



SISTER OF THE FOUR

A Play in
Two Acts

Eugene
Vodolazkin

Translated
by Shelley
Fairweather-Vega

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SISTER OF THE FOUR

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CHARACTERS

FUNGHI, twenty-nine

WRITER, sixty-four

DEPUTY, forty-three

DOCTOR, forty-one

NURSE, unspecified age

PSYCHIATRIST, a woman of indeterminate age

POLICE OFFICER, a man in the prime of life

ACT I

Morning. Outskirts of Moscow. A four-bed hospital room in the Albert Camus Hospital for Infectious Diseases. From the other side of the wall of that room, from time to time, we hear the sound of an axe. On one bed, in hospital pajamas, sits FUNGHI, listening to the radio. The DOCTOR, NURSE, and WRITER walk into the room.

RADIO. This is our broadcast of the very latest news.

NURSE. Good morning, Mr. Patient.

FUNGHI. How good can it be with this very latest news? The very latest, like the very last? There will never be news again! There will never be anything again! What a virus!

RADIO. Lombardy has set a dismal new record: 960 people dead of coronavirus in the past twenty-four hours. The ratio of infections to deaths has set another record . . .

NURSE. Mr. Patient!

FUNGHI. You're distracting me and keeping me from the news of infections and deaths.

NURSE. Mr. Patient, allow me to introduce your new roommate . . .

FUNGHI. And what's with this "Mr. Patient?" I'm perfectly healthy. Just call me Funghi.

DOCTOR. Funghi? Great. What does "Funghi" mean?

WRITER. Funghi is a type of pizza. *(to Funghi)* With mushrooms, right?

FUNGHI. Exactly. Mushrooms. And I'm healthier than every one of you. Temperature 36.6. *(Shows the thermometer.)* What do you say, Doctor? Not too high? 36.6, Doctor.

DOCTOR. Impossible!

NURSE. *(Walks over to Funghi, places a hand on his forehead, then turns to Doctor.)* I'd say 38.5, no less.

DOCTOR, *to Funghi*. Are you trying to trick us?

NURSE. You could light a match on his forehead. (*Takes the thermometer from Funghi's hand.*) But what do you know: 36.6. How did you take your temperature?

FUNGHI. Under my arm, like we do all over this country. Abroad they do it differently, you know. Orally, for example. And also . . .

DOCTOR. Let's stop at orally. That's the perfect method for you. It keeps you quiet for five whole minutes. We've all gone a little crazy in the days you've been here.

NURSE. If you had that thermometer in your mouth right now, I could have already introduced your new roommate.

FUNGHI. Don't introduce him! I'll guess. You're a professor. Probably a law professor. Right?

WRITER. No.

FUNGHI. Don't tell me, Nurse! That goes for you, too, Doc. (*to the Writer*) Nothing striking about your outward appearance. Your look is sort of shabby, sorry to say. Safety instructor?

WRITER. (*Laughs.*) Not on your life!

DOCTOR, *to Funghi*. Can I ask what you do for a living? I didn't see anything about it in your chart.

FUNGHI. You were digging around, huh? Searching! Shameful! (*Crosses his legs.*) I'm in the food retail business.

DOCTOR. And what foods are in your sphere of interest?

FUNGHI. Pizza, mostly. I've loved it ever since I was a kid. They gave me this nickname, Funghi.

NURSE. You make pizza?

FUNGHI. No. Not exactly. I basically take care of logistical issues. More specifically, transportation issues. I set the routes and conduct the negotiations. It requires keeping a whole lot of information in your head, you know. My work is clients, accounts, and a whole load of responsibility.

WRITER. So, pizza delivery? In Zarechye District, right?

FUNGHI. Um, yeah . . . You're very well informed. How did you know? But you wouldn't believe how much you've underestimated our zone of operations. We serve other districts, too.

The Doctor and Nurse smile.

NURSE. You really deliver pizza?

FUNGHI. Well, of course I could say yes . . . Probably I would say yes, although that really simplifies things. Take the vehicles I have to manage, for one thing. They've got their quirks. They're not your statistically average automobiles.

DOCTOR. What make and model?

FUNGHI. What difference does that make? The important thing is the quirks, got it?

NURSE. No, come on! I love quirky things! They must have quirky names, too.

FUNGHI. Well, there's the three-wheeled cargo motoroller, for instance. That's the Ant Technologies model.

DOCTOR. (*Chuckles.*) Ant Technologies!

FUNGHI. I don't see anything funny about it. It's a very agile machine. Much more agile than a Jaguar, though of course it is a little slower. I'll admit that honestly.

DOCTOR, *wiping away tears*. If there's anything I appreciate in you, it's your honesty.

NURSE. But now we know that the Jaguar is faster than the three-wheeled cargo motoroller from Ant Technologies.

WRITER. Not necessarily. With all the traffic jams downtown, Ants are usually faster than Jaguars. You do know how to get around the traffic jams, don't you, Mr. Funghi?

FUNGHI, *to the Writer*. You seem to know a lot about my biography. Now I know you're not a professor. I think you must just be a spy.

WRITER. Yes. They sent me here to spy on you.

FUNGHI. Can I ask who sent you, specifically? The Americans? The British? The Germans?

WRITER. The Italians. They want to know the secrets of Russian pizza.

DOCTOR, *to the Writer*. It seems as if you do know something about our Funghi.

WRITER. I live in Zarechye District, and he's delivered pizza to me a few times. I remember him.

FUNGHI. Now that's interesting! How come you remember me and I don't remember you?

WRITER. That's very simple. You were always talking the whole time, and I wasn't. He who keeps quiet, remembers.

FUNGHI. Stop! Stop! Stop! I remember. I remember bookshelves . . . I know what you do! (*Funghi's hand draws a curve through the air.*) You're . . . you're . . .

NURSE. This is going to go on forever.

FUNGHI. Quiet!

NURSE. He's a writer.

FUNGHI. Come on, I asked you! I asked you not to tell me! Of course he's a writer! It was right on the tip of my tongue. (*Sticks out his tongue.*)

DOCTOR. I don't like the look of that tongue of yours. Stick it out again. (*Funghi sticks out his tongue.*) No, I don't like it at all. (*Writes in Funghi's chart:*) Coated tongue. (*to Funghi*) If I were you, I wouldn't work that tongue so much. Now, say "aaaah."

FUNGHI. Aaaah . . . Now I bet you'll say you don't like my "aaaah."

NURSE. That "aaaah" is the most intelligent thing you've said so far, Funghi.

FUNGHI, *to the Writer*. You should write about this harassment. It's intolerable.

NURSE. As if he'd be interested, Funghi! He's a famous writer. Very famous. He certainly has things to write about. For example, our Albert Camus Hospital for Infectious Diseases, with its groundbreaking equipment, crack team of doctors, and (*Points to the Doctor.*) the head physician himself. The doctors are all down with the virus, so the head physician is personally attending to patients.

The axe knocks against the wall.

WRITER. What is that sound?

DOCTOR. We're expanding our infectious disease ward.

WRITER. But that sounds like an axe. Are you saying they're using an axe to expand this ground-breaking hospital?

FUNGHI. An axe is so yesterday. I don't understand how you can erect a modern building with an axe.

NURSE, *to the Writer*. Are you hinting that they're making coffins?

WRITER. I didn't say anything about coffins.

NURSE. Well, it was understood! What do you take me for, a little girl? Why is it all you people ever do is think about coffins? (*Her speech is suddenly broken up with sobs.*) You all probably think that during a pandemic they move coffin manufacturing closer to the hospital?

FUNGHI. Well, there is a certain logic to it.

NURSE, *to Funghi*. Shut your mouth! That's a completely unsophisticated view of things. I'm sorry to disappoint you, but during big epidemics, they bury people without coffins. Just in a common grave.

DOCTOR, *to the Nurse*. That's enough with the gloom and doom, my dear. We need a positive emotional tenor. I'm leaving, but please give our friends vitamin B6 and B12 injections.

FUNGHI. Do you think that will improve our emotional tenor?

DOCTOR, *at the door*. It will freshen things up, at least.

The Doctor walks out. The Nurse fills syringes for the shots.

RADIO. Coronavirus mortality statistics have grown worse again in Belgium. That country is now in first place in lethal outcomes per capita.

WRITER. Don't they ever talk about anything else?

RADIO. Unfortunate statistics are being reported from Spain: the number of pandemic victims has passed the psychologically important threshold of one thousand in twenty-four hours. Spain's chief infectious disease specialist, a Señor Gonzales, reported at a press conference that the peak of the crisis in that country is still a long time off.

FUNGHI. Ay caramba!

NURSE, *to the Writer*. He has fantastic Spanish pronunciation. It's almost embarrassing to give a person like that a shot.

WRITER. You know the poem, right? "I'm a little Norwegian all over! I'm a little Spanish all over!" We should put on some nice clothes and beat it to Spain.

FUNGHI. Piasters-piasters-piasters! There's a problem with that.

NURSE. Who wants the first shot, gentlemen? Completely free of charge!

FUNGHI. The writer, who else? Literature is always on the front lines.

WRITER. What do the front lines have to do with it? I've had it up to here with this military terminology! A writer writes, he doesn't fight. He's above fighting.

FUNGHI. I don't understand how you can write about something you haven't felt. Before you write about, say, me getting a shot in the ass, you should make your own ass available.

WRITER. You have a mistaken idea about the nature of creativity. Personal experience kills the imagination. The best descriptions of a love scene are written by those who lead ascetic lives.

NURSE. This is terribly awkward, but I have two full syringes here. I have a choice to make: Whom do I inject first?

FUNGHI. Let's put the question differently: If, inside this treatment facility, I were to get close to, say, a nurse, then I should think twice before I try writing any love scenes?

WRITER. That depends on how capable you are, in general, with describing love scenes.

NURSE. Not to mention with nurses.

FUNGHI. My wife is a teacher in an old folks' home. So I could handle it, no problem.

WRITER. In an old folks' home, isn't it too late for teachers?

NURSE. It's never too late to teach. Funghi, pull down your pants and lie on your stomach. We'll give you some B6.

FUNGHI, *pulling down his pants*. This is so traumatic. B6 is the worst shot. How about a B12 instead?

NURSE. I'm giving you what was prescribed. (*Shows Funghi her instructions.*) It says right here: today, B6.

FUNGHI. Don't be such a bureaucrat! If you and I get close, that will be the fly in the ointment, which . . . which . . . (*His voice becomes more and more anxious.*)

NURSE. You should be getting close to your wife. (*She gives him the shot. Funghi yelps.*) I have to say, she hasn't done a good job teaching you.

WRITER. Maybe the problem is that he's outside her usual age category (*Lowers his pants.*) B6 for me, too?

NURSE. (*Gives him a searching glance.*) You get B12.

FUNGHI. Must be nice to be a writer! All I get is B6, and prejudice. Tell me, Writer, are you married?

WRITER. Yes. Or, I was. Last week she left me.

The Nurse breaks out in hysterical laughter. The Writer and Funghi look at her, surprised.

NURSE. I'm sorry. It isn't funny.

FUNGHI. Did she leave you for another man?

WRITER. No, she just left.

FUNGHI. You wouldn't submit to her teaching?

WRITER. She never tried to teach me anything.

FUNGHI. Did you beat her? You know, lightly, like a writer?

WRITER. No, not at all.

NURSE. I'll never understand why a woman would leave her man. I never could, believe me.
Especially if it wasn't for another man.

FUNGHI. Well maybe she had reasons we don't know about? You know what I mean . . .

NURSE, *to Funghi*. Listen, you need to learn to mind your own business! We can't ask him about things like that, because everything having to do with someone's personal life is . . .

FUNGHI. Personal.

NURSE. Exactly. Unless, of course, the Writer tells us about it himself.

WRITER. No, I'm not impotent, if that's what you mean.

FUNGHI. So when it comes right down to it, what do we know? (*Counts on his fingers.*) A writer. Not impotent. And you didn't cheat on her?

WRITER. No, no cheating.

NURSE. I really hate digging around in someone else's life. But there must be some kind of cause!
Because there is no effect without a cause.

FUNGHI. The funny thing about life is that there actually can be, as it turns out.

WRITER. "The little bird flies the path of troubles, merrily he sings, and never gives a thought to all the tragedy it brings." I didn't put my boots away on the shoe shelf. What do you think, is that any reason for a breakup?

NURSE. It all depends on what happened next.

WRITER. This is what happened next: she said she was tired of my untidiness.

FUNGHI. Mm-hmm. And what did you say?

WRITER. I said if she was so tired, we should split up.

NURSE. And what did she say?

WRITER. She put her coat on and left. Her mother has an apartment nearby. It was a kind of vicious circle, you understand, where every spiral was even worse than the one before. Much worse.

FUNGHI. I think I may have even delivered her a pizza. Yes. I definitely did.

NURSE. Then it's partly your fault. You fed the woman pizza, and after that she left her husband.

FUNGHI. You think if I ask her, she'll go back?

WRITER. No, she won't come back. Well, maybe to you.

FUNGHI. But I already have a wife. She's . . . she's just crazy. You never know what she's going to do. She helped me out with a pizza once, packing it up. Before we got married. So I take the packed-up pizza to this very important individual. This individual takes the box. He gives me a tip. I say, "Thanks, that isn't necessary," but I take the tip. The individual opens the box. He gives me a strange look. He takes a book out of the box, and shows it to me. In the book is a postcard, with only three words on it.

WRITER. What was the book?

FUNGHI. Gorky's novel, *Mother*.

WRITER. That's terrible!

NURSE. But what did the postcard say?

FUNGHI. "Incinerate the bearer."

WRITER. That's harsh . . . And from a woman who teaches senior citizens!

NURSE. What did that mean, "incinerate"? You should have demanded an explanation! Why "incinerate"?

FUNGHI. And why *Mother*? You don't know her. She never explains anything.

WRITER. So what did you do then?

FUNGHI. I married her.

Evening. Hospital room.

RADIO. Here is your evening news broadcast. Today coronavirus statistics were published for the United States.

WRITER. Let's turn it off. This is my fourth day here and I haven't heard anything else yet.

FUNGHI. Is it really the fourth day?

WRITER. It might be the sixth. In a closed space it's difficult to sense time passing.

Funghi turns off the radio. The sound of the axe comes from behind the wall.

FUNGHI. They're working in three shifts. Around the clock. Do you hear that axe going? We Russians can work fast when we feel like it!

WRITER. I wish I knew what they were working on so fast.

FUNGHI. Maybe it really is coffins. Why else would the Nurse bring it up?

WRITER. You've seen how she sits with us here for days on end. Doesn't she have any other patients? How do you explain that?

FUNGHI. I can explain it. This might sound immodest, but I think she likes me.

WRITER. You don't say!

FUNGHI. And there's more: I am beginning to suspect that she . . . would like to get close to me.

WRITER. Is that so? Well, then that would explain everything.

FUNGHI. There is nothing unexplainable in this world. (Takes a bottle of vodka out of his backpack.) If you think hard enough, you'll find an explanation for everything. Or ask me, if it's an emergency. Why do you think my brain works so well?

WRITER. I wouldn't hazard a guess.

FUNGHI. Because I stimulate it. (Puts two cups on a bedside table and pours vodka into them.)

WRITER. Whoa!

FUNGHI. This isn't "whoa." It was "whoa" when I rode in here. But day after day, devoting myself to brainy activities, I drank up most of it, without noticing. And now I propose we drink through the rest. We have to meet this virus well armed! What does literature have to say about that?

WRITER. Literature does not object.

They clink glasses and drink.

FUNGHI. Well? Got any other unexplainable things?

WRITER. (*Finishes the contents of his glass, thinking.*) It's surprising, but everything has started explaining itself. But no – one thing does remain unexplained. Look: they've declared emergencies all over the world now. They've closed schools, theaters, stores, everything that can be closed. The world has stopped.

FUNGHI. Well, there is a pandemic. Pan-dem-ic. What a word! Here's to your health!

Funghi pours again. They clink glasses and drink.

WRITER. There's also the word "epidemic." When an epidemic takes over the whole world, it's called a pandemic. That happens from time to time.

FUNGHI, *pouring*. So it happens, from time to time, that's natural – what's not to get?

WRITER. This: why is it now that the world has stopped?

FUNGHI. Wait. First let's drink. (*They drink.*) I'll answer your question with a question. Why did my wife put Gorky's *Mother* in the box instead of a pizza? (*Sniffs his pajama sleeve noisily.*) Mother-effing-Mother! There will always be mysteries in this world.

WRITER. Does that mean that even we can't explain everything?

FUNGHI. That's right. Otherwise it would be too boring. No, honestly, it's much better for me to leave something unexplained than for us to die of boredom. (*Reaches for the bottle.*)

WRITER. This isn't too much?

FUNGHI. There's hardly anything left. My wife always says the stuff in the lower depths of the bottle is the tears. We can't leave them there.

They clink glasses and drink.

WRITER, *sniffing his sleeve*. I didn't drink all of it. We weren't down in the depths at all. That's a nice half bottle. What kind of tears were those?

FUNGHI. Bitter ones. Like Gorky's. Taste it – bitter, right?

WRITER, *sipping*. I think it is bitter.

FUNGHI. Then, to Gorky! (*They drink what's left.*) You know, Writer, with this plague of ours, everything actually makes sense. Somebody made a military virus, forgot to screw the lid on tight, and there you go, this is the result.

WRITER. That raises a legal question: Who made this virus? And who didn't screw the lid on?

FUNGHI, lowering his voice. For now, we only know one thing: somebody didn't screw it on. Maybe they went to the bathroom or out to have a smoke. The jar tips over in a draft, and bang! – the whole world's upside down. Listen! (*Knocks himself on the forehead.*) Why didn't I think of it right away? They never meant to screw the lid on tight! (*Digs through his backpack, takes out another bottle.*)

WRITER. But we already drank all the tears! I don't remember having any plans for a new bottle.

FUNGHI. Force-majeure circumstances. An act of God. (*Pours vodka into the cups.*) Right now let's drink, and I'll tell you something very important. On the record.

They clink glasses and drink.

WRITER. I don't have any paper or a pen.

FUNGHI. And you call yourself a writer! Then write it on your phone. Okay. An unknown saboteur, walking along the Great Wall of China, put the jar holding the virus in a nook in the crenelation.

The Writer turns on his phone and starts typing.

WRITER. . . . in a nook in the crenelation. – I don't remember, does that wall have crenelations? The Kremlin wall does, but I don't know about the Chinese one.

FUNGHI. I don't remember either. Okay, let's change it. Write this: This guy cooked up some fillet of carp in sour cream. He spiced it with a thick layer of virus from the jar, pasted on a mustache, and went to hand out the fish on Tiananmen Square.

WRITER, *writing*. . . . on Tiananmen Square. – But what a subtle calculation! A mustached man handing out fillet of carp in sour cream in the public square – what could be more natural? But who was this saboteur?

FUNGHI. He could be an alien; I'm not ruling it out. We don't want to point fingers and offend one planet or another, but witnesses have testified that there was something undeniably Martian about this stranger's gait. The saboteur took the rest of the jar and sprinkled it into the Yangtze River, down to the very last virus. Or the Yellow River, which is the same thing.

WRITER. Some people might argue with you.

FUNGHI. Please! Why argue about such little things? (*He pours, they drink.*) Okay, so write this: one hour later, a random passerby, name of Sun, walked up to the river.

WRITER, *writing*. . . walked up to the river. – Got it. I bet he dipped his hand in the river. Did he?

FUNGHI. Worse. He went all the way in.

WRITER, *writing*. . . all the way in. – What for?

FUNGHI, *pouring*. I don't know . . . Probably he dropped something in the river. His little Mao book, for example. Or one of those Chinese umbrellas. The wind ripped it from his hand, and there you go!

WRITER. No, probably he dropped a precious hairpin that belonged to his wife. I think his wife was named Baochai, which means "precious hairpin." So what happened to Sun?

FUNGHI. Well, he fished the precious hairpin out of the river and he, you know, goes home. Cold and soaked. His wife greets him with a smile, as usual, and says "Hello, Sun, my husband!" But he can't get his teeth to stop chattering. He's basically shaking all over. She says: "Sun, Sun! Why so quiet, Sun, my husband? Your dinner is cold, Sun, my husband!"

WRITER, *writing*. . . Sun, my husband! – You're getting the intonation just right, so precise!

FUNGHI. And this Chinese patient finally answers her: Ai, I went into the poisoned river. Ai, I have some kind of virus that looks like a crown. Now we learn that at the very same time he took his dip in the river, his wife was at Tiananmen Square. She wanted to buy her husband something for dinner, right? There she saw someone handing out carp in sour cream, for free! She took some, about half a kilo, but she didn't make them weigh it.

WRITER. . . about half a kilo. – Why pay if they're giving it out for free? That makes sense too. Is that all?

FUNGHI. No! So we have this double strike against one family, see? Fate! . . . Plus Sun and Baochai didn't take their infection as seriously as they should have. They told their friends and neighbors the whole story, laughing about it. Basically the two of them were social butterflies, and all their he-he, ha-has infected one and half million people in the space of a week. (*Pours for himself.*) Elixir of ginseng, by the way. You drinking? All right, have it your way. (*He drinks. Grunts.*) Now Baochai is infected. She goes on working at the People's Daily. At the People's Daily you can't avoid shaking hands, even women, unfortunately, including Baochai. Every-

one she shook hands with withered up and shriveled up, but they pressed fresh ginseng in the ginseng juicer and they somehow shurvived. And the infection raged on. – Got that?

WRITER. Yes, but . . . judging by the style, you’ve been abusing ginseng.

FUNGHI. Could be. Save that and copy it into an email. We should call it something.

WRITER. “Do You Remember How It All Began?”

FUNGHI. No, more like “Infectious Laughter,” or something. Now we just need to find an address for the Emergency Situations Ministry. We’ll send our message to them because, honestly, what we have here is an emergency situation.

WRITER, *letting his head drop onto one arm*. There’s one thing I don’t understand: What is the purpose of this message?

FUNGHI. There’s no need to search for a purpose in everything. Some things are done with no purpose. Just out of love for the magnificent. Did you find the address? (*Notices that the Writer is sleeping.*) How do you like that? He’s sleeping! (*Takes the phone from the Writer’s hand. Types in an address.*) All right. Emergencies Ministry. CC: Internal Affairs, Foreign Affairs, the Nuclear Agency, the Space Agency . . . Send. He’s asleep, but I’m wide awake. All alone, responsible for every little thing.

Morning. Funghi is asleep, sitting in his chair, and the Writer is sleeping with his head on the table.

RADIO. Japan has declared a state of emergency. The country had seemed to be an oasis in the coronavirus pandemic. Our correspondent reports from Tokyo.

The axe banging on the other side of the wall sounds like a drum beating. The Doctor, Nurse, and a parliamentary DEPUTY march into the room. The Deputy wears hospital pajamas and carries a bag.

DOCTOR, *to the Deputy*. Come on in, your excellency. (*with a look at Funghi and the Writer*) So now! You’re already up?

FUNGHI, *not opening his eyes*. No, we’re still down. And what is all that noise? Why is there always such a fuss?

NURSE. We have the honor of admitting a parliamentary deputy.

FUNGHI. That’s no reason to shout so much. (*Opens his eyes and stretches.*) A real parliamentary deputy?

DOCTOR. A real one? What other kind is there? Where are your manners?

DEPUTY, *smiling, gets his credentials out of his pajama pocket.* See if you give these credentials any credence.

FUNGHI. (*Takes the document, looks it over, returns it.*) The photo is glued on crooked. And I'm not sure about the print job. Did you buy that at a metro station?

The Doctor and Nurse laugh.

NURSE. I can't believe what I'm hearing! His fever must be getting the better of him. Who can help me understand what you two got up to yesterday?

WRITER, *lifting his head from the table with difficulty, coughing; he has a bruise on his forehead.* We were writing a document . . . We even sent it, I think . . .

FUNGHI. We totally sent it. With my own hand, from your telephone!

NURSE. Oh my goodness, the Writer has a bruise on his forehead!

WRITER, *to Funghi.* Do you happen to remember where we sent that document? And what it was, um, about, by any chance?

FUNGHI. I don't remember where. But what it was about . . . No, I can't remember that, either, but I know it was a matter of life and death.

DEPUTY. An extremely intriguing discussion, on the face of it.

WRITER, *feeling his bruise.* What's this on my face?

DEPUTY, *pacing confidently.* After all, without that, what work do we have? Life must be kept at a boil! Lances are made to be broken! The clash of opinions, uncomfortable questions, you see . . .

WRITER. The most uncomfortable question is where did we send that email?

DEPUTY. If you sent it from your phone, then all you need to do is look at the phone.

NURSE. Oopsy-daisy . . . (*Picks pieces of the broken phone off the table.*) We've broken our telephone all to pieces!

DOCTOR. All right, what actually happened here?

FUNGHI. I'm telling you: there was a lively discussion. At the end of the evening the Writer's head started to nod, and he busted up his forehead. (*to the Deputy*) Our email isn't the reason you're here, is it?

DEPUTY. No, I'm here for a different reason.

DOCTOR. The honorable Deputy has granted us the honor of visiting our hospital in person and undergoing a course of treatment here.

WRITER. In person, no less?

NURSE. And right here in this room!

DEPUTY. Why this one, specifically? As a deputy, I should be afforded a private room.

WRITER. That's very democratic of you.

DEPUTY. What did you think? As a deputy, I have an enormous amount of work to do. Which is to say I ought to be afforded every means of completing it.

NURSE. That won't be possible, unfortunately. All the rooms are completely full. We have a catastrophic lack of space. *(She covers her face with her hands and her shoulders heave.)*

DEPUTY. Don't take it so personally! We can solve this problem. Think of a way to optimize.

DOCTOR. We'd be happy to optimize . . . *(to the Nurse)* Shall we optimize?

NURSE. If only we knew how!

DEPUTY. It's elementary! Move somebody into the hallway.

NURSE. You walked down the hallway with us, you saw. The beds are lined up end to end!

FUNGHI. Ha! Well, move them into the courtyard, then. Easy-peasy! Give them a nice warm blanket. Have them brush the snow off the ones in critical condition. It only snowed twice in the last couple weeks.

DEPUTY, *to the Doctor*. Listen here, I understand that you don't make enough money. The management will certainly hear about that. But I put the blame squarely on you for the situation that has developed in this hospital. What have you done to increase the number of private rooms in this institution?

NURSE. We're building new ones. Do you hear that? *(Sound of the axe.)* They're all luxury rooms, too.

WRITER. You'd think they're working right behind this wall.

NURSE. Well, they are, because your room is the one on the end. *(to the Deputy)* I didn't want to have to say this. . . . The thing is that we've received instructions to place you right here.

DEPUTY. From where?

NURSE. From the top.

DEPUTY. What an odd one you are! Why didn't you say so? When it comes right down to it, why not right here? *(Tosses his bag on an empty bed.)*

DOCTOR. I need to duck out. I've got rounds. Oh, and don't forget to give the new patient a shot.

NURSE. B12?

FUNGHI. No, B6!

DOCTOR, *after hesitating*. Yes, I think B6 would be more appropriate. *(Exits.)*

NURSE, *to the Deputy*. I don't think we should put off that injection. Lie down.

DEPUTY. Where will you be injecting me, if I may ask?

FUNGHI. She puts all her injections in the same place.

DEPUTY. *(Lies down on the bed, lowers his pants.)* I'm ready.

NURSE. *(Slaps the Deputy on the rear.)* Relax, please.

FUNGHI. What a sound! Your rear end has excellent acoustic properties. You must spend a lot of time sitting down.

DEPUTY. Yes, it's a requirement. Though we do travel out to the regions occasionally. *(The Nurse gives him the shot and the Deputy yelps.)*

WRITER. Which committee are you on, if you don't mind my asking?

DEPUTY, *pulling up his pants*. The committee for family, mothers, and children. *(to the Nurse)* Maybe next time you could be a little more gentle, my dear . . .

NURSE. If you don't like it you can call another nurse. *(Collects her tools and heads for the door.)* But there aren't any.

FUNGHI. So where are they?

NURSE. Some quit, and some died. *(Laughs hysterically.)*

WRITER, *after a pause*. So that makes you the only one? For the whole hospital?

NURSE. The only one. For the whole hospital. *(Exits.)*

DEPUTY, *paces around the room*. That's a problem . . . Until we solve the demographic crisis, we will not solve any of this country's other vital issues. Not one! After all, it's not just a matter of conceiving a child. We can conceive as many as we like! That's the simplest part. Bang-bang-bang, and little Molly and Polly are running down the street! The real job is to get them off the streets again and make them study. And then to send them into space.

WRITER. Why?

FUNGHI. Because they're illegitimate. Get them out of sight.

DEPUTY. Now, you're a writer, as I understand it. What do you think about educating children? You must have some thoughts on the topic.

WRITER. Nothing new, I'm afraid. My son is forty-five years old.

DEPUTY. (*Walks over to the Writer and puts a hand on his shoulder.*) You understand, men, that right now we're only laying the foundations. The results will come twenty years from now. Maybe thirty. Maybe we won't live to see them. But the seeds we sow will certainly grow. We must remember that we have but one motherland, and one mother.

FUNGHI, *glancing at his phone*. How many wives, though? I'm asking because I see here on the internet that you have two different families.

DEPUTY, *hesitating*. The people who write those things aren't capable of having even one.

WRITER. Our responsible friend here is correcting the demographic situation in the country.

FUNGHI. Oh! Sorry . . .

DEPUTY. What, another family?

FUNGHI. I was mixed up. That's a different deputy. I was looking in the wrong place.

RADIO. This is our broadcast of the very latest news. The pandemic has hit the United States like a landslide. As of today, forty thousand deaths have been reported. The nature of the American health care system may have something to do with the . . .

WRITER. Would you please stop turning on that radio!

FUNGHI. But I didn't turn it on. It's turning on itself now. It's living by its own rules . . . like the coronavirus.

WRITER. Then break it!

FUNGHI, *passing the radio to the Writer*. You already broke your phone, and you did pretty well at that. You can be our authorized destroyer of electronics.

DEPUTY. I consider this an antisocial approach to the problem. Instead of assessing the true scale of the catastrophe and confronting it, you are fleeing from it. You're simply passing the buck in challenging times. In the final analysis, the radio has done nothing wrong.

WRITER. Oh yes it has! This whole psychosis is coming from that radio! (*Shakes the radio.*)

RADIO, *in the news reporter's voice*. Put me down, hear?!

WRITER. No, that's going much too far! (*Pounds the radio against the ground.*)

Funghi picks up the broken pieces and tosses them in a trashcan.

DEPUTY. I did not expect you to do that. A perfectly senseless act. We still have our phones to show us all the news.

The door opens, and the Nurse leads the Doctor in by the arm.

FUNGHI. What's this, unscheduled rounds?

DOCTOR. This morning I said to the Nurse: "I have a feeling that one of us is bound to get sick."

DEPUTY. And who did get sick?

DOCTOR, *collapsing on the free bed*. I did.

WRITER. But you were the last healthy doctor in this hospital!

NURSE. There is a bright side, though! Now no more doctors will get sick.

RADIO, *from the trashcan*. Thirty percent of Italy's medical personnel have fallen ill. In Milan, city dwellers held a flash mob, singing a hymn to the doctors from their balconies.

The Writer, Deputy, and Funghi walk over to the trashcan. From the trashcan we hear the song "Caruso."

WRITER, *to the Nurse*. Do you think you could take out the garbage?

NURSE. Singing pieces of a broken radio – that's a bad omen. It often happens before a disaster. (*Weeping, she exits, carrying the trashcan.*)

DEPUTY. Now what are we all going to do?

FUNGHI. Yeah, without a radio, things are going to be tougher. It brightened up our solitude all these days.

WRITER. In my opinion, it will be tougher not having a doctor.

DOCTOR. Don't worry. As a matter of fact, the doctors don't know what to do anymore, themselves. Whether or not there are doctors around is more a question of moral support. Right now a doctor is like a placebo: if the patient has faith in its potential, he gets better. If he doesn't, then, well, too bad.

WRITER. If you think about it the right way, this whole pandemic is also a question of faith. When Florence was dying of the plague in the fourteenth century, the bodies were dropping everywhere, all over the place, and nobody needed a radio!

DEPUTY. And now? Are you trying to say that if they hadn't been talking about it on the radio, we would never have known?

WRITER. We wouldn't know. I'm positive.

RADIO, *from the window*. You wouldn't have known – what a joke! Forty thousand corpses in the United States alone!

FUNGHI, *looking out the window*. The Nurse is carrying the trash bag across the courtyard.

DOCTOR. The Writer has it right. Combined with the annual mortality numbers, you'd never notice the coronavirus victims.

DEPUTY. Forty thousand wouldn't be noticed?

DOCTOR. Well, they'd say that this year the seasonal flu killed 150 percent more people than usual, maybe.

WRITER. But it all depends on how you say it. You could say a bed is something you sleep in. You could mention it's a place for conceiving children. And then there's this view: a bed is where people die.

FUNGHI. That's funny! You head for bed to, say, conceive a child, and someone yells at you: "Don't lie down there, that's where people die! That's all the newspapers are talking about!" Makes you wonder . . .

WRITER. The seasonal flu kills a comparable number of people, but that's an annual event, it's routine. What used to be just a statistic is being presented, now, as an emergent threat. There's statistics on car accidents, too. Why not look at those?

DEPUTY. But people are dying! Is that not a catastrophe?

DOCTOR. Was it a catastrophe last year? Or the year before that? But nobody talked about it then.

DEPUTY. So you think this is a . . . conspiracy?

WRITER. No, it's not a conspiracy. You can't conspire like that. We all rush around at the same speed, to the same rhythm . . . It's just that everyone wanted to stop, you understand? Somebody shouted "Pandemic!" And everyone stopped.

Everyone stands up.

FUNGHI. The squirrel just didn't know he could live without his wheel. The wheel kept spinning as long as he was spinning it. But he stopped, and looked around, and everything was fine. The world isn't falling apart!

DEPUTY. Of course it's falling apart! (*Turns on his phone, reads.*) Panic on the stock market. Currencies crashing. Oil prices have fallen to a critical level, their lowest point in twenty years. All that, and you say the world isn't falling apart!

FUNGHI. Now you're the radio. That's a risky job, given our Writer's thoughts about it.

The Doctor's phone rings.

DOCTOR, *in a different voice*. Hello? . . . No, this is not the head physician, I'm his assistant. The head physician has tested positive and he's in intensive care . . . Who should I ask? Him? He's on a ventilator . . . Oh, I don't need to ask? . . . Well, all right, I won't. (*He puts the phone down on a table. He walks to the window, thinking.*) But the world really hasn't fallen apart.

FUNGHI. I think we should celebrate that! I have one bottle left, but I have to tell you, it's the last one.

DOCTOR. Please don't worry. You can imagine how many bottles I have in my office. I'll be right back. (*Exits.*)

DEPUTY. Probably nothing but cognac, I'm afraid. And nothing but French cognac. Why do people always give everyone French cognac? Isn't there anything else to drink?

FUNGHI. I wouldn't say they give it to everyone. Nobody's ever given me cognac, for example, for some reason. Not even Russian cognac. To say nothing about French cognac.

DEPUTY. May I ask what you do for a living?

FUNGHI. Let's say I deliver pizza.

DEPUTY. You have to admit that a bottle of French cognac is a little much for delivering a pizza.

FUNGHI. Have you ever tried our pizza? No, have you? Want me to order one for you right now?
(*Picks up his telephone.*) Only nobody will deliver one to a hospital for infectious diseases, unfortunately.

The Doctor walks in with some cognac in a bag.

DOCTOR. Here it is. Let's treat ourselves.

WRITER. Is that really French cognac?

FUNGHI, *walking over to the Doctor, glancing in the bag.* It really is. French.

DOCTOR. Don't you like the French kind? From the land of Cognac!

FUNGHI. Well, no, we like it, we like it. But not everyone.

WRITER, *closing the door to the room.* Now then, what were we going to drink to?

DOCTOR. To the world not falling apart yet. (*Pours the cognac.*) And if we're lucky, it won't.

DEPUTY. What do you mean, if we're lucky? History has objective laws, by which everything develops. . . . (*Drinks.*) There are the forces of production and productive relationships, you understand, which . . .

FUNGHI. (*Drinks.*) All your productive relationships are a bunch of hogwash!

DEPUTY. And a squirrel on a wheel isn't hogwash? I'm talking about the laws of history, and you're talking about squirrels! Do you see the difference?

FUNGHI. While the squirrel was spinning his wheel, he thought that was a law of history, but he stopped spinning, and nothing happened. No catastrophe. It turned out that spinning the wheel was not a law. Of course, we could make him spin the wheel. But it's not a law.

DOCTOR. What do you think about the laws of history, Writer? What do they consist of?

WRITER. History has one law: rhythm! Ecclesiastes says "A time to cast away stones, a time to gather them together." And it says, "A time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing."

FUNGHI. That is exactly what our Nurse does.

WRITER. Big wars don't start because there is an objective need for them, but because there haven't been any wars for a while. The proletariat unites, the proletariat splits up. Inflows and outflows. History is defined by rhythm.

DOCTOR. To rhythm! *(He drinks.)*

DEPUTY. Well, if that's the case . . .

FUNGHI, WRITER, DEPUTY. To rhythm! *(They drink.)*

DOCTOR, *to Funghi*. So, how's the cognac?

FUNGHI. Not bad. But if you ask me, vodka's better.

DEPUTY. Then drink your vodka, who's stopping you?

FUNGHI. Right, I was just waiting for your permission.

WRITER. Let's not fight, my friends! We still haven't figured out what times we're living in!

DOCTOR. What times do you mean?

WRITER. Our rush to unite has somehow been replaced by the opposite. It's not the virus getting into people, it's the reverse: people have saddled up this virus in order to ride off on it, to flee from globalization. To remember that borders exist, and to close them!

FUNGHI. I've got a toast for that – just let me grab my vodka! *(He crawls under his bed, where his backpack with the vodka is lying.)*

DEPUTY. Say what you will, he's persistent!

DOCTOR, *pouring cognac*. French cognac and Russian vodka: Brothers in arms. Or brothers in bottles. Hear that, Writer? I'm the author of a proverb!

WRITER. Proverbs don't have authors. If it has an author, it isn't a proverb.

DOCTOR. But what if it's a proverb anyway?

WRITER. Then the author has to die. The world of proverbs is a cruel one.

FUNGHI, *looking surprised*. There's a scythe under my bed.

DEPUTY. A scythe?!

Funghi pulls a scythe out from under the bed.

WRITER. A scythe? What could anyone use a scythe for here?

DOCTOR. As the head physician, I can tell you that there is no scythe in the inventory of tools this hospital has entrusted to my use. There's just nothing here to scythe.

FUNGHI. Should I throw it out?

DOCTOR. But we don't know whose scythe it is. Maybe somebody desperately needs it. Put it away in a corner for now. I don't think it will bother anyone.

DEPUTY. And weren't you going to get some vodka?

FUNGHI. Thanks for reminding me. (*Gets the vodka.*) Well, let's get pouring, whether it's vodka or cognac. The important thing is to start drinking.

DOCTOR. I thought of a toast: to humane diseases! A disease can be humane, too, you know. Look how wonderful it is for us. We've all got mild cases. It's hardly asking anything of us.

WRITER. Just to sit here, locked up. But I agree, that's not torture. Sorry, I interrupted you.

DOCTOR. On the contrary! As a writer, you are polishing up my words into a final draft. So, a toast: to the humane disease that has brought us all together!

DEPUTY. It's true. We've ended up here purely by chance, but we feel very comfortable with each other. We represent a diverse cross-section of society, as they say: medicine, culture, government . . .

FUNGHI. And the food industry. You shouldn't have left me out. Without food products not even the government can function.

DOCTOR. That's the truth. To the humane and, I would add, intelligent disease that has united us!

DEPUTY. Because only an intelligent disease could have united people like us.

WRITER. The sugar is just dripping off the walls in here.

DEPUTY. But everything we're saying is true! Maybe that's why diseases exist, to make us think about what kind of people we are.

FUNGHI. And to make us hear the truth.

The Nurse walks in.

DOCTOR. And here's our snow maiden! We've discovered a few ways that history works and we're drinking to that. Come and join us!

DEPUTY. We've discovered quite a lot. A scythe, for instance. Now we don't know what to do with it. We don't even know whose it is. I don't suppose you happen to know?

NURSE. I do happen to know. *(She runs a finger over the blade.)* It's mine.

DOCTOR. Yours?! What did you bring it here for?

The Nurse chuckles.

NURSE. It can stay, can't it? It's not bothering anyone?

FUNGHI. What are you drinking: cognac or vodka?

NURSE. Both of them are equally bad for the health.

DEPUTY. The cognac, by the way, is French. It's making everyone feel much better. Everyone but Funghi – he's drinking vodka.

NURSE. The fact that the virus has been treating you all gently so far doesn't mean anything. At any moment it could take a completely different track. Or go off the rails, I fear.

FUNGHI. So, vodka then?

NURSE. Cognac. When else will I get to drink French cognac?

The Doctor pours the Nurse some cognac. She sits down on Funghi's bed.

FUNGHI, *sitting next to her, speaking intimately.* In your choice of seating, I see a certain sign, which tells me. . . . Which inclines me to. . . . Just a second ago we were pronouncing metaphorical phrases, or proverbs, basically, which inspired me. . . . A time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing. But first let's have a drink. To those who inspire us!

DEPUTY. On our feet to drink to that!

NURSE. Better lie down. You're all sick, you know.

Everyone drinks.

FUNGHI. Now then, about embracing . . .

NURSE, *to Funghi*. Yes, today you said that I refrain from embraces.

DOCTOR, *to the Nurse*. But you . . . I remember very clearly . . . When he said that, you weren't here.

WRITER. Admit it! You can read our minds from a distance!

FUNGHI. Admit it! (*Puts an arm around her.*) Sometimes you walk a little distance away, and you read . . .

NURSE. No, come on. I just eavesdrop sometimes.

DEPUTY. What do you mean, eavesdrop?

NURSE. (*Picks up a metal cup, puts it against the wall, and presses her ear to the bottom of the cup.*)
Like this.

WRITER. But there's that . . . chopping over there.

NURSE. No, it's just that somebody hung an axe on the wall and the wind is making it knock. The usual thing. And I was listening in from the hallway.

FUNGHI. A queen! What honesty! (*Lifts his cup.*) To honesty!

DEPUTY. On our feet to drink to honesty!

NURSE. No, my dears, stay lying down. You're sick. As long as we're drinking to honesty, I'll tell you: you're very sick. Every one of you has the worst possible prognosis. The worst.

Complete silence.

WRITER. What is it?

NURSE. See, you praise a woman for honesty, and she'll tell you all kinds of things!

WRITER. What is our prognosis?

NURSE. Mors.

FUNGHI, *upset*. What's that?

DEPUTY. I don't think I heard you . . .

WRITER. Mors is Latin for “death.”

DOCTOR. Death? Are you sure?

NURSE. Did they ever define that word for you at medical school, Doctor?

DOCTOR. Mors . . . is that some kind of dessert?

DEPUTY. Who are you to deliver a prognosis like that, anyway?

DOCTOR. She’s a nurse. A medical nurse. No more. Well, and no less, of course, because less would be impossible.

NURSE. I’m not a nurse.

FUNGHI. What then?

NURSE. Me? *(Takes the scythe from the corner and slowly heads for the exit. At the door, she turns around.)* Death.

ACT II

The four patients sit on their beds. Before them, higher up on a stool, sits the Nurse.

FUNGHI. Are you truly Death?

NURSE. I am. Truly. Death.

WRITER. What a theater of the absurd . . . And what do you have that . . . (*Points to the scythe.*) . . . prop for? Are you trying to frighten us?

NURSE. Yes, I am! I want to frighten you. You all go around living as if I don't exist! (*Weeps.*) Because when you remember Death, you can't live like you people are living.

FUNGHI. I don't understand what you want from us! You can't just constantly think about Death! Life would turn into hell.

NURSE. Or maybe, on the contrary, it would turn into a paradise? A paradise where you would value every moment! Sorry, I'll take a tranquilizer . . . (*She takes one.*)

WRITER, *walking up to the Nurse and stroking her head.* There now, calm down, calm down. (*Kisses the top of her head.*) Yes, we live like beasts, I agree, but . . .

NURSE. You live as if life is a seaside restaurant. You don't have the slightest (*Her voice betrays her.*) . . . respect for me! And the better off you get, the deeper you hide me away! Do you know they're not even allowing open coffins at funeral services in Europe?

DOCTOR. That's elementary public health!

DEPUTY. I suppose you'd rather have them publicly incinerate the dead bodies? May I recommend a trip to India?

FUNGHI. Let's all go to India!

NURSE. You're looking for the darkest possible corner for me. To hide me away like Grandma at the family party! (*Tosses the scythe to the floor.*) But now this virus has returned Death to your houses. They're reporting thousands of dead every morning in the richest countries in the world – and the living can't escape! Even if they break every radio they have! And they can't live the way they used to, either. Because Death is a part of life!

WRITER. And now what are we supposed to . . . do?

NURSE. First I'll need you to give me your phones and watches. We have a difficult journey ahead of us, and we have to prepare. Telephones and watches will only get in your way.

Everyone gives the Nurse their phones and watches.

DEPUTY. I'm sorry, but how are we going to know the latest news? Or even what time it is?

NURSE. While preparing for this journey, there's just no point in that. Where we're going, none of that exists.

DEPUTY. I wouldn't want to be exclusionary, but when it comes right down to it, I'm a parliamentary deputy and I must work to the end of my term in office.

NURSE. Don't worry. We'll be reviewing all the terms. (*Jots something down in a notebook.*)

FUNGHI. Still, I can't believe you're Death.

NURSE. That's because we don't know each other very well yet. You wanted to get close? Now we can. I hope that you won't refrain from my embraces, my dear.

FUNGHI. We should really think it through, ten times, before we embrace.

DOCTOR. Just a minute. In the Albert Camus Hospital for Infectious Diseases, you are on the payroll as a nurse, and all this talk about death somehow just . . . doesn't seem compatible with your job description.

NURSE. Well, "Death" isn't a job on your payroll.

DEPUTY. And why are you – how to put this? – taking charge of our room, in particular?

NURSE. They assigned me to the dying, who have been collected in this one room for the sake of convenience. That's all.

DOCTOR. Who assigned you?

The Nurse looks upward, moving only her eyes.

WRITER. I can't shake the impression that we've gotten lost behind the scenes somewhere. How do other people behave in this . . . role?

NURSE. It varies. Some people remember their childhoods. Believe me, sometimes I hear stories that really put a lump in your throat. (*Wipes her eyes.*) Some people pray. And there are some who fall into despair. They lie down and never get up again. Their tears roll down onto their pillows. Sometimes the tears roll into their ears. It depends on the shape of their ears and where they're positioned.

DEPUTY. From my observations, ears are positioned the same way on everyone.

FUNGHI. Please. When I was in the army, we had one colonel, and his ears were stuck on very high up, like at the top of his head. Maybe that's why he could wiggle them.

DOCTOR. What a valuable skill.

FUNGHI. It was valuable in the army. I mean, there, you're not allowed to say a lot of things the usual way. Sometimes you have to wiggle your ears. Like a code, right? Only you speak it with your ears.

WRITER, *to the Nurse*. You know, it's very important for us to work together now. We should have been doing it our whole lives, come to think of it.

DOCTOR. I'd be happy to get rid of her, to tell you the truth. I do have the right to fire her.

NURSE, *to the Writer*. He doesn't even understand that that is impossible.

The axe knocks against the wall. When he hears it, the Writer starts coughing, hard, as if he's about to turn inside out. Everyone fusses around him, pounding him on the back, but he can't stop coughing. He tries to say something, but can't.

NURSE, *to everyone*. Stop that! (*Gives the Writer a shot in the upper arm and helps him into bed.*)

The Writer lies motionless.

DOCTOR. This is terrifying. I think he's dying.

NURSE. He'll only die after we finish our conversation. (*to the Writer*) But for now, I'd ask that you please not die. (*to everyone*) Why do you all look so stunned? Talk about something! That will make it easier on him.

FUNGHI. So the general comes from the capital. To inspect us, right? Well, our colonel reports to him that everything is in order. But he wiggles his ears. Which means, not everything is in order. So the general, naturally, gets the point right away that army property is being sold under the table for peanuts.

DOCTOR. He got all that from the guy's ears?

FUNGHI. If only that's all it was! (*Lowers his voice.*) He also got the point that if he, the general, would look the other way . . . well, you know what I mean. All because of the colonel's ears.

DOCTOR. How does this story end? The general got the point – and then what?

FUNGHI. Nothing special. The story isn't about the general getting the point, it's about how much you can say by wiggling your ears.

DEPUTY. Yeah . . . that's useful information. (*to the Nurse*) Since you've . . . brought us all together here, I assume you had something in mind other than ears?

NURSE. Yes, there's a program, of sorts. Let's start with the letter. (*Digs through some papers.*) Here . . . Several days ago, Funghi and the Writer sent this email message. I consider letters like this to be in bad taste. And if you take into account your upcoming death, they're just nonsense.

WRITER, *sitting up a little, in a weak voice.* I'm sorry, I can't, uh, remember: who did we send that email to?

NURSE. So, he's recovered! You sent it to everyone. Everyone except the postmaster general. I was surprised, actually: what did he ever do to you?

FUNGHI. No, we sent it to him, too! It's just that everything having to do with the postal service is late. They have a bad connection.

NURSE. Was it really wise to send such a mass mailing? And from a hospital, too!

DOCTOR. Oh, no . . . did someone complain?

DEPUTY. I looked. Everyone in the world has filed a complaint about your hospital.

WRITER. In this world, or the next?

FUNGHI. But there aren't any complaints in the letter we sent. The Writer and I were trying to find the reasons the coronavirus appeared.

DEPUTY. A familiar situation. Do-gooders, out to save the world! We get letters like that by the hundreds, every day. We just don't answer them.

NURSE. But this letter was signed by an absolutely first-rate writer. First rate. And that was impossible to ignore.

DOCTOR, *to the Writer*. I honestly don't understand why you wrote that letter.

WRITER. You know, there are moments of such creative union that you want to make them last. As soon as we started writing that letter (*Coughs.*) I felt an inspiration I had long forgotten.

FUNGHI. It was immediately after the first bottle of vodka. And that's exactly what grabbed us. Creative union.

WRITER. My roommate here wanted to draft a unique text. To write the sort of story, you know, that would amaze the world. (*Coughs.*) He thought of just such a story. I don't remember the details. Something set in China. I helped him write it down. I'll tell you something surprising: our Funghi would make a great writer!

FUNGHI. They think all I ever wanted to do with my life was deliver pizza!

NURSE, *looking over the letter*. I have to say the text is only mediocre. Sentence fragments. Completely fantastical in content. And really, all these spies and conspiracy theories . . . You ought to be ashamed of busying yourself with all this nonsense just before death!

WRITER. Oh, who cares about the theory. That doesn't bother me. I'm interested in the details. The smell of the fresh-cooked carp in sour cream, the ripples on the river. Telling the story of this good man Sun in an interesting way. (*Coughs.*) I remember: he ended up in the Yangtze, which had been poisoned by his enemies. A swim like that, naturally, could really put a damper on harmony at home.

FUNGHI. Even if his enemies hadn't poisoned it, he'd definitely be infected with something in there. It's that kind of river. And after that, it's pretty obvious: he walks home all wet, his clothes eventually dried in the breeze, but then there was a thunder storm. Thunder, lightning, he's soaked through again, his clogs are squelching full of water.

WRITER. And the scene handing out the carp! Such precise, calibrated movements. An exact psychological calculation, complete confidence that they'd all get snapped up. (*Coughs.*) To the very last fillet.

FUNGHI. A Roman nose, narrow, practically razor-sharp eyes, a flash of a glance from under his peaked cap. His moist, nefarious lips move, counting what he's given away. Shimmering and trembling like tentacles. Counting and murmuring.

DEPUTY. Powerful! Palpable! Heart-wrenching! There you have it: the writerly word. The pandemic as an engine of literature.

WRITER. The worst part is that I haven't written a thing in the past fifteen years.

DOCTOR. I just bought a book of yours. I haven't read it yet, but I bought it. Copyright this year.

WRITER. That's all old stuff, or old stuff with a new face. But sitting down and writing seriously? I haven't done that for a decade and a half. (*Coughs.*) It's surprising, but here in the face of Death, I'm not ashamed to admit it.

DEPUTY. What kind of writer are you if you haven't written in all those years? Why should readers consider you a – what's it called? – a thought leader?

WRITER. Because readers don't read.

FUNGHI. That seems logical to me: writers don't write, and readers don't read. The Doctor bought your book, but he didn't read it!

DOCTOR. No, I didn't. I'm not ashamed to admit it, either. Because I work twenty-five hours a day.

NURSE. They don't write, they don't read, they're not ashamed. Our conversation is turning into a confession. But confessing just before death makes sense.

FUNGHI. That's an excellent idea. Let's all confess! Who will admit to something first? The Writer already did.

DEPUTY. I admit that a few days ago I ran a red light. And the traffic police caught me. I also admit that I often run red lights. Usually all I have to do is show my parliamentary credentials, and they let me go. But this time it didn't work. They found out I had a temperature. They might have forgiven me running the red light, but there was no chance they could forgive that temperature. "No chance, got it?" they told me when they stopped me. I asked if there was a temperature protocol in place, and they said, "Yes, a strict one. It's a pandemic." They were extremely upset and they told me to follow them. I followed them, and here I am, ladies and gentlemen!

NURSE. Well, that's information that deserves some attention, although the presentation is too much of an outline. I think we should establish exactly what happened. Fill in the lines with real life, put it in 3D, you could say. When a person exits the scene, he at least needs to leave a narrative behind. But the narrative ought to be a good one, understand? Writer, we could really use your help here.

DOCTOR. You won't establish anything from such a miserly presentation. You're dumping sardines from a can into the ocean and acting as if they'll swim away.

NURSE. But isn't that what literature does? How will we ever understand those sardines' lives otherwise? And remembering a life is the most important thing. Funghi will play the traffic cop, and the Deputy will be the Deputy. Let's go.

DEPUTY. I'm in a hurry, going almost 200 kilometers per hour.

WRITER. How do you feel?

DEPUTY. Drunk on speed!

WRITER. And?

DEPUTY. To hell with all those traffic cops!

WRITER. And?

DEPUTY. I'm the most powerful man on the planet! Or maybe just, I'm the only man on the planet!

NURSE. You see the traffic light.

DEPUTY. I see the traffic light!

WRITER. But we can't see it! We can't see it! Describe it!

DEPUTY. There's a red light in front of me. It stretches across the horizon like a fiery sunset, it takes over the whole sky!

WRITER. Funghi, you're up. Keep calm. You eat guys like him for breakfast.

FUNGHI. Well, naturally, we traffic cops can see that red light where we are, too. And we see the Deputy's car, and we realize he'll never slow down of his own free will. There is nothing but contempt for the rules of the road in his eyes. "What's the matter with him?" my buddy asks me. "Let's go find out," I tell him.

DEPUTY. The cops stop me and ask to take my temperature. "38.6," they say in chorus. I show them my credentials, they check them, but one of them says: "In that condition, you can't go where you want to go."

FUNGHI. In that condition you can only go where you don't want to go, or, to be specific, to the Albert Camus Hospital for Infectious Diseases. *(to the Nurse)* Do you have a thermometer?

NURSE. You already took the Deputy's temperature. Whose do you want to take now?

FUNGHI. Mine. I feel hot.

Funghi takes his own temperature and hands the thermometer to the Nurse.

NURSE. I knew it. 39.5. (*Gets some pills out of her bag and brings over a glass of water.*) Take these. They'll help bring that fever down. Temporarily. (*to the Deputy*) Do you have anything else to confess, Deputy?

DEPUTY. No. I don't know. Let me catch my breath.

DOCTOR. Yes, let him catch his breath. Shortness of breath is a symptom of coronavirus. You know, his confession got to me a little. I think I want to confess, too.

NURSE. Go ahead, Doctor.

DOCTOR. Well, I'll start by saying that I came into this world in a family of medical personnel. They were not poor people, but they were honest. They were a couple whose conversations mostly addressed medical topics. Tell me, Writer, am I laying this out clearly?

WRITER. Certainly. Only you're using too much bureaucratic language. (*Coughs.*) Also, cut out some of the less important parts, otherwise no pandemic will be long enough for us to hear you out. Where did you go to school?

DOCTOR. I graduated from medical school.

WRITER. So, you should have started with getting in there.

DOCTOR. I didn't start there because I didn't get in there. All I did was graduate, like I said.

WRITER. All right, you didn't get in there, but somehow you ended up there?

DOCTOR. I transferred.

WRITER. From where?

DOCTOR. From nowhere.

WRITER. How could you be a physician if you didn't get into med school?

DOCTOR. Don't forget: I was the chief physician.

FUNGHI. Chief physician is just a management job.

DEPUTY, *pointing at Funghi*. He's feeling better!

DOCTOR. Now circumstances have forced me to start taking care of patients myself.

NURSE. And that, my dears, is the reason for his very small repertoire of prescriptions: vitamins B6 and B12. I have to tell you, this was a humane decision by the chief physician. Neither one of those injections can do any radical harm. Strictly speaking, nothing can harm any of you, at this point.

DOCTOR. Certainly not. I consulted widely about those vitamins.

DEPUTY. Does this mean that the whole time we've been here we haven't been receiving treatment?

DOCTOR. Yes, formally speaking.

FUNGHI. What does "formally speaking" mean?

DOCTOR. It means that while you weren't receiving treatment, you were avoiding unjustified interference in your health. That could have done you serious harm.

NURSE. Well now! The honesty here has shot up a few degrees. *(to Funghi)* What about you? Nothing to tell us?

FUNGHI. Why do you say that? We can even act something out. For example, I deliver expired pizzas. Our company buys them up on clearance at the supermarket. *(Gesturing like a magician.)* We add some ham or mushrooms or something, spread on a little sauce, and stick 'em in the oven.

DOCTOR. Then what?

FUNGHI. Then I deliver them. To be honest, that's what caused the conflict with my future wife. She didn't approve of that line of work.

NURSE. Wait! This should be a great scene to act out. I can play your future wife. *(Breaks out in hysterical laughter.)*

FUNGHI. No, she's my current wife now. Or my former wife, if we never see each other again.

WRITER. Your formerly future wife. How did the fight begin?

FUNGHI. Out of nowhere, as usual. That evening she was repacking pizzas. She said . . .

NURSE. She said, "You're trying to use these poor-quality ingredients to . . ."

FUNGHI. No, she didn't say it like that. These were her exact words: "You're trying to make a bullet out of bullshit. It's time to knock it off." "Well, listen, let's do it one last time," I suggested. "We already bought them, so we need to see a return." Suddenly she calms down, and she says: "Fine. One last time." I go to the customer's place. A well-off middle-aged guy . . .

NURSE. Wait a sec. *(Points at the Deputy.)* Like him?

FUNGHI. This guy was more impressive somehow. But basically like him. Talks through his lips that same way.

NURSE. Mr. Deputy, would you be able to take part in our reenactment?

DEPUTY. Are you asking me personally?

NURSE. Yes, let's say I am.

FUNGHI, *to the Deputy*. I didn't mean any offense. It's just that that guy . . . he was more convincing, you understand?

DEPUTY. Are you saying you don't believe I'm a parliamentary deputy?

NURSE. Let's not insult each other's ambitions. I saw right away there was some kind of . . . enmity, I suppose, between you two. End-of-life antipathy!

WRITER. Keep your emotions in check, Deputy. Open the door to him. Say hello. Maybe you can ask him a question to break the ice.

DEPUTY, *opening an imaginary door*. Good evening. What dumpster did you find that pizza in?

NURSE. Hold on, hold on. How do you know anything about the quality of the pizza?

DEPUTY. I can smell it.

FUNGHI. I don't think so, because there was no pizza in there. Just Gorky's *Mother*.

DEPUTY. And that smelled . . . oh no, oh no! This is strange . . . I think I'm losing my sense of smell.

NURSE. That's a symptom of this disease, with everything that stems from it. But how did you realize you can't smell anything?

DEPUTY. Because he (*Sniffs in Funghi's direction.*) always smells like stale booze.

FUNGHI. That's a lie!

DEPUTY. And now I can't hear anything.

FUNGHI. You just don't want to be in this scene, because it's proving that you're a liar.

DEPUTY. Shut up! I'll play it to the end out of principle, even if I die doing it! What happens next?

FUNGHI. You handed me the tip.

WRITER. Hand it to him.

The Deputy gets a banknote out of his wallet and hands it to Funghi.

FUNGHI, *sticking the money in his pocket.* Thank you! That isn't necessary.

DEPUTY. If it isn't necessary, then why are you taking it? If it isn't necessary, give it back! (*to the Writer*) Right?

WRITER. It's the logic of paradox, you see. Funghi is a man of contrasts. Yes, he's taking the money, but at the same time he's stressing his indifference to it.

FUNGHI. Then, I insisted that he open the box.

WRITER, *to the Deputy.* Open it. Your face reflects your curiosity. You are extremely intrigued.

DEPUTY. (*Opens the imaginary pizza box, looks intrigued.*) Something completely inedible. Gorky's Mother.

WRITER, *to Funghi.* You return home. Now we have the final scene with your future wife. What question did you ask her?

Funghi whispers something in the Nurse's ear.

NURSE. Got it. His words were bitter, and not completely printable. Their general sense was this: "Didn't we agree that this would be the last time?" And she said, "Well, I've made sure this was the last time!"

WRITER. And after that, you married her.

FUNGHI. No, not after that. In the spirit of confession, I'll say that first, I smacked her.

NURSE. I knew it. Back when you were first telling us all this, I thought, There's no way he wouldn't smack her! (*to Funghi*) That doesn't make you look very good.

DOCTOR. I don't think it makes anyone look good. Can you image the Writer acting that way, for instance?

The Nurse breaks out laughing.

FUNGHI. I can't.

WRITER. Well . . . Should we go on confessing? (*Coughs.*) I have done something like that. Only for them, it ended with marriage, and for us it ended with divorce.

DOCTOR. Here we go.

NURSE. I'll play your wife, if you don't mind.

WRITER. Yes, if you could . . . This is what happened. We're sitting at home in our second week of quarantine. We're both on edge. I can't seem to write my next novel. It's been fifteen years since I was able to write anything. And she asks me . . .

NURSE, *playing the Writer's wife*. Again your boots aren't on the shoe shelf?

WRITER. Very softly, I say to her, "What?"

NURSE, *shouting*. Again you didn't put your boots away!

WRITER. She said it much more quietly. But that was the last straw. I pulled all the shoes off their shelf in the cabinet. Then I took out the shelf. Then I put her inside. (*to the Nurse*) That part will be hard to act out.

NURSE. Well, we get the idea. And we don't have the right kind of furniture.

DOCTOR. We could pull in a cabinet from the hallway. There are some big ones.

WRITER. I don't think there's any need for that. In art, it's better to leave something unsaid than to say too much.

Nobody speaks.

DEPUTY. That's in art. But life is not art. It's cruder. (*Points at Funghi.*) Our friend here, for example, doesn't believe I'm a parliamentary deputy.

FUNGHI. I never said that.

DEPUTY. But I really am not a parliamentary deputy.

DOCTOR. Then who are you?

DEPUTY. That doesn't matter right now. What matters is that I am not a deputy.

DOCTOR. But you showed us your credentials.

DEPUTY. I always show people my credentials.

WRITER. You know, when you took them out the very first second, I did think you weren't a deputy, for some reason. A deputy doesn't need to show his credentials left and right.

FUNGHI. I said right away it was a cheap fake job.

DEPUTY. I agree, it's not the best document. I've had better. Every time I show it to someone a cold sweat runs down my back.

NURSE. Then why do you show it to people?

DEPUTY. That's the business I run. I show my credentials to people and tell them I can help them get a good job.

WRITER. What happened to the people you promised to help?

DEPUTY. Nothing. That's the problem. They gave me money and we never saw each other again. The most important thing was to bail out on time, you know. My work kept me constantly traveling around the country.

NURSE. You gave out promises you obviously couldn't keep, and took money in exchange! Didn't you think you'd be ashamed of that before you died?

DEPUTY. If it would make my life last longer, I'd make those promises for free.

NURSE. I'll be right back. *(Takes the scythe and walks out.)*

DOCTOR. When it comes right down to it, nobody made those people bribe him.

WRITER. Just like nobody made him take the bribes. The general caught on – remember? – that he was being offered a bribe, but he didn't take it. Isn't that right, Funghi?

FUNGHI. Right, the general refused the bribe the colonel offered him by wiggling his ears.

DEPUTY. Well then, I'm glad we have generals like that serving in our army.

FUNGHI. The general demanded a different bribe from him. When the colonel heard the amount the general named, his ears stopped wiggling. Forever.

The Nurse enters. Now instead of her nurse's smock she is wearing a long, black dress and pointy-toed high heels. Her hair is smoothed back and she carries the scythe. Wrapped around the scythe is a black ribbon.

FUNGHI. What a beauty you are!

NURSE. I put some effort into it. This evening I wanted to do something nice for you all. I've had to usher a lot of people out. They've cried, they've kissed my hands, they've asked for more time, but I've never seen people as ready to be expurgated as you are. This is a special day in my life. If Death can talk about her life, of course. *(Puts the scythe away and sits on a chair.)* Let's not discuss sad things any more. From what I've seen, your condition has grown much worse.

I'd like you to leave here at peace. Let's remember some good things. Only good things, gentlemen! Because if you stop with the bad, life won't seem to have had any meaning.

DEPUTY. The best memories of my life come from my childhood. I grew up in a hot southern city. On the weekend, early in the morning, my grandmother used to take me walking to the market with her.

FUNGHI. Early in the morning there's a surprising freshness in the air, even in southern cities. Especially in the shade.

DEPUTY. The street leading to the market was lined with acacias. When we walked under the acacias, it was cool, and when we came out in the sun again it was hot. I can still feel that alternation between light and shadows on my skin. Then we came to the market. And my grandmother bought baby potatoes, dill, dried fish – I won't list everything.

DOCTOR. Just tell us about the strawberries that gleamed in the sun.

DEPUTY. Yes, strawberries! When she bought those, my grandmother asked them to wash a few berries, and she gave them to me. And then we walked to a place that made my happiness complete. A place where they sold whistles made of wood and clay.

WRITER. They were beautiful, very beautiful. (*Coughs.*) Just astoundingly beautiful. (*to the Nurse*) Like you.

DOCTOR, *to the Nurse*. I'll be honest: I'm afraid of you, because your beauty is not of this world. I'm just trying to be completely honest. I'm having a hard time breathing . . .

WRITER. The whistles made a heavenly noise. When I think about the sounds of paradise, I imagine them being the divine sounds those whistles made. They were shaped like birds of paradise. Some of them had water inside, and they whistled in trills.

DOCTOR. I can't breathe . . .

DEPUTY, *to the Nurse*. Well? Put him on a ventilator!

NURSE. That's going much too far! I've saved one, then another . . . How many of you can I save? You must be forgetting that I have a different job to do. The exact opposite job, you might say. In the end it would be perfectly natural if he dies right now. (*Sobs.*)

FUNGHI. They're just taking advantage of your kindness.

NURSE. You're supposed to die the natural way. Right after our conversation, according to my script. What are you going to ask for next, that I chop you up with an axe?

WRITER. But you're a sister of mercy! Mercy!

NURSE. My way of showing mercy is to let you all die peacefully, without resorting to any radical methods. *(She puts the Doctor in bed and hooks him up to a ventilator. Everyone freezes, watching. The Nurse turns to Funghi.)* Come on, tell us a story! Why are you all so quiet now? Entertain us!

FUNGHI. They say that in Soviet times, a master folk artist, a whistle maker, lived in Moscow. A Hero of Socialist Labor, no less. The Soviet authorities wanted to support the traditional trades, so they gave the famous whistle maker a huge workshop on Gorky Street.

WRITER. Did it encourage his creative growth?

FUNGHI. Yes, from one point of view. He didn't know how to make anything other than whistles, so he started using that huge workshop to make huge whistles.

DEPUTY. And every time we went to the market, my grandmother bought me a new whistle. *(Takes a whistle out of his pocket and whistles.)* And we walked home down the street with the acacias, and I whistled the whole way.

WRITER, *pointing at the Doctor, frightened.* He's also . . . whistling.

Everyone listens silently to the Doctor's rasping and wheezing.

FUNGHI. And I remember the day I first tried pizza. The girl who gave it to me was a classmate of mine. We went to her place after school. And ate pizza.

NURSE. She said she was too lazy to make you a real meal, so she just threw together everything she had and made a pizza. She kept saying how lazy she was. She was fibbing, of course. She wanted to make him something special, and she put a lot of effort into it.

FUNGHI. We stayed friends until we graduated. And she always fed me pizza. Our parents thought we'd be together our whole lives. But then she left for the capital, and married a jeweler.

NURSE. And there, she died! She caught atypical pneumonia and her lungs turned to glass.

FUNGHI. I don't think she made him pizza, because that's not the right kind of food for a jeweler, if you ask me. And that made me feel a little better . . . *(Points to the Doctor.)* Him, too, I think.

The Doctor gestures for them to turn off the machine, and the Nurse switches it off. The Doctor props himself up in bed. He wipes away some tears. He asks for water. He drinks.

DOCTOR. I always dreamed of not being a doctor. Because everyone in my family is a doctor.

NURSE. They were doctors. Now they're in Municipal Cemetery Number 2, and believe me, their professions no longer matter in the slightest.

FUNGHI. Didn't you tell us to only talk about good things?

NURSE. Yes, I did. But what could be better than death?

DEPUTY. Being a doctor is a noble calling. You never tried to like the profession?

DOCTOR. I tried. One time I even sacrificed for it. Near the end of med school there was a lecture by a famous forensic pathologist. He said the single most important thing every doctor had to struggle against was squeamishness. He had a beaker full of urine in front of him. He stuck a finger inside, and then he licked it. And he said that anyone who could do the same thing was a real doctor. So I walked up and I did it.

WRITER. Quite a feat for a physician, I'd say.

DOCTOR. But the forensic pathologist didn't think so. He put his arm around my shoulders, and he said, "Yes, a doctor must not be squeamish. But he also must be attentive. I stuck one finger in that beaker, but I licked a different one." Everyone in the lecture hall laughed like crazy. And that was my last sacrifice for medicine.

NURSE. Your last sacrifice! That sounds truly beautiful.

DOCTOR. I don't want everyone to be left with the impression that my whole life has been a disaster. I have been happy. I felt happiness in a train that stopped for the night at the Konotop station. I was in the top bunk. Diesel shunters were whistling in the distance, and the two people sharing my compartment were whispering, an unhurried conversation. And I realized that the world can be so quiet and comfortable. That we can love it.

NURSE. Tell us, Writer. What did you dream of? And here before Death, can you say that you have been happy?

WRITER. I always wanted to find a word that would make the world weep, and those tears would wash away all its filth. And it seemed to me I've come very close to that word. Just a little farther, and I'll find it, and the world will be awash in tears over what I imagined.

FUNGHI. Did you find it?

WRITER. No. And I stopped writing. I mean, I write scripts for soap operas, police dramas, sitcoms, but nobody weeps over my words.

DEPUTY. I don't even think they laugh. They put the laughter in automatically after each line now.

WRITER. And my name isn't in the credits, because I won't let them use it. But sometimes, in my sleep, I hear that golden word that I cannot quite say. Very rarely, I hear it. But those are moments of true happiness.

DOCTOR. If we weren't about to die, I'd go study to be a nurse practitioner.

FUNGHI. And I'd be a writer. *(to the Writer)* If only you knew how much I loved writing with you that time! I could imagine the Chinese man, and his wife, and the water squelching in his clogs. Do you think I really could become a writer? I never studied for it.

WRITER. I think so. Because a writer isn't someone who writes smoothly, but someone who feels vividly. Someone with strength radiating out of him.

NURSE. That's a wonderful epitaph! Just wonderful.

Outside the window, the sound of police sirens and then car doors slamming.

FUNGHI, *looking out the window*. Two cars. A police car and an ambulance.

DEPUTY, *to the Doctor*. One urgent question: Who has the key to the back door? *(Puts on a medical mask.)* But that actually doesn't matter anymore.

Hand in hand, the POLICE OFFICER and the PSYCHIATRIST enter. Smiling, they walk diagonally across the room.

PSYCHIATRIST. Hello, gentlemen. It's a good thing we got here in time. *(to the Nurse)* Isn't that right, Antonina? *(Puts a hand on the handle of the scythe.)* Can you let go of the sharp object, my dear? *(Slowly takes the scythe from the Nurse's hands.)*

POLICE OFFICER. Hello there, Deputy! *(Clicks handcuffs onto the Deputy's wrists.)* When they told me they'd put a parliamentary deputy in here, I knew it was you right away. Take off that damn mask.

WRITER. Why are you poking at him like that?

DEPUTY. We're old friends. It's all right.

POLICE OFFICER. I told you, take off that mask!

DEPUTY, *taking off the mask*. Deal.

FUNGHI. Now you just need to make a deal with the virus. *(to the Police Officer)* You'll be the first one to get infected.

POLICE OFFICER. I'm so sick of that virus! It doesn't exist anymore. And maybe it never did.

PSYCHIATRIST. The pandemic is over. Didn't you know?

DOCTOR. The Writer broke the radio. Accidentally. And she (*Nods at the Nurse.*) took away all our phones.

FUNGHI. Also accidentally.

PSYCHIATRIST. We do that sometimes, don't we, Toni?

DEPUTY. So, she . . . isn't Death?

PSYCHIATRIST. That depends how you look at it. Last time Toni here escaped from the mental hospital we ended up with three dead bodies.

NURSE, *sobbing*. Two.

WRITER. Still not bad.

PSYCHIATRIST. It was three. One of them died later in the emergency room.

NURSE. Oh, well, that's three, then.

PSYCHIATRIST. And Toni convinced you that she's Death?

DOCTOR. I can't believe it, now: four grown men, one with a medical degree . . .

NURSE. Who here has a medical degree?

The Police Officer handcuffs the Deputy to the radiator and starts carefully searching the premises. He looks in every corner and under the beds.

PSYCHIATRIST. You see, psychologically deviant people often have hypnotic abilities. The mechanism has not been fully studied, but for now we can say . . .

POLICE OFFICER. No axe. The scythe is here, but there's no axe.

PSYCHIATRIST. Last time, Toni did her killing with an axe.

NURSE. I didn't kill anyone! I took them across the Styx, that's all. After they repented, of course.

PSYCHIATRIST. I'm sorry, sweetie, I forgot. I just thought that you preferred the axe.

The sound of the axe on the other side of the wall.

FUNGHI. Well, Doctor? Off to nursing school?

DOCTOR. Yes, definitely. Just as soon as I get things in order here in the hospital . . . And then I'll go for sure.

POLICE OFFICER. And for you, Deputy, your luck's run out. (Points at the Nurse.) We came for her. I only found out about you on the way over here.

The Nurse chuckles.

DEPUTY. Captain? Have you ever wanted to be a major?

POLICE OFFICER. I don't know, never really thought about it . . . (to the Psychiatrist) Well, what, off through the trash chute? Are you planning to pack her up?

PSYCHIATRIST. Pack her up?

POLICE OFFICER. Where's your sedatives? You're not going to bring her along like that, are you? I'll give you the handcuffs if you need them. (Nods at the Deputy.) We can take them off of him. I trust him.

PSYCHIATRIST. What? Why? Look at poor Toni – who is she going to bother?

POLICE OFFICER. Roger that. And what about . . . (Makes a chopping motion.) the axe?

PSYCHIATRIST. Oh, that's what you mean . . . that all depends on the ambiance. This is completely different.

NURSE. I didn't need an axe here. I think they would have died anyway.

Funghi walks up to the Nurse.

FUNGHI. I really did think that you were Death. But I'm not sorry that I repented.

NURSE, *putting her head on his shoulder*. Funghi, can I repent, too? I deceived you all. There is no death. It's just that in order to know that for sure, you have to die.

FUNGHI. You know, I'm actually glad that you thought up all of this.

WRITER. So am I. And I'm glad there was a pandemic. If it didn't exist, we would have had to think it up, too. It's turned us all around.

DEPUTY. What are you going to do now?

WRITER. Me? If I get better, I'll probably go deliver pizzas.

DEPUTY. Oh, you're so full of it. You're not going anywhere.

WRITER. No, I'm not. *(to Funghi)* And what will you do?

The Police Officer takes out the telephones and hands them to their owners. The Doctor's phone rings. He talks, cupping one hand around the receiver.

FUNGHI. I'll try to be a writer.

DOCTOR. Especially because it doesn't even require writing. Listen, here's another thing. I just got a call. They want a statement for the press. They asked for somebody in management. I don't want to . . . there will be questions, you understand . . .

DEPUTY. At the present time, I would also prefer not to comment.

NURSE. Maybe I can do it?

PSYCHIATRIST. Why not? I think our Toni would do a great job.

The Nurse walks to the front of the stage. Noise of a crowd. She lifts a hand and summons everyone to quiet down.

NURSE. Sorry, I'm really nervous . . . We've been through a lot here, we've thought a lot of things over . . . And it turns out we all haven't died yet. But, believe me, this life of ours will never be the same. Never.

Curtain