

AND IT RAINED ALL NIGHT

Lewis Owens

The following text is posted as supplied by the author, without editorial intervention.

3 November 2015

Acknowledgements

Sincere thanks to Patrick Farrimond for his comments, encouragement and for turning this play into a marvellous forthcoming screen adaptation; Henry Hardy, Mark Pottle and Liz Baird for their wonderful assistance concerning the history of Wolfson College, Oxford; Kelly Phelps, for her expertise on the Oscar Pistorius trial and South African legal system; Bengt Jangfeldt for his expertise on Mayakovsky. Thanks also to Anashri Pillay, Peter Bien, Darren Middleton, Lee Oliver, Ilya Szilak, Angela Teasdale, Brian Smith, Alex Griffiths, Andrew Tomlinson, Lucy Kourpas, Anneli Page, Liza Gamburg, Galina Yatsura, Mhairi Donaldson Mansell, Julia-Maria Eiben, Clare McCaldin, Vanessa Zachos, Nora Klein, Darren Shaw, Kirk Hemmings, Egbert Baars, Henny van der Groep, John Riley, Colin Stone, Rustem Hayroudinoff, Thomas Dixon, Annabel Arden, Delyth Jones, Faye Arrowsmith, Lars Martin Dahl, Anna Wagstaff, Richard 'Kipper' Arrowsmith, Richard Lambert, Paul Harrison, Neil Harrison, Gavin Bown, Jessica Duchen, Louise Chaston, Rebecca McGuire, Sharon Pirie, Adam De Vile, Kevin Fitzgerald, Duncan Heath, Charlie Bruce, Antonia Azoitei, John Steinmetz, Alma Stoessel, Anna Smith, James Crouch, Andrew Crouch, Louis Barfe, Dan Jolly, Mike Feather, Claire Feather, David Sweet, Fiona Sweet, Simon Follett, Nicola Porter, Reshma Patel, Susie Greenwood, Russ Greenwood, Maddie Wicks, Ian MacNormandy. This play for is Tanya, Dani and Sofia, with love.

And It Rained All Night

by Lewis Owens

A play based upon fact,
developed through fiction,
and motivated by justice

Lewis Owens © 2015

.....

Characters (in order of appearance)

Vladimir Mayakovsky, Futurist / Revolutionary Soviet poet

Marvin Walker, Bathroom Attendant at the New York's Plaza Hotel, and father to Bobby

Earl, Bathroom Attendant at New York's Plaza Hotel

McGeorge Bundy, former advisor to President Johnson, and now President of the Ford Foundation

Norman Mailer, novelist and journalist

Peter Duchin, orchestra and band leader

Gedall Kovalsky, piano tuner for Duchin's band

(Voice of) Frank Sinatra, singer and actor

Journalist

Aline Berlin, wife to Isaiah

Isaiah Berlin, Visiting Professor of City University of New York, and inaugural President of Wolfson College, University of Oxford

Tatyana Yakovleva, former muse to Mayakovsky, and benefactor to the young Bobby Walker

Sandra, girlfriend to John Sanders

Margaret, girlfriend (later wife) to Bobby Walker

Bobby Walker, a leading criminal lawyer in New York

Larry Solomon, friend and colleague to Bobby Walker

Conference Moderator

John Sanders, a veteran of the Vietnam War

Audience Member

Man

Prelude

1926

[*Moscow. Vladimir Mayakovsky, wearing his trademark yellow tunic, is sitting at a table, arranging a collection of papers. It is his recently completed manuscript, 'My Discovery of America'.*

The scratchy sound of the song 'Hard-Hearted Hannah' emerges from a gramophone. He sits back, lights a cigarette, and reads from the papers.]

Mayakovsky: "There's now a certain fatty layer of bourgeois poets, thinkers and artists ...

Americans are trying to find a soul – the rhythm of America ...

In New York, many things are for decoration, for show ...

What is America, what sort of American nation is there, and what about the American spirit?

America will become just a financial centre, a money-broker of a country.

And why shouldn't the Negroes consider Pushkin their writer? Why, even now Pushkin wouldn't be allowed into a single 'respectable' hotel or salon in New York. Well, Pushkin did have curly hair and a Negroid blueness under his nails ... It's the white man who calls himself 'an American'. He considers even the Jew to be black, and will not shake hands with the Negro. If he sees a Negro with a white woman, he'll chase the Negro home with a revolver. He himself will rape black girls with impunity, and will subject a black man who goes anywhere near a white woman to lynch-law – that is to say, he'll tear off his arms and legs, and roast him over a bonfire.

The Negroes who are heated up over the bonfires of Texas may yet prove to be a sufficient dry powder for explosions of revolution.

I visited the Ford factory in a state of great excitement ... 'Fordism' is the most popular term among our labour organisers. They talk about the Ford enterprise almost as though it were an entity that could be transposed, without any changes to the socialist system.

At four o'clock, I stood by the Ford gates, watching the out-going shift. Workers staggered onto the trains and, completely done in, fell asleep straight away ...

The Ford system gives its workers impotence."

[*The music ends. Mayakovsky smiles approvingly. He collects his papers, and slowly exits.*]

Scene 1

The evening of Monday November, 28, 1966

[A public bathroom in New York's Plaza Hotel, the evening of Truman Capote's 'Black and White Mask Ball.' Enter two black bathroom attendants, smartly dressed, wearing black tuxedos and white bow-ties. One attendant arranges the hand-towels while the other polishes the chrome handles. In the background, we can hear the music of Peter Duchin and his Orchestra playing 'Once Upon a Time'. The music ends, and off-stage there is polite applause.]

Earl: It seems like the whole world is here this evening.

Marvin: So it seems.

Earl: Our usual routine?

Marvin: Absolutely. 'Specially tonight. You seen the guest list? Jesus!

Earl: Anyone and everyone. Peter Duchin and his Band are playing, so we should get some good white nigger music. You imagine the wealth that's gonna be jazzing up there this evening? They got ten Secret Service men coming just to keep an eye on the President's daughter.

Marvin: Oh yes, I'm gonna lay it on thick. It's a black and white ball and they sure as hell got some poor, needy black folk here. *[Adjusts tie, stoops, frowns, and mocks a stereotypical voice of a black bathroom attendant]:* 'That Mr Sinatra, he don't give me as much as a dime when I clean away his mess. He got so much Wild Turkey inside a' him that the skin o' the pan gets burnt right off. I got me a good lady and six kids. Ain't got me much else but I do the best I can with what the Lord provide. I is on hard times though, sir. Hard times indeed. Fresh towel for you, Mr Capote?'

[Both laugh, and continue with their chores.]

I ain't planning on doing this for much longer, I know that for sure.

Earl: You can retire after tonight, if we play our cards right. We got 53 tables and 450 bottles of Taittinger champagne flowing like the Mississippi. Capote can sure as hell afford it. I read he earned 15 bucks *per word* for writing *In Cold Blood*. Ten hours o' cleaning up shit still not gonna get me 15 bucks.

Marvin: I just want enough to keep putting Bobby through College and then I'm going back to smelling of oil and petrol rather than soap.

Earl: He's still going to Oxford University in England?

Marvin: You bet he is ... It's all confirmed. Starting this new College there – Wolfson – next year. First Walker to go to grad school! In fact, any kinda school!

Earl: That's costing you heaven and earth, no? Where you gonna get the money for that?

Marvin: I aint paying a cent. The bill is being picked up by some Russian lady here in New York. Tatyana Yak...I can't pronounce it proper. One tough lady. Asks helluvalot a' questions. She used to live with some Russian dude who did poetry. He spent some time here and wrote a book 'bout it. Hung out with the niggers. Went home, got his white ass kicked by Stalin and ended up blowin' his brains out. Bobby digs his poetry though.

Earl: I aint read no poetry 'cept the book of Psalms!

Marvin: I ain't read NO poetry. Period.

Earl: Bobby not a writer though? He wants to be a lawyer, you told me?

Marvin: Sure does. But this Tatyana heard 'bout Bobby being accepted to Oxford but having no money and the deals been done.

Earl: It's a College specially for blacks?

Marvin: Hell, no. It's run by some hot-shot English 'Sir'. He's over here right now as a matter 'o fact.

Earl: White fella?

Marvin: Christ, Earl, it is *Oxford*. In *England*. And the guy's a 'Sir'. Of course he's white. I don't know much about 'im ... but Bobby says he's a good man.

Earl: God damn it, that's summin' else, Marvin. Most people his age are endin' up in 'Nam. He sure is better off outta that hellhole.

Marvin: I just gotta keep getting him through Buffalo this final year. These evening shifts are killing me but I sure wanna do my bit too.

[**McGeorge Bundy** enters the bathroom, briefly acknowledging the two attendants.]

[**Marvin** winks subtly to **Earl** and then adopts the exaggerated stoop, frown and voice, before addressing **Bundy**] Y'all having yourself some fun in there, Mr Bundy sir? I sure *think* that's you, Mr Bundy, although it is a fine mask you have there.

Bundy: [*Smiling*] Yes, it's me.

Earl: Sounds like a party that the good Lord Himself should be at.

Bundy: [*Relieving himself*] Well, the good Lord would certainly make more pleasant company than some others present.

Marvin: And the Good Lord would bless you for saying so, sir.

[**Norman Mailer** enters, slightly inebriated.]

Mailer: You can't hide from me, Mac, not even by taking a piss ... You wanna answer my last question?

Bundy: Mr Mailer. I don't believe that this is the time – and I'm absolutely certain that it is not the *place* – to discuss events in Vietnam ... The President has made his position very clear ... and I suggest that you remind yourself of that.

Mailer: I'll ask you this then: you have no objection if I send some photos of this evening's decadence to *The New York Post*? Maybe our boys in the paddy fields would appreciate seeing them. Cheer them up. Make them feel proud to protect our fat, lethargic, useless politicians. [**Bundy** ignores **Mailer**, who continues] You're the damn reason they are there in the first place! Remind me of the latest body-count? At least our esteemed Secretary of Defense had the sense to stay away.

Bundy: No-one forced you to attend this evening either. We both know that if we are going to win this war we need public support, and the media is crucial to that

...

Mailer: ... We can't win this war in any way. We both know *that*.

Bundy: Well, of course, you clearly don't know much about the situation.

Mailer: I know that sending thousands of extra troops to South Vietnam and bombing North Vietnam is just a game for you. I guess that's why you quit the White House to sit behind your new safe, cosy desk at the Ford Foundation handing out your own personal donations.

Bundy: Mr Mailer, I really have no intention ...

Mailer: ... How much you planning to give the CIA this year under the guise of philanthropy? What about Harvard, MIT, Yale? Give them a few million bucks, and get them to train up and suppress the underdeveloped minds of Asia under the façade that America gives a shit about them?

Bundy: You may prefer to concentrate on your fiction and leave others to concentrate on the facts?

Mailer: I actually hear that you are already controlling the elite American universities so you are now trying to worm your way into Britain: \$2m donation to Oxford? Well, that sure is a wonderful way to help the American people. Or are you thinking of retiring there? Maybe that's tied into the deal. Perhaps not a bad idea: get rid of that smug, arrogant face of yours.

Bundy: Mr Mailer, this is silly; I think you're being childish.

Mailer: Why don't we go outside and talk properly about this. I'm ready.

Marvin: You gentlemen need extra soap?

Bundy: [*Addressing Marvin*] I'm done; thank you [*leaves the bathroom, pushing past a swaying Mailer*].

Mailer: [*Calling out, over his shoulder*]: You got all your brains in your dick!

[*Mailer finishes urinating, then waves away a fresh towel offered him by Earl; then he staggers out of the bathroom, back to the party.*]

Marvin: [*Looking towards the door*] Some people just have no God damn manners ...

Earl: I sure as hell hope security frisked him for a penknife.

Marvin: A penknife?

Earl: Mailer ... The guy stabbed his wife at a party, a few years ago. As she bled, he said 'let the bitch die'.

Marvin: Get outta here ...

Earl: I'm telling you the truth ... You don't remember that?

Marvin: Why would I? ... What is the matter with these people? Too much money ... or just any excuse to get in the papers?

Earl: Probably both, Marvin ... Probably both.

Marvin: God help us.

[*We hear the audience applaud, as the music takes a break. Both attendants resume their chores. Enter band-leader Peter Duchin and piano-tuner Gedall Kovalsky. Duchin urinates, while Kovalsky leans against a back wall, clearly anxious.*]

Duchin: It's inevitable, Gedall. Anyone with an accent like yours is going to be quizzed. Don't worry about a thing. It's normal these days.

Kovalsky: I just wasn't expecting it, Peter. You reckon it *was* Bundy's men asking the questions?

Duchin: Well, Bundy is paranoid about anything and anyone from the USSR, particularly now he's in charge of the Ford Foundation – it's all about the 'Reds'. But hell, they have security all over the damn place this evening. Could have been anyone. Forget it. You were anxious before that, though. What's up?

Kovalsky: It's just the piano.

Duchin: You still worried about that key? I told you, its fine.

Kovalsky: It's not just that D-key. The whole register doesn't sound right. Does it sound OK to you when you play?

Duchin: Gedall, relax ... you're the best piano-tuner I know, and you've tuned it well.

Kovalsky: But if Sinatra *does* sing?

Duchin: He won't.

Kovalsky: Are you sure? ... I want to be prepared.

Duchin: Don't worry about Sinatra. He'll be outta here in an hour or so, and heading downtown to *Jilly's*. He may sing there. But not here.

Kovalsky: I hope you are right, Peter ... I am not used to such media and security.

Duchin: I think we can kiss goodbye to the elegant, artistic exclusiveness that we have been used to 'til now. This party will change everything.

[*In the background we hear the opening bars of 'One For My Baby'.*

Surprised, Duchin and Kovalsky pause to listen. Soon after, we hear its opening lines ...]

(Voice of) Frank Sinatra:

"It's quarter-to-three

There's no-one in the place

'Cept you and me."

Duchin: Well Gedall, what do *I* know, huh?! [*Laughing*] Benny's playing for'im! [*Pausing to listen, then:*] Yup, you're absolutely right ... Anyone who is *anyone* is here, selling their soul to the media to achieve 'fame'. "Celebrity is the Nirvana of the masses" says our Andy.

Kovalsky: But Warhol is here this evening though. I saw him.

Duchin: Like I said, anyone who is anyone ... You know, a reporter even asked me if I would smuggle him in as a trombonist!

Kovalsky: Truly?

Duchin: No kidding.

Kovalsky: This really is my biggest job since arriving from Odessa.

Duchin [*Singing loosely; humorously in conjunction with Sinatra's singing*] "It happened in Odessa...!"

Kovalsky [*surprised*]: You know Mayakovsky's poetry? I had to learn it word for word at school.

Duchin: I know a little. I know *The Bedbug* and the music Shostakovich wrote for it. I can remember a few other lines like the one about Odessa but that's about it.

Earl [*interjecting*]: You say Odessa, sir? I got me some folk down that way in Texas. Land is as dry as a priest's throat though so they sure as hell struggling.

Kovalsky: I am actually from Odessa in Ukraine. Soviet Union.

Earl: Oh, I beg your pardon, sir. My humble mistake.

Kovalsky: I believe the two Odessas have similar land, though. My family are farmers, too.

Earl: Is that a fact?

Marvin: A fresh towel for you, Mr Duchin?

Duchin: [*Accepting the towel*] Thank you.

Earl [*looking out the door towards the party*]: Sounds like it's gotten all kinda sad up

there. You do me a favour and get those folks back happy and dancing, sir!

Duchin: Before you know it, the hall will be filled with bisexual quadrupeds doing the foxtrot. [*Looks to **Kovalsky***] More snippets from Mayakovksy! It's all coming back to me. "Band leader, play a march!"

[***Duchin** reaches into his pocket and gives a dollar bill to both **Earl** and **Marvin**. **Kovalsky** adds a few dimes.*]

Marvin: May the Lord bless you both.

[*Exit **Duchin** and **Kovalsky**.*]

Earl [to **Marvin**]: Now they're my kinda people ...

Marvin: [*To himself*] A bisexual *what?*

[***Marvin** and **Earl** continue their chores.*]

*As they do, a rather large **Journalist** slowly and painfully pulls himself through a window, then falls heavily onto the floor.*

The attendants just watch in astonishment.

*The **Journalist** curses, picks himself up, recovers his notepad and pen from the floor, and straightens his tie.*

Noticing the attendants, he nods sheepishly, and hurries out of the bathroom.

***Marvin** and **Earl** look at each other with a bemused shake of their heads, and continue working.*

The final bars of 'One For My Baby' are heard.]

Scene 2

The following evening: Tuesday, November 29, 1966

[*The New York Blackstone Hotel room of **Isaiah Berlin** and **Aline Berlin**, who enter, dressed formally, in anticipation of a dinner. **Mayakovsky**, now dressed in a sharp suit, emerges in a pale light in the corner of the room. He appears forlorn and depressed, as he writes a letter.*]

Mayakovsky:

"My own beloved Tatyana ...

Letters move so slowly, and I need to know every minute what is on your mind. That's why I send you telegrams. Send me piles of both! I take joy in each word you write. I received one of your letters just now. I read it until I was saturated with it ... I've been writing a new play, *The Bedbug* ... Twenty hours a-day, without food or drink. My head swelled so from this labour that my hat ceased to fit ... I work like an ox, my muzzle bent, red-eyed ... Even my eyes gave up ... I still have to put cold compresses on them ... But never mind ... it doesn't matter about my eyes. I won't need them until I see you again, because outside of you there is no one to look at."

[*'Bang Bang (My Baby Shot Me Down)', by Cher, begins to play at low volume, from a radio in the Berlins' hotel room.*]

Aline: But why *us*? What does she want, Isaiah? What do *you* know about her? I know the basics: she was a lover of Mayakovsky, and now she's a *milliner*, for goodness' sake. She worked at Saks. There must be more to know than that. Do tell me we aren't going to spend the entire evening talking about hats.

Isaiah: I'm afraid I'm not much better informed than you, Aline. She has simply requested dinner with us. All *I* know is that she was born 'Tatyana Yakovleva', and now she's married to Alexander Liberman.

Aline: Who's Alexander Liberman?

Isaiah: He runs Condé Nast. And he's a sculptor.

Aline: I see ... I'll take it it's not *money* she's after, then.

Isaiah: Ah! Well, she's coming to the wrong people if it is. No, money is not the issue. She's friends with Dietrich, Dali and subsidised Warhol when he was just starting out.

Aline: ... You haven't written anything ... controversial ... on Warhol. Have you? Or Mayakovsky?

Isaiah: Not a word on Warhol, and very little on Mayakovsky.

Aline: Then what on earth does she want? ... I am beginning to wish we hadn't agreed to this dinner. I can't imagine that Mayakovsky is *en vogue* here in New York.

Isaiah: No, I don't know if he's thought of here at all ... Don't worry: just think of it as an evening out, and enjoy the food. Let me do the talking.

Aline: Well ... don't talk too much about Oxford. Not until we know what her motive is.

Isaiah: I can't imagine Oxford is of interest to her. Why would it be?

Aline: ... But she must want *something* out of you. I just feel a little uneasy about the whole thing. Honestly, you have such a pleasant life here now ... To establish a new College at Oxford is madness ... I still don't see why you needed to get so involved.

Isaiah: I suppose I did arrange that Honorary Doctorate for Akhmatova last year ... maybe she's got it in for me!

Aline: Just ... be careful.

Isaiah: I will. And we won't be late. I have a seminar at nine ... Oh, before I forget: she suffers from claustrophobia, so we must avoid the subway. And lifts.

Aline: [*Smiling*] 'Elevators'!

Isaiah: ... [*Smiling*] 'Elevators' ... She is rather cultured, though. Can recite Russian literature for hours, and once played Brahms four-hands with Prokofiev. Apparently.

Aline: She sounds like hard work.

Isaiah: By all accounts she can be a little intimidating. Especially after a few glasses. So we'd better watch for that. Has a habit of correcting people's mistakes in the middle of readings! I always find that so unnecessary.

Aline: [*Smiling*] Probably because you are such an expert misquoter!

Isaiah: Probably so! ... This morning I re-read Mayakovsky's poem, 'Letter to Tatyana Yakovleva'. She forbade its publication at the time. It's a bit saccharine for my liking ...

Mayakovsky:

“... Only you match me for height

Come, stand beside me

Brow against brow.

I want to talk for a bit about this crucial evening

Like one human being to another ...”

Aline: Was she with him when he shot himself?

Isaiah: No. That was a certain Polonskaya. An actress. She walked out of the room one evening, and he shot himself through the heart. He was quite the womaniser. Seemed to go through women like I go through Plato: quickly but intensely. Tatyana declined his marriage proposal the year before his death, and that seems to have gnawed away at him until the end.

Aline: He must have been a deeply troubled man.

Mayakovsky:

“More and more often I think

It might be far better for me

To punctuate my end with a bullet.”

Isaiah: Oh, he certainly was. I think his mental instability scared Tatyana off. He was a mass of emotional extremes: could fly into a jealous rage one moment, and then overwhelm his lover with flowers the next. I ought to use him as a case study when teaching students how to analyse Dmitry Karamazov: massive highs and shocking, debauched lows. Though of course Karamazov only *threatened* to shoot himself; Mayakovsky actually went ahead and did it ... Popular but denounced by Lenin and then praised by Stalin – his suicide was a stunning political statement. *[Pause]* I shan't talk about this with our guest, of course.

Aline: No. Don't. What is her patronymic? Or shall I call her just ‘Tatyana’?

Isaiah: Yes, ‘Tatyana’ will be fine. I'm sure she will refer to him as ‘Volodya.’

Aline: *[Checking the drinks cabinet]* Didn't they remove his brain, as they did Lenin's? After his death, I mean.

Isaiah: They did. There was considerable disquiet as Mayakovsky's weighed more than Lenin's! The authorities had to doctor the official weight to make sure Lenin's was seen to be ‘heavier’ than the average man's.

Aline: What a ridiculous way to judge the value of a person! They should have rather examined the scientific reasons behind why one chooses to murder oneself.

Isaiah: Well, if Mayakovsky's was indeed 1700 grams, then Pasternak's must've been double that! I don't mind Mayakovsky, but everyone is a pale shadow when compared to Boris Leonidovich.

Aline: It seems they were very different writers.

Isaiah: Oh, they were. I find Mayakovsky rather a brash hooligan by comparison. But he was a poet to the workers, so he used ordinary language. Boris Leonidovich was a born intellectual, so his poetry is more refined.

Mayakovsky: “We really are different, Boris Leonidovich. You love the electricity in the sky; I love it in the electric iron.”

Isaiah: Despite Lenin's renunciation, Stalin eventually made sure Mayakovsky's name lives on in Moscow: Mayakovsky Square, Mayakovsky Station, Mayakovsky stamps, Mayakovsky cigarettes ... you name it. Even Stalin couldn't ignore that hundreds of thousands came out in the streets to march with his coffin.

Mayakovsky: "In the words of 'Comrade Stalin', "Mayakovsky is, and will remain, the best, the greatest poet of our Soviet age ... Indifference to his memory and work is a crime.""

Aline: It's been years since I read anything by him, but I seem to recall some rather ... fantastical ... ideas. Didn't he believe in the future physical resurrection of humans?

Isaiah: It's hard to know *what* he believed in. One has to doubt if he really knew himself ... at least towards the end. That was part of his tragedy. But he was definitely attracted to certain ideas about "resurrecting the dead", as in *The Bedbug*.

Aline: Oh, that's it, *The Bedbug*. Queer name ... Remind me of it, though. Quickly, before she arrives.

Isaiah: It pokes fun at the New Economic Policy. A chap named Prisyppkin becomes a petty bourgeois, gets frozen in 1929 and resurrected fifty years later, in 1979.

Aline: [*Nodding with recognition*] And no one can understand his language, and his views on love ... Gets put in a zoo.

Isaiah: That's it. Love has become a purely mechanical and unemotional concept. It is as if Prisyppkin comes from a totally different world so he is an oddity for people to jeer at.

Aline: Now I remember! A Soviet Rip Van Winkle. Shostakovich did the music.

Isaiah: Yes. It got decent reviews, but Mayakovsky's reputation went downhill afterwards. The music is rather frivolous for Shostakovich, but he was young, and it's a rather frivolous play. It should be on the graduate reading list, actually: very forward thinking for the time. Amusing, too. But not *Zhivago*, of course.

Aline: I doubt he was trying to compete with Pasternak.

Isaiah: No. In fact, I think Mayakovsky has more in common with Capote, in a strange sort of way.

Aline: Capote? How odd. In what way?

Isaiah: Oh, the brashness, the showmanship, the hypochondria, the impulsiveness ... the need to be loved and the equally strong compulsion *to* love.

Mayakovsky

"To love

Is to break

From insomnia-torn sheets,

With jealousy of Copernicus

Swallowing saliva;

him,

not the husband

of Mrs. Sugar and Sweets

regarding

as your most deadly rival.”

Aline: Such ... sensitivity ... is not uncommon among artists ...

Isaiah: There’s ‘sensitivity’, Aline, and then there’s ‘paranoia.’ Apparently Mayakovsky never touched doorknobs without a handle, and always carried his own soap in his pocket. And he ate only fish completely filleted of bones.

Aline: But how is that related to Capote?

Isaiah: I just mean that both Mayakovsky and Capote are essentially news reporters carrying out ‘social commissions’. Journalists, effectively. Struggling to generate their own ideas, they ‘borrow’ from stories in the news. There’s enough paranoia in the media at the moment... we don’t need any more. I won’t say *that* to Tatyana either.

Aline: No, probably for the best ... Capote has no links with Soviet ideology, though?

Isaiah: None that I’m aware of. The closest he got was visiting Moscow and Leningrad for the *Porgy and Bess* tour, in ’56. Wrote an article on it for *The New Yorker*. Some remarked on his physical similarity to Shostakovich ... a comparison which I’m sure would delight Dmitri Dmitrievich! [*Pause.*] Are you alright?

Aline: Oh, it’s just this damned head.

Isaiah: Have you taken something for it? Probably weighs more than Mayakovsky’s at the moment.

Aline: It certainly *feels* that heavy. It will pass.

[*There is a ringing sound.*]

Isaiah: That will be her.

Aline: [*Smiling knowingly*] Take the stairs, remember.

[*Isaiah leaves. Aline remains seated.*]

*The focus switches back to **Mayakovsky**, who, looking earnestly and nervously towards the door, reads the remainder of his poem, ‘Letter to Tatyana Yakovleva’.*

“You who went

Through the snowstorm

And typhus

On those legs

So many times

Must not

Let them be caressed

By oil barons

in salons by night.

Forget all that.

Your eyes are on fire

And the arcs of your eyebrows uncurve into lines.

Come here instead,

here where my big clumsy hands

Stretch out to you.”

[*Enter **Isaiah** and **Tatyana**.*]

***Tatyana** is dressed in fur coat and hat which are rather drenched by the rain.*

Tatyana: ... And later on, Isaiah Mendelovich, you must tell me more about your Visiting Professorship...

Aline: [*Advancing, and interrupting*] ... Tatyana ... what a pleasure to meet you! Goodness, look at you, you are soaked ... Let me take your coat.

Tatyana: Thank you, Lady Berlin, but I can manage.

Aline: Oh, 'Aline', please!

Isaiah: Aline is suffering from a slight headache. She was 'making rather merry' last night, at Truman Capote's extravagant expense.

Aline: It's nothing at all. I'm fine.

Isaiah: It doesn't help that we seem to have the Lexington subway directly beneath us here at the Blackstone. I tend to give into the rhythm – the click, click, clack – but Aline finds it more difficult.

Tatyana: [*Bluntly*] I never use the subway. [*Tatyana sits down, stretching her long legs in front of the sofa. Isaiah and Aline look at each other with mild amusement at their rather eccentric guest. Tatyana continues*] I read the reports about the Ball this morning. It sounded spectacular. Are you sure you are well enough to go for dinner? You should have cancelled, if you are unwell.

Aline: Absolutely. It will be a pleasure to have some quiet conversation after last night.

Isaiah: Indeed. Aline and I have been looking forward to this tremendously [*looks over to Aline with a secret wink*].

Tatyana: ... If you're sure ...

Isaiah: Perfectly sure. Now, what can we get for you to drink?

Tatyana: Scotch. Neat.

Isaiah: Oh, do we have any Scotch? I am not a drinker, so I have no idea what we have or don't have on offer ...

Aline: [*Looking nervously at the drinks selection*] Unfortunately not. I am sorry. We have plenty of wine.

Tatyana: Red. Thank you. [*Aline hands drink to Tatyana, who smells the bouquet and wrinkles her nose in restrained displeasure. Aline sits. Tatyana continues*] He's quite a character. Capote, that is. I have read *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, but I am not familiar at all with *In Cold Blood*, though. Are you?

Isaiah: I have read it. I don't think Aline has.

Aline: No, I haven't, even when it was serialised in *The New Yorker* last year. The subject has little appeal for me.

Isaiah: I found it a rather confused book: neither a novel nor a pure journalistic piece. Unfortunately it ends up serving neither purpose.

Aline: A 'non-fiction novel' was what he repeatedly called it last night. He kept on and on, advocating that journalistic reportage is a new and viable art form.

Isaiah: 'Art without imagination' would be more to the truth. Or a 'failure of imagination', as Norman Mailer termed it. I don't understand what a 'non-fiction novel' is. If it's a novel, then by definition it is fiction; if it's non-fiction then, by definition, it can't be a novel. He can't have it both ways. Or maybe he can ... Anything seems possible these days.

Aline: We do need good reporters and reportage.

Isaiah: Oh, and I think we have them, by and large ... Kay Graham runs a steady ship at *The Washington Post*.

Tatyana: The party was in her honour last night?

Isaiah: Ostensibly, yes. That's the only reason we were invited. Kay is a dear friend. But the evening was all about Capote. I attended one of the dinners beforehand but then decided not to go on to the Ball. I couldn't stomach any more. Literally ... all that cheese ...

Tatyana: And the weather was terrible ...

Isaiah: ... It was dreadful. Poor Mia Farrow looked completely saturated when she arrived with Sinatra. Not sure many people recognised her anyway: long mask and short hair. Aline stayed and did the dancing for the pair of us ... which is rather fortunate if you have ever seen my attempt at a foxtrot.

Aline: [*Smiling affectionately at Isaiah*] Isaiah has two left feet. On a *good* day.

Isaiah: That's actually an undeserved compliment, Aline ... It's a good job Churchill didn't ask 'me' to dance that time we met. That would have given the game away immediately.

[*Confused, Tatyana looks over to Aline for clarification.*]

Aline: [*To Tatyana*] Churchill once confused Isaiah with *Irving Berlin* ...

Isaiah: Fortunately, Irving was only called upon to eat copious amounts, and listen enthusiastically. Neither singing nor dancing was required.

[*Aline laughs.*]

Tatyana: Maybe Capote will make a 'non-fiction novel' out of that incident. It sounds amusing.

Isaiah: There are several different versions of the story ... and all of them are true! [*Aline and Isaiah laugh; Tatyana merely smiles. Isaiah looks at Aline, and attempts to pursue more serious conversation in keeping with Tatyana's attitude.*] Don't misunderstand me: non-fiction definitely has its place. But it is not art! I think Capote's proselytising is a dangerous precedent to set. Soon, random acts of graffiti that are claimed to have a social message will be declared art ... just like Warhol's preposterous brillo boxes, or whatever they were. You ought've asked Warhol last night what the point of that work was, Aline.

Tatyana: Clearly you are demanding when it comes to the appreciation of art ... My husband and I are great admirers of Warhol. In many ways I see him doing with his art what Volodya did with his poetry. Both are revolutionary.

Isaiah: I'm old-fashioned. I don't think art can afford to have low standards, particularly not today, in this fragile and vulnerable époque. Let artists stick to art and reporters to reporting. It's safer that way.

Tatyana: [*Loosening her scarf*]: You see no merit at all in Capote's book?

Isaiah: Not really; at least not in terms of literary imagination. I see it as a poor *roman à clef*: a façade. But that's purely my opinion. It's obviously very popular with others. Informative, maybe, but facts are facts and there is not a great deal else you can do with them. I did enjoy musing over the psycho-analytical profiling in the book, though. I'm no Freud, but I think Capote is just exorcising his own demons

– seeing one of the killers featured in the book, Perry Smith, as living out his own warped fantasies.

Tatyana: Sounds more like those theories about accepting our own dark shadow.

Isaiah: You mean Jung? [*Looking at Aline*]: Don't get me on the subject of that Nazi!

Aline: Maybe it's because he's not tall enough to threaten anyone. He would have to stand on a chair to do any harm.

Tatyana: [*Confused*] Jung?

Aline: No, no. Capote. I rarely look down on anyone but I had no choice with him. He barely came up to my chin. Tiny man. Peculiar voice, too.

Isaiah: Yes, he is a squeaking homunculus. But Smith was only an inch taller. He suffered some type of motorcycle accident which deformed and shortened his legs. But it's the psychological similarities that I find interesting. Smith, like Capote, came from a broken home, had an absent father and alcoholic mother who drank herself to death very early. They both essentially come from the same mangled root.

Tatyana: So, you are saying that Capote found release through his 'art' and Smith through murder?

Isaiah: Unless we contend that Capote murdered the novel, which in my opinion is a very sound accusation. Another chap is mentioned in the book: Lowell Lee Andrews. He slaughtered his own family in '58 on Thanksgiving weekend. Maybe it was '57. I don't quite remember exactly when. It doesn't matter.

Aline: It sounds ghastly.

Isaiah: Oh, it was. What I found interesting was his claim to be innocent on the grounds of insanity. The case opened up a whole new debate on this matter.

Tatyana: You mean with the definition of 'insanity'?

Isaiah: Exactly. I'll tell you. A young lad, rather well-read, is reading the final chapter of *The Brothers Karamazov*. He then puts on his best suit, goes downstairs and calmly blows away his sister, mother and father with a shotgun. Later tries to blame it on a robbery but the police are having none of it.

Tatyana: You see a link between his reading of *The Brothers Karamazov* and the murder of his family?

Isaiah: Yes, I do. I think art can be poisonously influential, especially when in the wrong hands. Andrews was only eighteen.

Tatyana: But well-educated, you said?

Isaiah: No, I said he was well-read, just as Smith was.

Aline: There is a difference.

Isaiah: I think so. I can't help thinking that merely reading without education is dangerous, potentially murderous, in fact. You can read all the Dostoevsky you like, but if you don't understand anything it's just asking for trouble. I am sure that half of the undergraduates I teach are potential killers and without erudition and exposition would be hanged the same as Andrews and Smith.

Aline: I wouldn't share that in the Senior Common Room! The Americans are far less accommodating of such humour than the English or the French, particularly at these times!

Tatyana: Or the Russians, I may add.

Isaiah: It's true, though [*winking at Aline*]. I ask God for protection every time I give a lecture on Machiavelli, knowing it could very well be my last.

[*Aline and Isaiah laugh; Tatyana remains serious.*]

Tatyana: But God is dead, no? Even TIME Magazine confirmed it a few months ago. I fear your prayers may be in vain.

Isaiah: Oh yes, TIME Magazine, the American *Pravda*, our mirror on society, with their usual sensationalist headline! To be fair in this case, though, they only raised a question, not confirmed an answer.

Tatyana: It was a fascinating article, though, and very relevant. Did you not read it?

Isaiah: [*Quite firmly*] I read it.

Tatyana: As Dostoevsky suggests, if God is dead then of course the criminal is free to do as he wishes.

Aline: I don't think Isaiah necessarily agrees with that idea.

Isaiah: [*Looking over to Aline a little warily, then back to Tatyana*] Aline's correct. We can explore it further if you really want to ... but I don't wish to turn a pleasant evening into a legal seminar or a Socratic dialogue. [*Looking to Aline*] I'll have enough of that tomorrow!

Tatyana: I would be very interested to hear your thoughts on criminality though; especially as you raised the subject with the criminals mentioned in Capote's book.

Isaiah: [*A little resigned*] Very well [*Looks to Aline*] How long before we have to leave?

Aline: [*Looking at her watch*] Thirty minutes or so. The table is booked for 8.30.

Isaiah: That's enough time. Let's imagine a scenario, a criminal scene - if you are sure?

Tatyana: Very. What kind of scenario in particular?

Isaiah: You will have to give me a minute or two to think of one.

[*As Isaiah ponders his thought-experiment scenario, the Intermezzo from Shostakovich's 'Bedbug Suite' is played, off-stage. Aline and Tatyana seem discomfited by the break in conversation.*]

When the music ends, Isaiah resumes.

So, imagine this: a young lad is at home with his wife. It's the early hours of the morning so it's obviously dark. Both had gone to bed, some hours earlier. He hears a noise in the bathroom a little down the hall. He arms himself, and shoots through the door – four shots – the same number as Perry Smith in Capote's book: bang, bang, bang, bang. He comes back to the bedroom, and, given the absence of his wife, realises it was actually *her* in the bathroom. She is now dead. Later, he claims in his testimony that he thought it was a burglar. Are you both with me?

Tatyana: Yes.

Aline: I follow you.

Isaiah: Good. Now, the interesting thing is his background. His father was nowhere to be seen in his early development, and he lost his mother to alcoholism in adolescence. Like Smith he has deformed legs, and stands barely 5 feet tall. OK?

Tatyana: [*A little puzzled*] ... OK ...

Isaiah: There is no doubt that he is the killer, and he's not disputing it. He fired the shots, no question. But the question *I* am raising is whether or not this background should be factored in when sentencing takes place.

Aline: Yes, it should. But regardless of his background it seems to me an utterly disproportionate reaction. Did he not check first that it wasn't his wife in the bathroom? Check the bed? Call out? Turn on the light, for goodness' sake?! His priority ought to have been the safety of his wife.

Isaiah: Well, let's say that he claimed he was too terrified to check properly. His over-riding thought, because of his physical limitations and restricted height, was to eliminate the perceived threat.

Tatyana: But you can't just fire blindly at a closed door! It's an entirely unreasonable response.

Isaiah: Ah! But that is the crux, as I see it! How do we define 'reasonable', or 'reasonable response'?

Tatyana: You mean: would a reasonable man have acted in the same way?

Isaiah: Exactly. The question is: firstly, whether or not the perpetrator was able to distinguish between right and wrong; and secondly, if he *was* able to make that distinction, whether or not he was able to act in accordance *with* it ... *Reasonably* in accordance with it. [*Pause*] Let us imagine two possible scenarios. Number one: I intend to kill you, Tatyana, but I miss and kill Aline instead.

Aline: Charming!

Isaiah: Hypothetically murdered, Aline!

Tatyana: And so?

Isaiah: [*To Aline*] Well, I can't be charged with premeditated murder, as I did not have the intention of killing *you*. I remain responsible for your death, though. Number two: I intend to kill Tatyana [*nods to Tatyana*], and again end up shooting *you* instead Aline [*looking back to Aline*] ... but this time it's because I *mistake* you to be Tatyana. Then, I *am* guilty of outright murder because the intent to kill another human being *was there* ... The identity of the victim is irrelevant.

Aline: But surely in *both* scenarios the intent to kill another human being was there ...

Isaiah: Mmm [*Pause*] Oh, I suppose you're right, Aline ... So if the identity of the victim is irrelevant...

Aline: ... in *both* scenarios ... The *identity* of the victim comes into play *only* in the context of whether or not the victim ought to have been considered a *threat* ... The killer may have a case for acquittal if he could prove he genuinely believed his life was in danger ... irrespective of his being *mistaken* in that belief.

[*Pause. All parties appear immersed in thought.*]

Tatyana: So where does that leave our case?

Isaiah: It leaves us with too many nebulous, ill-defined words: ‘wrong’, ‘right’, ‘mistake’, ‘responsible’, ‘reasonable.’ There is no real consensus. If we were frozen and resurrected fifty years from now, like Prisyppkin – what would that be ... 2016 – I should hope there’d be more clarity on the matter by then.

Tatyana: Perhaps we should simply embrace the fictional *Institute of Human Resurrection’s* Decree that Volodya wrote about.

Isaiah: [*To Aline*] Which is ...

Tatyana: [*To Aline, interrupting*] ... that all human life must be declared inviolable.

Isaiah: ... And so it must! ... But, if I remember correctly, *The Bedbug* states that that Decree came into action on November 7th, 1965 ... In other words, six months too late for Andrews and Smith! They hanged April 14.

Tatyana: April 14? [*Pause*] The same day Volodya took his life.

[*They pause.*]

Isaiah: Oh, really? ... I am sorry.

Tatyana: Don’t worry; it’s of no matter. That date is probably where the similarities end, though. Volodya was impulsive, but no murderer. And he stood 6 feet 3 inches, so no claim to physical inferiority, like your other examples.

Isaiah: Quite so. We can stop this silly game now.

Tatyana: No, it’s fine. Finish your experiment. Is this a method used to teach law students at Oxford?

Isaiah: Ha! More like my way of thinking things through ... I’ll wrap it up. [*Pause*] I’m just asking whether or not a degree of leniency might be afforded to a killer who is physically disadvantaged and, in addition, suffers profound anxiety instilled by a dreadful upbringing. I can’t help thinking that his reaction to any perceived *threat* would differ greatly from that of someone who doesn’t share his afflictions ... In other words, it would be *less reasonable*.

Tatyana: [*Fiercely*] No! Otherwise anyone coming from a broken home, suffering the ignominy of an alcoholic mother, harbouring a physical inferiority complex by standing barely an inch over five feet, or declaring a tendency to anxiety, will walk free! We can’t allow that. What about women, children, the elderly? They are vulnerable, too, but I don’t see the courts filled with *them* accused of murder ... Law has a duty to protect the oppressed.

Isaiah: So, in our experiment, the perpetrator should be found guilty of murder?

Tatyana: He should. He intended to kill someone, and ended up doing so.

Aline: But what about the perceived *threat*?

Isaiah: [*Still to Tatyana*] And hang?

Tatyana: That’s an entirely different question.

Isaiah: Absolutely. [*Turns to Aline*] Aline?

Aline: ... Even if he can prove that he was reasonable in perceiving a threat, one fact remains ... The perceived threat was in the bathroom behind a *closed door*! So, the perpetrator must have had time to reflect and conduct himself *reasonably*. *And* he must’ve known that shooting four shots into a door would most likely kill whoever was behind it. Yet he went ahead and did it. It is not murder *in cold blood*, as in Capote’s story. But it *is* stupidly excessive and negligent. And tragic, too: it

was his wife he killed, after all ... But regardless of whether or not he should be found guilty of murder, he certainly shouldn't hang.

Isaiah: ... Probably the most balanced assessment ... But what if he *did* know who was behind the bathroom door? ... Perhaps it's just my academic background, and I suppose it does relate to your question about God. [*Looking to Tatyana*] But I repeat: education is essential. The Andrews case, mentioned by Capote, is a prime example. Like Smerdyakov in *Karamazov*, he was unable to understand the implications of the philosophical ideas raised in that novel. Instead, it turned him into a lawless maniac. It's ironic, really.

[*They pause.*]

Tatyana: Was this approach to education the motivation behind the founding of this new College at Oxford? ... I understand you are its President. I am interested to know more [*as she removes her scarf*].

Isaiah: Yes, partly the motivation, but more simply because McGeorge Bundy stumped up the cash.

Aline: [*Quickly interjecting*] And the Wolfson Foundation too, don't forget.

Isaiah: Yes, of course! Wolfson himself may be a noisy, vain, self-centred tycoon ... I am nonetheless grateful for his money!

Tatyana: McGeorge Bundy is also donating, you say?

Isaiah: Not personally. But he twisted the arm of the Ford Foundation Committee in my favour. I understand they are giving us the largest single benefaction in Europe.

Aline: [*Concerned*]: I am sure Tatyana isn't interested in all these details.

Tatyana: On the contrary, I am very interested. The Foundation has a slightly conflicting reputation, from what I hear. There are rumours that it's just an extension of the government.

Isaiah: I don't really see how that could be possible. The Foundation does wonderful things for the underprivileged.

Aline: And the arts, too: \$80m to various orchestras last year?

Tatyana: Governments don't always rule by guns and force. They have other, more subtle and invisible ways of maintaining power through a broad range of activities and institutions. Wouldn't you agree?

Isaiah: [*Smiling*]: Well, I don't imagine that the brass section of the New York Philharmonic is comprised of various CIA agents, if that's what you mean.

Tatyana: No, it is not what I mean.

Isaiah: [*A little frustrated by Tatyana's lack of a sense of humour*] I really don't know, to be honest ... and I prefer not to trouble myself with rumour. Though rumours *will* inevitably surface given that the previous Chairman, McCloy, had a close relationship with President Johnson, and the National Security Council in Washington. I believe he was also part of Warren Commission examining Kennedy's assassination.

Aline: [*Interjecting*]: You know, the Commission first met exactly three years ago today: November 29, 1963. I read about it earlier. Heaven knows where three years have gone.

Isaiah: I didn't, no. Save us from more insane gunman theories, please!

[*Tatyana quickly resumes the conversation.*]

Tatyana: Do you know Bundy well?

Isaiah: Oh, I've known Mac for years. Since our Harvard days. I wouldn't go so far as to call him a close friend, but he's a useful ally. We all dined with the Kennedys, a few years ago.

Tatyana: But you oppose the Vietnam invasion?

Isaiah: I do, most categorically. Or let me qualify: I opposed the *invasion*. Now that the troops are there I think it would be disastrous to withdraw. South Vietnam would be swallowed up by communist forces in no time. Now, it is a matter of making the best of a bad job.

Tatyana: You don't feel any sense of guilt accepting money from Bundy given his role in the war? I imagine there will be a strong American influence in the College?

Isaiah: [*Indignant*] Not in the slightest ... The two roles are completely unrelated. Mac was a ruthless politician, sure, and clearly does not mind walking over corpses, but that doesn't concern me as long as I am not one of the corpses. This is *Ford's* money, not Mac's ... and it is being used to very good purpose, and intellectual advance.

Tatyana: [*Fondly*] Volodya would have found such delicious irony in all this ...

Isaiah: How do you mean?

Tatyana: Well, when he was in America he often confused the name 'Mac' with the phrase 'Make money!'

Isaiah: I am not sure I follow ...

Tatyana: He seemed to think that all Americans greeted each other with the phrase 'Make money!' I suppose 'Mac' and 'Mek monei' don't sound too different. Easily confused. He writes somewhere in his poem *Broadway* ...

Mayakovsky:

"The mechanical city grinds its teeth
everywhere
noise and confusion, but the people
are mute mid the noise and they stop
chewing gum only to toss off the greeting
'Make money?'"

Isaiah: How wonderful! I feel Vladimir Vladimirovich is already endorsing Mac's endorsement!

Tatyana: Well, I would hope that you see education as a means of equipping people with a voice rather than sending them to Wall Street or the World Bank.

Isaiah: [*A little put out*] Of course I do. I am a university Professor made purely out of ink and paper.

Tatyana: I am sure it is quite a coup for a New York university to have a British 'Sir' as a member of its visiting staff.

Isaiah: Oh that title is nothing but a nuisance sometimes. I couldn't even cash a cheque in Macy's recently because I had signed 'Isaiah Berlin' instead of 'Sir Isaiah Berlin', as is written on the cheque. I tried to explain that 'Sir' was just a title and

not part of my actual name, rather like the title 'Duke'. The assistant quickly rebuked me and said: 'I beg your pardon but Duke Ellington always includes 'Duke' when he signs.'

[*Aline and Isaiah laugh.*]

Tatyana: Will this new College specialise in any particular subjects?

Isaiah: It will be for graduates only. We've been berated for our lack of commitment to graduate teaching and I find that far more rewarding intellectually anyway. More than that, it will be unlike any other Oxford College. Purely egalitarian: no 'high table' nonsense. That went down well with the current Labour government who are trying to undermine Oxbridge elitism.

Aline: Also better College rights for spouses and families, which is definitely needed.

Isaiah: Yes, quite.

Tatyana: A good combination of academic quality and democracy, it seems. Would that be fair?

Isaiah: Well I hope so. They should have sent Perry Smith to me at Wolfson rather than have executed him. Apparently his IQ exceeded 130. I'd have disarmed him with essay after essay on Kant. He'd then be too mentally exhausted to kill anyone.

Tatyana: I'm not sure. Some people are beyond rehabilitation.

Isaiah: That is undeniably true.

Tatyana: You no longer hang people in Britain?

Isaiah: Fortunately not. The last execution took place a couple of years ago. It is currently suspended for five years. I can't imagine it will be restored.

Aline: Well, I am very pleased that it is not an issue that any of us has to deal with, or rectify.

Isaiah: I would gladly take my chances with Capote!

Aline: I am sure you are joking, Isaiah.

Isaiah: Well, let's just say I am glad I sauntered off before the Ball. A one-sided conversation with a drunken Frank Sinatra would probably make a discussion with Capote seem positively sparkling.

Aline: I didn't see much of Sinatra at all. He demanded a table at the front with his friends, and stayed there. He did sing once though. [*Looking at her watch*] I think we really should be setting out ...

Tatyana: [*Rising*] I would love to hear more about last night, and also more about this new College ...

Isaiah: Well, I am grateful for your interest but we've heard nothing about *you* ... My usual habit of stealing the conversation has won through again! Let us head for dinner, and we shall rectify that. Let's take a cab; it's still raining.

[*Isaiah looks at Aline and playfully whistles 'There may be trouble ahead' from Irving Berlin's 'Let's Face the Music'. Aline looks suspiciously towards Tatyana. Exit Isaiah, Aline, and Tatyana.*]

Mayakovsky stands, and looks towards the vacated door with a forlorn sense of longing ...]

Scene 3

Tuesday October 17, 1967

... Then, from opposite sides of the stage enter two young ladies:

Sandra, who is her early twenties and white;

and **Margaret**, who is in her early twenties, and black.

Both are holding letters.

Also entering are John Saunders and Bobby Walker and. John is early twenties and white, dressed in military uniform which is slightly too large for him and carrying duffel-bag. Bobby is also early twenties and black, dressed in shirt and smart slacks, carrying a pile of books. Both walk to the end of the stage and face the audience, seemingly unaware of each other's presence. Bobby looks content, excited and confident; John looks scared, innocent and unsure.

Mayakovsky looks towards **Sandra**.]

Sandra: [Facing the audience, she reads her letter to herself, in a voice that trembles with emotion.]

"Tuesday November 28th, 1967. My dearest John ...

You must be there by now. Goodness, I didn't sleep a wink last night. I guess you didn't either. How are you? What is Vietnam like? Are you safe? Where are you staying? So many questions. I don't even know if this letter will reach you. If it does, write me back *straight away*, you hear me?!?! I know your Mama is smiling down on you from heaven! And don't you give a thought to your Daddy – he is a loser. You are not. We are all so proud of you John Sanders!!! As promised I will look every night to the moon and blow a kiss to you. You must do the same. That way we can still be together. Please keep safe and come home as soon as you can. I miss you already, so much. Your girl forever, Sandra."

[**Sandra** wipes away tears, and slowly leaves the stage.]

Mayakovsky

"Me being strong

If they need me

And order:

'Get yourself killed in the war'

The last thing

clotted

on my bullet-torn lip

will be your name."

[He looks towards **Margaret**, who is situated at the opposite side of the stage; facing the audience, she reads her letter in an upbeat and excited tone.]

Margaret:

"Tuesday November 28th, 1967. My darling Bobby ...

Tell me, tell me, tell me!! What is Oxford like? Is it as beautiful as we both imagined? And Wolfson College? I want to know everything! When do your classes start? Is it just full of white people? Is that a problem? You must be so excited! I

saw your Mama and Daddy yesterday and they still cannot believe you are actually there! We are all so proud of you Bobby Walker!!! Is it definite that you will be back for Thanksgiving? The Russian lady is ok with that? She really is one of God's angels! That means it is only six weeks until we will see each other again. Don't forget to look at the moon every night and blow a kiss to me! I will do the same, one million times. See you soon, Professor Bobby Walker!!! You girl forever, Margaret." [*She smiles, and skips excitedly off the stage. Bobby and John remain on the stage. They turn inwards to leave and their eyes seem to catch for a split second before they exit. Exit **Mayakovsky.***]

INTERVAL

Scene 4

The afternoon of Monday, November 28, 2016: fifty years later.

[A public bathroom in New York's Plaza Hotel. No attendants are present.

*In walk two smartly dressed lawyers, aged in their late-sixties or early-seventies: **Bobby Walker** and **Larry Solomon**.*

***Bobby** heads for the urinal, while **Larry** prefers a cubicle.*

Music is played through the bathroom speakers.]

Larry: Exactly?

Bobby: 50 years ago. To the very day. It was the year before I went to Oxford. Sinatra, Capote, and the rest of the celebrity world were standing right here. I still have the \$100 bill that Sinatra gave my old Dad as a tip. He refused to spend it.

*[**Bobby** washes his hands, dries them, and from a pile of 'TIME' magazines picks up a copy from March 2013 with the title 'Oscar Pistorius: Man, Superman, Gunman'.]*

Bobby: *[Addressing **Larry**]* 'Pistorius: Man, Superman, Gunman'. What are they doing with old magazines in here?

Larry: *[From the cubicle]* Don't shoot! I don't fancy being carried out of this hotel with my pants round my ankles. Not at my age.

Bobby: *[Laughing]* You're safe. He's still under house-arrest.

Larry: You know, I am still kinda in the middle on that one. Not sure whose side I come down on.

Bobby: Margaret is the same. But come on, Larry. He's as guilty as sin. Even the Judge felt so but she couldn't convict him of premeditated murder 'cos of the dog's dinner the prosecution made of their case *[flicking through the magazine]* You know as well as I do that the onus of proof is on the state to establish guilt beyond reasonable doubt. No onus is on the accused to convince the court of any truth of any explanation he gives.

Larry: We all know your views, Bob, and I'm sure you will make them crystal clear again at your talk coming up. But you gotta let it go. Whatever side you come down on Pistorius is one screwed up guy.

Bobby: Pistorius is not screwed up. He knew exactly what he was doing. The shrinks made it clear that he didn't suffer from any mental defect or illness at the time and was able to distinguish between right and wrong. He was criminally accountable. He's just a trigger-happy egotist. Take away the guns. Don't give him the means to make the front cover of *TIME*. He doesn't deserve it.

Larry: You have done more than anyone I know to try and change our gun laws but this one is not your battle. Let the South Africans deal with it.

Bobby: It *is* our battle, Larry. Let's not forget that the Ford Foundation pumped millions into the ANC to promote black leadership and black lawyers. It had nothing to do with a desire for racial equality; they just wanted to control whoever came next after apartheid fell.

Larry: You think so?

Bobby: I *know* so. They sensed early on that it was only a matter of time before the government was ousted. So they got in quick and exploited the unrest by setting up university-based institutions, legal aid clinics, grants. All in the '70's. 'Are you black? Come be a lawyer. Your country needs you...!'

Larry: And you blame Bundy for this?

Bobby: He ran the Foundation til '79! And before he was out the door we had the Centre for Applied Legal Studies and the Legal Resources Centre both set up in South Africa, ready to blindly accept US advice on how to build a new and fair legal system out of the rubble of oppression. Hell, he even based Ford's South African staff *here in New York*.

Larry: Doesn't sound a whole lot wrong with that to me.

Bobby: On paper, no. But its damn clever politics: one oppressed group raises its voice in protest and the Ford Foundation just feeds a larger voice from the same side - but a voice that they can *control*. I could give you a list as long as my arm of Ford grant-recipients who have gone onto senior legal positions in South Africa: ministers of justice, members of Parliament, several judges of the Constitutional Court. You name it.

Larry: *You* owe the Ford Foundation a lot though too, Bob. Without them, *you* wouldn't have gone to Oxford, and without them this Conference wouldn't have gotten any sponsorship. Come on, let's give credit where it's due.

Bobby: I know all that. And I'm grateful. *And* I'll extol the virtues of the Ford Foundation shortly and give the audience what they want to hear. But we need to learn how to protest again. You see, all radical movements have been divided up into smaller, safer, more manageable and legal organisations because it's easier for the authorities to control dissent and revolt that way. And I don't just mean the blacks. I mean everyone who has their rights impinged upon unfairly by the authorities.

Larry: Well, much has been said about Bundy's motives back in the '60s and '70s, sure, but I just don't see the link between the Pistorius case and the American people. It was not a case of white favouritism, surely: the Judge was a black lady.

Bobby: She is just a 'tea lady from Soweto.'

Larry [*shocked*]: Huh?

Bobby: Not *my* words, of course, but those of a South African commentator. That's how her name has been dragged through the mud after delivering her verdict. Ironic, isn't it? We now have a respectable black Judge sitting in the big chair but she is struck from pillar to post because she follows the law *to the letter* and doesn't nail a white guy.

Larry: You think the verdict would have been different with a white Judge?

Bobby: We'll never know. But what I *do* know is that Judge Masipa had to evaluate the evidence of a dismal white prosecutor who clearly had as much ambition to make the front cover of *TIME* Magazine as Pistorius did.

Larry: So she got the verdict correct?

Bobby: Any Judge has to make a decision based on what the law says, Larry. Simple as that. Whether that decision is morally right or wrong is another question

entirely. No...the reason Pistorius wasn't found guilty of murder was because the South African legal system introduced the idea back in the '70's that *a mistake or honest ignorance of the law can operate as a defence*. And Pistorius's team sure milked that idea. [Mocking the voice of Pistorius]: 'I made a mistake, m'lady.'

Larry: A good defense team will find every loophole they can. You know that.

Bobby: I know. But it stinks. It flies in the face of our belief that every responsible citizen has a *god damn duty* to know the law. No excuses. By feeding the new generation of South African lawyers throughout the 80's and the '90's, we – and by that I mean the Ford Foundation – continued to support this dangerous idea of an *honest mistake*. We are as responsible as anyone for what happened in the Pistorius trial.

Larry: [*Exiting the cubicle, then washing and drying his hands*] Well, I don't know that, Bob. But at the end of the day it was still his girlfriend that he killed. He was found on his knees praying to God to save her.

Bobby: Well, a bunch of good that did. He got no response from the Merciful Lord, clearly.

Larry: Not a word.

Bobby: ... Well, as my old Dad always used to say, "Some people just have no God damn manners" ...

[*Bobby throws the TIME Magazine issue on top of the pile and they both laugh as they exit.*]

Scene 5

The evening of Monday November 28th 2016

[*A conference room of New York's Plaza Hotel.*

*To the front of the stage stands the **Conference Moderator**. Behind her sit **Bobby** and **Larry**.*

*Stage-right sits **Mayakovsky**.*]

Conference Moderator: Welcome, everyone, to this plenary session. I am going to begin with the cliché that often precedes these kinds of announcements, and say that our guest speaker needs no introduction. But it is true. Bobby Walker has, for over thirty years, been one of New York's most respected and, truth be told, outspoken criminal lawyers. Educated at Buffalo here in New York before attending graduate school at Wolfson College at the University of Oxford, where he was the first black student to be admitted, a fact which I know he holds dear. He then served at some of the leading New York law firms before establishing his own practice in 1990. He has, somewhat incredibly given his schedule, also managed to write regular columns for *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Huffington Post*, as well as the seminal text-book, *Crime, Criminality, and Mental Illness*, a Bible for many of today's law students. I am delighted that Bobby has agreed to talk with us today, and I now invite him to take the floor.

[**Bobby** moves towards the lectern. He squeezes the **Conference Moderator's** arm, as she turns back to sit alongside **Larry**.]

Bobby: Carol, thank you. Very much. It is not my intention to speak for long. At my age I tend to forget what I have already said, where I said it, and to whom, so perhaps it's best if I play safe and keep things as brief as possible [*smiling*] ... It is always wonderful to be here at the New York Plaza. Fifty years ago, to the day, my father was attending the bathrooms downstairs while this beautiful Grand Ballroom was filled with guests at Truman Capote's famous Black and White Ball, dancing to Peter Duchin's wonderful orchestra. And that got me thinking about a theme for this short talk. I would like to start by reading a short extract by the Russian Vladimir Mayakovsky, whose work I greatly admire. It comes from his collection *My Discovery of America*, which he wrote after a visit here in 1925. In this extract, he is talking about the seaports of New York ...

Mayakovsky: [*Addressing the audience*] The avenues adjacent to the quays are known as 'The Avenue of Death' – because of the locomotives pulling in with their goods right onto the street, and because of the villains who pack the pubs.

It is from here that robbers and hold-up specialists are supplied for the whole of New York: to the hotels, to put whole families to the slaughter for a few dollars; and to the subway, where they thrust cashiers into the corner of their change booths and snatch the day's takings, at the same time changing the dollar bills of the unsuspecting public passing through.

If they get caught, it's the electric chair at Sing Sing jail. But it's also possible for them to get away with it. On his way to rob, a bandit may call his lawyer and say: 'Phone me, sir, at such and such a time and such and such a place. If I am not there, that means I'll be needing bail and release from custody.'

Bail sums are considerable, but the criminals are not just petty thieves and are quite well organised...

In the papers there were reports of one criminal who had got out of prison on bail forty-two times. Here, on the Avenue of Death, the Irish run the show. In other areas, it will be others.

Negroes, Chinese, Germans, Jews, Russians – they all live in their own districts, with their own customs and language, preserving these through the decades in unadulterated purity.

In New York City, not counting the suburbs, there are one million and seven hundred thousand Jews. A million Italians. Half a million Germans. Three hundred thousand Irish. Three hundred thousand Russians. A quarter of a million Negroes. A hundred and fifty thousand Poles. Three hundred thousand Spaniards, Chinese, and Finns ... An enigmatic picture: who then, especially, are the Americans? And how many of them are one hundred per cent *American*?"

[**Mayakovsky** sits. **Bobby** puts the papers down, and removes his glasses.]

Bobby: Now, why read all this from a Russian poet ninety years ago, you may ask? And it's a fair question. Let's bring Mayakovsky's statistics up to date [*puts glasses back on*]: today, in 2016, there are over 8 million people living in New York. Over 2 million are black; 700,000 Italian; 450,000 Irish; 300,000 Germans; 260,000

Russians; 250,000 Poles and thousands of English, Greek, French, Hungarians, Ukrainians and Jews. Again, why I am focussing on this? Because it shows, quite clearly, that New York is one big ensemble of different nationalities and cultures. And, more than any organisation, it has been the Ford Foundation, sponsors of today's Conference, who have conducted this ensemble. From 1966 to 1969, for example, under the Presidency of McGeorge Bundy, himself present at Capote's Ball by the way, they allocated over \$100m dollars towards 'rights for minorities' – blacks, whites, Hispanics, women, Jews - and by so doing shaped the multicultural America in which we live and thrive today. And it is not just Americans who have benefitted from the initiatives of the Ford Foundation. Millions of dollars were spent in the late 1970s, sanctioned by Bundy in his final year as President, to support and educate the black movement in South Africa, enabling them to live in a world of equality and democracy free from oppression. It was the Ford Foundation, more than any other American organisation, who, when the evil of apartheid fell, was there to help South Africa rebuild its economic *and* legal constitution to where it stands today.

[Pauses to take drink of water and wiping brow]

I personally owe a lot to this Foundation, having studied at Wolfson College, Oxford, which simply would not have been established had not the Foundation provided the financial means to do so. I also cannot forget the support of a wonderful lady, Tatyana Yakovleva – Russian by birth but an adopted New Yorker - who supported my studies at Oxford and who knew Mayakovsky intimately. When I first started at Wolfson in the late '60's, there were 39 students; now there are over 1400 in a variety of disciplines. The seed planted by Bundy and the Ford Foundation has indeed borne rich and diverse fruit. This is just one example of thousands – tens of thousands – of educational initiatives both home and abroad that have been supported by the Foundation over the last thirty years or so and continue up to the present day.

[From the audience a voice is heard in dissent.

*It is that of **John Sanders**, a white man aged in his late-sixties or early-seventies, dressed in casual clothes out of place with the other audience members. **John's** hands and forearms are heavily tattooed.] Bullshit.*

[There are shocked murmurs from the audience]

Conference Moderator: Hey, please, sir ... there's no call for that. Let's have some respect, please.

John: Respect? For McGeorge Bundy? Like hell. You know what we used to call him: *But. Unfortunately. Not. Dead. Yet ...* You want some statistics of your own to chew over, Mr Walker: 58,000 people were sent to their deaths in Vietnam by Bundy. I sure as hell was nearly one of them. How many of these 58,000 were part of the 'American ensemble' you talk about?

Bobby: I am talking about the Ford Foundation and *not* Vietnam, which is unrelated to this Conference. There will be plenty of time for *relevant* questions ...

John: ... You don't think it's relevant that the majority of veterans who, for whatever reason, needed the right to legal counsel after Vietnam either had their

minds shot to pieces or were without two dimes to rub together? They got legal counsel all right: they got it from the *National Legal Aid and Defender Association*, which was funded by - you've guessed it - the precious Ford Foundation.

Conference Moderator: If you do not restrain from calling out you will be asked to leave, sir. Now, please ...

John: ... And you were one of those who benefitted from that legal aid, didn't you Mr Walker? Lawyers have to be paid too and paid well. Were you in Vietnam, sir?

Conference Moderator: OK, that's enough ...

Bobby [*placating the Moderator*]: It's OK, it's OK [*looks to Sanders*] As I am sure you know very well from your rhetorical question, I was not a serviceman in the Vietnam conflict.

John: Then what can you say about criminality and mental health to someone who went through it? Someone who lost everything: his right foot, his girl and, for a time, his sanity [*taps his temple fiercely with his index finger*] ... all in the space of four years.

Bobby: I don't think I would know what to say unless there was a specific question put to me.

John: You think a man can make a mistake?

Bobby: That's beyond question. I do so daily.

John: No, *sir*, I mean a *mistake*. I don't mean forgetting to put your cufflinks on, or picking the wrong silk tie or shining your leather shoes with the wrong polish. I mean a *mistake*.

Bobby: Is there a point you are making. If not, we will move on.

John: [*Rising slowly*] Don't worry, I'm outta here. I'll let you continue your tear-jerking speech to the audience who will just lap up whatever you say. One final thing: maybe if I had had the money to pay for a shit-hot defence team I may also have ended up with a cosy house-arrest. [*Sarcastically*] I hear that's kinda common these days. God bless McGeorge Bundy and Ford Foundation for all the lives they have screwed up.

Audience member: Just leave ...

John: Oh, I'm goin', lady. Believe me ... I'm goin'.

[*John exits the conference room, walking out with a perceptible limp.*]

Conference Moderator: [*Embarrassed*] I am very sorry about that. I am not sure how that 'gentleman' was admitted to this session. Let's try and get back to where we were. Sorry... Bobby.

Bobby: [*Flustered by the confrontation*] ... You know, I think I will bring things to a close, and let you continue with the plenary session ... Thank you ... all of you ... very much ... Thank you ... [*He collects his papers, drinks some water and slowly exits.*]

[*Exit Conference Moderator and Larry. Exit Mayakovsky.*]

Scene 6

Later in the evening of Monday November 28th 2016

*[The same public bathroom in New York's Plaza Hotel. Enter **Mayakovsky**. He addresses the audience.]*

Mayakovsky:

“To all of you:

I'm going to die.

Don't blame anyone and please don't gossip – this stiff really hated that ...

As they say – ‘The case is closed.’

The love boat wrecked on everyday routine.

Life and I are quits

and there's no need

for a list

of mutual hurts, harms and slights.

Be happy!”

*[**Mayakovsky** looks towards **Bundy** who has entered. **Bundy** addresses the audience.]*

Bundy: “My wish now is that we had done less in Vietnam. I wish that I had understood that more clearly. Why did I *not* understand it? What can we learn from this episode that will help us to do better in the world ahead? I had a part in a great failure. I made mistakes of perception, recommendation, and execution. If I have learned anything, I should share it.”

Mayakovsky *[addressing **Bundy**]*: “There isn't a country that spits out as much moralistic, lofty, idealistic, sanctimonious rubbish as the United States ...”

Bundy *[addressing **Mayakovsky**]*: “The first conclusion I offer is that the most deep-seated and destructive of all the causes of the Negro problem is still the prejudice of the white man.”

*[**Mayakovsky** and **Bundy** stare at each other. Their gaze is broken by the entrance of **Bobby** who walks towards a sink, leans on it, and stares into the mirror above it.*

He takes a small box from his pocket, opens it, and takes a small pill, which he swallows.

He takes a long deep breath, removes a handkerchief and wipes his brow.

A fly flies round his face, emitting a 'buzzing' sound.

*He is interrupted by the sound of mock applause, as **John** enters.]*

John: Well, how poetic, Mr Walker. You almost had me moved to tears earlier.

Bobby: Most people have the manners to wait until the Q&A.

John: *[Sarcastically]* I am so sorry to disappoint you ...

Bobby: Well, sir, I don't believe that we've ...

John: ... you don't think we've *met*? ... Is that what you were gonna say?

Bobby: No, actually it wasn't ...

John: ... Oh, we sure as hell have met ... Maybe I don't look familiar to you anymore? A little older, maybe? ... Greyer? ... Well, I haven't had the best of times, recently ... you know?

Bobby: I am very sorry, but if you don't mind ... [*He heads for the exit, prompting John to step into his way, to block him.*]

John: Maybe this will jog your ancient memory: "It has been argued convincingly by the prosecution that you did not act in self-defence, but rather in an entirely unreasonable manner. You are a cold-blooded killer. I have taken into account your service for our country in Vietnam, but I cannot allow this to prevent a substantial custodial sentence being bestowed upon you. Mr Sanders, I therefore sentence you to twenty years imprisonment, with eligibility for parole after fifteen ... Take him down."

Bobby: [*Horrificed, but softly*] John Sanders.

John: Oh, now you remember ... Yes, that's me. The sonofabitch *you* put away for twenty years ... Well, guess what, I'm back ... Paroled. [*Manically*] 'Heeere's Johnny!'

Bobby: I appreciate it has been a difficult time for you but this really isn't the time or place ...

John: [*Erupting*] Bullshit! [*Bobby shudders.*] Now, for once, you just shut that black velvet mouth of yours and listen. I coulda been like you ... you know that? But you get the education and the sharp suits; I got two tours of Vietnam and twenty years inside. You wanna tell me who got better deal?

Bobby: We all make our own way in this world, Mr Sanders, from wherever we started and whatever help we may have received. You cannot blame other people for your own actions, and ...

John: Don't you dare '*Mr Sanders*' me ... Let me tell you a little about what's been happening in my life, while you were creaming off every grant you could get your dirty hands on ...

Bobby: ... Look, I know that sometimes it isn't easy to accept that there are things in our lives that we cannot change, and ...

John: ... hospital porter, security assistant, garbage collector. That's all I was able to get after being discharged from service. And do you know why? Because I couldn't *sleep*, I couldn't *concentrate*, I couldn't *think* ... *think* ... *think* properly ... Understand?

Bobby: Mr Sa ... *John* ... I really think it would be for the best if you ...

John: *Noise noise noise* ... All the fuckin' time ... *click clack click clack* ... like a subway train in my head. But that train was going nowhere, you see. "Mr Sanders, you are a cold-blooded killer". "Take him down" ... *click clack click clack*. Oh, yes, I was responsible. I committed the crime just like the 'Superman' on that front cover [*points to the TIME Magazine cover featuring Pistorius*]. I made a mistake, too. An honest mistake... *but I needed help* ... *I needed support* ... *I needed someone to understand* ... Do you *understand*, sir, what it means when you have absolutely nowhere to turn? ... Oh, I didn't go to Oxford, but I can read the big Russian books too. Surprised? Reading is all I did for twenty years ... that is, I *educated myself*.

Bobby: Now that you have been released ...

John: [*Incredulously*] '*Released*'? ... You think I have been '*released*'? [*He points to his head*] You think the noise has gone? You think that this train pulled into a quiet

subway station? You think I have a girl waiting for me outside in a shiny new car, so we can enjoy retirement and go fishing together with our grandchildren? ...Huh? ... No, *sir*. I have *nothing*. *No-thing* ... This train terminates right *here* ...

[Enter a **Man**, who immediately seems aware that here is a hostile situation.

He looks towards both, and addresses **Bobby**, who is visibly shaken.]

Man: Are you OK, sir?

Bobby: I'm fine ... thank you.

[When the **Man** enters, **John** moves away from **Bobby**, and backs into a cubicle, locking the door behind him.]

Man: [Going to use a urinal, and trying to swat the fly] Damn fly ... In November?! ...

[Turns to **Bobby**] Sir, are you sure that you're OK? ...

[**Bobby** tries to compose himself, washes and dries hands, then slowly walks out of the bathroom, speaking to himself.]

Bobby: Oh, quite sure ... thank you ... I ... I guess ... Well ... Well, I guess that some people just have no god damn manners ...

[**Man** finishes urinating, glances at the locked cubicle door, washes and dries his hands, and exits.

Soon after, **John** emerges from the cubicle.

He stares into the mirror in front of him, and takes a gun from his jacket pocket.

He places it in his mouth.

The fly flies round his face, signalled by a 'buzzing' sound.

At this point, the 'buzzing' sound of the fly morphs into the music 'Pink Section' by Thom Yorke through the speakers.

John wafts away the fly, and in so doing removes the gun from his mouth.

He turns, and exits.

The stage is empty.

The music continues.

Then after thirty seconds, there are two very loud gunshots, off-stage.

An abrupt, deadly silence.]

CURTAIN

.....