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Yes, Svetlanla, There is a Grandfather Frost

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by James Venhaus

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- ***KRINGLE-PHOBIA*** - A man must confront his fear of Santa Claus as demonic manifestations of his fears tease, taunt and haunt him as he tries to work up the nerve to take his son to the mall to see Kris Kringle.
- ***HAPPY HOLIDAYS FROM ANDERSON, DAVIS, SETON, AND FENNER*** - Julia, a receptionist at a law firm is trying to get through the last ten minutes of her shift before the holidays. She gets calls from rude clients, her boss, her boyfriend, her mother and her best friend. Can she get them all sorted out before leaving for her second job as an elf at Macy's?

**YES, SVETLANA,
THERE IS A
GRANDFATHER FROST
BY JEFF GOODE**

Yes, Svetlana, There is a Grandfather Frost was developed with Studio Roanoke in Roanoke, Virginia. It debuted December 8th, 2009.

Directed by Todd Ristau

GRANDFATHER FROST/ZLOVESCHII: Simon Adkins

DEVUCHKA: Shay Mullins

MADAM EDITRIX: Stevie Holcomb

TSERKOV: Patrick Kennerly

BOLYSHOI: Brian O'Sullivan

SHIROKY: Chad Runyon

Producer: *Kenley Smith*

Costume Design: *Min Johnson, Todd Ristau*

Scenic Design: *Todd Ristau, Jason "Blue" Herbert*

Lighting Design: *Jason "Blue" Herbert*

Sound Design: *Jason "Blue" Herbert and J.D. Ruelle*

Scenic Construction: *Jason "Blue" Herbert, Steven V. Rice, Todd Ristau and Chad Runyon*

Technical Board Operator: *Jason "Blue" Herbert*

Line Coach: *Patrick Lyster*

Program and Marketing: *Steven V. Rice*

Box Office and House Services Crew: *Chad Runyon, Michelle Bennett, Studio Roanoke's Board of Directors and Volunteer Crew*

Community Partners: *Playwright's Lab at Hollins University, Roanoke Times/Roanoke.com, City Magazine, and New City Media*

Props, costumes, and other material support: *John Forsman, Hollins Theatre Department, Jonathan Overturf, Stevie Holcomb, Shay Mullins, Patrick Kennerly, J.D. Ruelle, and Showtimers Theatre*

Yes, Svetlana, There is a Grandfather Frost
By Jeff Goode

CHARACTERS:

Grandfather Frost

Zloveschii

Devuchka

Tserkov

Bolyshoi

Shiroky

SETTING:

The cramped and cluttered offices of the *Solntse Novosti* newspaper.

**YES, SVETLANA,
THERE IS A
GRANDFATHER FROST**
BY **JEFF GOODE**

(Lights up on: GRANDFATHER FROST, a rotund Russian fellow who looks suspiciously like Saint Nicholas, dressed all in blue.)

G. FROST In the Soviet bloc, religious celebrations were curtailed in favor of state-sanctioned holidays in order to ensure that every citizen's highest allegiance was not to God, but to country. Even children were forced to set aside their dearest traditions when the Party replaced holy Saint Nicholas with the secular fairy tale of Grandfather Frost, who brings gifts to children on New Year's Day, instead of Christmas, with the help of the snow maiden Snegurochka, instead of elves.

It was not easy for that first generation of children to suppress their fondest beliefs overnight. But for the generations that followed, who knew nothing of Saint Nicholas, Grandfather Frost and New Year's became the tradition. And Christmas just a fairy tale...

(SCENE: The cramped and cluttered offices of the Solntse Novosti newspaper. An eager, young receptionist, DEVUCHKA, is merrily wrapping gifts at a desk cluttered with holiday favors and carved wooden figurines of Grandfather Frost and Snegurochka. The telephone rings. She answers it.)

DEVUCHKA *S Novym Godom!* Happy New Year! This is the *Solntse Novosti*. How may I place your call?

No, the editor is still at lunch.

No, I don't know when she will be back. Would you like to speak to one of the reporters? Comrade Tserkov is away on assignment, but Comrade Zloveschii is around here somewhere.

Oh, I see, it's about a letter? Well, if you have written to the editor, I'm afraid you will have to wait to read it in the paper, just like everyone else.

No, there's nothing that can be done about that.

No, there isn't, sir.

Please, don't shout at me.

I don't think I appreciate the tone you are taking, sir.

I may only be a receptionist, but my uncle Yuri is an important deputy minister in a very influential sub-department of the local polit-council, who recommended me to this position, and I'm sure he would not like to hear the way I am being mistreated.

Now what is your name again, sir? Because I think I will find your letter after all.

(She angrily sorts through a pile of mail.)

Ah! You see, here it is. I have your letter, and I am taking it directly to my uncle, who has connections in the security service, and they will be very interested to know whether you are a threat to the state.

Don't try to deny you wrote it, sir, I have the letter right here. The one that looks like a little girl's handwriting.

Oh, I'm sorry. The letter is from your daughter?

She's only 8 years old?

Please, don't cry, sir.

No, no, we are not going to arrest your daughter.

I didn't mean to frighten you, sir.

Don't worry, I will have someone read it right away.

No, no, not the police. Someone at the newspaper will read it, I promise. I will make sure of it. They will read it today.

It's all right, sir.

No, I'm sorry, sir.

No, you're welcome.

Happy New Year, sir.

S Novym Godom.

Okay, goodbye, sir.

(She quickly hangs up the telephone. Then she shuts it in her desk drawer for good measure. She looks around guiltily. She sets the letter at the far edge of the desk where the editor will be sure to see it when she comes in. Devuchka tries to go back to wrapping presents, but her curiosity gets the better of her. She eyes the letter apprehensively. Finally, she opens the letter and reads it.)

“DEAR EDITOR: MY NAME IS SVETLANA. I AM 8 YEARS OLD. SOME OF MY LITTLE FRIENDS SAY THERE IS NO GRANDFATHER FROST. PAPA SAYS, ‘IF YOU SEE IT IN THE *SOLNTSE NOVOSTI* IT IS SO.’ PLEASE TELL ME THE TRUTH; IS THERE A GRANDFATHER FROST? SVETLANA HANLOVNA, 115 DEVYANOSTO PYATI”.

...Oh, the poor thing.

(Devuchka takes out a steno pad and pencil.)

“DEAR SVETLANA...”

(She pauses to consider her response, then writes furiously.)

“WHO ARE YOUR LITTLE FRIENDS? MY UNCLE YURI HAPPENS TO BE AN IMPORTANT MEMBER OF THE LOCAL PARTY COUNCIL, AND I WILL ASK HIM TO HAVE A WORD WITH THEIR PARENTS...”

(MADAME EDITRIX, the editor-in-chief, returns abruptly from a business lunch.)

M. EDIT. Devuchka!

DEVUCHKA *(startled)* Good afternoon, Madame Editrix. How was your luncheon?

M. EDIT. Another bland plate of fish with another bland information minister. But if it gets us the press releases a few days early, I am willing to make the sacrifice. Here are the news items for next week from the approved media. Type it up for Tserkov and for Zloveschii, and leave the original on my desk.

DEVUCHKA Right away, Madame Editrix.

M. EDIT. Has Tserkov turned in any copy yet? I want to see his report on the bread shortage. If it's going into the holiday edition, it has to be more cheerful than his usual. And there was an item about an unauthorized tree lighting in Cathedral Square. I want to make sure it will pass the Party censors.

DEVUCHKA Yes, Madame Editrix. Here you are. There are stories from Comrade Zloveschii, as well.

M. EDIT. *(suspicious)* He hasn't been bothering you, has he?

DEVUCHKA No, Madame Editrix.

M. EDIT. Stay away from that Zloveschii, do you hear me, Devuchka? I won't have another secretary ruined by his philanderings.

DEVUCHKA No, Madame Editrix.

M. EDIT. Has the post arrived? We still need letters for this evening's edition.

DEVUCHKA I was just getting to that.

M. EDIT. Nothing too controversial. The censors deserve a holiday, like everybody else.

DEVUCHKA Would we publish something controversial, Madame Editrix??

M. EDIT. Of course, we would not. I am joking. Cheer up, Devuchka. In this life, you must always find reasons to laugh, because, trust me, they never find you.

DEVUCHKA Yes, Madame Editrix.

(Madame Editrix notices the letter from Svetlana.)

M. EDIT. What is this?

DEVUCHKA It's a letter from a little girl named Svetlana who's friends have bullied her into thinking there is no such thing as Grandfather Frost.

M. EDIT. And she wrote a letter to the editor? Resourceful.

DEVUCHKA I think her father put her up to it. He strikes me as subversive.

M. EDIT. And what are you doing with it?

DEVUCHKA I am answering her letter.

M. EDIT. So you are the editor-in-chief now, Devuchka?

DEVUCHKA No, Madame Editrix.

M. EDIT. I didn't think so. Letters-to-the-Editor are letters to me.

DEVUCHKA Yes, Madame Editrix. I apologize. I thought I could help.

M. EDIT. You are not here to help. You are here to learn. I know your uncle is a deputy minister in the local politburo, but that does not mean you are qualified to be a journalist and have an opinion in a state newspaper.

DEVUCHKA I'm sorry, Madame Editrix. I thought it was important.

M. EDIT. You are not qualified to make such distinctions.

DEVUCHKA No, Madame Editrix.

M. EDIT. Here, let me see it. *(takes the letter)* How old are you, Devuchka?

DEVUCHKA I am eighteen years old. I will be nineteen in eleven months.

M. EDIT. You still believe in Grandfather Frost, don't you?

DEVUCHKA Of course, I do, Madame Editrix, don't you?

M. EDIT. I am an adult. I believe what I am supposed to believe. That is the difference.

DEVUCHKA (*baffled*) Yes, Madame Editrix.

M. EDIT. You seem like a sweet girl, Devuchka—

DEVUCHKA Thank you, Madame Editrix—

M. EDIT. But you must think sometimes with your head and not always your heart. If you want to be a journalist, you must first learn to be objective.

DEVUCHKA That is a good lesson.

M. EDIT. You must learn to have no opinion.

DEVUCHKA No, Madame Editrix.

M. EDIT. Only then will you be qualified to shape the opinion of the proletariat.

DEVUCHKA Yes, Madame Editrix. I look forward to it.

M. EDIT. I have high hopes for you, one day, Devuchka. But in the meantime, you are to listen and learn. And answer the phone.

DEVUCHKA Yes, Madame Editrix. I understand completely.

M. EDIT. Then why aren't you answering the phone?

DEVUCHKA Because it is not ringing?

M. EDIT. That is because the drawers in that desk are sound-proofed.

(Devuchka opens the desk drawer. The telephone is ringing.)

DEVUCHKA Oh!

M. EDIT. My predecessor was somewhat paranoid, may he rest in peace.

DEVUCHKA (*answers*) *Solntse Novosti*, how may I place your call? Hello?

M. EDIT. And stay away from that Zloveschii!

(Madame Editrix exits into her office with the news copy and the letter from Svetlana.)

DEVUCHKA *(on phone)* Hello? Hello?

(She eyes her telephone suspiciously.)

G. FROST *(offstage)* O ho ho! Happy New Year!

DEVUCHKA Hello? Who is there?

G. FROST *(offstage)* S Novym Godom! O ho ho ho ho!!

DEVUCHKA Who is that? Can it be...?

(GRANDFATHER FROST peeks into the room.)

G. FROST Are there any good little girls in here?

DEVUCHKA *(ecstatic)* Oh! Oh! Grandfather Frost!

G. FROST Could that be my little snow maiden Snegurochka?

DEVUCHKA No, it's me, Grandfather Frost! Devuchka from Balakhna! Do you remember me?

G. FROST How could I forget? My goodness, look how you've grown. In all the right ways, too. Has it only been a year since I saw you last? O ho ho!

DEVUCHKA Did you have any trouble finding me? I was worried about your horse-drawn troika, when I moved to the city to take this position. The streets are so narrow here. But I'm learning so much! How are your white horses? Are they waiting outside in the alley?

(She goes to the window and tries to wipe away the frost to look out.)

G. FROST Don't worry about the horses, Devuchka. Why don't you come sit on Grandfather Frost's lap and we'll see if I have brought you any New Year's gifts?

DEVUCHKA Oh, I hope so, I hope so!

(Grandfather Frost rummages in his bag of gifts.)

G. FROST Let's see, what have we here? Perhaps some...

DEVUCHKA Chocolate!

G. FROST And what little girl doesn't like...?

DEVUCHKA Stockings! Oh, Grandfather Frost, I knew you would remember. My parents warned me you might not visit me when I moved to the city, so far from your home in Velikiy Ustyug, but I always knew you would come. How can I thank you? Shall I make some honey toast for your white horses? Oh, but we are out of bread. The lines were so long yesterday, I did not have time to wait.

G. FROST Forget about the toast. You spoil those horses anyway. Let's take care of Grandfather Frost for a change.

DEVUCHKA What can I do for you, Grandfather Frost? I am so grateful to see you!

G. FROST Well, I see you've hung some mistletoe over your desk.

DEVUCHKA Oh, that. My co-worker Zloveschii put it there. He is always thinking of reasons to snuggle and squeeze me.

ZLOVESCHII He sounds like an awful scamp, that one.

DEVUCHKA Oh, yes, he's awful. They say the last two secretaries had to quit because of him.

ZLOVESCHII Ah, well. Tradition is tradition. The mistletoe, I mean. While you are under it, perhaps you'd better give us a nuzzle. You know, for luck.

DEVUCHKA A nuzzle?! Grandfather Frost!

G. FROST Call me Frosty. Come on, Devuchka, you know how cold it gets in that horse-drawn troika? And it's such a long way home to Velikiy Ustyug.

(He tries to grope her. Devuchka pulls off his beard. She recognizes her sleazy co-worker ZLOVESCHII.)

DEVUCHKA Oh, Zloveschii! You dog! You are trying to trick me!

ZLOVESCHII Don't be such a prude, Devuchka. If you close your eyes and give me a hug, I bet I feel just like the real Grandfather Frost. O ho!

DEVUCHKA You are no Grandfather Frost.

ZLOVESCHII And you are no spring chicken. You would do well to let yourself be seduced by a promising journalist like me, while you are still young enough to make a good trophy bride.

DEVUCHKA Promising is all you do, Zloveschii. And you are hardly a catch. You are only the number two reporter at the *Solntse Novosti*. And we only have two reporters.

ZLOVESCHII Comrade Tserkov will not be number one for long. Not if he keeps making a fool of Madame Editrix. She cannot afford another of his controversies. Not with her family history.

DEVUCHKA You mean her father? She hardly ever speaks of him. But my uncle Yuri told me all the rumors.

ZLOVESCHII He used to run this newspaper, you know, a long time ago. In fact, he was a hero of the Revolution for a while. But then he began to question the Revolution. He thought the Party should answer to the same scrutiny as the monarchists they overthrew. They tolerated him at first, out of respect for his former loyalty. But it is difficult for our leaders to fight for the cause of the common workers if they are always answering charges about the treatment of the common workers. Eventually he had to be silenced. You know what that means?

DEVUCHKA (*nods grimly*) It must be a terrible embarrassment for her.

ZLOVESCHII Being embarrassed is what got her this job. Do you think she would be running a public newspaper if they thought she was still proud of her father and his accomplishments? Maybe you should try a little embarrassment, Devuchka. It is good for the complexion. It's good for the career, as well.

(Zloveschii pinches Devuchka's cheek, then her behind.)

DEVUCHKA You are a pig, Zloveschii!

ZLOVESCHII All right, stop hitting. Has Madame Editrix read my article about the unauthorized Christmas tree lighting?

DEVUCHKA I gave it to her just now. But I thought that was Comrade Tserkov's story?

ZLOVESCHII Not after she sees that I have already written it. Soon, she will realize that I am the one who reports the news here, while Tserkov is off "investigating" about it. And then my future at the *Solntse* will be made.

DEVUCHKA Well, I have made sure that she is reading it right now. So you could have a future at any minute.

ZLOVESCHII Thank you, my little Snegurochka. You are truly a gift. I wonder how I shall have to reward you, when I get my big promotion.

(Zloveschii tries to pinch her again.)

DEVUCHKA You behave yourself, Zloveschii, or you will make me regret giving you a New Year's gift at all.

ZLOVESCHII You have a New Year's gift for me? I knew you could not resist my charms forever. I think you must be sweet on me after all to have gone to such trouble. *(apprehensive)* It's not a nutcracker from your cousin's wood-carving shop, is it? Because that's what the last secretary got me for New Year's. And the secretary before that.

DEVUCHKA Oh, sit down. I promise, it is something you will like. I have put a lot of thought into this. But before I give it to you, I want you to understand that this does not mean I have special feelings for you. I regard you as a co-worker and nothing more. And I always will.

ZLOVESCHII Of course, of course.

DEVUCHKA You are a crude, obnoxious, despicable slug of a man. And I can think of no worse a fate than being married to you, or being your mistress, or being seen with you in public.

ZLOVESCHII Okay.

DEVUCHKA And I want you to understand that the fact that I took the time to think of a gift for you in no way means that there is any chance that you would ever be able to seduce me. No matter how many clumsy attempts you make. Even if you lived to be a thousand years. Is that understood?

ZLOVESCHII Yes, yes.

DEVUCHKA It is in the spirit of the season, nothing more.

ZLOVESCHII Strictly seasonal, I understand.

DEVUCHKA I have gifts for Comrade Tserkov, and Madame Editrix as well. You are not special.

ZLOVESCHII All right, I get it. If it's a sweater, I hope it fits me. It has gotten very chilly in here.

DEVUCHKA Oh, be quiet. Now hold out your hands. And close your eyes.

(He does. She takes a large gift-wrapped package off her desk and places it in his hands.)

ZLOVESCHII If my eyes are closed, how can I unwrap—?

(Devuchka throws her arms around Zloveschii and kisses him very passionately.)

ZLOVESCHII Mmph!

(Madame Editrix walks in on them.)

M. EDIT. Zloveschii!! What are you doing to that girl?! Let go of her!!

DEVUCHKA Happy New Year, Comrade Zloveschii.

M. EDIT. What do you think you are doing?!

ZLOVESCHII I didn't! It was she—

M. EDIT. I told you to keep your filthy hands off the secretaries. I am tired of replacing them every New Year's. Are you all right, Devuchka?

DEVUCHKA Yes, Madame Editrix.

ZLOVESCHII It was perfectly innocent.

M. EDIT. Then why are you dressed like Grandfather Frost?

ZLOVESCHII Toward the end it was perfectly innocent.

M. EDIT. How many times do I have to warn you about molesting your co-workers?

ZLOVESCHII This makes seven.

M. EDIT. You always go too far, Zloveschii.

ZLOVESCHII But I am the victim here!

M. EDIT. That's what you said last year.

ZLOVESCHII Last year the girl attacked me!

M. EDIT. And the year before.

ZLOVESCHII You see? It's a pattern with them.

M. EDIT. Yes, I see the pattern, like a web of spiders, and you are always at the middle of it. Always with your fingers in something you shouldn't be fingering. Especially when their relations happen to be important local Party officials.

ZLOVESCHII Ha! Her uncle is only a deputy minister. I've had more important borscht.

M. EDIT. Perhaps you'd like Devuchka to inform her uncle Yuri of that opinion.

ZLOVESCHII No, no! Please, don't tell him that, Devuchka. I was only joking. Tell him Zloveschii is a joker. I love borscht.

DEVUCHKA I'm sorry, Madame Editrix, it's not Comrade Zloveschii's fault, this time. I was just giving him his New Year's present.

ZLOVESCHII Thank you, by the way.

DEVUCHKA I have something for you as well, Madame Editrix.

(Devuchka gives Madame Editrix a small wrapped gift.)

ZLOVESCHII Yes, you see?

(Zloveschii holds up his own package. Devuchka takes it away from him.)

DEVUCHKA And this one is for Tserkov.

ZLOVESCHII I thought it was mine!

DEVUCHKA You already got your present. This was to keep your hands full while I gave it to you. Happy New Year.

M. EDIT. Devuchka, we do not exchange holiday gifts at the *Solntse Novosti*. This is a place of work. Not satisfaction.

DEVUCHKA Oh, I know. I do not expect anything in return. It's just that I am so grateful for this opportunity: Allowing me to work here and learn from you, Madame Editrix. You are a great example, and an inspiration for any young woman. Please, take it?

M. EDIT. *(embarrassed at the adulation)* All right, well... thank you. But don't let it happen again.

DEVUCHKA I think you will like it. My cousin Mikha says that is my special talent: I always know just the right gift. She works in

a wood-carving collective in Khimki, and I had her make something very special for Comrade Tserkov—

M. EDIT. And where is Comrade Tserkov? I need to speak to him.

DEVUCHKA He is not back yet.

ZLOVESCHII He's been gone all morning. (*furtively*) I think he's drunk.

DEVUCHKA Oh, Zloveschii! He's investigating an incident.

M. EDIT. I want to see him about this story on the Christmas tree lighting.

DEVUCHKA That's the incident. He is interviewing witnesses.

M. EDIT. What witnesses?!

ZLOVESCHII That's what I told him: What witnesses? Why witnesses? All of the necessary information is in the official press release. What more do you need?

M. EDIT. If he hasn't come back, then why do I have the finished article here in my hand? "RELIGIOUS ZEALOTS INJURED AT ILLEGAL TREE CEREMONY." Who wrote this?

ZLOVESCHII I did, of course. I could see that Tserkov was wasting time with his "investigative reporting," so I finished the story for him. And well ahead of deadline, you will notice. (*under his breath*) Now who is lazy and stupid?

M. EDIT. Zloveschii, what were you thinking?!

ZLOVESCHII It's true, I am always thinking—Wait, what?

M. EDIT. Do you know what you have done, you idiot?

ZLOVESCHII What's wrong? I thought you would want the story right away. It is sure to be the top headline. Religious fanatics trampled at an unsanctioned holiday event?

M. EDIT. Yes, it is most certainly going to be the top headline. In tomorrow's paper. Not today's.

ZLOVESCHII Why would we delay until tomorrow? This is first page news. A tragic accident at a Christmas tree lighting? It is perfect for the holiday.

M. EDIT. Do you even bother to read the press releases, Zloveschii?

ZLOVESCHII Of course, I do. I told you that's where I get all my facts.

M. EDIT. And yet you missed the fact that the Party has requested this be the front page for tomorrow? How would that look if this copy had gone to the typesetters, and we published it a day ahead of everyone else? This is not Western Europe. We do not “scoop” our competitors.

ZLOVESCHII No... Oh no... I thought it was for today. I could have sworn—

(He frantically fumbles for his copy of the press release.)

ZLOVESCHII Here it is. Look, you see? “ELEVEN ZEALOTS INJURED YESTERDAY AT RELIGIOUS PROTEST.”

(Madame Editrix takes it from him.)

M. EDIT. Why does this bulletin have today’s date?

DEVUCHKA I’m sorry, Madame Editrix. Don’t blame Zloveschii. This is my fault. I changed the date on the press release when I typed their copies.

ZLOVESCHII You little fool!! You don’t change information in official Party communications! You could get us all killed. We have to hide. Stay away from the windows!

M. EDIT. Shut up, Zloveschii! No one is getting killed. But stay away from the windows or I may want to pitch you out of one. Devuchka, why would you do such a thing? Do you know how much trouble we could be in for publishing state secrets out of schedule.

DEVUCHKA I didn’t know they were secret. I thought it was a mistake. The report describes a horrible accident, yesterday, at an unauthorized Christmas tree lighting in front of Sobor Cathedral. Eleven religious subversives were injured in the panic to escape. Three of them are not expected to survive. But the item is dated for release tomorrow. Which makes “yesterday” today, which is impossible.

ZLOVESCHII You’re impossible!

M. EDIT. Shut up!

DEVUCHKA So I changed the date of tomorrow to today, to make “yesterday” last night, so the story would make sense.

ZLOVESCHII Why would you want to make sense of anything that comes to us through official channels?!

M. EDIT. Be quiet, Zloveschii!

DEVUCHKA But the information must be wrong. If the accident is tonight, how would they know about it already?

ZLOVESCHII Don't be naïve, Devuchka. The Party knows what it wants to know. They have inspectors everywhere. Maybe they discovered there would be an accident because of faulty scaffolding. Or a fire hazard. Who can say?

DEVUCHKA But if someone knew about the accident in advance, wouldn't they just prevent it from happening?

ZLOVESCHII How should I know? Do I look like a mentalist?

M. EDIT. Perhaps it's too late for that, Devuchka.

ZLOVESCHII Yes! Maybe the protestors prevented them from preventing it out of rebellion. Did you think of that? Radicals never put their own public safety first.

DEVUCHKA But how does the ministry of information know the number of the injuries? And the names of the victims? "GREGOR PETROVICH, TRAMPLED, IVAN LEBEDEV, LACERATIONS, FATHER SVYASHCHENNIK, BEATEN INTO A COMA..." The report is very detailed.

M. EDIT. Your uncle is a member of the politburo, isn't he, Devuchka?

DEVUCHKA Yes, of course.

M. EDIT. Then he must have taught you that what the Party tells us in its official releases always turns out to be true, even when certain skeptics find it hard to believe at first.

DEVUCHKA Well, yes, of course. But surely even the Party makes typographical errors from time to time?

ZLOVESCHII Errors!? I have to hide.

(Zloveschii covers his ears and looks around for a place to hide.)

M. EDIT. Is that what you want me to tell the information minister the next time I have lunch with him? That there were errors?

DEVUCHKA No, of course not.

M. EDIT. Are you prepared to run the newspaper without me when I am detained for reeducation?

DEVUCHKA No, no! The information is correct. There are no errors.

M. EDIT. Then we are all agreed. The report of tonight's accident will go out tomorrow.

ZLOVESCHII I didn't even see a report.

DEVUCHKA But how can this be? The Party cannot see into the future.

ZLOVESCHII How do you think they make five-year plans? And ten-year plans? You are old enough to know that the Party can see into anything it chooses to see into. They have ways, and methods. Secret protocols. Special machines.

DEVUCHKA Machines—?

M. EDIT. There are no machines, Zloveschii! Don't fill her head with nonsense. But just because there is no explanation for something is no reason to doubt that it exists, Devuchka. Stranger things happen all the time. People who seem to be in perfect health at breakfast, suddenly succumb to consumption over supper. Loved ones who were thought to be missing or long dead appear in public after many years, as if nothing has happened. Isn't that so?

DEVUCHKA You read about it in the paper all the time.

M. EDIT. And we publish that paper. So now does it make sense to you?

DEVUCHKA (*more baffled than ever*) I think so, Madame Editrix. The world is full of inexplicable things and we must learn to accept them. No one knows how Grandfather Frost delivers toys to every child in Russia all in one night. But somehow he does it year after year.

M. EDIT. Yes... well... exactly.

DEVUCHKA The people's Party would not give us the information if it was not proper for us to have it. And you are right, sometimes my uncle Yuri seems to know things no one thought possible. Yet he always turns out to be right in the end, somehow. Are you going to open your present, Madame Editrix?

M. EDIT. Not now, Devuchka! We still have to find Tserkov, before it's too late. You corrected his information about the dates of the accident as well?

DEVUCHKA Yes, Madame Editrix. I am sorry.

M. EDIT. Where did you say he was going?

DEVUCHKA To the cathedral. He wanted to interview the survivors.

ZLOVESCHII He can't do that! What if they're still alive?

M. EDIT. We have to make sure no one speaks to Tserkov.

DEVUCHKA What? Why?

M. EDIT. Call the cathedral. Get them on the phone at once!

ZLOVESCHII Tell them it is a matter of state security!

M. EDIT. Tell them it is urgent.

ZLOVESCHII Tell them he is crazy! Tell them he is an escaped lunatic! From Bezumnyi! They're always crazier in Bezumnyi.

M. EDIT. Tell them your uncle is a Party minister and you don't know what he will think when he finds out.

DEVUCHKA I can't do that.

ZLOVESCHII Why not?!

DEVUCHKA Because he is only a deputy minister, and I have no way of knowing what my uncle will think.

M. EDIT. So it's true that you don't know what he will think?

DEVUCHKA No! ...I mean, yes. ...Oh, I see.

(Devuchka makes the call. Madame Editrix and Zloveschii hover over her desk.)

DEVUCHKA Hello? Is this the Sobor Cathedral? I am calling from the newspaper *Solntse Novosti*. I am trying to find one of our reporters: Comrade Tserkov. Do you know if he is there? No? Are you sure? Could you check? He might be from Bezumnyi.

M. EDIT. *(scanning the press release)* Ask for Father Svyashchennik.

DEVUCHKA The one who is in a coma—?

M. EDIT. Just do it!

DEVUCHKA Excuse me for asking, but is Father Svyashchennik there? *(puzzled)* Yes, I will wait.

(TSERKOV, a grizzled veteran reporter, bursts in with a bottle of vodka in one hand and a pad of notes in the other.)

TSERKOV I have wonderful news!

DEVUCHKA Oh, look, here he is! Comrade Tserkov!

TSERKOV Well, it's terrible news, but it's news! Actual news, at last! Can you believe it? We have to celebrate!

ZLOVESCHII Tserkov, what have you done?

TSERKOV Do you know where I've been?

M. EDIT. Cathedral Square.

TSERKOV That's right. But do you know why—?

M. EDIT. You went there to investigate the tree lighting accident.

TSERKOV You are very good at this game.

DEVUCHKA *(on phone)* Father Svyashchennik? Hello... *(perplexed)* How was your coma?

M. EDIT. Devuchka, hang up, hang up!

DEVUCHKA I'm sorry, I have to go.

ZLOVESCHII Don't tell him anything.

DEVUCHKA And for your information, I am not calling from the *Solntse Novosti*, you must have dialed a wrong number. *S Novym Godom!*

(She quickly hangs up.)

TSERKOV Do you know what I have just discovered?

M. EDIT. That there was no Christmas tree lighting at Sobor Cathedral.

TSERKOV That's right. There was no tree ceremony last night. There was no accident. There was no panic from the accident. And no injuries in the panic. And no one has been killed.

ZLOVESCHII We already know that.

TSERKOV But do you know why?

M. EDIT. Because the tree lighting event takes place tonight.

TSERKOV Because—How do you know these things?

ZLOVESCHII Because Devuchka changed the dates on the press release. There is not supposed to be a story until tomorrow.

DEVUCHKA I'm sorry, Comrade Tserkov. I didn't mean to cause trouble. You did all that research for nothing.

TSERKOV Nothing? It is far from nothing, Devuchka. This is a story! A very big story! The information ministry has information about an accident at a Christmas celebration that does not happen until tonight. Tonight! Don't you see what this means?

ZLOVESCHII Yes.

DEVUCHKA No.

M. EDIT. It doesn't matter. Can you please keep your voice down?

(She shuts the telephone in the desk drawer.)

TSERKOV It means it's not going to be an accident. Party officials already know who will be injured, and how badly. They are planning to provoke an incident at the cathedral this evening.

DEVUCHKA Oh! Is that what it means?

TSERKOV They are going to use it as an excuse to attack those poor people.

DEVUCHKA Oh no...

M. EDIT. You are reading too much into it.

TSERKOV The government plans to intentionally injure its own citizens. If I am reading anything in, it is a very short book.

ZLOVESCHII You don't know that it will be intentional. They could be injured while resisting arrest. Or fleeing the scene of an accident. Or possibly self-immolation.

TSERKOV We have to do something about this.

M. EDIT. There is nothing we can do.

TSERKOV This is a newspaper. We can publish the story. We can make sure they don't get away with it. The people have to know about this.

M. EDIT. The people do not pay your salary. This is a state paper.

TSERKOV The people and the state are one and the same. Isn't that what Comrade Lenin taught us?

ZLOVESCHII Tell that to the state.

TSERKOV You're not going to sit by and do nothing, are you? There are lives in danger.

ZLOVESCHII And some of them could be ours, if you don't stop acting like an alarmist. So what if eleven zealots brought trouble upon themselves? Would you like to join the protest and make it an even dozen?

TSERKOV It's not a protest. I spoke to the parish priest just now, Father Svyashchennik, and he told me it is only going to be a small peaceful gathering to light a few candles in a celebration of their beliefs.

ZLOVESCHII There are no such thing as peaceful beliefs. Every act of faith is a threat to the very republic. Beliefs are what make a man stand up to things he would do well to accept. Beliefs are what get a man silenced. Or a woman. Or worse!

DEVUCHKA It's true. My uncle Yuri says those who cling to the old religions are always the most troublesome. And the most unhappy. And I should cross to the other side of the street when I see them.

TSERKOV Then you may want to stand at a safe distance while I write this, or you might get your beliefs ruffled. What time is it? I have to get this article to the typesetters right away.

M. EDIT. There is no hurry. We will run the story tomorrow.

TSERKOV If we publish it tomorrow, it will be too late.

M. EDIT. On the contrary, it will be right on schedule.

TSERKOV But no one will believe we knew about it in advance. We will be dismissed as conspiracists.

ZLOVESCHII Which is what you are. What proof do you have that these people do not deserve to have an accident disrupt their unlawful activities?

DEVUCHKA Comrade Zloveschii is right. Why must there be a Christmas tree lighting at all? There are plenty of New Year's trees all over the city. Why do certain persons have to have their own holiday, when there are so many wonderful festivities that don't arouse suspicions?

TSERKOV It's not the same thing.

ZLOVESCHII It's exactly the same thing. It's a fir tree just like any other and some candles. What's the difference?

TSERKOV Well, in that case, what does it matter?

ZLOVESCHII Because it is an act of treason.

TSERKOV Lighting a candle just like any other candle?

ZLOVESCHII Lighting an unauthorized candle in an unprescribed manner as an outrage against the established social order.

TSERKOV So there is a difference.

ZLOVESCHII There is no difference!!

TSERKOV You are all brain-washed. It doesn't matter what their beliefs are. They should not have to be punished for them.

ZLOVESCHII What would you like them to be punished for? Their clothing? Their complexions? Next you will be suggesting genocide.

TSERKOV No, I am suggesting tolerance.

ZLOVESCHII Tolerance for genocide?! This is insanity. Can't you see that we are all getting worked up over nothing?! Nothing!!

TSERKOV This nothing is news.

M. EDIT. This news undermines the credibility of institutions which require our respect.

TSERKOV Isn't that the role of the press? To undermine that which is built upon shoddy foundations. Why do you think the symbol of our paper is the sun? Because it sheds light on the truth.

ZLOVESCHII I thought it was because the sun is the source of all heat and power.

DEVUCHKA I thought the Sun hid his light from Lady Winter because he is shy and she is beautiful. And it is only in the spring that he finally gains the courage to greet her, but by then she is gone, and he is too late to brighten her winter sorrow.

(They all stare at her blankly.)

TSERKOV We have to publish this story. It is our responsibility as journalists.

M. EDIT. We have a higher responsibility, as citizens, to our nation.

ZLOVESCHII And a lower responsibility, to ourselves, as people who don't like being tortured.

TSERKOV I would not expect you to understand, Zloveschii, but you, Madame Editrix—I would think that you, of all people—But I guess I was wrong.

M. EDIT. What do you think you know of me?

TSERKOV I know that your father built this place. Before the Revolution, this newspaper belonged to him. You were practically raised on the printing house floor.

M. EDIT. I am not my father. And if you know what's good for you, neither are you.

TSERKOV But you must remember what he taught you: "PRAVDA ZA VSE!" His motto is still emblazoned on our masthead.

M. EDIT. Yes, "TRUTH ABOVE ALL." It is a marvelous slogan. And it is a deplorable lifestyle. My father's truth made him many enemies, and in the end, it got him silenced. He thought of himself as a revolutionary, because they let him publish their manifestos. But when the Revolution was over, he never got over his thirst for rebellion. He was warned many times. My mother begged him to listen. But he thought he had a higher calling.

One winter night, they came for him. They came very late, when I would be in bed asleep, because no revolutionary likes to pry a crying child from her father's arm.

But I had stayed up to watch for Saint Nicholas. My father tried to go quietly, but I wouldn't let go of him until I made them promise that he would be home in time for Christmas. But Christmas never came that year. And now it doesn't come at all. My father was a selfish idealist, and it got him killed.

DEVUCHKA (*shocked*) Oh! You mustn't think that.

M. EDIT. What?

DEVUCHKA Well, what if, perhaps he wasn't dead...

M. EDIT. What are you talking about?

DEVUCHKA Oh... Well... I only mean that... Well, it's good to have hope. My uncle Yuri says that it is only a terrible rumor that so many died in the purges. Why some of them were only silenced and sent to exile, and now they live perfectly happy lives in the border republics with others of their kind, where they can do no harm.

M. EDIT. I'll not have such talk. I don't care who your uncle is: My father is dead. He abandoned me. He abandoned his family. He abandoned everything, except his principles. And I was raised in an orphanage, because principles don't feed a child, whose mother has died of grief.

ZLOVESCHII How dare you throw the memory of that traitor in her face, Tserkov! You know how the mention of him upsets her.

M. EDIT. Quiet, Zloveschii!

ZLOVESCHII No! I am sick of his meddling. You spent your whole life working to earn the trust of those in power to let you do the job your father should have done, and restore the reputation of this newspaper. And this one wants you to throw it all away for the sake of some reckless speculations that will only save a handful of rabble from a well-deserved beating.

M. EDIT. I said be quiet!

TSERKOV There is only one way to fight a revolution. Either you stand up and fight it. Or you hide under your desk and cower.

M. EDIT. That's two ways.

TSERKOV If no one will help me, then I will go back to the square, and stop them myself.

M. EDIT. You will stay here and do nothing, like a good reporter, and that will be the end of this. I learned one thing from my father. And that is what happens to your family when you don't protect it. Well, this newspaper is my family now. And I will not let anyone in it come to harm. Even if I have to save you from yourselves.

TSERKOV You can't keep me here.

M. EDIT. Turn in your resignation and you are free to go. But if you want to be employed here tomorrow, you will not leave this office again today.

TSERKOV But—!

M. EDIT. Do you need paper?

ZLOVESCHII Give him paper, Devuchka!

TSERKOV So I am the only one here who cares about the truth?

M. EDIT. Fool yourself, Comrade Tserkov, but don't think you can fool me. I have seen that look in a man's eye too many times. If truth was all that mattered, you could have whispered it

to Father Svyashchennik in the privacy of his confessional just now and no one would be the wiser that you had saved the day. But you came all the way back here first, to get the story in print. With your name under the headline. You don't want the truth. You want the credit.

TSERKOV For telling the truth.

M. EDIT. As you see it. But it is my job to see things otherwise. And there is a reason my vision outranks yours. Zloveschii, fix this article. You know what needs to be done.

ZLOVESCHII You are putting me on the top story?

M. EDIT. It seems that keeping your hands full is the only way to keep them off of Devuchka.

ZLOVESCHII You will not regret it.

M. EDIT. Devuchka, you scream if he touches you.

DEVUCHKA Yes, Madame Editrix.

M. EDIT. And Tserkov, your hands can be full of answering the mail. Perhaps you can apply some truth to the question of how to make bread pudding when there is a shortage of bread. That is something half the city will want to know tomorrow. And here is a little girl's letter we could publish in the holiday edition. She wants to know if there is a Grandfather Frost.

TSERKOV What am I supposed to do with that?

M. EDIT. *(shrugs)* She will find out eventually. *(hands him the letters)* That should keep you both out of trouble for the rest of one day, at least. I will be in my office.

DEVUCHKA Excuse me, Madame Editrix?

M. EDIT. Yes, Devuchka?

DEVUCHKA Don't forget to open your gift.

M. EDIT. Gift? What gift?

DEVUCHKA The present I gave you. You didn't lose it?

M. EDIT. Yes, yes, I have it here. I will look at it right away.

(Madame Editrix takes the gift out of her pocket as she exits into her office.)

DEVUCHKA I've got something for you, too, Comrade Tserkov.

TSERKOV Keep it.

DEVUCHKA I cannot keep it. I had it made specially for you.

TSERKOV I don't want any presents.

ZLOVESCHII He doesn't celebrate the New Year.

TSERKOV I don't acknowledge the New Year.

ZLOVESCHII He thinks if he doesn't ring it in, it won't come around.

TSERKOV That's not the reason.

DEVUCHKA Oh, Comrade Tserkov, you are not so old.

TSERKOV I didn't say I was old. The holiday is a hoax, and I won't be a party to it.

ZLOVESCHII I, on the other hand, would never miss a party to it.

TSERKOV Didn't Madame Editrix explain to you that we don't exchange New Year's gifts anymore? Not since Zloveschii was seriously injured with a nutcracker last year.

ZLOVESCHII It was not a serious injury. The girl surprised me, that's all.

DEVUCHKA You don't have to celebrate the New Year to be happy about it, Comrade Tserkov. It is the most joyful time of the year!

TSERKOV No, in fact, it's not the most joyful! But we are all too blinded by the holiday lights to see the darkest days of winter for what they really are.

DEVUCHKA We have the whole year to see things as they are. The New Year is for seeing things as they could be. Like when a new child is born and we don't yet know if they will grow up to be a famous ballerina or a soldier.

TSERKOV I think we know that the first time they change its diapers.

DEVUCHKA What do you mean?

ZLOVESCHII Oh, leave him alone, Devuchka. He's just a New Year's grouch. I will gladly accept your present on his behalf. Do you need me to close my eyes?

(Zloveschii closes his eyes, holds out his hands, and puckers for a kiss.)

*(Enter **BOLYSHOI** and **SHIROKY**, visitors from the Committee for State Security who seem to enjoy their work.)*

BOLYSHOI *S Novym Godom, comrades!*

SHIROKY *S Novym Godom! Happy New Year!*

DEVUCHKA Happy New Year to you! How may I help you?

BOLYSHOI Please to excuse us, we are looking—Shiroky?

SHIROKY *Solntse Novosti.*

BOLYSHOI Yes. Is this the address of the *Solntse Novosti* newspaper?

SHIROKY It is newspaper.

DEVUCHKA Yes, this is the *Solntse Novosti*.

BOLYSHOI Ah, we have come to the right place. You see, Shiroky, what did I tell you?

SHIROKY I should never have doubted you. (*to the others*) He is eyes like bloodhound, this one.

BOLYSHOI Tell me, where can I find Comrade Editor? Is it you?

TSERKOV No. I am Comrade Answers-Mail-For-Children.

DEVUCHKA Madame Editrix is in her office. I will get her.

(Devuchka exits into the editor's office.)

SHIROKY Wonderful weather, yes? Very cold. Brutal like Cossack.

BOLYSHOI Tell me, who is head reporter, then?

SHIROKY Top dog. Number one. There is a man, I can tell you, I should like to shake my hands with.

ZLOVESCHII That would be me! I am the reporter who handles the top stories now. Madame Editrix gives me complete confidence. Do you have news for us?

SHIROKY (*chuckling*) I think we do. I think we have news for you.

BOLYSHOI No.

SHIROKY Not at all. Figure of speech. Where is your telephone?

(Re-enter Madame Editrix still opening the gift from Devuchka.)