

Stanislav Stratiev  
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## CHARACTERS

FIRST OLD MAN

SECOND OLD MAN

THIRD OLD MAN

FOURTH OLD MAN

THE OLD LADY

Also members of the public, candy floss sellers, a policeman, a photographer, a binoculars seller, a foreigner, passers-by

## SCENE ONE

A drawing room. Paintings. Bookshelves lining all walls. Antique chandeliers, carpets, chests of reddish wood. In the middle – a double, solid, carved, baroque door made of the same kind of wood. It is tightly shut. The door dominates the drawing room, stands apart from the rest and attracts attention. In the fore stage, in a baroque armchair, facing the audience and with his back to the door, is an old man of about seventy-five. He is thoughtful, obviously reminiscing something and his words could be both memories spoken aloud and the stream of his own thought.

FIRST OLD MAN: How we used to laugh... we were young, the children were small. There was always something to make us laugh... and we used to laugh a lot. Not a day went by without a big laugh over something.

There we were, sitting, leafing through the newspapers, but really listening to our seven-year-old daughter... as she explained the facts of life to her younger brothers. She fetched an umbrella from the closet and showed it to them. “This is an umbrella!” she said, “You can open it. Like a door... but not exactly... because, when you open the door, people can come in. But when you open the umbrella, the rain can’t come in...”

We could hardly keep a straight face behind the newspaper pages. “Both have handles”, she went on, “But you should not confuse them...”

Then she got up and dragged in the open a mousetrap with an old shoe caught in it. “Mousetrap and shoe!” she pointed out, “The shoe catches the foot, and the mousetrap catches the mouse. But it’s not the same. Because the shoe lets the foot go... when you go to bed... but the trap does not let the mouse go. The trap catches mice and shoes... but a mouse is one thing and a shoe another. Shoes grow old and mice don’t. They get eaten by cats...”

Her brothers stood there patiently; they didn’t understand a word but they looked absorbedly at their sister’s face... “Well no, I’ve no mouse but I could draw you one... without the head.”

At this point we couldn’t hold it back any longer and would burst laughing openly... She glared at us... tried to be angry... and then started giggling with us... That was what the little ones had been waiting for – they joined us too.

A big laugh... The door nearly fell off the hinges... That very door... it was not so tightly shut ... We never closed it ... It was always open ... People went in and out... all the time... The children were small and scuttled about the house like insects... (*pause*) We didn’t pay much attention to it... We didn’t even notice it... I had the feeling that there was no door at all there... We passed so freely and easily... throughout the house... from one room to another... as if floating... in mid-air... Why do they close it on me now? What are they going to do with me? Once we didn’t attach any importance to whatever doors there were... For years

I hadn't thought about doors at all... like you breathe without thinking about it. Doors carried no additional information, no hidden meaning... no message... took no part in my life... didn't take sides. You could say I lived with no doors at all. Free. And God, how we used to laugh...

## SCENE TWO

A heavy near-darkness everywhere. Only the figure and face of the old man are visible. He is pacing nervously to and fro, pausing from time to time to utter a few sentences and then starting again. Behind him there are the dim, barely seen outlines of shelves and objects, dark shapes. They are not readily visible; their presence can be felt if one tries hard...

SECOND OLD MAN: They are incongruous... whichever way you look at them. Their very existence is absurd. Their origin... I'm sure they are a chance phenomenon... totally valueless. A regrettable mistake... a tragic misconception... that's it... that's the word... a tragic misconception... When mankind was too young to know what it was doing... in the dark and dim prehistoric ages... (*pause*) The ill-advised youthful homo sapiens... What a lot of clear warnings against them... The Tower of Babel collapsed for a reason...

Why do we need them? What use are they to us? Can't we do without them? What is it that makes us reproduce them day and night? What is this humiliating dependence? They aren't like bread or air, are they? I insist that they are completely useless. Superfluous. Rudimentary growths. Parasites. Thousands of people live happily without them...

But not all. The majority are deceived by their shining lustre. By their false depth. By their apparent smoothness. By their transparency. By their treacherous perspective. They are very good at deceiving... at luring people... They do their best to convince you that you can see through every one of them... that they are as clear as daylight and as impartial as the polar icecaps. I've never met anything more vicious... or more hypocritical. They, of course, try to appear friendly.

I even resent their name. If it was up to me, I'd remove it from all dictionaries. I'd eliminate every single one of them down to the last... (*pause*) They are the reason I can't stay in the room... I try to stay in this closet but I can't languish here too long... It's dark, you see, and I can't stand the dark... my thoughts keep coming... yet otherwise you waste too much electricity: I've been told not to switch on the light.

If they weren't there, I'd be able to walk about the house. I'd have no trouble going to take books from the shelves... or filling my pipe by the table... the drawing room table... And I'd be able to turn my armchair whichever way I chose and not sit with my back turned to them all the time.

I tell you they are nonsense even from an architectural viewpoint.

Cutting the whole into pieces! Punching holes in the essential! Deforming the unity! For the sake of what?

Just think about it! Why the Hell make WINDOWS?

As if the formicary has windows! Or the bee-hive, the most highly organized structure that Nature ever made. It is indeed incredible that Man should all of a sudden want to have windows!

Openings to let in the rain, wind, the din of passing trams, the noises of motors, trumpets, insects, wasps, apple skins and cigarette butts from the above floors, dust, wads of poplar seed, scruffy sparrows, ash, phenol and fog, thieves, adulterers, oppressive heat, human screams and dogs' barking, dry leaves, cherry stones...

And then you have to adjust everything to the window... To always keep it in mind... lurking in the depths of your consciousness... "No, not by the window, you'll catch a cold...", "No, the window faces the other way...", "We've a view of the sea from this window...", "You're blocking my view out of the window...", "Don't put it right beneath the window...", "As soon as you wake up and look out of the window..."

What a tragic plight... an absurd tyranny that man voluntarily accepts... and even welcomes... We could do perfectly well without windows... They don't exist in nature... Since times unremembered there hasn't been a single foxhole, cave, hollow tree, igloo, nest, refuge, bomb shelter, wigwam, or what not, with windows.

If I had my way, that word would be wiped out of everyone's memory... the very concept... with its thousands of incarnations.

Maybe I should switch on the light. It's pitch dark in this closet... And those thoughts threaten to drown me completely. Let's turn it on for just a little...

### SCENE THREE

A street. A crowd of passers-by. Peddlers, binoculars sellers, a policeman, members of the public and a photographer appear in turn. The faces of most people are turned up, towards an eighteenth-floor window, invisible to us... A man with a rucksack, apparently a stranger, a foreigner, mixes with the crowd.

FOREIGNER: What's the matter? Why this crowd?

PASSER-BY: Well, can't you see? They are throwing an old man out.

FOREIGNER: An old man?!?! Out of where?!?!

PASSER-BY: Why, out of up there. Look: it's the... let me see sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth floor window.

FOREIGNER: But that's monstrous!

BINOCULARS SELLER: Telescopes, binoculars, opera glasses, full colour, three-dimensional... Enjoy a better view of the fall of the old man! Special discounts! Blue cross day! We even rent them! A further 30% off for high school and university students!

MEMBER OF THE PUBLIC: I'll take one. Three-dimensional. (*The seller stops and hands him a pair of binoculars.*)

POLICEMAN: Ladies and gentlemen, would you please move a bit to one side! Don't stand straight below the old man! He'll drop and break somebody's neck and next thing everybody will blame the police again! Come on, move along! Haven't you ever seen an old man being thrown out of the window?

II MEMBER OF THE PUBLIC: Gee, just look at how firmly he's clinging...

III MEMBER OF THE PUBUC: I bet he won't last more than two minutes.

II MEMBER OF THE PUBLIC: If the ledge doesn't give way, this one'll hold for at least seven. Looks like he's pretty tough, doesn't it?

III MEMBER OF THE PUBLIC: You bet?

II MEMBER OF THE PUBLIC: I'll bet you five thousand. (*They shake hands and make a bet.*)

III MEMBER OF THE PUBLIC: And who's that guy now? The one at the window near him?

II MEMBER OF THE PUBLIC: From the local council. To see if he has paid all his taxes before falling down. (*The two of them look up.*)

CANDY FLOSS SELLER (*Appears with all his wares*): Candy floss, sun glasses, popcorn, chewing gum... deck chairs... shades.

III MEMBER OF THE PUBLIC: All they ever think about is taxes. Why don't they improve the public Throwing Out Services instead. Then the relatives wouldn't have to do it all on their own.

II MEMBER OF THE PUBLIC: Well, yeah, but whoever cares about the taxpayer these days.

MEMBER OF THE PUBLIC: Hey, wait, it's like this pair of binoculars isn't three-dimensional after all! (*Starts a row with the binoculars seller.*)

PHOTOGRAPHER: Want a snapshot with the falling old man? Instant photos!... A souvenir picture with the old man in the back ground!

POLICEMAN (*reappearing*): Come on, move along, you're blocking the traffic. Move along.

IV MEMBER OF THE PUBLIC: Excuse me, officer, but I seem to remember that the local council had suggested, in order to avoid traffic jams, to collect all old persons subject to being thrown out, take them to the stadium and do the job in batches before the Sunday match.

POLICEMAN: That's right, but the lottery people objected. Wanted to do it themselves. OK now, move along!

#### SCENE FOUR

The facade of a tower block. In the middle of it, on the seventh floor, there is an old man clinging to the window ledge. He is hanging over the void. Down below, at street level, life goes on as usual – passers-by hurry, children roller-skate, cars drive by, crates of bottled wine are being unloaded from a truck nearby, a street dog crosses to the other side...

THIRD OLD MAN: They said there would be almost no wind... Just a slight stir of the air. But how slight? That is the question... Anyway I think they meant dead calm... a total absence of wind. They mentioned the stir just to be on the safe side... Meteorologists always do. What I'm feeling now wouldn't bother even a moth... A slight stir of wind – that's the word... besides, it's the seventh floor... Down below there wouldn't even be that... It's a pleasure really, the wind can't sway me; it is only a caress... I never thought it would be that nice outside the window.

Well, yes, my left arm is already a bit numb... but that's natural at my age, isn't it? The right one is either OK or completely lifeless, for I don't feel it. However, my legs are in perfect shape. I've always had strong legs... Won every single competition at school... and at university... It's only that I feel them warmer than usual. Which is a good thing in itself. This slight stir of air can give you a cold all too easily. You catch a cold most easily if your feet are cold. I've always trusted my family. You could even say I've been proud of them. We've never been exactly like the other families... there has been a sort of affection... yes, that's the right word, affection... an extraordinary affection between us... we just never could do without each other... a kind of warmth that we never talked about... but you felt it... like fragrance in the air. I always felt it... and prided myself on it... There you are now, for instance: other old people get thrown out like rotten fruit... out of windows... while I was not thrown out... Not at all... I was just pushed, very gently, very lovingly, so to speak, to the other side of the window... And the window was then closed... of course, with the due respect... that a parent deserves... No slamming, no impatience... You could say it was quite noiseless... You couldn't even say that I am outside. I am just on the other side... But to the wasp crawling behind the glass, the "other side" is the inside ... After all, those are the two sides of one and the same thing – the window. Inside



and outside are relative concepts... Depending on your point of view... The wasp would do anything to be in my place right now.

The important thing is, I have a choice... I can hang on, or I can let go and jump... It's my decision... I could hang on like that for, say, fifteen minutes... Or five... Or half an hour. It's entirely up to me.

That's what freedom actually is, isn't it – the right to choose? The right to make the decision yourself. I have it. Therefore I am free. I'm thinking things over... not hurrying... weighing the pros and cons... making a decision. It's all up to me I've got my fate in my own hands. There aren't many who could say that. Most people don't even have a say in the delivery of their morning paper.

My left foot is a bit cold... I should've taken my slippers. On the other hand, it's probably better that I didn't... They would've been an additional weight... A pound more...

What's that scream... which stopped all of a sudden? They must have thrown somebody out of the window... Somebody next door... The voice sounded faintly familiar... True, it was somewhat tense, excited, you might say... But not so excited as to be unrecognisable... It was my friend from flat 79, I think... He's always been volatile... At our age, however, overexcitement is harmful... He must have grown nervous when they opened the window... and he couldn't control himself.

No, it can't be rain, I must be mistaken... In such incredibly sunny weather conditions... You can't rely on the forecasts anymore... Quite apart from a possible cold, wet clothes are heavier than dry ones... On the other side, it's not bad to cool down a little... from time to time... A little water has never done anybody any harm... Life began in water... It's stopped... In all probability they watered the flowers on one of the above floors... They must've opened the window and just emptied the watering can on the other side... If there was an old man in that room, he must have got nervous.

That's how it is, some of us just can't get used to it... As if it's more humane to throw us in the hug of the social services... Life grows harder, they can't take care of old people anymore... A monthly pension lasts you three days...

Our children don't think like us... We don't think like them either.

They have their children, and the children – their own children... And they never have time... Isn't it a hundred times more civilized to be thrown out of the window than be left to suffer in an old people's home... or be a burden to your family? Besides, this law does not have compulsory action. There is absolute freedom... Each family can choose to do whatever it likes. It may throw the old man out of the window, but then again it may choose not to... Like my own family... They just put me gently on the other side of the window...

Of course this situation can't last forever. But then is there anything in this world that's eternal? Can you remain forever in your armchair, slippers on your

feet, leafing through the evening paper? There comes a time when all this has to end... Then why should you be worried more than any other person sitting in his armchair and smoking a cigar?

Especially at my age. Isn't it the same with tightrope-dancers? They might fall any second... But then again they might not... Most rope-dancers walk the rope for a hell of a long time...

The really hard thing is to get used to the monotony of this existence... One and the same patch of sky, the two silhouetted chimneys opposite, and the rough surface of the window ledge... No pigeons, nor chimney-sweeps... A grey, dull, depressing view... You can't see a living thing... I'm not looking down. Of course, a man must look straight ahead.

The important thing is, I can change things whenever I like... It's all literally in my hands... I never thought they'd last for so long... True, I can't feel a thing in them, so I am not quite sure what keeps me hanging on, but, come to think of it, yesterday I had difficulty even leafing through the paper... Life on the other side has its assets... You get into shape... Develop skills that you may need afterwards... in life.

Come to think about it, I miss my newspaper... Probably there is some way to get it here... Air mail... Isn't that the true purpose of air mail – to deliver to people who are in the air? If you consider the words literally, that's precisely its *raison d'être*. I wonder who won the match on Saturday.

Life's beauty is sometimes precisely in not changing anything.

Hanging like this in the sunshine, feeling the soft caress of the gently stirring air, closing your eyes... and meditating... But, when I start thinking, I seem to discover that the slight stir is not that slight... yes... it's growing stronger... That is what you call "wind"... Whatever the forecast's name for it... absolute calm or something else... Only don't let it swing me too hard... I hate swings... I've been getting sick on swings ever since I was a child... It's swinging me like a pendulum... And as we know from physics, when the amplitudes overlap... However, at least the wind is warm... A wholesome airing... It's as if you're in the Alps... in the summer... grass, edelweiss blossoms... I love warm wind... as long as it doesn't turn into a hurricane, of course. I hate excesses... so I don't exactly like hurricanes either... Yet I have never heard of any in this part of the world... of course what with climate change... that takes place every day... I wouldn't be surprised if a tornado popped up... Typhoons are usually quite conservative... It stopped – must have been just a gust... of wind... The air warming and expanding... It took my breath away... (*pause*) Or maybe I should let go and jump? I love flying... My childhood dream was to be Icarus... Feathers, linen thread and wax... and you fly toward the sun... In fact, mankind's oldest dream: to fly.

The dream of flying... I am so near that now... Few people have ever been that close to fulfilling their lifelong dream... Isn't that what they call happiness – making your dream come true? Big words ... Things are really much simpler... you just start flying and that's all... No drama... Enough adjectives... We ruin everything by speaking too much about it... Simply fly... without comment... And your dream will come true... There... OK... You just did let go... now fly!

## SCENE FIVE

The old man's shape is etched against the background of the sky – its blue expanse, clear air, passing clouds.

FOURTH OLD MAN: Should I wave my arms?... It seems ridiculous... Why should I play the thunderbird... I'm too old to be a seagull... Only, I don't know what to do with my hands and arms... It somehow doesn't seem very appropriate to fold them on my chest or shove them in my pockets... The legs should be stretched, that at least is clear... I've seen albatrosses do it... Stretched and kept horizontally behind you... It applies to the toes as well... But then albatrosses have a sort of membrane between their toes.

Well, you should mind your own business... Since you've no membrane, try at least making neat circles... Don't just drop like a stone... fall slowly... gradually... Funny how thin air is... When you look at it, it seems a bit more solid and thick... Well, I should start waving my arms sooner or later... I'm losing altitude... Make a broader sweep with those arms... Broader and more rhythmical... I wonder how albatrosses fly... Do they actually manage it from the very first time... because I don't seem to be able to... They might be somehow less affected by gravity... velocity by the square of the mass, wasn't it? Well, it doesn't work with me.

Try to ride an air current... let it carry you... because, you know, you can't exactly say you're flying... it's so easy to say – ride an air current. Only where are they? I have a feeling they might be available in other parts of the world... Everything's distributed rather unfairly in this world, isn't it? All the air currents seem gathered in one place, while others are completely deprived of them...

Don't philosophize, just fly... You don't really have to fly like an albatross... this would be overdoing it... try a smaller bird... a swallow, say... Swallows are very nice creatures ... and useful, too ... and they dart this way and that in the air just like me... The question is, do I really dart about in the air? And in what direction? In fact either way I'm going heavenward. Can't miss it... Where everybody else goes... I mustn't worry about the direction... It's been determined long ago... The thing to worry about is that something's wrong with the flying... I don't think it works... If only I had a membrane, a web, isn't it called so?

All right, I give up the swallow idea too... That's enough megalomania. I'm still a beginner... What about a sparrow... There's a bird with an individuality of its own... It isn't a great flyer, but then I don't need much more than what it can do... It just flits and flutters... very appropriate... I think you'll manage it... Flit and flutter... just flutter and it'll be all right... You don't have to make broad neat circles... nor dart about in the air... just flit and flutter... it's quite within your grasp... For God's sake do something! Don't just act like a flightless bird... Kiwi... or Dodo... you are a real bird – small, perhaps, but capable of flying... To fly, you need intrepidity most of all... the rest will come in due course... just flap your wings a bit more often.

Don't rely on ascending air currents... With your luck you'll hit a descending one instead. There may be just one in the neighbourhood, but you'll hit upon it for sure... In fact, I must've come across it from the very beginning, for I've been steadily falling... Flap, damn it! Fly... fly... don't fall...

I am flying!... It's incredible, but I am flying... I can feel myself getting lighter... as a feather... my bones becoming hollow and filling with air... and my body temperature going up... to 42 degrees Celsius... as in birds... Oh, God!... I'm quite stable in the air now... (*pause*) Shall I rip the sky apart with the archetypal bird cry?!?!?

CR-R-R-R-O-O-O-A-A-AK!... God, this sound really gave me the creeps... MY cry... That's how albatrosses cry... Splitting the very air apart with desperation and loneliness...

Something's taking me up very quickly... an air current... warm air... up... even higher. I'm not even flapping my wings now... just keeping them spread...

Farewell!

If you need me... you'll find me along the bird routes!

## SCENE SIX

Poorly furnished room. Plain wooden chair. An old lady is sitting on it. The photographs of three boys hung on the walls. There isn't almost anything else but a table and a chest of drawers.

THE OLD LADY: The neighbours are good people, but they have their own elderly... Their relatives don't leave them a moment to spare, either... Not a day goes by without someone calling them to help... I can't blame them really... They are doing their best... Life became harder... And theoretically this is the local council's concern... Not the neighbours'... Society should take care of people... What are we paying those taxes for...? But of course the local council's just sugaring the pill... Words... Promises... Flashy shows of concern into

which they pour millions in order to save a mongrel or two... They are always short of money... The eternal budget cuts... Their services have been choked with work for years... It's always the same...

I'm a patient person but that's gone beyond reason... I've been on the council's list for five years... as an urgent case... And indeed I am such... They promised that the people on that list would be served in two weeks, or a month at most... All rubbish... They are pushing their own protégés... There is always someone who's got connections in the municipality... And then the moment their relatives' problems are over, the next elections come, that party falls from power and the other one comes and takes over the local council... Then the others arrange for THEIR relatives to get it first... Intolerable...

What a country we're living in... If you are a big shot or simply rich, you just buy whatever you need... or the municipal services come in a flash... True, I'm not a big shot... My parents weren't either... In our whole family there hasn't been a single one you'd call a big shot... So what? I'm an honest, poor widow who's as much human as everybody else. With my two hands I raised three kids and no one could say they didn't receive every care possible... Am I to blame that they all went to America? I don't want anything... just to be treated like a human being... But that seems impossible nowadays... Inequality's in full swing... If you have the money, there you are in three days... while people like me can wait for years... With this corruption I wonder why God doesn't burn this whole city down... like Sodom...

People don't care about their fellow beings... As soon as one arranges to be thrown out of the window, one forgets all about the others... Humaneness, if it ever existed, has long disappeared... Not to mention morals... Every single day hundreds of old people get thrown out of the windows, yet nobody's remembered me so far... Do they expect me to jump out myself or what? What's more, much younger people than me get thrown... there is the law, but they always pull some strings... While I sit and wait... for Prince Charming to come and throw me out of the window... All my friends got it long ago but I'm still waiting... I must be a real fool to expect the council to do its job... Whenever did it do anything for the taxpayers? Although they get exorbitant salaries... It's always been like that – some get thrown, others don't...

Indeed I've nothing to offer ... except the old snapshots in my box... a wedding ring... chipped and broken china... and seven postcards from America... sent a long time ago. I should probably wait for one of the children to come back... But I doubt it... they haven't written for years... and yet... you never know... What if they came back for Christmas? They must have grown much older now... It'd be snowing... all white... and they'd come... Let at least one of them come. Oh, dear, how beautiful it would be! And then they would throw me out!

The old lady goes on daydreaming, reminiscing about times long gone, or thinking about times to come; the light around her gradually dims and she melts in the dark just like the snow she's been dreaming about.

THE END