

## **Aria before the oven**

### **Tragicomedy**

#### **Reet Kudu**

#### **CHARACTERS:**

#### **SINGER LEMBI**

#### **PHOTOGRAPHER MIHKEL**

In the middle of the room, a powerful stove is burning, the door ajar.

Above the stove hangs a huge circular clock, its seconds hand moving backwards. Photographic prints are everywhere: on the walls, on the shelves and in piles on the floor - the evergreens used to take pictures at the beginning of the twentieth century, and brand-new technical cameras on different shelves.

Lembi, a singer, sits in front of the stove on a low bench and stares at the burning wood, while she practices her vocal exercises and prepares for the evening concert.

**Lembi (humming): Aa aaa ee iiiii...aaaii. Lord, I can't seem to hit the right note anymore. I'm wheezing like an old sofa! What has happened to me here in Klaipeda?**

**Mihkel (comes into the room with a few logs, adds some of them to the oven and starts as if from half a sentence): ... why don't you want to know about the computer business? Even my friend Algimantas is getting a lot of money from it, even though he's a complete incompetent compared to me! Everybody here in Klaipeda is sure that Estonians are the best in the world at computer science, but you...?**

**L (offended). I'm the best at singing!!!! Well at least better than you, and I don't care about business! (Starts singing the Traviata aria provocatively and then coughs).**

**M (continues in an admonishing tone): The whole world is praising Estonia's tiger leap and digital revolution, but I have to teach you how to buy bus tickets online all the time!?? It's as easy in Lithuania as it is in Estonia.**

L (stops shouting and glares at the man): No, because everything is in Lithuanian, which I don't understand. Besides, there's no correlation between buying a ticket and my computer skills!

M (triumphantly): Of course there's a connection! If you had some internet knowledge, you could order an electric car from China for 500 euros!

L: I wouldn't take such a car for free. Electricity is already a swear word. If everything gets even more expensive, we'll have to learn to live in the forest instead of on the computer!

M: You just don't want to educate yourself.

L (irritated). I educate myself all the time! Can't you hear me? La-la-la-laaa (starts again with the bravura aria of Traviata). My aria is for love, not for an electric car! I need a voice for today's concert in Klaipeda, not your business advice. Babbling hasn't made anyone rich, many have been conned by internet tycoons! And from our electricity bosses too.

M: There is such a thing as a fixed electricity price. There are a thousand tricks to pay less! You can switch on the washing machine only at night, you can... (Slaps his hand.) Ah, you don't care about savings, primadonnas are always embezzling!

L (insulted). People should stick together, but you talk only about saving money! Opera heals the soul!

M: Singing doesn't cure anything, the singers are said to have spread the coronavirus the most! Probably other little germs too...

L: That's too harsh! I've got a very challenging concert, I'm getting ready, what about you?

M: You don't need to prepare to sing! (Mumbling under his nose) That's exactly what the primitive people could do.

L: I have a good ear, like all musicians. Stop your silly babbling, because it's not the opera that's ancient, it's your attitude towards me and... everything beautiful! I performed on many great theatre stages before that horrible corona plague, but I don't boast my skills like you do with your e-business!

M (with a shudder). What have I boasted about? I just wanted to develop you a little, well, teach you.

L (even more irritated). I don't need your lessons! I'm not a schoolgirl! But my vocal chords could have done with a warmer place to sleep than that awfully cold atelier of yours!

M (apologetically). It'll be warmer soon! (Adjusts the wood pile.) Why are you so impatient? I taught myself how to do stuff online....

L: Oh, here you go again! You're still full of praise! You told me what a worthy man you are in your very first online post. You boasted that you graduated from school with a silver medal and that you keep getting prizes at photo exhibitions. I was really lucky to come to your icy atelier... I should have gone to a hotel, now my voice is hoarse, my throat hurts. You had me hooked with your praise for the gorgeous atelier in the centre of town and all!

M (defiantly): I didn't double cross you, I wrote as it is, I shared accurate and honest information. You should be grateful that you can save hotel money! I didn't lie about anything. But I'm not really in favour of splurging, like all the opera primadonnas!

L (startled): What kind of tone is that? You were quite different online! Did you call me here to mock me or ... some kind of weird business?

M (reproachfully): There is no business here! You stayed in my atelier for free! My Lithuanian friend Algimantas was right that women turn everything upside down! I offered you all this like a good friend on the 'net, but you... you complain!

L: I'm not complaining, I'm singing! In what tone are you talking to me in?! I'll pay for your accommodation, oh, I was really in a mess when I came here!

M: I don't want your money!

L: Then what do you want?

M (defiantly): I already told you, I'm not a businessman, I'm a photographer! Of course, a primadonna like you wouldn't understand! My wife didn't understand either, she left me when I stopped bringing money bags home!

L (joking): So you used to be interested in money?

M (proudly boasting): I was the best computer specialist in Klaipeda printshop, I was paid very well because I foresaw a great future for the online market. I received a good education in Estonia!

L: So why didn't you foresee your own future when you moved to Klaipeda?

**M:** I just got my feet under me, I was unemployed long before I played basketball! But you think that when the opera theatres closed down for a while, it was the end of the world. You don't know anything about the life of the common people.

**L (joking).** You're an internationally award-winning photographer. Especially the blatant paparazzi must charge as much as the killers. Take a few compromising photos of Lithuanian celebrities and you're on the hill!

**M (wagging his finger at Lembi):** You're just like my wife - still a big reward and a lot of money! That's all you understand.

**L:** Don't pout so arrogantly, better explain to me why you are always exaggerating and skulking? One minute you're complaining that you're as poor as a church urchin, the next you're banging on about how you're as rich as a king and you've got loads of property?

**M:** I have nothing compared to the moneysharks in Lithuania.

**L:** But you have a atelier in the centre of Klaipeda, which you got as a freelance art photographer, then you have a cottage on a beautiful seashore. And, of course, a gorgeous apartment and a seedy piece of land. All inherited from a Lithuanian mother-in-law, as you bragged online!

**M:** That's some wealth! I live from paycheck to paycheck.

**L:** You're sitting on your own fortune, greedy and stubborn! Your atelier is full of old things like Aladdin's cave! (Lembi rises abruptly, walks around, examines the walls, notices the clock above the stove, dismayed): You have everything upside down. Even the time?! Is it just me or does it really seem that way??

**M (eagerly).** It's my invention. The time is right, but the pointers move backwards, counterclockwise! I have a lot of patents, I am famous all over Lithuania for my technical inventions.

**L:** Yes, you really have all kinds of miracles here.

**M( softly):** Take a look around, then maybe your mood will improve and you'll stop complaining!

**L:** Who's complaining!? Only you!

**M (spins around the singer, who starts doing vocal exercises again, walking around and examining things.)** I found a rare photcamera in the trash! Did you know, Lembi, that Lithuanians throw away perfectly usable things! I've rescued pots and

household appliances from the rubbish with only a minor flaw. I repair it, clean it and it looks as good as new, but the Lithuanians don't bother to do that. Estonians appreciate recycling, it is a great advantage of our nation! My parents also kept all their old stuff, I brought all the stuff I inherited from them to my basement, my summer cottages are full of worthy junk. I so love the Estonian word „taaskasutamine!“

L (sneering). Taaaaaskasutamine? Taaaas... taaaaasarmastamine Taasvaesumine? Aren't these all such beautiful new words? (Spinning around the room in a waltz.)

M (watching him with longing eyes). It's so nice to be able to speak my mother tongue again after a long time, to speak Estonian with you... taaskasutada!!!

L: You don't even know what you want!!! You don't know what you want, you want your wife back. You want to go back to Estonia, but you won't leave Klaipeda. A flesh and blood Estonian woman would be much better than your plentiful online girlfriends.

M: I don't need an online girlfriend! But it's true that I can't leave Klaipeda anymore, even though I miss Estonia so much. It's a different sea here.

L: A sea like any other sea.

M: You've obviously never been to the Neringa Peninsula if you say so!

L: I have, in the distant past.

M: You should go again, there are such powerful sand dunes. I'll show you. (Opens his photo book. Large photos of the dunes of Neringa appear on the back.)

L: There is a sunset festival in Kabli in Estonia, it is beautiful and well organised. Are there any Neringa festivals?

M: I'm not interested in festivals where people drink and party, I'm a nature photographer and I like solitude.

L: You don't really photograph anything other than just these dunes. Do you just like dunes?

M: And don't you get tired of singing the same aria every day.

L: An aria is an aria after all. Giuseppe Verdi's timeless music and it's never quite the same. It all depends on the performance, the audience, a thousand little things.

**M:** It's the same with nature, it's always changing. Only a photographer can capture a moment and make it eternal.

**L :** Even if only grains of sand are photographed?

**M:** Man is also a grain of sand in space. Have you ever been to the desert, there is a special enchantment there. People go there on camel treks, spend the night on the sand, look at the stars.

**L:** It's funny that you are a hopeless romantic, even though you hate opera.

**M:** How long do I have to repeat that I don't hate it, I just don't understand it? Expressing love through singing gets on my nerves...especially after a divorce!

**L:** Again, I don't understand your passion for sand grains. Is this love of sand also related to your failed marriage?

**M:** Why do you think that?

**L:** I'm pretty sure you first expressed your love on the Neringa sand dunes! Ah, you're even blushing like a boy. What a beauty!

**M (awkwardly):** Yes, you're clever, just there... Listen, I love talking to you! Don't mind if I sometimes say the wrong thing and can't stand opera. I haven't talked to people for so long, really spoken to people....

**L (dancing seductively):** Why don't you come back to your homeland, then, if you have such a longing for Estonians and your mother tongue? Estonia needs people who are good with internet. And other men too!

**M:** I'm used to Klaipeda. And now I have the language of Lithuania in my mouth, no one can understand that I'm not Lithuanian. But at the beginning I spoke Russian to my wife, because she was learning English at school, I was learning German grammar! My mother in law kept nagging me. She said she was ashamed that I couldn't do business! She was the one who drove us apart.

**L ( continues spinning):** Taaaaas tagasi koju, taaaastulema ja eestlasi taaaaskasutama! Estonian mothers-in-law aren't mean, they're eagerly waiting for a worthy groom like you. Taaaaas... (starts coughing and sits down again on the stove in front of the oven door.)

**M (looking for sympathy):** I really miss Estonia, but I can't move back because I want to live near my wife. In Klaipeda, I still see her sometimes (takes an ex-wife's photo from the dresser, shows it to Lembi) Isn't she a bit like you?

**L:** Are you blind or what? Where do you see the resemblance?

**M (dreamily):** There is still something in common.

**L:** Yes, that we are both female.

**M:** No, it's your demeanour that's so similar, even though she wasn't an opera prima donna!

**L:** Come back down to earth! Find yourself a new wife in Estonia and start life over in your homeland.

**M:** In Estonia, I wouldn't have anything to do with Lithuanian! It would be wasted there. It was so hard for me to learn the language. It would be a wasted effort in my country!

**L (disappointed and disheartened):** Did you really only stay in Klaipeda because of your dear Lithuanian wife? Or was there another reason? Usually brides move in with their grooms.

**M (wisecracking):** Why does life have to be ordinary? You have to travel the world and discover new places!

**L:** Indeed, Lithuania is at the end of the world, you have come a long way! The Baltic countries are all the same!

**M:** The Baltic countries are not historically similar at all. Lithuania had a duke called Mindaugas and here was the Grand Duchy. Where are the Estonians' nobles? We have only foreign barons and boyars! We are a wild nation that still believes in its witches and spirits! We are terribly stubborn, but...

**L (grumbling):** The most foolish Estonians are you, Mihkel! After all, we had Lembitu and have had a thousand years of struggle for freedom. That is why my father named me Lembi. Why should an Estonian in Lithuania bow down to some Mindaugas and cower? Or have the new princes of Klaipeda had that effect on you? (with a sneer) No, we're not going to be mocked in front of the Germans, so don't wear a robe.... (Coughs, moves closer to the fire, takes the stove-grate and starts to stir the wood). A living fire, so beautiful... Haven't sat in front of the stove for a long time.

**M:** It's a stove.

**L :** What's the difference? A fire is a fire.

**M :** For an opera prima donna, maybe not, but there's actually a big difference. A fireplace is for showing off, a stove is for warming up. My wife used to leave the stove

door open in our cottage too, so it would be like a chimney. But it's not, it's still a stove! And the oven door has to be closed!

L (sarcastically): I think your wife left because you have to argue all the time and lecture everyone! In Klaipeda you can't get over the pain of losing! In Estonia it would be much easier, we are our own people after all - our language and our mind. (Laughing.) Eeeesti keeeeel and eeeesti meeeeel. What the hell, I can't really get the right note anymore! Where did he go, you bastard?!! A voice is screeching from your cold atelier ( coughs).

M (cheerfully): It'll be warmer soon! (Throws more wood.) I already have more acquaintances in Klaipeda than in Estonia! My parents died there several years ago. Besides, I'm over my divorce.

L: It doesn't feel like it. When did you get divorced? This year? (Takes the stove and starts stirring the wood.) Uhhhh, how cold...

M: Twenty years ago.

L (lets the stove clattering to the floor): How? When did you break up?

M: The same Christmas Eve as today, twenty years ago.

L: Twenty-eight years ago? That's terrible! Have you lived alone all the time?

M: In the meantime, I moved in with my father in law. We got on well, being men anyway. My wife didn't talk to him any more because he divorced my mother-in-law. I felt sorry for him when he got sick, I took care of him and fed him.... He was nearly blind in his old age, I wouldn't let him go into a nursing home. Now the old man is no more and I live alone in his pre-fab apartment with his cat.

L (shrugging):Yes, it's definitely more comfortable in a flat than in this atelier. It's a bit stuffy in here! It's like a kennel.

M (reproachfully): When my wife kicked me out, I lived here for twelve long years. You're already complaining about one night!

L: So why don't you live here yourself, in your father-in-law's warm flat?

M (justifying himself): I'm used to it. My cat too! But it was much more fun with my father in law! We were both free of women and happy for it.

L: You don't seem to be very happy. You're always crying after your lady!

**M (looking for sympathy):** I don't like living all alone! But when my cat goes to heaven, I'm all alone .

**L:** Listen, stop your whining! You're a man full of life and there are hundreds of women in Estonia who would be happy to....

**M:** But I'm not ready. I love my wife.

**L: (sneering):** The one who left?

**M ( angrily ):** I've only had one wife.

**L:** Judging by your online postings, you seem to have had hundreds of wives. One hotter than the next!

**M (grumpily):** It's as silly to look for love on the internet as it is to look for it on a hotline.

**L:** So why are you looking?

**M:** I'm not looking for anything.

**L.** And yet I'm here in the kennel only because of our internet friendship.

**M:** I thought you were coming to Klaipeda to give a concert, so I offered you my studio. But did you come looking for a man?

**L:** What a shame! Of course I came to give a concert, but if we hadn't met on the online portal, I would have gone to the hotel yesterday.

**M:** You were very pleased at first that I came to meet you by car at Palanga airport! So what's wrong now?

**L:** Don't be arrogant all the time. Of course I'm grateful, but I didn't know that... (starts coughing.)

**M:** Bolder, bolder... Tell me straight out what you're missing? You got a free overnight stay and a nice reception with dinner that I cooked all day. But all you do is pout! That's the way women are, always whining!

**L (angrily):** I don't pout, I cough! Can't you hear? My voice croaks and I can't get the right tone. How can I sing tonight? It's still too cold! This damn corona took a long break and last night was still awful here, I'm completely rusty.

**M: You are not. You have such a powerful voice, you scared my cat away. I should have left my cat in the flat. It's absolutely impossible to find him in this old house. I can't even give him an an injection.**

**L (surprised): You inject your cat yourself? Are you still a vet? As a hobby?**

**M: I'm not a vet, but I really inject my cat myself because he's used to me. He's got a disease so bad that he has to poke you every day! He used to be such a beautiful fat cat, and now he's really skinny (sighs piteously, turns his head to hide his tears).**

**L: Does Klaipeda have that effect on all our men? Makes them foolish and faithful forever? Or are you loyal only to your cat?**

**M (wiping his eyes). He's sick and shouldn't be wandering the streets. And now he's lost!**

**L (shyly): Don't worry, cats are much cleverer than us, they can sleep in some dark corner of the house for sixteen hours and come out when the time is right! Your cat will come out when it wants to eat. (Singing):**

**Plains are cities of animals.**

**Caves are the houses of animals.**

**The horns are the breasts of animals**

**and the daughters of animals are sons.**

**M (wiping his nose in pain): Daughters can't be sons!**

**L: You must have been so clever, now you can't even understand children's poetry, even though you're always praising the Estonian language! We have male kittens, but not female kittens. There are calves, piglets, lambs, but dogs and cats only have sons, daughters are silenced! Where are the eyes of our linguists. Cats keep having cubs when they should have had kittens long ago!**

**M: In the eighties, I went to a kindergarten in Võrumaa, but the poems were quite different!**

**L: Ah yes, I forgot you were our man in Klaipeda. A hopeless lover.... Listen, you big fool, make up with your wife, then you won't be so vain and won't have to water your cat. Or is your ex now living with another man?**

**M (startled): Of course not! When we didn't see each other for a while, after many years neither of us had a new love. I didn't even start drinking, my wife was drinking.... Everyone warned me that if you divorce, you start! But I held back on purpose!**

**L : You really are a master at restraining yourself. Take a step forward once in a while and set your clock right again. Now you're making more money after all?! Or at least you could, because you boast about your business acumen. And if I remember correctly, you recently won another international award for your series of photographs of the Nida sandflats. You were bragging about it for a long time online! I'm sure your wife has been waiting for you for a long time, she needs a man!**

**M (with a heavy sigh): Your neighbour also said that your wife sometimes needs a man! Damn, he introduced my wife to some Polish guy. I still haven't forgiven him for bringing a damned foreigner into our flat!**

**L: Kulla Mihkel, you yourself are a foreigner in Klaipeda. What's the difference - from Estonia or Poland? All immigrants are the same! Your wife couldn't find a husband in Lithuania.**

**M: Leave my wife and cat alone!**

**L: You're the one who started talking about them! How was I supposed to know that your wife is now living with a Pole? And that the cat's dying. You didn't say a word about them online.**

**M: My wife doesn't live with a Pole, she lives with a bottle. She was drinking!**

**L (groaning in exasperation): Start over with her and stop your whining. She'll forgive you if you have this...whatever it was...eternal love!**

**M (wisecracking): You can't step in the same river twice.**

**L: Heaven have mercy, love is not a river, but is sometimes a plague worse than the corona! If you haven't got over a woman in twenty years, you won't get over her in the next twenty. Go, ask her forgiveness!**

M: For what?

L: I suppose there's a lot to apologize for when she's gone.

M: She's the one who should apologize for kicking me out of my own apartment!

L: You want your wife back, not her you!

M: Why do you think that?

L: I don't think anything, it's just a summary of your complaints! I still haven't really figured out why you broke up if you're so in love?

M (in a lecturer's tone): Business has driven many couples apart. Especially when life in Lithuania turned completely upside down and professionals like me became unemployed!

L: Pull yourself together! You're a good Estonian man whose worth was not understood by a stupid Lithuanian woman.

M (hiding tears). Ah, my wife was right after all, that I became a complete destitute, my parents couldn't adapt and neither could I! (Becomes even more miserable.) I couldn't cope with the irritation! In the beginning I was much needed in the printing shop, being computer savvy. I got a hard salary and my wife was used to it. I was the only one who knew all the technical stuff, I had inventions and patents, but a lot of inventions were just stolen away from me because I couldn't get them in the right form at the right time.

L: You should have resisted! You should have sued!

M: You sound just like my wife again. She also reproached me for not suing and for giving in to those raids. She accused me of being unemployed in my day job, of not knowing how to do business and make money! But I just walked out of the print shop with my head held high when I realised I had been robbed bare.

L (impatiently): You stole your own self! Stop your foolish whining and make up with your ex. After all, she's a drunkard and a thief now too! You'd make a good couple!

M: How now? How dare you...? I'm an internationally renowned photographer!

L (awkwardly): You said yourself that your wife called you a thief.

**M (furiously):** I said my wife said I was, but I'm not, and I ask you not to speak to me in that tone, not under any circumstances, I won't allow it (approaches threateningly)!

**L (retreats to the corner, startled):** Yes, of course you're a good photographer, not a thie... you are a genius! I see that you keep photographing me secretly too, even though I asked you not to. I'm here without make-up and all... I can't stand paparazzi!

**M:** Ah, now I'm a paparazzi! You should choose your words wisely!

**L:** And you choose what you take a picture of. Is that why you invited me to spend the night in your atelier, to be a free model for you? (Sings the beginning of the Traviata aria again.)

**M (puffing his nose):** Better to be a free model than to nag all the time, so that my ears are already plugged!

**L:** What shame, you're at the other end of the room.... And I'm singing, not nagging! Of course, you'd like it if the singers were the ones most to blame for spreading the corona, especially our Vanemuine!

**M (snorting evilly):** I believe in science and scientists!

**L:** Scientists say one thing today and another tomorrow! But it's a fact that during the plague, when the singers weren't allowed on stage, some companies still got rich! All those vaccine sellers, test makers and other truth tellers. Money is added to their accounts by both evils, vaccines and restrictions! And now cannons and bombs. (Only now noticing that the man has been taking pictures of her the whole time, once from his knees, then almost lying down, then from the back of a wheelchair) And stop the wicked photo hunt, I didn't give you permission!!!

**M (awkwardly hiding her camera behind her back):** I'm just photographing for fun. It's just professional cretinism that I have to practice my hand all the time and think of better angles....

**L (bored):** You'd better think of a way to get my voice back. I've got a concert in a couple of hours, but my voice is crackling like a broken radio (Starts singing the pre-mortem aria from Traviata in a very high, high-pitched voice).

**M (jumping frightened away from the woman and holding his ears):** I've heard that singers drink raw eggs. Some are helped by a splash of brandy. I have some in the cupboard.

**L: You have cognac? Why didn't you say so before!**

**M: Lithuanians are gallant hosts, I've learned from them that you should always have cognac on hand.**

**L : I'd really like a shot of cold cognac right now! For the sake of my voice, although I don't usually drink before a concert.**

**M (rushes to the cupboard, deftly opens the bottle): It was supposed to be the best French drink. I'm glad I can offer it to you and talk to you! Don't mind if I say the wrong thing sometimes! My mother-in-law was also upset that I was terribly stubborn and couldn't compliment nicely. She has fine Lithuanian noble blood, but I the blood of a peasant! The Grand Duchy of Lithuania ... this Rzeczpospolita...**

**L: What was this res...polita?**

**M: Didn't you go to school? Oh, I forgot, you don't want to study, only sing! Well, Rzeczpospolita was ... Rzeczpospolita! The Polish-Lithuanian Sejm was said to have decided everything there, and my mother-in-law's ancestors were said to have been ślahta! Now even some Lithuanians reproach the government that everything is much cheaper in Poland! I guess they want a new Rzeczpospolita like my mother-in-law, who thought Lithuanian was the most beautiful language in the world, even though it is Estonian! They haven't even found a better word for the sea than "jura" ...!**

**L: What jura? Don't mock the Lithuanians just because your wife left you! How is the word "sea" actually in Lithuanian?**

**M (laughing triumphantly): That's what they call the sea - jura, juuuura, which in Estonian is complete nonsense or jora, not something beautiful, nautical, foamy, wavy, but jurrrrra! And my wife was also born jura, because my mother-in-law's name was Jurate, may the earth be light for her! What was to be expected of a woman with such a name? Only quarrels and strife! Lithuanians were already very warlike in their great duchy.**

**L: (swallows the lace in one gulp, wrinkles her face): Who's warlike here? Arguing with you is like carrying water with a skimmer. You are always right! Perhaps our sea means something even stranger in Lithuanian than jora and jura to us??? Words are just combinations of letters. But if you sing them beautifully, all words are like a**

love aria. Amore mio, amore, aaamore.... Don't be so narrow-minded! Poor mother-in-law, I feel for her and for all Lithuania!

M: What's got into you now? Do you really like some kind of "jura" more than the Estonian word "meri"?

L: All you want to do is teach everyone, even remake the Lithuanian language! You always have to be right.

M: But I am right! The whole world knows that it's good to sing in Estonian because we have a lot of vowels. And everyone knows it, except a prima donna like you, that the digital age is upon us.

L (mockingly): Maybe we're in for an ice age and the life of a caveman? That primordial thing you think is appropriate for singers.

M: There's talk of global warming and...?

L: Yeah, everyone's predicting the planet's going to get warmer, but it's just freezing outside! I'm still freezing (finishes the second cognac in one gulp). Do you have these frosts every winter in Klaipeda?

M: No, this is extraordinary. But there is a snowstorm in Germany and Scandinavia at the moment. It's a good thing your plane landed yesterday. Palanga airport is closed today. And, you know, the storm is nothing in the city, it's still raging on the Neringa peninsula. Want me to take you to see it tomorrow? The planes won't fly anyway, you can't get back to Estonia.

L(laughing): I feel like I'll stay here forever, even though I don't have eternal love in Klaipeda like you!

M (with unexpected glee). You can find anything in Lithuania. You see what a wonder I found right next to the rubbish bin.

L (repulsed, eyeing another camera that Michael hands her): What strange monstrosity?! Can you really take a picture with it?

M (eagerly): You can, you can! (takes a picture of Lembi.)

L: Don't start that again, I don't like this paparazzi stuffing of yours at all. Who drove Princess Diana to her death?

M (childishly offended): Death? That's too much!

L: The atlejees here can freeze to death anyway!

**M:** Listen, I came to meet you at the airport, I treated you to the Lithuanian national dish - zepelins - I picked out the food myself, I prepared it with my own hands, you know how complicated it is, although it looks like an empty potato ball, meat inside.... Making a good zepelin is a great art. But you keep repeating! Paparazzi , paparazzi , I should have known! (Slaps his hand and starts angrily throwing fish into the oven!).

**L (retorts with equal fury):** If only I had known in advance that you weren't the least bit interested in my art of singing, but in your art of cooking! You won't even come to my concert in the evening!

**M (pulling herself together, as calmly as possible):** I'm very interested in art, but I've already said I don't understand opera singing!

**L:** Then what do you understand at all? What art?

**M (justifying herself):** Well, listen, that opera stuff is old! Now's the era of the synthesizer and electric guitar!

**L:** How could I forget! The computer is the only art, everything else is out of date!

**M:** Not all of it, but a lot of the deep music isn't really that deep, that hits you deep down, straight to the soul. Opera arias are a constant wailing and howling, like a funeral for some kind of weeping nun.

**L (wryly):** Truly very artistic opera criticism! Better explain to me, finally, why you invited me anyway, if you don't tolerate howlers?

**M :** I invited you like an Estonian, dear compatriot! Why should I come to your concert if I don't know anything? It would be torture for me, but the concert hall is full without me. There are only a few free seats, I just checked online....

**L (mockingly):** ... those few seats are waiting for my online friend Mihkel, who considers himself a great lover of art, but can't listen to opera singing! Not even in Estonian. (Provocatively twirling and banging wood) And I'm waiting for a plausible answer as to why you dragged me into your studio anyway?

**M (trying to hide her irritation):** How many times must it be repeated? Why should you have gone to an expensive hotel when you can stay in my studio for free? You yourself wrote to me that singers also have a hard time after the corona restrictions, their fingers are at the very bottom, their bank account is empty! The Klaipeda performance is almost a charity, the fee is minimal.

**L (groaning):** Yes, it's awful, I'll have to start singing on the street soon. It would be much easier for you to start from scratch, Estonia is in dire need of computer men, come back at once! (downs another pint of cognac). I'd be happy too!

**M (provocatively):** Happy? What for? And who's actually giving advice here? Not me, you! First of all, you're advising me to make up with my wife! Now you know better than me where and how to live! You really are like my wife!

**L:** No, because I don't drink and she doesn't sing!

**M:** Oh don't drink? What are you doing now? Don't think you're better than other women because you're a great prima donna. Not everyone gets on stage! Life isn't a singing contest, a normal person has to work hard all day!

**L:** You know nothing about singing. You don't know what you're talking about, you don't know anything! You'd better get your life in order and stop whining at me! Go to a real job yourself, yes, a supermarket would be just the place for the likes of you.

**M (approaching threateningly):** My life is none of your concern!

**L (bravely):** Of course not and my concert is none of your concern! My voice is completely dead in this cold studio.

**M (insulted):** You yourself were delighted yesterday with your live fire and live fire! Nobody brought you here by force.

**L:** I didn't know it would get as deadly cold here at night as in the morgue. Also, do you really not have any radiators?

**M:** Electricity is expensive. I don't even use an electric kettle, just a gas stove.

**L:** Now gas is expensive in Estonia too. So it's not in Klaipeda?

**M:** Not that expensive and I am used to saving electricity.

**L:** That's right, you're used to saving everything and constantly complaining! You'd rather die of hunger and cold than go and ask your ex-wife to come back. I bet she doesn't know your eternal love. You won't tell her, will you?

**M:** Of course not, she went away herself! Let her manage on her own!

**L:** But you're on your own too, and you can't manage!

**M:** I can manage very well! And I'm all alone because she went away, not me!

L: I'm going to a hotel after the concert, I can't stand another night like this, your whining is making me sick! A healthy and strong man, but such a miser. I thought you were interested in me, that is, in my... singing, but you...

M: I'm very interested in you as... an Estonian, what with the Estonian language and all... And of course I apologize if it was cold last night, because this oven... An old wisp, needs a chimney sweep! The studio was unheated for a long time, well, that's why it was a bit chilly yesterday. But there's no point in going to the hotel tonight, it's going to get really hot in here, believe me!

L (angrily): It's as hot as it is in Tootsi's sauna! Of course I'm going to a hotel! I was so happy to finally have a concert abroad again! And now I can't sing properly at all...thanks to your studio!

M (offended): Earlier you said you were rusty because of the corona and the long stage break. Don't blame everything on me. I really only meant well for you, after all, a compatriot is performing in Klaipeda. You came here to spend the night voluntarily.

L: How was I to know that you were crying all the time for your wife...? it's so cold here!

M: I won't talk about my wife anymore if you don't like it! I haven't talked to anyone for so long, so I started to talk too much.

L: But you're not going to bring me an electric radiator anyway?

M: I just don't have it!

L: You're rambling! I'm sure you have one in your flat, even though prefabricated houses have central heating.

M (awkwardly): Well, there is a radiator, but it's for my sick cat. The cat needs warmth, he needs it badly.

L: And I don't? The cat is cuter for you...?!!! Ah, you're not in your right mind!

M: What's my sanity got to do with it? I wanted to help.

L (hysterically): Help? I don't understand who's crazy! You left me here alone to lounge around last night and you went to your hot cat yourself!

**M:** Why does someone have to be insane if you had a bit of a cold night? Then take more blankets on top. (Opens cupboard doors and pulls out a bunch of blankets, opens an old wooden chest and throws more and more flat blankets on the floor, piles them all in the middle of the room). Choose! How warm! Even a prima donna shouldn't be so helpless that she can't open a cupboard and take a blanket for herself!

**L:** Now I have myself to blame for not wasting away in other people's closets and trunks. Afterwards you would have branded me a thief if some things were missing!

**M (bewildered):** Who do you take me for?

**L (mockingly):** The eternal lover whose wife left him because you wouldn't let her turn on the electric radiator!

**M:** Look at you! I'm not offended by women's talk for a long time!

**L:** You don't? Who's the one who's all pouty and vicious? You've left me in a freezing cold studio to spend the night, even though you have a two-bedroom apartment.

**M (awkwardly):** My sick cat can't stand strangers.

**L:** That's it, I'm going to the hotel after the concert, I'm not coming back here. (Looking at the clock on the wall, very startled.) Ah, because of your backwards clock, I've completely lost track of time. I'm going to be late, that's what was missing!

**M (reassuringly):** You won't miss anything, it's only a few steps from here, you'll be there too early.... (Lembi rushes away, Mihkel shuffles the logs, carefully closes the oven door and then slowly follows the woman.)

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## II VIEWING

Lembi sneaks stealthily into the studio, wearing a long dress with a plunging neckline, holding several gorgeous bouquets of flowers. Mihkel sits by the stove,

notices the woman, but does not get up from the stove but continues to tend to the fire.

LEMBI: You had the door open! (... remains awkwardly silent.)

MIHKEL (reluctantly): Did you forget something?

L (offended): I left the taxi waiting, I might as well go on to the hotel.

M: Then go!

L (in falsetto): Okay, okay, I'm sorry, thank you for letting me spend the night in your studio, you've given me a good opportunity to meet an online friend face to face.

M: Oh, now you've suddenly got a good opportunity!?? It wasn't too cold?

L (bravura): Yes, I wanted to check if you are waiting for me or if you have gone to hug your cat.

M: I'm not waiting for anyone!

L: Then why are you squatting here and not going home?

M (defiantly): Maybe I want to admire the live fire like you.

L: Stop your childish stubbornness and tell me plainly, am I going to send the taxi away or not?

M: Make up your own mind, you're an adult! You don't like my studio....

L: Didn't like it, yes, but my concert went so well and.... and... I'd like to share my happiness with someone, to make you a little happier too! Estonians among themselves, let's celebrate my triumph together, ah, the Lithuanians were so impressed with me!

M (sarcastically): How do you know that it was the Lithuanians? In our country, such fancy concerts are mainly attended by foreigners, locals don't have enough money, tickets are terribly expensive.

L (spins around and throws the flowers on the table with a proud bow). The audience stood up to applaud me, what a great feeling. I really don't feel like going to a hotel. I'll send the taxi away! (Leaves the room, humming the aria of Traviata).

**M (sits down, thinks, finally takes a big bucket and puts all the bouquets in it, muttering to himself):** What a waste! And I have to save electricity. There's life in these prima donnas!

**L (overhears his last sentence at the door and looks disappointed):** What's wrong with these prima donnas again?! You're up to your nonsense again.

**M:** Nothing!

**L (trying to stay in a good mood):** The smell of cake is so good. Are the neighbours having a party?

**M:** There are no neighbours in this house any more, the tenants moved out of the old wooden house a long time ago or...? dead! All my good friends are dead. (Thinks for a long time.) I baked a cake. I thought it would be cheaper that way, I wanted to give you something good after the concert!

**L (faltering and shaky, lightly chuckling):** You weren't expecting me, were you?

**M (flatly).** I already knew you were coming!

**L:** Oh, how confident you are! (Spins as if still on stage, stumbles. The man catches her in his arms and holds her a little longer than necessary. Lembi throws her head down and laughs triumphantly): What strong hands you have! Ah, I'm so happy the concert went so well and the cake smells so good. (Sniffs the man.) And you too.

**M:** When drunk, you are even more like my wife.

**L (Presses herself against the man and sings a well-known operetta line).** But where is your wife? You're a lonely wolf. Maybe a steppenwolf? Oh, I forgot, a brute like you, of course, knows nothing about steppenwolves or opera.

**M:** (Pushes the woman away from him and almost throws her into an armchair): I have certainly read more Hermann Hesse than you have and I am not a brute (Starts to declaim very eloquently):

I'm talking about a specific person,

he is still alive.

He can talk about himself,

because it is not polite.

He has clear dreams,

but he does not reveal them,

because in cold weather

naked company does not appear.

But now he comes and then

not ashamed of his desires

even these fifty-five,

who desire knives.

Let's not go around in a circle.

Nor anyone.

They are still ashamed of souls

And in the end not even that.

L (doubtfully) Did Hesse really write like that?

M: No, that was Juhan Viiding, who was driven to suicide at the time of the revolution. I understand him very well...

L (hysterically). Let's enjoy life a little. I'm sick of all the troubles in the world! Let's forget them all! (Waving the bottle threateningly) Look, I've got half a bottle of champagne left. Let's put an end to it, and then there'll be an end to all your troubles!

M: It's not champagne, it's a sect!

L: Again you have to argue, even at night, when the cake smells so enticing, what an aroma! If you argue, you won't get any šampanja!

M (grabbing the plate from under Lemb's nose): If you won't give me the sect, I won't give you the cake!

L (laughing drunkenly again): What kind of jokes are these? (Drinks straight from the bottle and again gets between Mihkels hands, now on purpose, slides against the man, throws her head even more theatrically and cheers). All those Lithuanians. Just like you once conquered your Lithuanian wife, dear Michael! Still with a torrent!

M (abruptly releases himself). What are you talking about?

L (sits down by the stove door and starts to bask in the fire, almost singing as he talks): I'm telling a fairy tale. It happened a long time ago, when a cloud boy called Michael...

M: Leave me and my wife alone!

L: Okay, okay, not Michael, but the cloud boy Ruhnu fell in love with a cloud girl called Neringa. They circled around the Baltic Sea and chased each other, but the sea god Poseidon got really angry.

M (pouting): That's something even an opera prima donna would know, that Poseidon had nothing to do with the Baltic.

L (sighing shrilly): Michael, you are hopeless, but I forgive you because I am too happy to be angry. Anything is possible in fairy tales! (Drinks more straight from

the bottle, closes his eyes and continues blissfully): So Poseidon, who roamed the Baltic, was just as annoying as you. The god of the sea became a reclusive misanthrope, because he was far from home and longed for ....

M: All the stories about Poseidon have been known for a long time, stop this nonsense!

Lembi: It's not a story about Poseidon, it's a story about a cloud boy called Mihkel, sorry, Ruhnu! And a cloud girl called Neringa. They believed and hoped that they would be happy, because they were in love in the seventh heaven, but the bitter sea god, out of jealousy, created a wild storm, even worse than the one that is now beating against the roof. And then the cloud-boy Ruhnu fell from his seventh heaven, and Poseidon cursed him to be the island of Ruhnu, but the sea-god flew the cloud-girl Neringa to the other side of the Baltic, and there she became the peninsula of Neringa. The two lovers could never again ascend as clouds and reach the seventh heaven.

M: I suppose you're not only drunk, but also high on other substances?

L: (continues sleepily): All the tourists were fascinated by Ruhnu and Neringa. Only the locals were distressed, because whenever there was a storm and the waves beat their beach, they had the same sad dream: the tears of the lovers came with the storm from Lithuania to Estonia and vice versa. Ruhnu and Neringa cried piteously behind their heavenly love, so that the whole sea groaned. But after a great storm, Neringa and Ruhnu were united for a moment by a beautiful rainbow, like a fleeting kiss. Cloud boy and cloud girl they could never be again, the way to the lovers' heaven was closed.

M (irritated):Do you think I'm some kind of a baby that you tell me such silly fairy tales?

L (insulted): You think everything I do is silly. I don't really understand why you lured me to this studio. On the internet you post beautiful photos and compliments, but since yesterday you act like a total jerk. Listen, are you really a photographer? And do you even own this studio?

M: That's what you should have asked yesterday. Yes, of course I'm a serial killer.

L (bursts out drunkenly laughing, downs several more swigs from the bottle, gets more and more drunk): If there was a serial killer running around in Klaipeda, I would have been warned. I... I... just don't understand how a guy who takes such beautiful pictures can be so---hiii... ..a ... grump! ( Flips through a photo album ) Yep,

it's really your photo on the cover here, even though in real life you're not half as...  
SO... SO... SO...

**M (aggressively):** What am I not alive?

**L (snarling just as angrily):** You're not even half as... as...sexy!

**M (astonished):** What's sexy about this photo? Women can certainly be weird.

**L:** Everything is... look... and the view... just as dreamy as that cloud boy who fell in love in the seventh heaven...

**M:** Are you completely drunk already? Stop drinking from the bottle, it's not fit for a prima donna!

**L:** How do you know what's fit for a prima donna? Oh, I forgot! Only men talk sense in this studio.

**M:** Grow up for once and step down from the theatre stage. There are no cloud boys and cloud girls in real life, let alone the sea god Poseidon!

**L:** I'm really not surprised that your wife threw you out. I'd like to throw something at you too and send you away!

**M:** This is my studio and I'm not going anywhere.

**L:** Then which one of us is being childish? You've got a warm and comfortable flat in a block of flats, plus a cat waiting for you. Get out of my sight and leave me alone! You're spoiling all my fun!

**M (hesitating):** You don't really want me to go away.

**L:** For once I would like to understand why I was so stupid as to communicate with you online in the first place. And I want to know why sex stories upset you so much? Is it because of the sex that you broke up with your wife?

**M:** We had a completely natural ... What other stories are there?

**L:** You obviously need a sexologist. You're really messed up.

**M:** I don't need anything or anybody, I'm doing very well on my own.

**L (bursts out provocatively):** OK! So let's do a quickie, as long as you don't have any sex problems and you're OK with that little thing.

**M:** What? How dare you?

L (giggling). You're the one who started the sex story about how all the single women are fishing for a strong man. Well, a Pole was brought to bed with your wife! Why shouldn't I be lucky to have a pure-blooded Estonian?!? I should have some bonus after last night, when I nearly froze to a crisp!

M: Oh, so I'm a sex bonus? Me? You think I'm a gigolo? Me!? I wouldn't sleep with some jumbo prima donna for hard cash! Who do you think I am?

L: (approaches so impetuously that the man involuntarily backs away): I think you're a big fool, not a gigolo! You know everything about photography, but nothing about your own body. You never tire of repeating that you still love your ex-wife, and yet you stare at me with lustful eyes. Like Faust, you want to stop time and go back to the past, where the scar of youth blooms! You want to be the Mephisto who can bring back the beautiful moments! But you're the kind of earthly man who can only stop the photographic moment.

M: Leave it, it's all so ugly... and I still baked you a cake!

L: What's ugly is that you dragged me from the airport to your freezing cold studio because you're hungry for sex. Oh yeah, don't poke something in my eyes like a teenage tomboy. You've been sending me sinful body signals since yesterday, which your self-pitying mind ignores. You may be unsurpassed at shopping online and making air deals, but you have no desire to learn about the needs of your earthly body. Or have your parents indoctrinated you with hypocritical monastic morals because they grew up in a working class country where there was no sex?!

M (irritated): Were you taught to play a bitch in school!

L (laughing drunkenly): See, that's what I'm talking about! Any woman you stare at with winking eyes must be a slut! I dare honestly admit that I would have preferred a passionate lovemaking session to your photo shoots yesterday, but how would that be possible with a volunteer celibate preacher? Oh yeah, you are crying for your eternal love and therefore mocking the rest of the female sex!

M: Nobody is mocking you, I was cleaning and heating the studio, I thought we would have a nice evening together.

L: Sure, sure, if I caught fire from your lustful stare and sat on the lap of the world's most virtuous photographer, you'd surely sue me for harassment? A slut is a slut! For ever and ever!

M (insulted): I just wanted to do you a favour, I offered you free accommodation, food and drinks....

**L: To do a favour!?** Leaving me in a freezing cold studio and holed up with your precious cat! Oh my God, what a shame!!!

**M (barely holding himself together):** Stop your shouting or I'll put you in the oven where you belong!

**L: Of course, hell is the place of all sexy women!** But put your ex and all your miserable past in there first!

**M: You're drunk, you're cracking up just like my wife. I wouldn't expect that from a famous singer!**

**L: (Approaches the man with a new attack).** What did you expect? Why are you still staring at me hungrily? And baking cakes? What do you want from me? You have an apartment that doesn't need to be heated because it's already warm. Go there! Or go to bed, get under the blanket and let's do something that's real! (Snatches Michael, tries to hug him, then shakes him, then angrily slams his fists against his chest.)

**M: (Pushes the woman to sit down):** Calm down! Are you out of your mind? I thought we were cultured people.

**L (laughing maniacally):** Aren't cultured people having sex?! Well, in the age of global AIDS, it's safest to do it virtually. Oh, right, that's why you're throwing your love affairs out on the net, so you can safely satisfy yourselves there... Still cultured and nice, in front of the screen!

**M: What vulgarity, total barbarism. And you're a stage director. And I still believed that beautiful prima donnas have a deep soul.**

**L (sobering up a little and glancing at the fire):** You don't go to opera performances. What do you know about the soul of a prima donna?!!

**M (gathering himself and trying to calm down):** No, of course I went when I was young, but now tickets are terribly expensive!

**L: Everything is terribly expensive for you, you're just an incorrigible bigot. But if you've seen "Traviata", you'll remember that the leading lady was just the sort of lady you would have called a slut.**

**M: I wouldn't have called her a slut because she was in love!**

**L: How vain can a man be? Yes, she was in love, but she still had bad sex with all the lusty daddies who could afford it. A poor photographer like you would be lucky to get sex from me for free. I don't need to raise money for a brothel.**

**M: I've never been to a brothel. Leave it! It's all depressing, so depressing!**

**L: It's not depressing, it's the body's normal needs. Eating is an even more wicked activity, but without it we wouldn't be able to stand up. So it's trade for trade. An ice-cold bed from you, or rather a sofa, and a bedhead or a cake pop from me! Shall we do it? Or get the hell out of here with your hungry sex eyes and your moralizing.**

**M (quietly but menacingly): I repeat! This is my studio and I'm not going anywhere.**

**L: Today it's mine because you gave it to me! Go hug your cat, because you don't enjoy women! Impotent as ever! Or a pervert? You do that thing with the cat..**

**M (grunting and finally losing control of himself): Get out of here, burn to ashes, hell is your rightful place. (Carries the startled Lembi towards the stove mouth. Desdemona's famous pre-death aria is played, their fight is tragicomic, at one point the man succeeds in pushing the almost drunken woman into the furnace, then the woman manages to push the man)**

**L (tearing himself apart and pouring champagne from a bottle over his head): You are crazy, my head is burning, it's not funny anymore. Im calling the police!**

**M (dejectedly sinking down on the sofa): And what will you tell them? Why is a famous singer in a strange studio at night?**

**L (panting and adjusting her clothes): If you want to burn someone in hell, throw your ex-wife in the oven!!!**

**M (beaten down) : Well, let's do it then, if you want it so badly?!**

**L: What thing?**

**M: Well, the thing...! (Makes an ambiguous gesture with his hands.)**

**L: Why are men so casual? (Takes his suitcase and flowers from the bucket, puts on her fur coat...)**

**M (dismayed and miserable). Do you want to sleep on the street? It's windy and stormy outside!**

**L: A streetwalker's place is in the street. Anywhere is better than with a maniac like you... Ah, you've finally managed to completely ruin my mood. (Walks slowly and wearily towards the door.)**

**M (doesn't stop her, but sits down wearily):Ladies are impossible to understand!**

L (from the door): You certainly are!

M (makes a last desperate attempt to hold the woman back): But I tried so hard, I fired up the stove, I baked a cake...! What aren't you satisfied with?

L (hesitantly): You insult me all the time! Don't you understand?

M (muttering): I do, I don't, well, I certainly don't... Oh, I just don't know how to deal with women. Don't go, listen to me, I'll explain. Those teachings of Algimantas! That damn womanizer! He warned me that you must never show true feelings to an opera prima donna like you if I want to make you fall in love with me. That's the cardinal rule of the love life! (Begging piteously.) What have I done wrong? Tell me and stay!

L (listens attentively and then flatters in a Traviata manner): Aaaalgimaaantas, the killer of love... Aaaaalgimantas, oh, Aaaaalgimantas... (bursts out laughing sadly and disappears.)

M ((growls at her urgently): I like you, I like you very much! Where did you go... I fell in love with you a long time ago, with your voice and your face, your photos! (Genuinely puzzled.) Why don't I have luck with women? (Grabs his head between his hands in agony.)

The stage goes dark. The whole back wall is now full of photos that Mihkel secretly took of the singer. The beam of light is directed towards the wall, where the art photographs are transformed into magazine covers: in Italian, English, Estonian and Lithuanian, in large letters, are the happy announcements that the Estonian-Lithuanian photographer Mihkel Mannus has won an international photography competition in Italy, dedicated to the memory of opera composer Giuseppe Verdi, with his photos of the famous prima donna.

**The end**