saying go? Chasing after wind. And when you wake up, your shoulders are uncovered!...Look at the birds, there's no point! *(**Emma** pulls her self away gently and delicately takes his hand off of her.)* Isn't life supposed to be lived with pleasure, while we still could? Everything in a person has to be pleasant: thoughts, clothes, food, who said that? And the anniversaries? Them too! If we don't live now, in our purest years sharing our most sincere emotions, then when will we?!

*(He looks out the window toward the street, where **Ivan** shows up with the beer, and turns **Emma** back to the balcony.)*

*(In the kitchen, **The Girl** moans quietly, suppressing a sob. She folds over the sink, her shoulders shaking, whines silently, gags in convulsions and vomits in the sink. All the while she's peeling the potatoes, not daring to stop.)*

FIFTH CIRCLE

(Ivan crosses the street, stops in front of the building, looks in the windows hoping that they might have already left. In the apartment- he runs directly to the kitchen. Alone with The Girl, at last!)

Ivan: *(Thrusts himself toward her, shakes her by the shoulders.)* What took you so long? What happened? Did he ...do something to you?! You have no idea how I feel myself! *(Caresses her, wipes her tears mechanically with the kitchen towel.)* Please, hold on a little longer, please!... Lilly!

The Girl: *(horrified)* I am not your Lilly! And he...he is...! You don't know who he is! *(Grabs his hand; her fear transfers to him and he starts shaking too.)* O-o-o!

Ivan: *(Glancing toward the balcony over his shoulder.)* Sh-h-h-h! Be quiet! I know, of course I know! He's a crook! An extortionist! A hypnotizer! Did you see his tattoos? He might have escaped out of prison or something!...

The Girl: He...*(Starts whining again quietly.)* He is...Oh, I'm so scared!

Ivan: Do you think I'm not scared? Did he...did he force you? *(Clenches his fists; to the living room, through his teeth.)* A criminal! A sadist! *(Puts his hand on her shoulder.)* But we didn't have a choice, you understand! Please hold on a little longer, or...take him out!

The Girl: *(pulls away)* Please, let me go! Let... *(sobs)* Let me GO, you! *(drops a plate on the floor)* I don't want to!...Take your money! *(throws it on the floor)* Here!

Ivan: Be quiet! *(Pours some whiskey and holds the glass to her mouth, almost forcing it)* You don't know my wife! If she finds out, she'll kill us!...

The Girl: Ouch! *(Folds in two from the pain in her groins, pressing down with her hands.)*

(The vacuum coking pot suddenly starts whistling piercingly, muffling her groans. Arsen hears the noise, comes in, sniffing the air like a wolf.)

Arsen: *(yelling)* The pork! The pork! The pork is ready!....

(Runs over to the kitchen, separates Ivan from The Girl. Opens the cooking pot which explodes in his hands in a cloud of white steam.)

Emma: *(peeks behind him)* What's going on?... We were having such a nice conversation!

Arsen: ...where's the towel! My tri...! My fork! It doesn't work the same with electricity! Give me oil! Give me firewood and I'll show you! Oh, how I like the smell of smoke! *(Jumps around the stove and transfers the meat from the cooking pot to the pan and back.)* Not just some sauce! Lava! Lav-va! These things don't happen in a simple pan, Emma!... Ivan, salt! Run for salt! Vinegar! Lilly, don't stare at me like that! A plate!

Emma: *(amused by his dance)* Oh, my God! This man is crazy! *(to The Girl.)* Is he always like this? Come, come with me to set the table; it's a madhouse in here anyway! *(Notices The Girl writhing.)* Do you want me to give you some Advil? Oh, women's troubles! I'm like this the first day too.

(They get out of the kitchen. Emma holds The Girl's arm, helping her to the couch while searching for the pills. The men are left alone.)

Arsen: *(Lifts his head from the cooking pot.)* Are you still here? Run!

Ivan: *(frowning)* Enough with this! I'm not going anywhere! Take the girl and vanish! If you don't have money, keep a hundred bucks! Give me back the rest- we've been saving it for a cruise!

Arsen: *(offended)* A cruise? You think I work for money? Here, take it, take your money back! I don't want it either!

(Pulls out dollar bills, sets them on fire on the oven top and pushes them in Ivan's face.) Here today, gone tomorrow. A cruise!...

Ivan: *(Jumps back from the fire.)* Are you out of your mind?!...

Arsen: I have dough! Here! *(Pulls money out but puts it back in his pocket.)* There's something else I don't have! Hey! *(Beats himself on the chest.)* People! A soul! You understand! You, I miss you! That innocent creature, whose name you can't remember! Emma, who's been in a hurry to come back home! Do you know how I long for a bit of human kindness with those idiots at the fitness club! Why, why are you all like this! *(Sobs emotionally, presses Ivan's head to his chest.)*

Ivan: Like what?

Arsen: Egotists, that's what!... You all remember me only when you need me!

Ivan: Oh, ok! That's enough! If only this hell could end! Then- I'll be yours forever! Whatever you want! Only take her out of here...

Arsen: Hell? Do you know what hell is! *(Steals a glimpse at him, pokes his fingers in the boiling oil, grabs a potato, eats it and licks his lips.)* Mine, you say, huh?...

Ivan: *(in disbelief)* Isn't this too hot?

Arsen: I'm used to it.

Ivan: You...Are you really a cook?

Arsen: A cook? *(thinking)* Yes, I guess you could say so...

Ivan: What do you do?

Arsen: I'm an engineer, like you. We were all chief engineers up there! *(Points up.)* Have you heard of such an inflated staff!

Ivan: *(shocked)* Up where? In management?

Arsen: Higher, higher!...But ever since they took me down, I'm always underground! In the mines, in the foundries, in the grave yards. *(Counts his fingers.)* In the boiler room, a fitness instructor now, always physical labor!... What are you looking at? And why all this? Because I didn't conform to someone! *(Shakes his head threateningly upward.)* But they don't worship him like before either...

Ivan: That's enough! Will this ever end! Go away!

Arsen: Yes. It will! *(Pushes the cooking pot in Ivan's hands.)* Here, let's take everything in the other room, later you'll see what I've cooked!

Emma: *(Meets them in the living room.)* M-m-m, smells so good! What were you two gossiping about?

Arsen: So many things to catch up on- the army years, life in general...

Emma: I was just telling Lily how Ivan and I met for the first time in the big city *(Brings the family album and opens it in front of Arsen.)* Here's Ivan as a boy scout. Here's me in high school. And the wedding pictures...We are so young here!

(Ivan makes an attempt to get closer to The Girl. At that moment Arsen puts the album down, turns on the stereo so he gives up.)

Arsen: Let's have some fun! What do you say? You made me sad with these pictures! All of a sudden I felt so old and sick! Ouch! *(Limps.)*

(An Italian melody starts playing. Arsen gradually pumps up the volume to the max.)

Emma: *(stunned)* But this... This is the song we listened to when we met! Hey, you sly boots! *(to Arsen)* Is this your CD?

Arsen: *(Shrugs his shoulder mysteriously.)* I don't know... You'll tell me. It's yours already, I think...

Emma: Arsen, Ivan! *(Lifts up to kiss him.)* Forgive me... Please don't be mad with me! I have really forgotten! Believe it or not though, it was as if something was pulling me back to come home early... and I could have stayed if I wanted to... Thank you! *(Pulls Ivan close to her and they dance awkwardly.)*

Arsen: *(happily, clinking on glass)* A kiss! A kiss! A kiss! *(Snaps his fingers at The Girl.)* Why aren't you happy?

The Girl: *(in her previous raspy voice)* A kiss, a kiss!...

(Arsen drums with his fork on the plate and invites the others to join in. Ivan moos, The Girl croaks. A neighbor bangs on the wall to make them stop. The wall clock turns on by the vibrations adding unnecessary order to the commotion.)

Emma: *(blushed)* Thank you! To all of you! *(Lifts her glass.)* You *(to Arsen)* And you *(to The Girl)* I am really moved and... I don't know what to say! I just wish you to experience what Ivan and I are experiencing right now! *(Wipes a tear.)* I don't know, everything now is so... So real! Cheers! Thank you once again!

Arsen: *(Pops up the champagne, pours some in the glasses.)* A toast! A toast! Who's gonna talk? *(to the terrified Ivan)* You or me?

Emma: You! You!

Arsen: Well, ok, I'll do it! Silence! Silence, please!

(Gently taps the glass with his fork. Everyone is quiet, expecting.)

SIXTH CIRCLE

Arsen: (*solemnly, blushed by the drink*) To the anniversary in this home. To the anniversary of the most noble of all families, allow me to recite my favorite poem! It (*Looks at everyone intently.*) as well as everything else beautiful...is about love! Love with a capital L. The rest is...lies! (*Focuses on his glass, slightly swinging back and forth.*) First, to the hostess: "Behold, thou art fair, my love; behold, thou art fair; thine eyes are as doves behind thy veil; thy hair is as a flock of goats that trail down from mount Gilead. Thy teeth are like a flock of ewes all shaped alike, which are come up from the washing; whereof all are paired, and none faileth among them. Thy lips are like a thread of scarlet, and thy mouth is comely; thy temples are like a pomegranate split open behind thy veil. Thy neck is like the tower of David builded with turrets, whereon there hang a thousand shields, all the armour of the mighty men. Thy two breasts (*whispers passionately*) are like two fawns that are twins of a gazelle, which feed among the lilies!" (*Pleased, he claps to himself. Emma covers her décolletage.*) And now to the host: "...Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth--for thy love is better than wine. Thine ointments have a goodly fragrance; thy name is as ointment poured forth; therefore..." (*Shakes his head conspicuously toward Ivan.*) What was next?...Men love him!... Unfortunately, I only remember this much...

Emma: Wonderful! Wonderful! Whose poem is this?

Arsen: No. It's from a book but it's as if I've written it. Very appropriate for the occasion!

Emma: Let's drink then!

Ivan: (*growling*) What book. What men?

Emma: (*to her husband*) Oh, come-on! Stop arguing!

Arsen: Well, it looks like the whole book has been created just for this poem! A great poet has written it. Perhaps the greatest of all!

Ema: You?

The Girl: A poet?...A poet?... Hahaha!... A poet?!

(*She starts laughing quietly at first, but gradually her laughter grows louder and more and more hysterical.*)

Arsen: Let's drink to love! Bottoms up!... And then, h-e-e-ey-h-e-e-ey! (*Smashes his glass on the floor, stomps on the glass pieces, dances, growls.*) To make love!!!... Because, my dear friends!... My dear people!... There's no time!

(*He pumps up the volume even more, a passionate and audacious gypsy melody sounds with a lengthy instrumental intro.*)

Arsen: Aah! How can one not envy you!... Hop!...Hop!... Hop-pa!... E----h-a-a!

(*Like hypnotized, everyone else follows him, **Ivan** bangs his head on the table rhythmically. **The Girl** hops like a hedgehog, **Emma** screams joyfully, saves the dishes from being smashed, angry neighbors bang on the wall again, **Arsen** grabs a napkin from the table and blindfolds himself, spreads his arms widely.*)

Arsen: A-a-ah, how I want to kiss you, to kiss you all...And never leave here!... You! (*Chases **The Girl** who hides under the table.*) And you! (*Chases **Emma** like a chicken.*) And you! (*to **Ivan***) We'll eat later! Let's get hungry first!

Emma: Please! But please! We'll knock something down!... Oi! (*Jumps up as the blindfolded man catches up with her.*) Stop it!... Ivan! The pot!...

Arsen: "Awake, north wind! Rise up, south wind! Blow on my garden and spread its fragrance all around." ...Hop!...Hop! Be joyful, Ivan, rejoice, my friend! Because only love is blind. O-o-h!... Emma...Em-ma!...Come to my embrace!!!...Hey, people! You are so sweet! I love you, folks! I'll eat you alive!

(*He thrusts himself toward her, but she manages to slip away and he barges onto **Ivan's** back, hanging on to it. **Ivan**, appalled, tries to shake him off, crawls on all four on the floor; **The Girl** screams up on the couch.*)

Arsen: (*riding the host*) Giddy-up!...Giddy-up! E-e-e-ee-h-a-a-aa! Wanted!... A man is wanted!...

The Girl: (*Points in horror, in her previous raspy voice.*) Mommy, mommy, A rat!...A rat, mommy!...A rat!

(***Emma**, for some reason, is laughing, but jumps on the couch just in case...*)

Ivan: (*to **Emma**, trying to free himself*) Take him off my back, do you hear me! (*to **Arsen***) What are you doing on my back, are you crazy?!

Arsen: (*Pulling up the blindfold, peeks and jumps off.*) Pardon me, I've perched on the wrong flower! Lady-bug, lady-bug, which way did you fly?...

Ivan: I'll give you ointments now, I'll give you lilies now, you dirty freak! Leave my wife alone! You filthy pervert!...

(Lifts up the closest chair and drops it on his head.)

Emma: Ivan, watch out the table!...Ivan!!!

(Ivan hits the lamp instead. The electricity goes out. A commotion begins as everyone is fighting in the dark with whatever they can. The women scream. The men groan, grunt, and fight. The Girl uses the disarray and crawls out in the light, and runs toward the door.)

(Ivan crawls after her also. Interestingly, the chase continues after he leaves the brawl.)

Arsen: *(from the dark)* Kitty-kitty-kitty!...Kitty-kitty-kitty!...Meow!

Emma: *(from the dark)* Oi!...Ouch!...But please! What are you doing?!

Ivan: *(Catching up to the Girl, short breathed.)* Where do you think you are going?!... Stay here, or I'll kill you... Take him right away!...Pull him out immediately!

The Girl: *(Sstruggles to pull herself off desperately.)* Help!...Help me!!!...Ouch! Let me go, you!

(She swings her handbag at him and hits him in the eye. Blinded, Ivan folds in two, manages to reach her skirt, but The Girl pulls out, and the skirt remains in his hands. She doesn't have much, if anything, underneath... That's how Emma, who runs to The Girl's rescue, finds them. Arsen dutifully holds a lighter up above Emma's head and illuminates Ivan- on his knees in front of the naked Girl...)

Emma: *(Screams.)* Ivan, what are you doing, Ivan!!! On my holiday?!... *(to The Girl)* And you!...How dare you! I didn't like you from the start, with these eyes of yours! Out!...Out!!!... You dirty bum! Your place is in the street, not the university!

(She makes an attempt to kick her but Arsen immobilizes her in his arms; she turns to him and pounds him powerlessly with her fists until she starts sobbing on his chest in a nervous breakdown.)

Arsen: I'll show her the next semester!

Emma: *(through tears)* You won't forgive her, will you? She turned us all into a joke!... Promise me!

Arsen: I won't forgive anybody! They can't mess with our feelings like that!

Emma: *(quietly)* Thank you. How noble you are...I want to wake up, I want to wake up from this nightmare! Tell me that I'm dreaming!...And this is not real!

Ivan: Emma, pull yourself together! I'll explain everything! (*Struggles to pull her away.*)
It's true- she attacked me!...

Emma: I'm not asking you, be quiet!

The Girl: Freaks! (*Uses the commotion, grabs her skirt and runs outside, Ivan leaves Arsen and Emma runs after The Girl, then comes back.*) Liars! (*from the door*)
Perverts!...

(*Swings her handbag helplessly and hurls it to them. Runs outside. Arsen picks up the hand bag, dusts it off carefully and hangs it on the chair.*)

Arsen: (*to Ivan*) Friend, eh? A friend!... We'll see about that! (*Hugs the sobbing Emma and leads her toward the bedroom.*)

Ivan: (*Looks wildly from them to The Girl and back.*) Get out of here with her! Leave!...

Arsen: Emma! Come here, my dove, don't cry! Come here, come to get even with them!... Emma! O-o-o! Shame on them! Oh, how can I watch a woman cry without helping her?!... (*Leads her to the bedroom.*)

Ivan: (*after them*) Arsen, this wasn't our deal, Arsen!!! (*Torn between the desire to catch up with The Girl or go back, yells after her.*) Wait, come back! Come back here and take him! The entrance is locked!

(*Runs after The Girl, but she (with or without skirt) has already ran the distance through the theater- first to the right door, catches a glimpse of her clothes, turns back abruptly, runs to the left door and disappears there in a matter of seconds.*)

Arsen: (*from the bedroom door*) S-h-s-h! Be quiet!

(*Ivan searches in vain in the audience, then pointed to the wrong direction, enters the wrong door. The stage is finally empty. The clock starts tolling mercilessly... while it measures time, the door slams shut from the wind. Arsen shows up from the bedroom. Pushes up the safe switch of the electricity above the door and the apartment fills up with bright light again. He looks through the window and when he sees Ivan approaching, turns the key in the latch. He goes back contented and takes the stereo and the bottle on his way.)*

SEVENTH CIRCLE

*(Short breathed, **Ivan** stops in front of the apartment, searches for his keys in his pockets, doesn't find them, and rings the door bell. From the bedroom sounds the familiar Italian melody.)*

Ivan: Quit joking around! Open up!... *(Kknocks on the door, the music gets louder.)*
Emma! Arsen! *(Waits a bit then yells in a pretend voice.)* Open the door! This is the Police!

*(At the same time, just like before, **Arsen**, tightly wrapped in a bed sheet, hops from the bedroom to the bathroom, invisible to **Ivan**, who is outside.)*

Ivan: *(Rings the neighbors' doorbell.)* Excuse me,, May I, please, skip through your balcony? I left my keys at work again!

*(Hostile silence. **Ivan** goes down the stairs. Runs to the supermarket, then runs back carrying an aluminum ladder over his shoulder. He fastens the ladder, climbs up, and enters through some kind of a shaft. He walks on the window ledge, his back fast against the wall. Through the balcony door we see him hanging from the top floor. He slides down somehow over the railing and lands on the balcony. He tiptoes quiet as a cat toward the bedroom, but is surprised in front of the bathroom by the sound of the flushed toilet and a song.)*

Arsen: Signor capitano io permi quiiiiiiiiiiii...

*(**Ivan** glues his eye to the door, then his ear. A second before the door opens, he jumps back. **Arsen** shows up in a cloud of steam.)*

Arsen: Emma-a-a?... *(Notices **Ivan**.)* Ha!...Where did you disappear? We waited and waited...Where's the girl?

Ivan: *(barely audible, his head down)* She's gone...

Arsen: Won't you take a shower? Come on...

Ivan: Leave...

Arsen: As you wish *(closes the door)* "...Uno sol-dato mio...!"

Ivan: Arsen!!!

Arsen: Aye-aye, sir!

Ivan: *(crying)* Arsen...

Arsen: *(Pokes his head out.)* I'm listening!

Ivan: *(Whispering through his tears.)* You haven't told her, have you?

Arsen: Whom?

Ivan: Emma...

Arsen: What?

Ivan: About last night...

Arsen: About the baby? No, it wasn't mentioned, why?

Ivan: Tell me, have you told her!...

Arsen: Come on! Who do you take me for?

Ivan: *(sobbing softly)* Do you want more money?

Arsen: What do I need money for? Come, come, I'll rub your back...

Ivan: No! Not this, no!...

Arsen: *(sadly)* Why? You don't need me any more? At least bring me the towel... *(Hides inside.)*

Ivan: Ok. Wait a minute...

(Crosses the living room; opens up the couch and pulls out a pair of swim fins, a snorkel, a mask, and a harpoon gun.)

Arsen: Iva-a-an! Come on! Do you want me to die of pneumonia in here?...

Ivan: *(buying time)* I'm coming... I'm coming...

(Shaking, he pulls out a big black robe from under the couch. Walks to the bathroom bent down, hides the harpoon behind his back, knocks on the glass door.)

Arsen: Is Emma taking a shower too? You haven't woken her, have you?

EIGHT CIRCLE

(Complete darkness, long lasting darkness...)

Hellish darkness!

*Just when the audience decides that the play is over and starts clapping, at first politely then anxiously, the lights come back on. The more impatient ones might even be standing up from their seats, those who had been bored might have gone out, others will still be seating when **Emma's** cell phone starts ringing continuously on stage.*

There's a certain change in the scenery. It's morning. The sun is shining through the balcony door. Birds are chirping. The setting has been changed ever so slightly. The lamp shade is at its place, the honeysuckle is back in the vase and it wasn't there before because it was lying on the floor...

*From the bedroom, stretching out seductively comes out a mature, completely satisfied woman, entirely different than the suspicious housewife **Emma**. It is still her but...changed. She is wearing the black robe, tightly fastened around her body.)*

Emma: Hel-o-o-o? Yes?...Oh, is that you?...O-o-oh! Let them stay at your mother's today too, I have contract negotiations, yes. You caught me at the door of my hotel room. Oh! I had a dream about you...Can you hear me? *(disappointed)* No, you can't hear me of course, when could you...It doesn't matter, I'll stop by to pick them up tonight, I love you too! Don't forget to wear your hat in the sun... *(Hangs up. Deep in thought, she fixes the twig in the vase mechanically. The bathroom door slowly opens and a freshly shaven fit man dressed in the familiar white shirt comes out. This is **Arsen**, but he looks refreshed, younger, more refine, minus the goatee and the golden chain. A different **Arsen**. He is no longer the primal and untamed cook from before.)*

Arsen: Who was it? *(He leans toward her and kisses her tenderly while tying his necktie.)*

Emma: Who do you think it was?...Please! You should go, I feel nervous!

Arsen: Why? *(Rubs her shoulders.)*

Emma: I think he suspects something.

Arsen: M-m-m! Pet me a little longer. I want you to pet me again and whisper: oh, you little furry tail, oh you naughty kid...Oh!...Oh!...Oh!!!

Emma: Stop it! I feel embarrassed; I've never done it like this...

Arsen: *(Interrupts her.)* Like what?

Emma: Horrible!... Like an animal, like a goat!

Arsen: Don't be vulgar! *(Shines his shoes meticulously with his sock, places them on the chair and admires them.)*

Emma: You make me like this! On top of everything *(Points.)* your shoes look like hoofs too. *(Smirks.)* What size are you?

Arsen: Seven. Why?

Emma: Nothing. I remembered something about the size of the shoes and... Stop it!

Arsen: Oh... This white skin of yours, this dominant smile! These full... What I am going to do without them!

Emma: Why are you making fun of me!

Arsen: Because you don't deserve all this dullness. This jealous husband of yours! How long has it been since you've slept with him? You gotta be on fire, gotta fly, travel the world, instead of arranging other people's travels! You gotta catch criminals, you know-like in the movies! Gotta spend money, gotta waste it by the millions not by the thousands!...

Emma: *(Stomps her feet.)* Stop it, stop it! You've shown your horns!

Arsen: *(As if he'd been waiting for this moment.)* How's that when they are on your husband's head!... *(Makes horns, the cuckold sign, with his pinky and index fingers, laughs at the joke like a child.)* Ho-ho-ho! He-he-he! Mmm-a—ah!

Emma: *(brought to tears)* I forbid you to talk about him like this!

Arsen: *(honestly surprised)* Really? I thought you liked it when he travels? Look at the nice things he brings you! *(Points at the photo wall paper.)* Classic! *(Recites.)* “In the middle of the road of my life I awoke in the dark wood where the true way was wholly lost” ...How old is he? Wouldn't it be great if he got lost in the wood and you and me...in the middle of the road: Bam! Bam! Bam! All day long! That's what I say...

Emma: My husband is on a business trip in the desert, you jerk! You got that!

Arsen: *(wheezing, his eyes bulging)* I am your real husband! I!...I!

Emma: How dare you! My husband is an Associate Professor and you? An ex sportsman! A mere fitness instructor! What are you the rest of the time, tell me? A messenger boy! A gigolo?

Arsen: *(insulted)* A fire fighter!

Emma: Oh, yes, it's in fashion nowadays!

Arsen: Oh, no, it's always in fashion!

Emma: Well, that may be so but it's not enough to be just a good lover, you have to have some potential...

Arsen: What potential! I can't think of anything but this: I want one loooooooooong...
(Whispers through his teeth, his eyes tightly squeezed.) Can you guess?

Emma: You want it but you can't have it! Get out of here! *(Folds the robe's belt in two and smacks him on the rear with it.)*

Arsen: O-o-ouch! ...It hurts! *(through laughter, whispering)* Oh, no! Missy, you said no, so that means yes!... *(Starts plucking out the honeysuckle's petals.)* No, yes!...No, yes!...No, yes! *(He manages to pluck out almost everything until Emma notices.)*

Emma: *(Screams piercingly.)* Don't touch my flower!

(Arsen grows quiet, listens a second before the door bell suddenly starts ringing.)

Arsen: Oh, my God! Pu-pu-pu! *(Spits.)* See what you did! Speaking of the wolf - and he's at the door!

(Starts getting dressed in panic, hides in the bedroom but leaves his shoes behind. They remain up on the chair. Now we see Ivan, standing at the door for quite some time, in a raincoat and a suitcase. But he is quite different- tired, seemingly older, wearing glasses, sickly looking, huffing and puffing, slightly annoyed that no one answers the door for such a long time. He keeps ringing while Emma, not quite in a hurry, puts her self in order and walks toward the door to answer it.)

NINTH CIRCLE

Emma: Just a moment, pleeeeeease! (*Buying time.*) Who is it? (*Opens the door, stares at Ivan incredulously.*) You?

Ivan: (*sternly*) I had to...

Emma: Where are you coming from? Where did you call from a bit ago?

Ivan: From the Earth energy symposium in Oman. Ouch! (*Takes a few steps limping and holding his behind.*) Ouch!

Emma: What's the matter?

Ivan: I must have bruised while landing.

Emma: Turbulence?

Ivan: No, I was watching this idiotic film about a guy who was impaled to death. Apropos... When did you come home?

Emma: A few minutes ago.

Ivan: How can that be- you just called me from some hotel!?! (*Looks around.*) It's very quiet. Where are the kids?

Emma: I told you- at my mothers!

Ivan: At Mom's. How is she? (*Lifts up Arsen's shoes, studies them in disbelief.*) Emma?! What are these hoofs?

Emma: Honey... They are shoes! Did you only travel by camels over there?

Ivan: No, but whose are these, they are very small?...

Emma: (*suppressing her anger*) A colleague of mine's!

(They look at each other in silence. From this point on, until the last line, the conversation goes on very politely, with the well rehearsed sarcasm of a couple who have grown deeply tired of each other.)

Ivan: But why are they here, perched on our chair?

Emma: *(with sorrow)* Because they are clean!

Ivan: Perhaps I misspoke. What's the right thing to ask in this situation?

Emma: Well, first, who is he and what is he doing here...

Ivan: Well then, what is he doing here?

Emma: He is visiting with us, Ivan!

Ivan: With us?...Why did I have the feeling that it might be just with you?...

Emma: No, he isn't, Ivan. At least not in the sense you imply...

Ivan: I've stopped implying anything a long time ago. I just want to know where I can change...

Emma: *(quite irritated)* Oh, please! Don't get caustic! His girlfriend just went downstairs to get her hair done and he is still sleeping! *(exasperated)* Isn't she allowed?

Ivan: Well, what an elegant joke!

Emma: Well, not all of us are at your level. I'm going to get her, she must have gotten lost. *(Walks off down the stairs, swinging her thighs provocatively as she goes.)*

Ivan: Lost? Who are these people? Are they from your mother's town?!

Emma: *(from the door)* No, they are from the Wagadugo's Scientific Nuclear Center !

*(While she is getting down and out to the street (through the right wing), **Ivan** undresses carefully and enters the bathroom. Across from **Emma**, at the opposite end of the hall, is **The Girl**, in a light-reflecting vest, a broom, orange-violet hair, sweeping the pavement nonchalantly. She seems different too: self-reliant and confident, quite dissimilar to her previous image. She's not very good with the broom, it is obvious that she's just a novice; she stumbles on the viewers, sweeps on them, and cusses disapprovingly.)*

The Girl: *(to one audience member)* Move a little, will you! *(to another)* Put your hoofs away!

*(Overall, her behavior is of a young disobedient minority member, displeased with both her job and her pay. It is possible that she has other means to make the ends meet- and sweeping the streets might be just a cover. It seems that what she is now might be the result of what she turned into because of **Emma's** words from the big fight scene.*

*Everything that happens in a way mirrors what happened earlier. No one but **Arsen** remembers anything clearly- just faces, partial words, flashbacks.)*

Emma: *(to the audience)* A woman! I need a woman!...A woman!

The Girl: *(Runs into her.)* Are you blind, Goddammit!

Emma: Watch out! What are you yelling for!

The Girl: You are the one yelling, not me! What kind of woman do you need?

Emma: *(Studies her.)* You might as well do!

The Girl: A woman for what? A caretaker, a baby sitter, a palm reader, for sex, for porno, what?...

Emma: Well... *(Hesitates.)* For theater!

The Girl: What theater?

Emma: To pull a man out of my bedroom without my husband to know. If you run into him- that's ok, just be polite, you are my guests...

The Girl: A hundred bucks!

Emma: OK. The commission- later!

The Girl: No way! I've been in this theater before, you have no idea! Give me down payment!

Emma: What down payment? I don't have money on me...

The Girl: Take off your watch!

Emma: *(angrily)* Here!

*(Takes off her watch angrily while gripping **The Girl** by the arm. While **The Girl** holds the watch up to her ear to check it, **Emma** pulls the broom and points it like a gun poking **The Girl** in the back with the handle.)*

The Girl: *(Stops after a few steps.)* This gift won't be enough. I said a hundred!

Emma: Listen to me carefully now! I'm going to the ATM to get you a hundred, but not a penny more! Got it! This is my last offer.

The Girl: You know-it-all, don't you!... (*Studies her face.*) Wait, wait a minute! Where have I seen you before? You're from the Turnpike, aren't you?

Emma: (*angry*) I'm from the Moon!

The Girl: Where are you going! I thought we'd act together? A threesome, no?

Emma: I said theater, not sex! I'll run to the ATM. If I am late, start without me!

The Girl: Okay. Give me another hundred!

Emma: Get in! The second door on the right and think twice before you touch my things! (*Unlocks, pushes **The Girl** inside, closes quickly behind her; the latch clicks.*)

TENTH CIRCLE

(*The apartment. **The Girl** looks around- it's empty. Starts counting the doors. From right to left and back. Stops in front of the bedroom. Quickly strips down to a tempting, shiny, black thong and a shiny black bra. After a short hesitation, knocks on the door. **Arsen** pokes his head out.*)

Arsen: (*theatrically*) O! What see my eyes! (*Covers his eyes.*) In my own home!?! Who are you?... You are not...are you?

The Girl: (*Flounces, pleased with the effect.*) I am the girl, for the theater, man...

Arsen: What theater? I don't know anything! What kind of people has my wife brought!

The Girl: (*Shows off her behind temptingly.*) A-a-ah, good people, good people!...Are you her husband? Oh my! We almost made a mistake! Where is he?

Arsen: (*Keeps pretending to be outraged.*) In the shower! Go, go soap his back! And don't forget to take him with you and leave us alone...would you be so kind!

The Girl: Ok, okay. (*Walks toward the bathroom.*) Take it easy. What's with this 'be kind, be kind' that's on everybody's mouth...

Arsen: (*Looks around, pulls the honeysuckle twig out of the vase, strips it clean of the last leaves and hands it to her as a stick.*) Here, take this, just in case, who knows what he might be up to with all this singing... (*Listens caringly.*) He may be still hung over!

Ivan: (*from the bathroom*) La donna e mobileeeeeee! Lalalalalallaa!

The Girl: (*Grabs the stick from his hand.*) Don't you teach me! (*Opens the bathroom door abruptly; a cloud of steam blows out and she disappears in it.*)

*(Finally alone, **Arsen** first swipes the fallen honeysuckle leaves from the floor, gathers them carefully, tiptoes toward the exit and almost manages to escape when suddenly screams, yells, splashing, and moaning start coming from the bathroom. His face wrinkles in a compassionate grimace, he listens for a while with his ear against the glass. He barely manages to pull away as he shoves the leaves in the handbag, trying to get rid of them as soon as possible. Cursing his head off, covering his nakedness with a towel, and followed by **The Girl** as if by a wasp, **Ivan** jumps out of the bathroom.)*

Ivan: Emma!...Emma!...Emma!...

*(Eventually managing to escape, **Ivan** enters the only open door- that of the bedroom. **The Girl** follows; **Arsen** who watches all this through the glass balcony door, uses the moment, jumps out of his hiding place, pulls a key out of his pocket, locks the bedroom, leaving the key in the key hole, and runs toward the entrance door. It has however, been locked thoughtfully by **Emma** when she was letting **The Girl** in.*

From the bedroom, first comes a loud banging on the door, then squeaking of a bed, slapping, groaning, a-ah-ing and o-oh-ing which gradually grow into a passionate, lascivious, and languishing moan.

*Without too much thinking, at the moment when **Emma** is about to unlock the door, **Arsen** jumps on the balcony rail and throws himself in the emptiness below.*

***Emma** enters, listens and when she hears the commotion, sticks her ear to the door. She knocks nervously but politely. The noises stop.)*

ELEVENTH CIRCLE

Emma: (*hardly holding her anger*) Arse-e-en, coffee's waiting!... O! Why is the key on the outside? Arsen?!... (*Shakes the door handle nervously.*) Is there anybody in there? (*No answer. Unlocks the door decidedly and goes in. Then she screams as if she's seen a corpse.*)

Emma: I'm sick to my stomach, sick, sick, sick, sick, sick!...(Runs out, holding the leafless twig; falls on the couch, weakened by the sight, covered in tears and sobs.)

Emma: My flowers...My flower...My dear flower!

The Girl: (*Rruns outside.*) Done! Give me the dough now so I can take him out...eh?

Emma: What have you done to my flower?! (*Motions to hit her with the stick, The Girl jumps back.*)

The Girl: Wait a minute, what have I done? This flower, your husband plucked it like this, that one, with the shoes! (*or another characteristic feature of the actor.*)

Emma: (*Holds her head in her hands.*) Are you crazy?... The one in the bedroom is my husband! Oh...Oh...

The Girl: (*Consoles her.*) He is also quite good, you know! (*Shakes her head with understanding.*) If you know how he did me...

Emma: (*whining*) Where are its leaves!...Its petals! (*Looks under the table, in the waste basket- hot a trace.*) It's unbelievable!!! Where is he? (*Looks around.*) Where is he?!

The Girl: He went out to get a hair cut.

Emma: (*making fists*) Oh, what a treachery! Oh, what a deceit! Oh, what a...

Ivan: (*Comes out of the bedroom.*) Betrayal!...Yes, this is the end! Actually- the beginning of the end.

Emma: (*Collects her self.*) Oh, please don't start again!...

Ivan: The beginning of the real end! I can't believe you've paid her to bang me!...

Emma: Asshole!

Ivan: With a stick I mean.

Emma: I feel sick...I feel sick!

Ivan: (*quietly and seductively*) Oh, and I feel great! Yes, I feel great! For the first time in our bedroom...

The Girl: (*pleased with the compliment*) Then pay up if you feel so great- there's no free lunch!

Ivan: (*Raises his arm, listens.*) There's no time. Do you hear...it roars...It's coming.

The Girl: (*worried, to Emma*) Who's coming, you said there was only one?

Ivan: (*prophet-like, points up.*) The apocalypse!

The Girl: (*Listens too.*) What apoca- lacks! (*to Emma*) I haven't touch him, ya know! (*Points to Ivan.*) Only this one I touched! You pay me my money, hey! My money! That's what lacks!

Emma: Don't you dare mock my husband!

Ivan: (*still in trance*) The Judgment day, the Judgment day does lack!...

The Girl: (*Goes near Ivan and looks at him in awe.*) He lacks nothing, ya'll! Look at him, what a stud!

Emma: (*in disbelief*) Oh, I see now how all the pieces fit! I was asking my self what was still lacking...Don't touch him! How dare you break my family, you wicked bitch!

Ivan: (*to The Girl.*) You hear? The *Holy* family!...

Emma: (*in nervous breakdown*) O, God, what a filth! Oh, God, what a stench!... I'm sick, sick, sick! (*to Ivan*) I'm sick of you the most! Traitor!... Yes, this is Hell! The bottom! God, what a mire! And why, why! What did I do to you? G-o-od! Did I not please you enough! (*Sobs heartbreakingly.*)

Ivan: Stench. Filth. Mire...And whipping!

The Girl: (*Grabs the red hand bag from the chair using the confusion and runs toward the door.*) You fuckinng freaks! I'll teach you a lesson if I meet you outside!

Emma: (*desperately clinging to the hand bag*) My bag! No!!...No!!!

The Girl: Let go!... It's not yours!

Emma: It's mine, it's mine!...Ivan, don't let her rob us!

Ivan: (*philosophically*) We are already robbed!

Emma: (*Howls like a wolf.*) You-uu! How could you say that!!!

The Girl: (*Protects herself from Emma, kicks her.*) What are you howling for, you, what do you have inside to call it yours?

Emma: What did you steal from it, you! Thief, thief! My money for my trip! It's mine! Mine!

The Girl: (*Pulls.*) I keep my condoms in it, you! What money are you talking about? I don't keep no money in no hand bags! (*Motions to hit her.*) Are you crazy!

Emma: (*Doesn't let go, hits her back.*) You lie, you thief!

The Girl: You lie! You tricked me! Give me my money!

(They tear the red shiny hand bag apart. A few honeysuckle leaves drop on the floor...and also a shiny gun! The Girl motions to grab it but Emma steps on her hand. She lifts the gun up and starts shaking it under The Girl's nose, yelling. The Girl tries to grab it from her.)

Emma: Who did you come to shoot with this?! Answer!...Police!...Police!

The Girl: (*Hides her face, screams hysterically.*) N-o-o!...I'm not...don't shoo...!

Ivan: Emma! N-o-o-!!!...

(He joins in the fight as well. During the commotion, somebody accidentally pulls the trigger. The lamp shatters, the alarm in the theater goes off, the lights on stage go out, the alarm on the balcony starts blaring and blinking with a bright orange light, and along with it, do all the exit lights in the theater.)

TWELFTH CIRCLE

(In the distance- a wailing siren of an approaching automobile. Floodlights pointed toward the building. Growing motor roar shakes the theater. The curtains fly almost horizontally from the air wave. A black silhouette descends on a flying trapeze.

A megaphone voice. 'Stop engines! Bridge to the thirteenth floor! Follow my orders until the arrival of the authorities! Drop your weapons, drop on the floor face down, arms behind your neck. Spread your legs shoulder wide. No talking if there's more than one of you: for your safety all conversations may be recorded!'

Dressed in black uniform, with a barrette on his head, a gun in his right hand and a long flashlight in his left, a security guard jumps from the flying trapeze onto the balcony. On his back, in large light-reflective letters is a sign that reads, ARSENAL Security agency. Dropped from the sky "ex machina", security guard number one comes to finally bring some order in this play. The stage is dark. The flashing of the emergency light is annoying like in a disco club but is sufficient enough to reveal who this devout order keeper is. Everybody is on the floor, face down.)

Arsen: Your ID please!

Ivan: *(groaning)* In my back pocket!

Arsen: Don't move! *(Handcuffs him, reaches in his back pocket.)*

Ivan: *(Jumps.)* Ouch!...I said my back pocket!!!

Arsen: *(lighter)* I apologize... *(Studies his ID.)*

Ivan: I don't accept...

Emma: Mister police officer...my husband...

Ivan: Shut up, I don't accept his apology!

Arsen: I'm not a police officer. I said, don't move! *(Talks into the walkie-talkie on his shoulder.)* Falcon, Falcon, Hawk speaking, over... "I" like ice, "V" like victory... *(to Ivan, kicking him)* Is that your name? Ivan? Answer!

Ivan: *(with anger)* Yes! Y Like yellow...

Arsen: Shut up! Are you the owner? Well, *ARSENAL* services many young families, sometimes mistakes happen *(pointing at Emma)* Is the lady with you?

Emma: The lady? *(Lifts up a little with dignity.)* We've seen each other before I think!

Arsen: I don't remember, I can't remember all the families...

Emma: Families! This one came here to rob us and almost shot me! Families...

Arsen: *(to The Girl)* Who shot whom? What are you doing in this house?!

The Girl: *(Sobs.)* I am Lilly...they forced me, on purpose! She brought me here for money, boss! She lied to me! He wanted to shoot her, not me, to shoot you!...

Emma: What are you talking about, you thief! You stole everything from me!

Arsen: Whose gun is this? Don't speak simultaneously!

(Upon hearing this, all three start talking simultaneously, out of order, over each other. They resemble a trio in a Rossini's opera, whose music starts playing in the background.)

The Girl:

It's hers, it's hers!

I had condoms

in my hand bag,

I've made a mouse, a

horse's hair, an egg, but

a gun- never! You shut up!

You took it from me and

used it for black magic! Witch! What mouse?

I swear on the Chief of

Police's grave!

Emma:

Don't listen to her!

She came here to steal!

Shut up!

The gun's not mine,

we are not allowed, they

only promise. Not that we

didn't want to carry guns...

Vermin of all sorts! If I could

Ivan:

Despicable!...

In my house, here...

Mice?...

Abomination,

deluge!

Both of you shut up!

You gave me a

Headache!

There was a snake

It's hers!	use magic, I'd turn her into	who had a rat...
Her husband wanted to	a snake! Whore! Stop lying,	Orgasms?...
shoot her, and to kill me	you make me puke!	Lies, lies, lies!
and you too!		Don't think I'm so
		stupid. Enough!

(Every one stops. **Emma** uses the pause.)

Emma: It is not right to enter through the balcony, I think... And run away through it either, right?!... *(quieter)* Do you remember me now?... *(very quiet, with hope)* Arsen?...

Arsen: *(Points the sign on his back.)* "Arsenal" at your service. It won't happen again if you say so. *(to the Girl)* Miss, you're coming with me.

Emma: *(bitterly)* Yes... She's a Miss now!

Arsen : We were talking about something else. Go on.

The Girl:	Emma:	Ivan:
I'm not talking to you,	Don't you see that my	You have no right.
I'm talking to the boss!	husband is not well!	Where will you take her?
May you become a big Boss,	What are you waiting	I'm sick and tired of you!
if you let me go, and may	for, take her away already!	I, I raped her! The girl is
you have many women!	<i>(to Ivan)</i> You shut up!	innocent, my wife's crazy,
Many, and all beautiful,	I'm so mad at you and your	I shot, but I missed...
not like this one here!	nonsense!	it felt good!
May they crawl in your feet!... Bring some rope to tie her!		I wanted to kill you!
Let me go, you, I'm Lily,	Thief... Thief... Snake!	I know who you are
I'll be yours forever! To err	Snake...	and I'm not afraid of you!

is human, to forgive divine, Snake...

Stop! Everybody! Stop!

Right!

Thief!

In my family, in ours!

(They all stop. Rossini ends too.)

Arsen: *(on their side, claps)* Bravo! Bravissimo! Bravo!...What a brilliant house concert! Thank you! *(in his previous matter-of-fact tone, to Ivan)* And did you have a permit for the gun? No? Well, then in this case, you will stay here with your wife till further notice and the girl is coming with me. We need young people *(Pinches her on the cheek.)* We have new family cases all the time, more and more complicated. *(to Ivan)* If we have an opening for an engineer, we will contact you right away! *(to the Girl, nodding his head assuredly.)* If you only knew, Lilly, with your talents, what cases await us in the future! This here is nothing...

Emma: What about me?!...Do you say this to every one!!! *(Takes out a handkerchief.)*

Ivan: Emma! *(Embraces her, she sobs on his shoulder.)* Don't humiliate yourself any further!...

Arsen: *(in the walkie-talkie)* Call off the blockade! Bridge to F 13! Get the machine in close distance...Stop!

(Sound of motors. The curtains start flying up again from the air flow. The trapeze.)

Arsen: *(to The Girl)* All passengers please take your seats and fasten your seat belts!

The Girl: But make her pay me first, make her give me my money first!...

Arsen: *(From the trapeze, reaches out his hand to her.)* You won't need it...The broom! Don't forget your broom!...

(Snaps his fingers and the broom flies after them; Arsen catches it in the air and hands it to The Girl; The Girl jumps next to him; with roar of motors and screeching of machinery, they disappear up in the sky, shaking their legs carelessly.)

THIRTEENTH CIRCLE

*(Alone, **Ivan** and **Emma** are silent, embracing each other, following **Arsen** and **The Girl** with their eyes as they leave. They sigh and start cleaning around the house reluctantly. **Emma** brings over the vase, lifts the honeysuckle branch from the couch, puts it inside, and fills the vase with water.*

*At this moment, the door bell rings. They both startle and look at each other. Frozen, they wait. **Ivan** walks to the door slowly, looks in the eyehole for a long moment, turns around, and walks to the corner of the room tiredly, his eyes fixed on something invisible and distant in the photo wallpaper.*

*The doorbell rings again. Continuously. **Emma** walks to the balcony and looks down over the rail. There's no one. She returns and walks to the opposite corner of the room. A third ring. Decisive and persistent. They both face each other in anxious expectation. The lights which start dimming leave them like this.)*

THE END