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# Ephemeral: An Original Play

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# Ephemeral: An Original Play

## Abstract

Interesting conversations are had when an American woman spends a weekend with her Czech penpal and his relatives at his recently deceased mother's cottage. Based on a series of interviews with Czech citizens and personal experiences, Kierstan DeVoe's play focuses on the complex nature of tragedy and nostalgia, complete with moments of warm laughter and great tension.

## Keywords

Happiness, Memory, Play

## Disciplines

Creative Writing | Playwriting | Theatre and Performance Studies

## Comments

Written as part of the Theater Arts Capstone Experience (THA-400).

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**EPHEMERAL**  
An Original Play

Written by Kierstan DeVoe  
Cast of Characters

**McKinley**

An American woman in her early 20s

**Pavel**                    A Czech man in his early 30s  
**Agata**                    A Czech woman in her early 60s  
**Ondrej**                    A Czech man in his late 60s  
**Ivana**                    A Czech woman in her early 70s

**Setting**

A cottage in the forests of Northern Moravia.

**Time**

Now.

**ACT 1**

**Scene 1 (Optional)**

*Soft spot light up downstage center. A car with two passengers. PAVEL is driving; MCKINLEY is in the front passenger seat. Time is late afternoon. A brief moment of silence before they speak.*

PAVEL

I'm still really sorry about that. I didn't know it was going to be so-

MCKINLEY

*(interrupting him)* No, really Pavel. I didn't mind. I sat down by the river and finished my book. I actually really enjoyed some time to slow down and relax after all of the bustle of travel. *(PAVEL looks unconvinced. Moment of pause.)* I mean it! Don't worry about me, I'm fine. I promise. *(pause)* How are you holding up?

PAVEL

*(Long pause)* I'm okay.

*There is a long moment of silence that passes before PAVEL turns on the radio. The song that plays is American. MCKINLEY glances over at PAVEL, but he keeps his eyes forward on the road. His face is impassive. She shrugs her shoulders and turns to look out of the car window at the passing countryside. Spot fades out.*

*Soft spot light up downstage right. A train car. ONDREJ and AGATA are in the same area, but sit across the aisle from each other. ONDREJ is in the window seat to the right, and AGATA is in the window seat to the left. AGATA looks out of her window, pointedly ignoring ONDREJ's presence. After a moment or two, ONDREJ furtively glances over at AGATA. She does not react. He eventually turns to look out of his own window. AGATA turns to look at him briefly before returning her gaze to the passing scenery. Spot fades out.*

*Soft spot light up downstage left. A bus. IVANA sits in the window seat to the right. She is looking out of her window, but not seeing anything. She is deep within her own thoughts. A moment passes. She begins to cry quietly to herself. Spot fades out.*

*Lights up on the entire stage. A moment of observation of all of the characters en route. Lights fade out.*

## Scene 2

*Lights up. A cottage. Couch center stage with two armchairs on either side and a coffee table in front. Bookshelf upstage center, two potted plants on either side. Pictures and paintings on the walls. PAVEL and MCKINLEY enter through door downstage right, carrying small pieces of luggage. PAVEL walks directly in and sets his things down in an armchair. MCKINLEY stands close to the door, unsure.*

PAVEL

Okay, so you'll be sleeping on the couch in here, if that's okay.

MCKINLEY

Yeah that sounds fine. Where should I put my bag?

PAVEL

Anywhere really. Well, maybe keep it close to the side of the couch. Or behind it. But I guess wherever is fine.

MCKINLEY

Uhm, okay. (*Sets her bag down behind the couch upstage left, out of sight*)

PAVEL

Okay, so the bathroom is through that door (*points to a door upstage left*). The kitchen is through there (*points to a door downstage left*). I'll be staying in my mother's room and there are few more rooms upstairs that the other guests will be using, but there is only one bathroom. Hmm... am I forgetting anything? Oh! If you want to smoke, you can do so in the garden. There's an ashtray out there.

MCKINLEY

Okay that's fine. Is there anything I can help with?

PAVEL

Oh no. I don't think there's anyth—wait. What time is it?

MCKINLEY

(*Checks watch*) It's almost 4:30. Why?

PAVEL

Oh! I have to go pick up my aunt and uncle from the train station. They should be getting in any minute. Do you want to come along, or stay here?

MCKINLEY

Uh, I think I'll just stay here, if that's okay.

PAVEL

No, that's fine. Make yourself at home. I'll be back shortly.

*PAVEL exits through door downstage right in a hurry. MCKINLEY stares at the door for a moment. This scene and the next flow seamlessly into one another.*

### Scene 3

*MCKINLEY is alone in the cottage. She slowly moves about the space looking at the decorations and pictures of the home. Her discomfort is apparent.*

MCKINLEY

I feel like I have spent my entire life avoiding this precise moment. I have lost countless family members: uncles, aunts, great grandparents, cousins - you name it. But no matter how close I was to the deceased, I never, NEVER went to their home after they passed. There is just something about it that never sat well with me. On one hand, it's just a house. A building with things inside. But on the other hand, it is so much more than that... This is someone's home. Well, **was** someone's home... And now... It's just this empty shell holding artifacts of a life that is no longer present. And yet... not completely dead. The home of the deceased is a cross between a museum and a mausoleum; every object has its own story, its own set of memories, but at the same time each one is overshadowed with the knowledge that its owner is no longer here. Take this, for example. *(She picks up an obviously handmade clay vase)* Did Klara make this? Did Pavel? Was it handed down through the generations of their family, or did they buy it for ten crowns at a flea market? Or this? *(She replaces the vase and picks up an old photo of a baby smiling)*. Whose baby is this? Is it baby Pavel? Or maybe it's baby Klara. Who took this picture? How did the photographer get the baby to smile so genuinely? Is this some cherished photo of a great niece or nephew? Or perhaps a cousin? Would Pavel even know the answers to these questions? Maybe. But maybe not. *(Replaces photograph)* Would any of these things mean as much to anyone else as they meant to Klara? How many stories will have been forgotten without her here to tell them? *(Pause)* I didn't

even know her. I never knew she even existed. I mean, of course I knew Pavel had a mother, but I didn't know who Klara Hajekova was. I never will... And yet, I'm in her home... *(Slowly begins to walk towards couch, looking around as she does. She sits down. Pause)* I don't belong here. *(Beat)* But here I am.

*Lights fade out as she finishes her last line.*

#### Scene 4

*Lights up. The cottage is empty. There are of few moments of stillness. IVANA enters through the door downstage right. She closes the door behind her, and removes her shoes at the door. She turns around looks at the room for a long moment before placing her bag next to the armchair stage right. She looks around the space, visibly struggling with the strength of her emotions. She picks up a picture frame from the coffee table. She looks at it for a while, then breaks down into quiet sobs, clutching the frame to her chest. A toilet flushes. IVANA jumps, startled. Hurrying to wipe her face and replace the frame, she stands up as the door upstage left opens. MCKINLEY walks out of the bathroom, wiping her hands on her pants to dry them. She sees IVANA and freezes, letting out a small shriek of surprise. They stare at each other awkwardly for a few moments. IVANA breaks the silence.*

IVANA

So... you must be Pavel's American friend, yes?

MCKINLEY

*(Snapping out of it)* Oh! Yes. *(Walking toward IVANA, hand extended)* Uh, I'm McKinley.

*They shake hands.*

IVANA

Ivana. *(Attempts a smile)* It's a pleasure to meet you.

MCKINLEY

*(Manages a genuine smile)* It's nice to meet you too. *(Pause)* Pavel went to go pick up his aunt and uncle from the train station. He should be back soon I think.

IVANA

I see. *(Awkward silence)* Would you like some tea? I'm sure Klara has some in the kitchen.

MCKINLEY

*(Winces a little at the mention of Klara, as if she's forgotten where she was. She smiles weakly)* I'd love to have some tea.

*IVANA leads the way to the kitchen door downstage left, MCKINLEY in tow. Before going through the door, MCKINLEY pauses.*

IVANA

*(From offstage)* McKinley, do you prefer green or earl grey? There's coffee as well.

MCKINLEY

*(Pauses for an instant before answering back in an attempt at being cheerful)* Earl grey is fine!

*MCKINLEY exits. Lights fade out as the door closes behind her.*

**Scene 5**

Lights up. MCKINLEY and IVANA are sitting in the living room, MCKINLEY on the stage right side of the couch, IVANA in the stage left armchair. IVANA is holding her cup of tea, but not drinking it. There is a far away look in her eyes. MCKINLEY sips her tea with thinly veiled discomfort. They both startle slightly as the door downstage right opens. PAVEL enters, followed closely by AGATA. ONDREJ brings up the rear. Each person removes his or her shoes at the front door.

PAVEL

(Surprised to see IVANA there) Hello Ivana! (Shoots MCKINLEY an apologetic look) I didn't expect you until later this evening. I would have picked you up from the bus stop.

PAVEL walks over to IVANA, who stands to greet him. They kiss each other on both cheeks. Meanwhile, AGATA and ONDREJ set down their bags. MCKINLEY continues to stand there awkwardly.

IVANA

(Warmly) I decided to come earlier. Don't worry about me dear. The walk did me good. I've missed this mountain air. (Spots Agata and crosses towards her. They kiss cheeks and embrace) It has been too long!

AGATA

(Squeezes IVANA's arms gently after the hug) It is so good to see you.

ONDREJ

(Dryly) We missed you at the service.

AGATA shoots him a look. IVANA takes it in stride, kisses ONDREJ on both cheeks.

IVANA

I wish I could have been there. You look well, Ondrej.

PAVEL

(Noticing MCKINLEY) Ivana, I assume you've already met McKinley. McKinley, this is my mother's younger sister, Agata.

MCKINLEY

(Shaking AGATA's hand) It is lovely to meet you.

AGATA

(Smiles) I am glad to meet you, McKinley. Even under such circumstances.

ONDREJ

*(Stepping forward and extending his hand)* I'm Pavel's uncle, Ondrej. *(As he shakes MCKINLEY's hand, he looks pointedly down at her feet. She suddenly becomes aware that she is the only one still wearing shoes)* I suppose it's an American custom to track dirt through the inside of people's houses.

MCKINLEY

*(Blushing)* I- I'm sorry, I didn't-

PAVEL

*(Interrupting)* That's my fault uncle. McKinley has never come to the Czech Republic before, and removing your shoes at the door is not as common a practice in the States as here. I forgot to inform her. I have been quite... *(makes direct eye contact with ONDREJ)*... distracted.

*ONDREJ starts to reply, but is shushed by AGATA, who pushes her way in front of him.*

AGATA

*(Addressing PAVEL)* So where should I put my bag?

PAVEL

*(Relieved at the change of subject)* The guest room upstairs. I'll carry your bag. *(Goes to the door to pick up AGATA's bag, turns to IVANA)* Ivana, you can either sleep on an air mattress upstairs or- *(nodding to the door upstage right)* here in my mother's room. It's up to you.

IVANA

If you don't mind, I think I'll stay in your mother's room. If I lay on the ground, I might not be able to get back up again *(lets out a small giggle)*.

PAVEL

I don't mind at all. *(Addressing ONDREJ)* Uncle, you will also be sleeping upstairs, but on the pull out couch. Unless you prefer the air mattress.

ONDREJ

*(Picking up his bag)* The couch will be fine.

*PAVEL nods in acknowledgement. He leads the way to the door downstage left, followed first by ONDREJ, then AGATA. IVANA goes over to the armchair and picks up her bag, heading towards the door upstage right. While everyone else is in motion, MCKINLEY is still. As the doors close and the family members exit, the lights start to slowly fade out.*

MCKINLEY

This is going to be much, much worse than I thought... *(Pause)* When you first meet someone, you are accurately able to draw conclusions about their emotions and attitudes within the

first five minutes of interaction. Psychologists call it thin slicing. Everything from word choice, to tone of voice, to body posture can give you away. The most interesting part of this is that when asked how they were able to make these deductions, most of the subjects are unable to answer. This means that most of the decision-making occurs automatically and subconsciously. And it's almost always accurate. *(Pause)* Essentially, people are going to decide what they want to about you regardless of what you do to combat it. So, why bother trying to make a good impression... Right? *(Pause)* At least that seems to be the general consensus in this crowd.

*MCKINLEY remains motionless as the stage goes dark.*

## **ACT 2**

### **Scene 1:**

*Lights up. MCKINLEY and PAVEL are sitting on the couch. AGATA is sitting in the stage right armchair and IVANA is in the armchair stage left. ONDREJ is standing by the bookshelf, hands clasped behind the small of his back. Silence.*

IVANA

*(Breaking the silence)* Tell me about the service. I'm sure it was lovely.

AGATA

*(Relieved)* It was quite nice. We had it outside in the garden of this small restaurant in Prague. It was a small affair, but it had a good turnout. More people came than I expected, just because of the distance. We decorated this table with candles and fresh flowers for the urn.

IVANA

Sunflowers?

AGATA

*(Smiling sadly)* Of course. I had to search for them, but I managed to find some beautiful ones in a tiny corner store. It's funny, usually I see them everywhere, but the moment you need them, they are nearly impossible to find. But that's just life I suppose. *(Small chuckle before continuing)* Everyone who came said a few words, and then we listened to some of her favorite songs and just... remembered. *(Voice thick with unshed tears)* It was... nice.

IVANA

*(Choked up)* Certainly sounds like it. I wish I could have attended...

ONDREJ

*(Genuine, for once)* Don't worry about it Ivana. You'll be here for the important part. The service was rather informal. There was no casket, no burial-

PAVEL

*(Interrupting, speaking to MCKINLEY)* My mother never wanted to be buried. She always told me the idea of being put under that much earth held no appeal for her.

AGATA

*(Smiling)* Yes, our Klara was a creature of the air and sun, not of the earth. I think she would have been content with the service, though she would have scolded all of the guests for their tears.

PAVEL

Her favorite thing in the world was to make people smile. She would have hated to see everyone so upset... *(Small silence)* But yes, in the end, it was a nice service.

IVANA

What did you think of the service McKinley? Was it anything like those you've been to in America?

ONDREJ

*(Cutting McKinley off before she can speak)* She wasn't there.

IVANA

Oh.

PAVEL

I thought McKinley would be more comfortable elsewhere on her first day in Prague.

MCKINLEY

*(After an uncomfortable moment of silence)* I... I actually ended up down by the river. I was able to walk through the city a little bit, and then managed to finish a book I had started on the plane... It was nice to be able to spend some time in the sunshine. *(Pause)* The service does sound like it was very nice, though.

AGATA

I don't blame you, McKinley. It was a beautiful day today. What do you think of Prague, based on the little you've seen so far?

MCKINLEY

I think it's beautiful! This is my first time out of the US, so I don't really have much to compare it to. *(Thinks for a moment)* I think one of the things that stuck out to me the most on my walk was the architecture. It's so intricate and colorful, nothing like what I've seen back home.

ONDREJ

*(Under his breath, but everyone hears him)* Some holiday. Spending her first night at a dead woman's cottage...

MCKINLEY flushes bright red. AGATA and IVANA stare at ONDREJ in relative disbelief. A moment passes.

PAVEL

*(Standing up)* I don't know about you, McKinley, but I could use a cigarette. Excuse me. *(He moves towards the door downstage right)*

MCKINLEY

*(Following his lead)* Pardon me.

PAVEL and MCKINLEY exit downstage right. AGATA and ONDREJ make eye contact. She looks away, shaking her head. Lights fade out.

## Scene 2

*Lights up. Garden. There is a bench angled upstage located downstage left. PAVEL and MCKINLEY stand center stage. They both have unlit cigarettes in their mouths. PAVEL lights MCKINLEY's, and then his own before speaking.*

PAVEL

*(Taking a deep drag, then exhaling)* I'm so sorry about all that mess. I didn't think-

MCKINLEY

*(Interrupting him)* No don't apologize. *(She moves over to the bench and sits down)* It's okay.

PAVEL

*(Unconvinced. Moves towards her)* Are you alright?

MCKINLEY

Yeah, I'm fine. *(PAVEL looks at her)* No, really, I'm okay. Just a little uncomfortable, that's all. And maybe more than a little sad. *(Pause)* In all likelihood, I'm mostly just jetlagged.

PAVEL

*(Looks stricken. Walks slowly over to the other side of the bench and sits. Takes another deep drag)* I'm so sorry McKinley... This was a bad idea. I never should have brought you here...

MCKINLEY

*(Putting her hand on PAVEL's arm. He looks up at her)* Stop. I'm glad that I came. *(PAVEL looks at her, still disbelieving)* Really! I mean it. *(Hugs him with one arm for a brief moment. Pause. Then, playfully)* Plus. You need some sort of buffer with this crowd.

PAVEL

*(Laughing)* You aren't joking!

MCKINLEY

I mean seriously! What is the story here?

PAVEL

*(Looks back toward the house before speaking)* Well Agata and Ondrej were married for twenty years. About ten years ago, they got a divorce. I still don't know what caused the split, but there were some rumors of infidelity. I assume on my uncle's side, but I don't really know, and I'm certainly not going to ask. *(Pause)* It's funny to think about. The divorce was really messy, even though they never had any children. But even so, my mother wanted them both present... *(Notices MCKINLEY's look of confusion)* She had attached a letter to her will, requesting that her body be cremated. Then she asked that four people be there to spread her ashes: her sister, Ondrej, Ivana, who is her only surviving friend from childhood, and me. It's interesting because the letter was dated August of last year, and as far as I know, my aunt and uncle still hate each other. I didn't know my mother was that close to Ondrej in the first place. I wish I could ask her why she-

*A loud shriek from inside the cottage startles them, making them jump. MCKINLEY and PAVEL exchange a worried glance, and hurry to put out their cigarettes in an ashtray between them on the bench. PAVEL stands and rushes to exit upstage right, MCKINLEY closely behind. Lights out.*

### Scene 3

*Lights come up as PAVEL and MCKINLEY rush into the living room from the door downstage right. They find AGATA and IVANA sitting on the couch, a large photo album open between them. ONDREJ sits in the armchair stage left, looking on bemusedly. AGATA looks up and sees PAVEL.*

AGATA

*(Waving him over excitedly)* Look what we found! Come over here. *(Looking back at the album)* I haven't seen these in ages!

PAVEL

*(Glancing back at MCKINLEY before going over to the couch)* We thought someone got hurt. You can't scream like that, you'll give us a heart attack.

IVANA

No one's having heart attacks. Now sit down and look at these photos with us old ladies.

AGATA

*(As PAVEL sits down next to her)* Oh, hush. You're only as old as you feel.

ONDREJ

If that's true, then I'm one hundred and twelve.

*Everyone laughs. MCKINLEY makes her way over to the armchair stage right and sits down. AGATA flips through the album for a few pages before stopping.*

AGATA

Oh I remember this! *(She points to a photo)* This was when Klara and I put on our first "play!" I was seven, and your mother was thirteen. I think you're in this too, Ivana. If I remember correctly, it was some kind of star-crossed romance story we came up with.

IVANA

Let's see... Ah yes! That's me. I had just turned sixteen. I think this was taken the summer before we moved to Prague.

PAVEL

You put on plays when you were children?

AGATA

Oh all the time! Your mother wanted to be an actress when she was little; didn't you know? She would cook up all kinds of ideas: everything from horror to romance to westerns!

Sometimes we even convinced our parents to take part as well.

PAVEL

No, I don't think I ever asked. I always assumed that she had wanted to be a teacher.

AGATA

Oh no, that didn't come until much later, after she married your father. She even lived in Prague for a few weeks.

PAVEL

*(In disbelief)* Really?

IVANA

Yes! Klara was sixteen when she escaped with me to my flat in Prague late in the evening. She had written me to come visit her, and decided to come back with me and spend some time in the city.

AGATA

Our mother was furious! And I was so jealous! I couldn't believe you both had left me behind.

IVANA

Well we knew if we took you along, your mother would have most certainly hunted us down. Klara did miss you terribly though. I remember she cried the first night because she felt so horrible for leaving and not telling you. You're the main reason she came home when she did.

AGATA

She did? *(Pause)* I always thought she came back because she didn't like the city.

IVANA

That was certainly a factor, but she missed you more than she missed the countryside. Klara loved the shows that we managed to see, but she said that her theater was back home with you. So back home she went.

*AGATA and IVANA muse in silence for a moment. PAVEL flips through a few pages in the album before stopping and pointing at a photo.*

PAVEL

Was this your dog, Agata?

AGATA

*(Looking at the photo and smiling)* No that was your mother's dog! His name was Bohuslav.

PAVEL

Bohuslav?

AGATA

*(Laughing)* Yes, Bohuslav! She actually named him after the neighbor she stole him from.

MCKINLEY

She stole a dog?

AGATA

Oh, it wasn't like that McKinley. In those days, dogs were everywhere. People didn't get their dogs altered; it just wasn't the custom. This meant puppies everywhere. Most people would drown most of the pups after they were born, maybe saving one or two for the children to play with. But our neighbors growing up would wait until the puppies were a month old before drowning them. After a month, the children tired of them.

MCKINLEY

*(Horrorified)* That's terrible!

AGATA

Ano. So one night, we snuck into their barn. There were ten puppies! Klara said there was no way to save all of them, so we each picked one. She picked the biggest, and I picked the runt, a tiny yellow pup I named Daisy. We took them home and raised them on goat's milk.

PAVEL

Did they ever find out that you took them?

AGATA

A few months later we were walking through the village, pushing the pups in baby carriages, when we ran into Ol' Bohuslav. He looked at the pups for a long time, then said we had some good looking children, if not a little hairy, and went on his merry way!

*Everyone laughs at this. AGATA seems to greatly enjoy the memory.*

PAVEL

I had no idea my mother was so adventurous.

IVANA

Oh Klara was the most daring of all of us. She was the light that kept us going even in the darkest times. No matter what anyone was going through, she'd always have a knack at getting them out of their heads, either by making them laugh with a story or by dragging them on another escapade.

AGATA

*(In agreement)* Klara had this way of filling up the room just by entering it. She was always so full of life and happiness, even when life itself wasn't so easy.

*Everyone is silent, contemplating this. Sadness starts to become palpable in the room again. A moment passes.*

ONDREJ

*(Standing up)* Would anyone like a glass of wine?

*Everyone does. Lights fade out as he moves towards the kitchen door.*

#### **Scene 4**

*Lights up. Some time has passed. Everyone has had a few glasses of wine. The tension in the room has lessened significantly. IVANA reaches for the bottle of wine on the coffee table.*

IVANA

*(Filling up her glass)* I miss the carelessness of childhood.

PAVEL

What do you mean?

IVANA

Everything was so new and beautiful. We were free to do whatever we pleased. Well, except for school, but even that wasn't bad. *(Pause)* We could go to the river and swim whenever we wanted. Run rampant through the forest, picking mushrooms and playing games.

AGATA

If I remember correctly, there were plenty of moments when we couldn't do exactly what we wanted.

IVANA

Even still, I think some of my happiest memories come from childhood.

ONDREJ

*(Gruffly)* That's just because all childhoods are happy.

AGATA

What?

ONDREJ

All childhoods are happy. *(Takes a sip of wine)* That's just how children are wired. You forget all of the bad memories and keep the good ones.

AGATA

Ne, I don't think that's true. I have plenty of memories from my childhood that are less than pleasant.

ONDREJ

But would you say your childhood was a happy one?

AGATA

Well, yes, but that doesn't mean-

MCKINLEY

*(Interrupting)* What is your favorite memory from childhood?

AGATA

*(Offended at being cut off)* What?

MCKINLEY

*(Flushing slightly)* A favorite memory, if you have one.

*Tense silence. MCKINLEY shifts uncomfortably in her chair.*

IVANA

*(Rescuing her)* If you can't think of one, Agata, I have one. *(MCKINLEY smiles at her gratefully)* This might sound odd, but some of my favorite memories come from spending the night at my grandparent's flat in Prague. I remember trying to fall asleep and watching the shadows dance on the walls. The sounds from the street contrasting against the stillness of the room were my favorite lullaby. I always felt completely at peace there.

MCKINLEY

*(Smiling)* That sounds lovely...

PAVEL

I've got one. I remember every weekend during the summer my mother and I would go into the forest to collect mushrooms

and blueberries. *(Smiles)* We used to have these competitions to see who could collect the most blueberries. Then we would go home, and Maminka would make a pie and jam out of them. Whoever won the contest got to have the first slice of pie.

MCKINLEY

Who usually won?

PAVEL

I always did. *(Pause)* But I think she let me win. *(Sips wine. Pause)* What about you McKinley? Do you have a favorite memory?

MCKINLEY

Hmmm... Mine is more of a funny story than a memory.

IVANA

*(Warmly)* Let's hear it.

MCKINLEY

I was known for being very clumsy when I was a child. I was always spilling things or falling down or knocking things over... The funny thing is, it would always seem to flare up when I was with the family members that expected it to happen the most. My paternal grandmother for example. She was the kind of woman who kept everything in order. She had a lot of special knickknacks, and everything she ever did was done with great care. *(Pause)* Well, one night, my grandmother took me, my little brother, and my two cousins out to dinner. We had just ordered our drinks when my Mommom went to the restroom to wash her hands. I started to take a sip of my brand new, full to the brim glass of Coke... and somehow managed to knock it over. It went straight across the table and right into Mommom's open purse!

*Everyone erupts into laughter. The tension that had been there since MCKINLEY's interruption is completely diffused.*

MCKINLEY

And that's not even the end of it! Later, when we went back to Mommom's house for the evening, she sent the grandchildren to go open the door while she checked her bird feeders. My cousin, Tori, tried to open the door, but the key wouldn't turn in the lock. My other cousin tried; no luck. No one wanted to be chided for not being able to open the door, and my little brother was only five, so it was up to me. I grabbed the key and gave it a good, hard wrench... and promptly broke it off inside the lock! We all look at the door in horror and my little brother says, full of foreboding, "Sissy..." *(Everyone laughs again)* You see, Mommom really loved ladybugs, and her house key was custom made: a green key covered in little ladybugs. Needless to say, it

was a few weeks before I went to visit my grandmother again!  
(Giggles) What about you, Ondrej? Do you have one?

ONDREJ

Oh just the normal stuff I guess. Going to my grandmother's,  
going shopping with my mother once a week, playing with  
friends.

IVANA

Oh come on. You have to have some story to tell.

ONDREJ

(Shrugs) I won a poetry reading contest once.

AGATA

You're no fun. I have one, though it's more of my father's  
story than my own.

MCKINLEY

That's fine!

AGATA

Well, after the Russians came in the 50s, the Scouts were  
banned for being too "Western." In their place they formed  
the Pioneers. My father was a doctor, and he sometimes  
worked for these groups. One day, a young woman came to him  
because she was feeling ill. He attended to her, but she  
lingered around afterward like she wanted to say something.  
So he asked her what was wrong and she told him that last  
night she went to go work on the collective, but before they  
could start the work, the head of the collective pulled her  
aside and led her to a place where they stored hay so that  
they could have a "pleasure." Apparently she had had her eye  
on him for quite sometime, but she looked very distraught  
for a moment before telling my father, 'We will never build  
a socialist country if they want the pleasure before the  
work!' (Everyone bursts in to laughter) She didn't mind the  
hay barn "pleasure," she only cared that it came before the  
work was finished!

*Laughter continues. As it dies down, PAVEL goes to  
refill his glass and discovers the bottle is empty.*

PAVEL

(Standing) Looks like we're out. More wine? I can go to the  
cellar and grab another bottle or two?

*Everyone agrees. Lights fade out as PAVEL exits  
through the kitchen door.*

## Scene 5

*Lights up. MCKINLEY sits on the stage right side of the couch, PAVEL next to her. AGATA is standing next to the bookshelf, reading the titles. IVANA is in the armchair stage left. ONDREJ sits in the armchair stage right. A moment of comfortable silence.*

ONDREJ

(Abruptly) Kde je ta urna?

*IVANA looks up, startled, as if she had forgotten why she was there. AGATA turns to stare at ONDREJ.*

PAVEL

In her bedroom.

ONDREJ

Ah. (Long pause) So where exactly are we spreading the ashes?

PAVEL

Nevím... The letter didn't specify where. It just said "on the property."

ONDREJ

But that could mean almost anything. (*PAVEL doesn't respond. Beat*) I think the ashes should be spread in the forest. She spent most of her time there.

AGATA

No she didn't. If she wasn't in the house crafting, she was in the garden. Those flowers are- were her pride and joy. It seems only right for her to be placed among them.

ONDREJ

Ne, Klara would never want to be confined to such a small space as the garden.

PAVEL

I was thinking the river would be a nice place to do it. She always loved to sit by the waters edge and paint.

AGATA

(*Passing over his comment*) That's nice dear. (*To ONDREJ*) What are you talking about? You didn't know her well enough to say what she would or wouldn't want. I'm not even sure why you're here at all!

ONDREJ

(*Sharply*) Perhaps you don't, excuse me, didn't know your sister as well as you thought you did Agata.

AGATA

(*Gasps, incredulous*) WHAT?

IVANA

I think Klara would be happy wherever we put her. Or else she would have specified in her letter.

PAVEL

(*Pleading*) Ivana is right. She wouldn't want us to-

AGATA

(*Cutting him off*) WHAT DID YOU SAY TO ME?

ONDREJ

(*Raising his voice*) I said, perhaps you didn't know your sister as well as you thought you did!

PAVEL

Strýc, prosím.

AGATA

(*Advancing on ONDREJ*) How **dare** you! How dare you suggest I didn't know her! I knew her better than anyone!

PAVEL

(*Yelling*) ENOUGH! You are both so disrespectful! To come into her house and fight like this? What would she have to she say about that?

ONDREJ

(*Whirling on PAVEL*) No? And how respectful is it to bring a piece of American ass to your dead mother's house, when you yourself couldn't even be bothered to visit her here when she was still alive? What would she have to say to tha-

*AGATA slaps ONDREJ in the face. A moment of stunned silence. PAVEL storms past ONDREJ and AGATA and exits downstage right. MCKINLEY hesitates, then follows PAVEL outside. AGATA glares at ONDREJ, then goes outside as well. ONDREJ stands there for a moment in silence.*

ONDREJ

I... (*Turns to look at IVANA*)

*IVANA makes eye contact, disgust apparent on her face, before pointedly looking away and drinking her wine. Lights fade out.*

**ACT 3**

**Scene 1**

Lights up. IVANA is still seated in the armchair stage left. ONDREJ is sitting in the armchair stage right, head hung. AGATA paces behind the couch, still fuming, but no longer furious. A moment passes. MCKINLEY enters from the door downstage right. AGATA and IVANA look at her expectantly. ONDREJ doesn't look up from the floor.

MCKINLEY

*(Sadly)* He doesn't want to come inside. *(Walks over to the couch and sits down stage right. Long pause)*

IVANA

*(Worried)* He has been out there a long time...

AGATA

*(Checking her watch)* Over an hour now.

IVANA

He'll certainly catch cold if he stays out there much longer without a jacket. Should we bring hi-

*ONDREJ stands up while she is speaking, and exits through the door downstage right. No one moves, then AGATA visibly relaxes. IVANA gets up, walks over to MCKINLEY, who still looks shaken. IVANA pats her arm kindly, reassuringly. She continues to walk towards the bathroom door as the lights fade out.*

## Scene 2

Lights up. The garden. PAVEL is sitting on the stage left side of the bench, smoking and slowly tearing up a flower he has picked. A moment passes. ONDREJ enters cautiously from upstage right. PAVEL hears him, but does not acknowledge him. ONDREJ pauses, then walks over to the bench and sits down on the opposite side. A few long moments of silence.

ONDREJ

*(Speaking to PAVEL, but unable to look at him)* When I was six years old, my father came home very late one evening. At the time I didn't know it, but now I know that he was very drunk. He came in to the house, hardly able to walk. I remember my mother asking where he had been. He looked at her without seeing her, and punched her square in the face. I was so scared that I couldn't move, but once I snapped out of it, I rushed over to her. She was lying there, twisted on the ground, and I couldn't wake her. I started screaming. This went on for a moment or two, and then my father, still

silent, kicked me. He broke my arm and three ribs. *(Pause)* The next day, he packed a suitcase before he left for work. He kissed me on my forehead and left, never saying a word. I never saw him again. *(Long pause)* To this day, I still don't know if that was his decision or my mother's... She never married again... I used to get into a lot of fights as a boy. I was small, and rarely won, but that didn't stop me from throwing the first fist when I saw fit to do so. Got myself into a lot of trouble as a teenager. Alcohol didn't help much either. *(Clears his throat)* Things got better for me when I met your aunt. For a long time, everything was okay. And then I managed to drive her away too... After that, the anger came back, much worse than before. The only person who ever put up with me was your mother... Did you know she used to invite me over for lunch every month? *(PAVEL doesn't answer)* I never missed it. Those meals have been the highlights of these last years for me... And now that she's gone... *(Voice thick with emotion)* Listen Pavel. These are not excuses. There are no excuses for what I said to you. I am just trying to explain that I am a very angry person. I have struggled with it my entire life, but I have never been more sorry for it than I am now... *(Heavy silence)* I remember when you were just a boy. Agata and I would come out here every week during the summer, and we would cook sausages over an open fire. You and I would run down to the river and go fishing every time. Soon enough, you were a better fisherman than I was. *(Pause)* I was so proud of you. I still am. *(Choking up)* You're the closest thing I ever had to a son, Pavel. Promínte... Je... Je me to... to l-líto... I never meant to...

*PAVEL quiets him, wrapping his arm around ONDREJ's shoulders. They embrace for a small moment, both shedding a few tears. PAVEL lets go of ONDREJ. ONDREJ wipes away his tears, slightly embarrassed. Silence.*

ONDREJ

I quit smoking six years ago, but I could really use a cigarette.

*PAVEL smiles and hands ONDREJ a cigarette, taking another for himself as well. They smoke in relative silence for a few moments. ONDREJ takes out a handkerchief and blows his nose quietly.*

ONDREJ

*(Wiping his nose, then replacing the handkerchief in his pocket)* I can't tell if this means I need to drink more or drink less.

*PAVEL and ONDREJ laugh. Lights fade out.*

### Scene 3

*Lights up. Some time has passed. MCKINLEY, PAVEL, and AGATA sit on the couch. IVANA in the chair stage left, ONDREJ in the chair stage right. There are three empty bottles of wine and one newly opened on the coffee table. Everyone sips in silence for a long moment.*

PAVEL

*(To AGATA)* Do you think my mother was happy here?

AGATA

*(Surprised, then thoughtful)* Ano, very much so.

PAVEL

*(Long pause)* Do you think she was happy? You know, in general? *(Quietly)* Even with a son that hardly ever visited her?

AGATA

*(Pause)* Of course she wa-

ONDREJ

*(Interrupting her)* What does it even mean to be happy in the first place?

AGATA

*(Dismissive)* Ondrej, please-

IVANA

*(Interrupting her)* I guess that depends on the person.  
*(Shrugs)* Happiness means something different to everyone.

*Everyone considers this.*

MCKINLEY

I've never really thought about it like that, but I guess it's a pretty accurate way to put it... What is your definition of happiness Ivana?

IVANA

*(Contemplates for a moment before answering)* I think happiness is more of an inner state of mind, independent of what's going on around you. For example, I can be happy even if the world around me is falling apart. For me, it's like making a choice to be happy, rather than making the choice to be unhappy.

ONDREJ

So if the world was coming to an end, you could still consider yourself happy just because you made up your mind to be so?

IVANA

*(Considers this)* Ano. There are only so many favorable moments in life. Most of the time, conditions are not so favorable, but that doesn't mean most of the time we should be unhappy. I feel as though life is about finding the diamonds among the shards of glass.

PAVEL

What about you Ondrej?

ONDREJ

For me, I am the most "happy" when I have set a goal and am moving towards accomplishing it.

MCKINLEY

So happiness for you is reaching your goals?

ONDREJ

Ne, not necessarily. It's more about the process of reaching the goal than the actual achievement itself.

PAVEL

But what about everything else in between?

ONDREJ

What do you mean?

PAVEL

The moments where you aren't actively pursuing a goal.

ONDREJ

Well, I'm always moving toward some goal.

IVANA

Come Ondrej. You can't possibly be moving toward a goal all of the time.

ONDREJ

Then I guess my other definition would be just feeling calm and okay. Not rushed, not in danger. Just... okay.

*AGATA sips her wine. Everyone is deep in thought.*

AGATA

I agree with Ivana that happiness is a state of mind, but for me it's a little different. *(Pause)* I can feel it both physically and mentally. It's like the harmony of spaces, past, present, and future. It's the feeling that everything is in its proper place. For me, happiness is equivalent to feeling fully at peace and connected with myself and those around me.

MCKINLEY

Yes! Happiness is all about connection for me too.

PAVEL

What kind of connection?

MCKINLEY

That's the beauty of it! There are endless kinds of connections that can make me happy. Like walking through the forest and just opening yourself up and taking in all of the sights, the sounds, the smells. That makes me feel fully connected to nature. But I can be just as happy sitting with a group of friends and sharing ourselves. Like right now. Sharing our inner thoughts and opinions on a topic I don't think we otherwise could ever fully grasp. *(Pause)* I can also be in my room, completely alone, reading, feeling fully connected to the world and the characters the author has created for me. Or even more so, when I myself am writing something, and I feel connected to a part of myself I don't usually interact with...

AGATA

And you, Pavel? What does happiness mean for you?

PAVEL

I guess... for me... Happiness is making decisions and doing things that make sense for me. Like taking the job at the insurance office in Prague. I don't necessarily enjoy the work that I'm doing, but it pays well, and it makes sense for me to work there. I feel happy that I am comfortable monetarily, and that I don't have to struggle. If that makes sense...

MCKINLEY

*(Smiling warmly)* I think it does. *(Thinks for a moment)* So what advice would you give to someone to find happiness?

*Long silence.*

IVANA

Promínte; I can't help you on this one. I don't give advice.

ONDREJ

Why's that?

IVANA

*(Good humouredly)* Ondrej, I have raised three children. Ever try to tell a teenager what they should do? *(Chuckles)* No, my advice-giving days are over.

ONDREJ

*(Small laugh)* I certainly understand that. I didn't raise any children, but I remember being a teenager. *(Thinks for a moment)* I guess the only advice I could give would be to slow down. Everyone is always in so much of a hurry to rush their lives away...

MCKINLEY

I think that's really good advice. I should probably follow that myself.

AGATA

That is good advice. *(Contemplates)* I would say don't make a mess. Be able to see your borders. Identify what is possible within your given space, and strive for it. *(Pause)* Do you have any Pavel?

PAVEL

*(Long moment before speaking)* I would say to cherish the moments you have with the people you love... while you still have the chance to do so... *(Takes a slow sip of wine, holding it in his mouth before swallowing it. Silence)* I really hope that my mother was happy...

*Everyone murmurs agreements. Moment of silence. IVANA sighs and starts to get up from her chair, slowly.*

IVANA

Musím jít na toaletu. *(stumbles slightly once fully upright)* Oh! Jsem trochu... dizzy! *(giggles)* Klara did always have good wine.

ONDREJ

*(Getting up)* Ano. She did. *(Walking toward IVANA)* Here, I'll walk with you. *(Takes her arm and walks her upstage left to the bathroom door)* Speaking of wine, I believe our bottle is empty...

MCKINLEY

I could use another cigarette. (*gets up*) Pavel? (*He looks over at her*) Will you join me?

PAVEL

Of course.

*MCKINLEY sets down her wine glass on the coffee table. PAVEL gets up slowly, keeping his glass in hand as he moves towards the door. They both exit through the door downstage right. IVANA and ONDREJ have reached the bathroom door, IVANA goes inside. ONDREJ turns around, realizes he is alone with AGATA, who glances over at him then looks quickly away. Awkward silence. AGATA tries to refill her glass, but the bottle is empty.*

ONDREJ

(*Gruffly*) Seženu další láhev vína.

**Translation: I'll get another bottle of wine.**

*ONDREJ exits through the kitchen door. AGATA watches him leave. She stares at her empty glass for a moment, then sets it down on the table, picking up MCKINLEY'S almost full glass instead. She takes a sip, then begins to hum. The hum turns into a song, slow and mournful.*

AGATA

Ej láska, láska, ty nejsi stálá... Ej láska, láska, ty nejsi stálá... (*pauses to take another sip*) Jako voděnka mezi brehama... Jako voděnka mezi brehama... Voda uplyne, láska pomine... Voda uplyne, láska pomine... Jako lísteček na rozmarýně...

*ONDREJ enters quietly, holding another bottle of wine. AGATA does not seem to notice, or if she does, she does not show it)*

Jako lísteček na rozmarýně... Postavím kláštor mezi horama... Postavím kláštor mezi horama... Tam budém bývat bez milovaňa... Tam budém bývat bez milovaňa...

ONDREJ

(*Singing*) Bez milovaňa, tam budém bývat...

*AGATA looks up at him, startled. He pauses, and then continues to sing the repetition. She joins in halfway through the line.*

Bez milovaňa-

AGATA AND ONDREJ

Tam budém bývat... (*pause*) Uz sá nenechám mladensom klamat... Uz sá nenechám mladensom klamat.

*AGATA looks at ONDREJ, who is still standing by the kitchen door, for a long moment.*

AGATA

*(Plaintively)* Proč nebyl jsem dost pro vás?

**Translation: Why wasn't I enough for you?**

ONDREJ

*(Goes to stand by the other end of the couch)* Nikdy nebylo mým záměrem způsobit, že bolest.

**Translation: It was never my intention to cause you pain.**

*AGATA sighs heavily. She finishes the glass of wine and looks out toward the audience (but not at them).*

AGATA

Ja vím. *(Looks at ONDREJ)* Vždycky jsem věděl. *(Pats the couch next to her. He sits)*

**Translation: I know. I always knew.**

ONDREJ

*(Opens the bottle of wine. A peace offering)* Chtěli byste ještě víno?

**Translation: Would you like more wine?**

AGATA

*(Sad smile)* Ano, prosím.

**Translation: Yes, please.**

*ONDREJ fills her glass first and then his own. He sets the bottle on the table. A moment of nostalgia and contemplation.*

ONDREJ

Byli jsme šťastní jednou.

**Translation: We were happy once.**

AGATA

*(Shakes her head, then looks at him before speaking)* Ne, jsme nebyli.

**Translation: No, we were not.**

*A heaviness fills the room. Both AGATA and ONDREJ take a sip of their wine. Lights out.*

#### Scene 4

*Lights up. Morning. MCKINLEY is asleep on the couch. AGATA enters from door downstage left. She comes over to the couch, and gently wakes MCKINLEY, who sits up abruptly, confused for a moment before remembering where she is.*

MCKINLEY

*(Attempting to fix her sleep-swept hair)* Good morning.

AGATA

Dobré ráno. *(Lingers for a moment, then sits down next to MCKINLEY on the couch)*

*Small awkward moment before AGATA speaks.*

AGATA

I just wanted to tell you that I'm glad that you came here this weekend. *(Pause)* Pavel needs a friend right now, and I'm glad he has one here.

MCKINLEY

I am glad that I came too. I'm happy to be here for Pavel.

AGATA

(Pause) Did Pavel tell you how Klara died?

MCKINLEY

No... He just said she was in some sort of accident...

AGATA

(Pause) I think you should know what happened. Maybe it would help you understand Ondrej's outburst last night... Among other things... Well, Pavel was very busy with work and classes. Klara hadn't seen him in a little over a year, and decided to surprise him in Prague. She hadn't been to the city in some five years, and lost her bearings... (Pause) Klara tried to call Pavel, but he was in a meeting and didn't take the call. Klara was crossing the street when the phone disconnected. She looked down to see what had happened, and didn't see the tram...

*PAVEL enters from the door upstage right. HE has been listening from the other room. Neither MCKINLEY nor AGATA notice that he is there.*

AGATA

(Starts to cry) I know it's not his fault. Everyone does. Everyone, except for h-

PAVEL

(Slamming the door behind him, startling both women) Not my fault?! Of course it's my fault! But you know what? That's none of your business, and it's certainly not your place to speak to **my** friend about matters that do not concern you!

AGATA

Pavlík, I just-

PAVEL

Don't call me that! (storming forward) Je mi jedno, co máte na srdci. You want to put your nose where it doesn't belong? Okay. Let's go there. Yes, it was my fault my mother got killed. I wasn't busy in a work meeting; I was sitting in a café on my lunch break. I saw her call and **chose** not to answer it.

**Translation: I do not care what you have to say.**

*MCKINLEY gasps slightly and PAVEL grimaces. ONDREJ enters from downstage left, followed closely by IVANA. AGATA and ONDREJ speak at the same time.*

AGATA

Pavel, that doesn't mean her death was your fault. Byla to nehoda! An accident!

**Translation: It was an accident!**

ONDREJ

Co se děje?

**Translation: What's happening?**

PAVEL

I'm telling a story: how Pavel killed his mother by not answering the phone. (*ONDREJ opens his mouth to speak, but PAVEL raises a hand to silence him*) Let me say it. I haven't seen my mother more than twice a year since 2011. Proč? Because that's when she found out that I wasn't the perfect son she had imagined. That's when she found out that her dítě would never marry a beautiful woman and have children. Do you want to know what she did when she found out that I was gay? Your sweet Klara told me to leave until I found a way to change. My... "tendencies" just didn't fit with her Catholic belief system. I've left out all of the savory names she called me, as well as the fact that she wouldn't even return my calls for over a year. I spent years trying to plead with her to accept the fact that I couldn't change, that I hated it as much as she did. So I stopped trying. Overtime, the selfhatred I felt for failing my mother turned into something else entirely... anger at the woman who had raised me, taught me compassion, taught me how to forgive. Yet here she was. What a hypocrite I thought! When she finally started to call me, I refused to answer. Can you blame me? (*looks around at everyone*). She wasn't as pure and innocent as you all believe. Klara hurt me more deeply than any one ever has.

*No one can respond. Lights fade out.*

## Scene 5

*Lights up. By the river. PAVEL is downstage center, closest to the water's edge, holding the urn. AGATA, IVANA, and ONDREJ stand behind him stage left. MCKINLEY stands farther away upstage right.*

PAVEL

I'm not very religious, but my mother was Catholic. So I'd like to say a short prayer before spreading her ashes. *(Swallowing the lump in his throat)* O Lord, please take my mother into your arms. She has done all of the good that she may here on Earth. Please welcome her into the joy of Your everlasting brightness. *(Pause)* She deserves to be happy, if not in this life, then in the next. *(Voice breaks)* Amen.

*PAVEL kneels by the water's edge, and slowly pours the ashes into the water. When the urn is empty, he starts to sob, truly breaking down for the first time. He drops the urn into the water and wraps his arms around his head as he falls back on to the bank. ONDREJ is the first to embrace him, then MCKINLEY, followed by AGATA and IVANA. They stay like this for a while, letting out their sorrow. Then, one by one, they stand, MCKINLEY helping PAVEL to his feet. IVANA is the first to exit upstage left. AGATA is still crying heavily, and ONDREJ takes her by the hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. They look at each other for a moment, and then embrace. After they separate, AGATA exits closely followed by ONDREJ. PAVEL takes another moment to collect himself before speaking. He looks like he's about to apologize, but MCKINLEY smiles and shakes her head. Instead, he asks*

PAVEL

Are you ready to go back up?

MCKINLEY

You go ahead. I'll be up in a minute or two.

PAVEL

Okay. Take your time.

*PAVEL moves to exit, looking over his shoulder at the river once more before leaving the stage. MCKINLEY paces slowly by the water's edge. She stops. A moment of silence. MCKINLEY takes out her cell phone and dials a number. As it rings, she looks directly into the audience. Someone answers, and she looks away.*

MCKINLEY

Hi Mama...

*Lights fade out on her last line.*

**END.**