

TAKE ME IN YOUR HANDS

Characters

Iztok, 58-65

Maya, 25-30

Take Me in Your Hands was first produced by Theater im Keller in Graz, Austria, opening on March 1, 2012. It was directed by Alfred Haidacher with the following cast:

Maya
Iztok

Mayuna Hasebe
Tino Schubert



Mayuna Hasebe, Tino G. Schubert
Take Me in Your Hands, Theater im Keller, Graz, Austria, 2012



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Mojca Funkl

Take Me in Your Hands, Slovenian Chamber Theatre, Ljubljana, 2012



Mojca Funkl, Iztok Jereb

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Iztok Jereb, Mojca Funkl
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Secondhand bookshop in a small cellar. Books everywhere: on rickety shelves, on the floor, on the counter, under the counter... Because daylight coming through a small window at the back is insufficient, two old-fashioned standard lamps are switched on all the time, one at each end. Amidst the disorder of books on the left there is a shabby armchair with a small coffee table next to it. Lying on a pile of books on the coffee table is a black hat. Between the shelves along the right wall there is a passage leading into the front room (and to the main entrance) both of which are hidden from view. The passage has a wooden counter; the middle part is on hinges and can be lifted to enable people to pass through. On the fixed part of the counter there is a small computer screen with a keyboard, and next to it an old-fashioned black telephone. At the end of the shelves on the left there is a side door leading into a kitchenette, toilet, lumber room.

1.

(In darkness, the phone rings. Lights slowly up. The phone keeps ringing. Someone flushes the toilet behind the back door. The door opens and Iztok Novak, the shop owner, rushes out doing up his trousers.)

IZTOK: A man can't even ... *(He grabs the receiver and yells into it.)* Yes?

(He listens, changes his tone.) Thirty books?! ... Impossible, Madam ... I'm prepared to believe that you have too many, but I have so many I won't sell in five hundred years! ... Why don't you donate them to a nursing home? ... You *are* in a nursing home ... Even so, I just can't, I simply can't ...

(Replaces the receiver, sighs. Sits on the chair behind the counter. Picks up the magazine he had left open on the counter. The phone rings again. He lifts the receiver.)

Yes? *(Listens.)* There's every chance that I have it ... Come and browse. We close at seven. Every day at seven. *(Replaces receiver, resumes checking the magazine. He finds what he was looking for.)* I knew it! *(Grabs the phone, dials a number.)*

Iztok Novak here ... Owner of the bookshop Bibliophile. Listen ... I published an ad in your paper. Twice. There was no response to the first one because it was placed by mistake in the section Men Seeking Women ... Madam, I'm looking for a bookshop assistant! A student, ideally. Three hours a day, twice a week. So I can get some things done, attend my therapy ... Yes, I know the ad is now in the right section, but this time it says that I'm offering 400 euros an hour! *(Listens.)* You know what – !!! *(Angrily bangs the receiver on the cradle.)*

(He rises and walks towards his armchair. As he is about to sink into it, a strange noise can be heard from the right, as if someone had slipped on the stairs and rolled to the bottom. And then an angry female voice, swearing, moaning... Iztok rushes off into the front room.)

IZTOK: Are you all right?

MAYA: I could've killed myself!

IZTOK: That's true.

MAYA: Why do you pour water on the stairs?

IZTOK: It's dripping from the tap in the wall.

MAYA: Can't you fix it?

IZTOK: I'll call someone today. Come...

MAYA: I can do it myself.

(Iztok and Maya enter through the passage. Iztok is holding her elbow, she is limping a bit. She is dressed in a shabby winter coat and her head is covered by a red woolen cap, pulled over the ears. In her left hand she is carrying a red linen bag.)

IZTOK: Here, in the armchair.

MAYA (*pushes him away*): No. If I sit down I'll faint. Look, my hands are shaking!

IZTOK: Want me to call a doctor?

MAYA: Why, are you ill? And what's that tap doing above the stairs anyway?

IZTOK: No idea. It was there when I hired the place.

MAYA: Last week?

IZTOK: Four years ago.

MAYA: Water's been dripping from a faulty tap for four years?

IZTOK: You know how it is. First one thing, then another...

MAYA: In four years you must have collected at least twenty corpses. Do you sell organs for transplantations?

IZTOK: Thanks for the idea. Because selling books...

MAYA (*looks at the shelves*): You are well-stocked, I must say.

IZTOK: Fill your bag and take some away.

MAYA (*pulls three books from her bag*): Actually, I've brought you some.

IZTOK (*deep sigh*): Oh no ... All right, I'll take them. Although I'd rather not.

MAYA: They're yours. (*Iztok is puzzled.*) My ex stole them.

IZTOK: Where?

MAYA: Here.

IZTOK (*proudly*): It's impossible to steal a book from my shop.

MAYA (*puts the books on the counter*): Your stamp's on them.

(*Iztok checks the books and realizes that they are indeed his.*)

IZTOK: Spinoza, *Ethics*. Good choice for a thief. *How to Become a Millionaire*. Not ethically, for sure. Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*. Nobody searches for the soul anymore. (*Puts the books under the counter.*)

MAYA: I do.

IZTOK (*walks towards his armchair and sits*): You won't find it here.

MAYA: Will I be allowed to read when there're no customers?

IZTOK: I don't understand...

MAYA: I'm sorry I shouted at you. Because, really, I'm OK. Reliable. Punctual. And this work would really, really suit me.

IZTOK: Wait a minute... You came...?

MAYA: About your ad.

IZTOK: You should've phoned first.

MAYA: I believe in personal contact. And you won't have to pay me 400 euros an hour!

IZTOK: Well, that was...

MAYA: Four euros will be quite all right.

IZTOK: But...

MAYA: Chewing gum? (*Puts one in her mouth. Iztok declines.*) When I'm nervous I must give my jaws a good workout. Otherwise they freeze and then I can't open my mouth.

IZTOK: Why are you nervous?

MAYA: Because I'd like to make a good impression! And I don't know what you don't like.

IZTOK: Oh...

MAYA: Shall I tell you what *I* don't like?

IZTOK: If you must...

MAYA: I dislike stupid TV shows, like Big Brother and The House of Fame. Soap operas, backstabbing, hypocrisy, evil, rudeness, shouting for no reason, stubbornness. I dislike stupid bosses, exploitation, bad music, blues, punk, rock punk, people on drugs, laziness, losers of all kinds. I dislike wars. And loneliness. I dislike it when I reach the station and the bus pulls out before my eyes. I dislike acne, on me *and* on others. I dislike made-up women, half-naked women, and women who have no taste. And fat women who squeeze into tight trousers with belly flab wobbling around them. Want me to go on?

IZTOK (*looks at his watch*): If you're not in a hurry...

MAYA: I dislike people who torture animals or insult other people. And what's happening with the Earth, what we're doing to it. I dislike people who stick their noses into everything but never clean up their own mess. I dislike being indecisive, angry, and many other traits of mine. I dislike Mum shouting at Dad when there's no need... (*Suddenly remembering.*) What about you?

IZTOK: Me?

MAYA: What don't *you* like?

IZTOK: I think I've come to terms with most things.

MAYA: I'll need to know if I'm going to work here.

IZTOK: We'll see about that.

MAYA: Shall I tell you what I like?

IZTOK (*shrugs*): Well...

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MAYA: Rum cola, vodka, red bull, juice vodka, bamboo liqueur, cocktails, and practically everything else. Sports I like – almost all, skiing, rarely, I have no skis, but it's great, really, and swimming, specially in the sea though any pool will do, and jogging, and just walking along the streets, hill-climbing, cycling, diving. And good music, movies, theater, but not very often. I like summer, spring, the sea without seaweed, and pretty boys who know what they want, who respect themselves, who respect women and take care of their bodies and minds. And who have jobs. What about you?

IZTOK: Me?

MAYA: I'm too curious, right?

IZTOK: Well...

MAYA: And do you know what else I like? All fruits and vegetables, meat also, most of all fish, and juices, water, macaroni, pizzas and pies, and above all chocolate, Milka, of course, but also Lindt and Ritter Sport (*rummages inside her bag*)... none left, I must've eaten it, I'll bring you one next time... I also like if the scales tip at 56 instead of 65. And long talks about spirituality, higher consciousness, universe, souls, beautiful things...

IZTOK: Err...

MAYA (*turning sharply*): Oh, I like cleanliness, order, yoga, meditation, peace. But also action, activities, I like to play games, I do puzzles, especially when my life goes to pieces. I like laughing, I like being happy, with a full stomach, fresh out of bath and warm. I like my aunt's slippers because they're unusual, you don't have to take them off. I like warm blankets so I can wrap myself into them up to my neck and don't have to be cold. (*Looks around.*) Real winter in here. Have you no heating?

IZTOK: We do.

MAYA: Well... Now it's your turn.

IZTOK: How do you mean?

MAYA: To tell me a thing or two.

IZTOK: What could possibly interest you?

MAYA: If you're going to be my boss I'll need to know a few things.

IZTOK: As I said...

MAYA: How long married, how many kids, any grandchildren, that sort of thing.

IZTOK (*gentle laughter*): Actually you're quite funny.

MAYA: And you don't like that.

IZTOK: I think I do.

MAYA: Well then, answer my questions.

IZTOK: I'm divorced. My wife left me because she said I preferred books. She was right. But books are more discreet, they don't go on and on, they don't yell at you. They wait, patiently, for you to pick them up, open them, leaf through them and, if the moment isn't right, put them back on the shelf.

MAYA: Is that how you imagine an ideal woman? Like a book on a shelf, patiently waiting to be picked from among others, quickly leafed through and put back in her place?

IZTOK: I have three grown-up sons. They send me Christmas cards. I may have grandchildren, but I have not been informed.

MAYA: That must hurt.

IZTOK: Not as much as my back. Which hurts all the time.

MAYA (*seductively*): What do you appreciate most in a woman?

IZTOK: Cleverness. Tolerance. Imagination.

MAYA: Are you happy?

IZTOK: No. Should I be?

MAYA: You drink, right?

IZTOK: Not at all. Well... red wine. Moderately.

MAYA: Your favorite book.

IZTOK: Any on its way out of the shop.

MAYA: Favorite music?

IZTOK: Anything that doesn't sound like a chainsaw.

MAYA: Are you a loner?

IZTOK (*not very convincingly*): In the company of all these books?

MAYA: One day I'll have so many books at home! Shelves everywhere, even in the bathroom, and a large bookcase on the balcony. I adore books.

IZTOK: Take as many as you like.

MAYA: Hah, do you know where I live?! In a block of apartments, on the ninth floor. Ideal to see what it would be like if I threw myself off the balcony. We have a flat eight by five and not enough space to put a needle anywhere. Because Mum and Dad like to keep things. I, of course, *have* to throw out the drawings I made at the nursery school. But that's not important, right? Fuck it.

IZTOK: Well...

MAYA: Hope you don't mind my using expressions that aren't so nice. That's normal where I come from.

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IZTOK: Why are you interested in books?

MAYA: Because I want to become perfect.

IZTOK: And how are books going to help you?

MAYA (*astonished*): Books contain all the wisdom of the world! All the answers to all the questions. Advice of the cleverest people of all times. Don't you realize what you have in this cellar?

IZTOK: A large stone round my neck that's going to pull me to the bottom and drown me.

MAYA: I'll die if you don't give me a job.

IZTOK: No, you won't.

MAYA: I mean, I do visit libraries, but they don't have everything. And they want the books back. I'd like to live among them. Search through them day and night until I found the right one. (*Pulls another book from her bag.*) Here's another, stolen by my ex. I wasn't going to give it back, but I will now, of course. (*She opens a marked page and reads.*) "Reading liberates the reader and transports him from his book to a reading of himself and all of life..."

IZTOK (*takes the book from her hands*): Gabriel Zaid. *So Many Books!* (*Leafs through it, finds a passage he's looking for, reads.*) "If not a single book were published from this moment on, it would still take 250,000 years for us to acquaint ourselves with those books already written..."

MAYA (*pulls the book from his hand*): Why do you sell them, if you think they aren't worth reading?

IZTOK: Reading maybe, but selling? No.

MAYA: I'll get you customers.

IZTOK: Really?

MAYA: Yes.

IZTOK: For four euro an hour you will try to drag people away from TV and computers? Why?

MAYA: Because they don't know what they're missing.

IZTOK (*shakes his head, smiling*): Are you a student?

MAYA: Yes.

IZTOK: And what do you study?

MAYA: The art of survival.

IZTOK: A very good subject.

MAYA: But completely apart from that... I really must tell you this. The fact is that almost every day I ask myself: what is my essence? Why am I here? Every morning at six, when I wake up, I first say a

prayer, repeat my mantra and thank God for all the beautiful moments, for all the nice people I know, at least three or four, and I ask God to take care of them, and that everything will be all right with me. I know that sounds funny but many people do that. Don't you?

IZTOK: Say a prayer, repeat my mantra? (*He shakes his head.*)

MAYA: Don't you ever ask yourself: what is my essence, why am I here?

IZTOK: I'm here to repay my debts and prevent the bookshop from going bankrupt.

MAYA (*cautiously*): You have debts? Then how are you going to pay me?

IZTOK: Good question.

MAYA: I won't work for nothing. I've done that too often. I'll need some small change for food, at least.

IZTOK: Some small change I may be able to find.

MAYA (*joyfully*): Oh! I got the job!

IZTOK: It won't be a job. Just part-time work, three times a week.

MAYA: But a couple of hours I can work for free, can't I? Just so I'm here, so I can read...

IZTOK: Well...

MAYA: I can do the cleaning, get rid of dust. I can arrange all the books in alphabetical order. You pay me some hours, but the rest I do as a favor. OK?

IZTOK: I'll think about it.

MAYA: There's something about me you don't like. Do I talk too much?

IZTOK: No, no...

MAYA: That's how I am. I can't help it. The only time I don't talk is when I read. And because I read most of the time you don't have to worry. (*Pause.*) Or would you prefer someone who has experience selling books?

IZTOK: It's not that. Look, it was good of you to bring back these books. But your ex, as you said, actually...

MAYA: That's what you're afraid of? That I'm going to steal your books? After you asked me to fill my bag and take some away? (*Reaches for her bag.*)

IZTOK: Wait...

MAYA: It's true that I nick a thing or two here and there. But I'd never steal books. I have no place to put them.

IZTOK: You nick a thing or two?

MAYA: Only when I run out of money. But I won't anymore, I promise. It came to me this morning as I was staring into the flame of the

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candle. Because afterward I always dislike myself. I mean, I borrowed, because to say steal would be taking it a bit far, I borrowed, in a shop, ten pairs of tights. Simply because they didn't have that thing that sets off the alarm. And I gave them to Zoya, my friend, to sell. And she did, five so far. We split the money. They ain't half bad, very thick, good for winter. (*Pulls up her coat to reveal black tights above brown boots.*) But far too expensive for my taste... (*Looks at Iztok.*) What?

IZTOK: You think it's fair to nick a thing or two here and there?

MAYA (*agitated*): Is it fair for managers to get huge bonuses from companies they destroyed? Next to their salaries, which a factory worker couldn't even imagine? Is it fair that in Europe we pour milk down the drain and leave water taps open while brushing our teeth? While in other parts of the world they have nothing to drink? Or eat?

IZTOK: Well...

MAYA: Well what? If I reshuffled the ownership of ten pairs of tights, who is going to suffer? (*Reaches for her bag.*)

IZTOK: Wait...

MAYA: We have nothing to say to each other.

IZTOK: You need work.

MAYA: I'll find something.

IZTOK: Let's give it a try. We have nothing to lose.

MAYA: Except a book or two that may end up in my bag.

IZTOK: I won't even notice.

MAYA (*slowly comes back*): You're pretty lonely, aren't you?

IZTOK: It's not so bad.

MAYA: I can smell it. This place is full of loneliness. I know the feeling.

IZTOK: But you're young. The world should be one big party for you.

MAYA: Maybe it is, for some. But I'm not stupid enough. Or clever enough. Otherwise friends wouldn't turn away from me. Because I'm depressive, they say. Do you find me depressive?

IZTOK: Not really.

MAYA: But I am lonely. I've no one to talk to. My friend Zoya, for instance. Her childhood was really miserable, full of tears, I mean with her dad beating her mum. They're divorced now. She still hasn't gotten over it. I was always there to help her. But when I needed her once or twice in the last year she wasn't there. And when she promised she'd come for a drink on my birthday so I wouldn't celebrate by myself she didn't turn up.

IZTOK: What about boys?

MAYA: Well... I *am* meeting Damien, my ex, this weekend. But I doubt it'll turn into more than a quarrel. I also had a yoga teacher, about your age. But he sent me an SMS not to come anymore because I was always late.

IZTOK: It'll all work out in the end.

MAYA: Yes, but not by itself.

IZTOK: How then?

MAYA (*gently begging*): So that I find the answers to all the important questions in books?

IZTOK: All right, four hours a day, three times a week.

MAYA (*jumps with joy*): Yoohoo! How about five hours four times a week?

IZTOK: Couldn't afford that.

MAYA: But I can stay longer if I want to, right? You won't throw me out when my hours are over? I won't bother you, honest, I'll just read quietly in the corner.

IZTOK: All right.

MAYA: And you *will* give me advice about what to read? So I won't be wasting my time?

IZTOK: That'll be more difficult.

MAYA (*as if suddenly remembering*): Oh... one more thing. I must tell you this, to avoid misunderstandings. I was born in 1986. And you're... somewhere around 70?

IZTOK: 64!

MAYA: What?! You look much older. Too much stress I suppose. What I mean is that you shouldn't get any ideas about us. Friendship yes, that's another matter. I don't mean to hurt your feelings or anything, but let's face it, that's how it is.

IZTOK: I haven't even thought about that.

MAYA: No? (*Tries to hide disappointment.*) A normal man would. (*Takes her bag.*) Tomorrow when?

IZTOK: Anytime.

MAYA: After twelve, then. That'll give you time to prepare the list.

IZTOK: List?

MAYA: Yes, the list of books you think I should read. We agreed.

IZTOK: I don't remember...

MAYA: Oh come on! The brain stays flexible well into the eighties. Unless you drink. Do you drink? (*Iztok shakes his head.*) Because if you do I know a method that'll make you stop. (*Walks through*

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the passageway, lowers the board behind her. From the front room, offstage:) And don't forget to call a plumber!

IZTOK (*confused, to himself*): I will.

(Maya suddenly returns and stops at the counter.)

MAYA: Is there heating in this place?

IZTOK: There is.

MAYA: Well, switch it on. I'm rather cold-blooded. I need plenty of warmth. *(She leaves.)*

(Lights out.)

2.

(Maya is sitting in the armchair, reading. She is wearing jeans and a pullover. The phone rings. She ignores it and continues reading. The phone keeps ringing. Without taking her eyes off the book, Maya rises and slowly walks toward the phone. As she reaches out, almost touching the receiver, the phone stops ringing.)

MAYA: Even better.

(In the same way, without taking her eyes of the book, she returns to the armchair. Iztok enters. He removes his coat. He is wearing an elegant if slightly rumpled suit with a white shirt and a blue tie.)

MAYA: I hope you aren't wearing a tie because of me!

IZTOK (*apologetically*): I had an important... meeting.

MAYA: You know what you look like? Like a recently fired manager of a provincial bank.

IZTOK (*decides to ignore that*): You didn't have to wipe the stairs, that's my job.

MAYA: Didn't you notice that the pipe's no longer dripping?

IZTOK: What happened?

MAYA: I phoned one of my exes and he changed the washer.

IZTOK (*not too happy*): How much do I owe you?

MAYA: Nothing.

IZTOK: He did it for free?

MAYA: You're kidding! He'll have to do more than that before he can repay me.

IZTOK: Did you lend him money?

MAYA: No, but he had the use of my body. When it was still beautiful. Slim. Not podgy like now. Look. (*She pinches the side of her tummy.*) I'm surprised he still finds it appealing. Well, he won't get it. Not even if he changes a hundred washers!

IZTOK: Wait a minute... someone came to change the washer because you promised...?

MAYA (*snapping*): What? Promised what? A night of unforgettable passion on his filthy bed? What's the matter with you?

IZTOK: Nothing.

MAYA: Isn't it important that the pipe's no longer dripping? And that no one will get killed on the stairs?

IZTOK: Yes, but...

MAYA: But what?

IZTOK (*changes the subject*): What're you reading?

MAYA (*places the book on the pile of others on the table*): Wouldn't you like to know how many books I sold while you were away?

(*Iztok opens the cash register, takes out some banknotes and coins, counts.*)

IZTOK: Forty-two euros and thirty cents?

MAYA: Is that bad?

IZTOK: Depends on what you sold. And to whom.

MAYA: To my ex.

IZTOK (*closes the till*): Another one?

MAYA: The same one.

IZTOK: He made no charge for fixing the pipe, and on top of that you sold him books?!

MAYA: Pretty good, eh?

IZTOK: Wait a minute... Is that the one who...?

MAYA: No, this one wouldn't steal a fly's tail. This one is honest. But stupid. I told him he needs some education if he wants to see me again.

IZTOK: What did you sell him?

MAYA: An old encyclopedia.

IZTOK (*aghast*): Not the Britannica!

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MAYA: No, the other one. The old one. Torn, full of stains.

IZTOK: And for that he gave you 42 euro?

MAYA: Only because I gave him one book for free.

IZTOK: Which one?

MAYA: Kamasutra. You have three, so I thought you wouldn't miss one.

IZTOK: Not the hardcover one, with color illustrations?!

MAYA: That's the one he wanted.

IZTOK (*unhappy, with a big sigh*): I should've come back earlier.

MAYA: Have I made a mistake?

IZTOK: It's too late now. (*Takes off his coat.*) Hot in here.

MAYA: Just right for me.

IZTOK: Perhaps we should lower the thermostat just a little bit... (*Maya puts the book on the table, grabs her bag and coat, walks toward the exit.*) Where're you going?

MAYA (*putting on her coat*): I do you more damage than good.

IZTOK: I didn't say that.

MAYA: You'll find it easier without me.

IZTOK: You don't understand. I *need* my free time.

MAYA: I wonder what for.

IZTOK: I'd like to... finish my essay.

MAYA: You write? (*She slowly returns.*) You never told me you write!

IZTOK: I've been planning this essay for years. It's about whether Borges was a great poet because of his blindness. Whether it's blindness that enables us to access those parts of our soul that normally we can't see.

(*Maya produces a packet of chewing gum, puts one in her mouth, begins to chew.*)

MAYA: You mean those parts of the soul that are obscured by the world we *can* see?

IZTOK: Bravo!

MAYA: Just by the way – who was this Borges?

IZTOK (*a twitch of surprise*): The Argentine poet and writer who is regarded as great although his work contains only dribs and drabs.

MAYA: I don't like dribs and drabs. Must be the reason I haven't heard of this gentleman.

IZTOK: Probably.

MAYA: But you know... I often think that I'd also like to be blind. Because then I could see my feelings. When I look at the world it seems to me like a stage set. With some sort of ridiculous comedy going on. Maybe some people like that. I don't. (*Pause.*) I also write, in case you want to know. Poems.

IZTOK: I'll be glad to read them some time.

MAYA: Really?! I've got one here! (*Rummages inside her bag, pulls out a folded piece of paper, hands it to Iztok.*) Read it to me. Please.

IZTOK: Oh, I don't know...

MAYA: Come on. You have such a beautiful voice.

IZTOK (*who has quickly perused the poem*): Are you sure?

MAYA (*sinks in the armchair*): Let's pretend it's a poetry night. I'm the audience and you read for me. You'll get a huge applause.

IZTOK (*clears his throat, begins*):

Who am I?
I ask, looking myself in the eye.
Am I really what I see?
Or is there more of me up some tree?

My plans have already been made,
So don't try to persuade
Me that I'm a fool
Because I'm really quite cool.

MAYA: Go on. Please.

IZTOK (*clears his throat again*):

My first wish is all-powerful,
I want to be perfect without going to school,
I want my plate to be always full...

MAYA: Won't you read on?

IZTOK (*coughing*): Something's stuck in my throat...

MAYA: Well... What do you think?

IZTOK: Actually, I'm not on very good terms with poetry... Ask me about prose or drama, and I'll be able to tell you plenty. But poetry...

MAYA: You managed to get out of that one all right.

IZTOK: No, really... I wouldn't like to...

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MAYA: Hurt me, right? Well, you already have. (*Wipes a tear with the back of her hand.*)

IZTOK: Look... I also used to write poetry... And my poems, too... (*He shrugs.*)

MAYA: Tell me one.

IZTOK: That was so many years ago...

MAYA: Surely you remember some.

IZTOK: Only one. It's called "The Art of Poetry." *Ars poetica*.

MAYA: I want to hear it!

IZTOK: All right. (*He recites, with deep feeling*):

To feel that waking is another sleep
That dreams it does not sleep, and that death,
Which our flesh dreads, is that very death
Of every night, which we call sleep.
To see in death a sleep, and in the sunset
A sad gold, of such is Poetry
Immortal and a pauper. For Poetry
Returns like the dawn and the sunset.
They tell how Ulysses, gluttoned with wonders,
Wept with love to descry his Ithaca
Humble and green. Art is that Ithaca
Of green eternity, not of wonders.

MAYA (*clapping*): Bravo!

IZTOK: Did you understand it?

MAYA: No. But I felt it.

IZTOK: That's how it should be.

MAYA: But I'm not writing to get published. I write for myself, for my soul. Occasionally I send a poem to someone. To some boy, most of the time. Unfortunately their response isn't much different from yours.

IZTOK: Response rarely does justice to whatever causes it.

MAYA (*jumps*): Can I write that down? (*She fishes a notebook and a pencil from the jumble of books on the table and scribbles down Iztok's words.*)

IZTOK: I didn't say anything worth writing down.

MAYA: I write down everything I might find useful. I copy sentences from books. I've filled ten notebooks so far. Maybe one day I'll write

an essay. Or a book. Want to know the title? *Clever Thoughts Lifted from Clever Books*. Maybe I'll add a few wise remarks of my own.

If I remember any.

IZTOK: I'm sure you will.

MAYA: When did you write that poem?

IZTOK (*after a pause*): Never.

MAYA: Wait a minute...

IZTOK: It was written by Jorge Luis Borges. The author who inspired me to start writing poems myself. But I wasn't blind enough.

MAYA: You recited a poem that wasn't yours?!

IZTOK: I wanted to...

MAYA: Yeah, well, I should've known. I typed your name into Google, hoping it would throw out all sorts of things. Nothing. Just the name of this bookshop. Bibliophile.

IZTOK: That's all I am.

MAYA: No, you're not. You just don't want us to become friends.

IZTOK: You mean like on Facebook?

MAYA: No! I mean friends that really care for each other.

IZTOK: But you have so many boyfriends...

MAYA: Boys are not friends. They are for other things. In any case I don't have one at the moment. I'm alone. And lonely. Like you.

IZTOK: Maya...

MAYA: That's why you published the ad, didn't you? You needed someone so you wouldn't feel lonely.

IZTOK: I still can't figure you out.

MAYA: You find me a little crazy, do you?

IZTOK: It's not that...

MAYA: No, it's about keeping distance, right?

IZTOK: I'd like to know a little more about you.

MAYA: But I tell you everything!

IZTOK: Not everything.

MAYA: You really *are* an old Mr. Snoop, aren't you? I'm sorry. You're not old. But you will be one day. Ha-ha!

IZTOK: Not in this life.

MAYA (*looks at him*): Why not?

IZTOK (*changing the subject*): Wouldn't it be nice if we got a few customers? So I could pay you?

MAYA: I can wait. It's true I owe money all over the place, and even yesterday I borrowed ten euro so I could attend tai chi. But if the

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whole bleeding state can be in debt up to its neck, who can blame *me* for being inept with money?

IZTOK: Right.

MAYA (*rises*): Iztok... I have a few suggestions.

IZTOK: Really?

MAYA: First of all we have to change the name. I mean, Bibliophile, for God's sake... Do you think this'll attract anyone looking for a good read? Something contemporary and cheap? A crime novel, a romantic story for women?

IZTOK: Books like that are available in public libraries.

MAYA (*waves at the shelves*): You're not exactly short of them yourself.

IZTOK (*defensively*): There *was* a period when I thought it didn't matter what I was selling. But then I decided it was important for the shop to have character.

MAYA: It has character. The trouble is that people walk past it.

IZTOK: But don't you agree that Bibliophile is...? I mean what else is there?

MAYA: The shop needs a name that'll seduce people to come in and look at the books. Something romantic. Or profound.

IZTOK: For example?

MAYA: Food for Thought.

IZTOK: Cliché.

MAYA: Hungry Spirit? (*Iztok shakes his head.*) From Page to Page? (*Iztok shakes his head.*) The Drunken Poet?

IZTOK (*winces*): Why that?

MAYA: Well, because... you know... subconsciously... it's a promise...

IZTOK: Of what?

MAYA: Relaxation. Good spirits. Letting go of inhibitions.

IZTOK: This is a bookshop, not a bar.

MAYA (*moves closer to Iztok*): What about... Reading in Bed? (*Iztok shakes his head.*) What about... (*Moves a little closer still.*) ... Take Me in Your Hands?

IZTOK (*moves back a little*): Take Me in Your Hands?

MAYA: Yes. Imagine a picture of an open book, and next to it, in large letters, TAKE ME IN YOUR HANDS! Iztok, I think that's brilliant.

IZTOK: Too suggestive. You know what I mean.

MAYA: No, I don't. (*Writes the name in her notebook.*)

IZTOK (*looks at his watch*): Didn't you say you had a meeting at three?

MAYA: That can wait.

IZTOK: It's not nice to be late.

MAYA (*turns away*): You never want to talk about important things. (*Reaches for her bag and coat*). But I'll find a way. I'll drill a hole into your armor and squeeze inside.

IZTOK: Not worth the trouble.

MAYA: How do you know? Only a woman can understand a man. Because to yourselves you're a complete enigma. That doesn't mean that I'm less of one to myself, but it's impossible to understand women, anyway.

(She leaves. Iztok pulls a bottle of vodka from behind his armchair. He unscrews the top and raises the bottle to his mouth. As he does so, he notices Maya who has come back and is standing by the counter. Iztok's hand remains suspended in front of his mouth.)

MAYA: I still think that the best name for the shop would be The Drunken Poet.

(She turns and goes. Lights out.)

3.

(Maya is sitting amid a jumble of books on the floor, looking at titles and copying them into a notebook.)

MAYA: Schapen... No... (*Looks at the book again.*) Schopen... hauer... (*The phone rings. She ignores it, takes another book, writes.*) Thus Spoke... (*Yells at the phone.*) Yeeees! (*Continues to write.*) Zara... Ohhhhr! (*Rises and goes to answer the phone. Invitingly.*) Take Me in Your Hands... What!? (*Slight pause, she listens.*) No, you've misunderstood me. Take Me in Your Hands is the name of the bookshop you've just called. If we have what? *The Da Vinci Code*. I'd have to look. There could be a copy or two. Although, as I said, this is now a boutique bookshop with emphasis on serious literature. What, now? (*She looks at the jumble of books.*) We're in the middle of stocktaking. Can you call tomorrow? (*Replaces receiver.*) Even better. (*Returns to her work.*) Zara... (*Checks the book again.*) Zarathustra...

TAKE ME IN YOUR HANDS

(There is a noise at the entrance. Judging by the sounds, someone has slipped on the icy stairs and ended at the bottom of the steps with a loud thump.)

MAYA: Oh my God!

(We can hear swearing; it's Iztok. Maya rushes to help him.)

MAYA (*offstage*): Are you all right?

IZTOK (*offstage*): I could've killed myself!

MAYA (*offstage*): That's true.

IZTOK (*offstage*): If you could just... pull my hand... Up, not down... And now slowly... No, it won't work...

MAYA (*offstage*): You're all bent, straighten up!

IZTOK (*offstage*): I can't! Crutches...

MAYA (*offstage*): What?

IZTOK (*offstage*): There, at the back, inside the toilet, you'll find a pair of crutches...

(Maya comes rushing through the gap in the counter, opens the door at the back of the shop on the left, reappears with crutches, rushes back to the front room.)

IZTOK (*offstage*): Now help me... Slowly!

(They come into the room, Iztok on crutches, followed by Maya.)

IZTOK: What's ice doing on the stairs?

MAYA: I was going to wipe them, but I forgot.

IZTOK: Isn't the heating on?

MAYA: No. I saw the last bill. I lowered the thermostat.

IZTOK: But you fixed the pipe!

MAYA (*almost angrily*): I didn't, my ex did. I have no idea why it started to drip again. I'm not a plumber.

IZTOK (*lowers himself into the armchair*): Neither was your ex.

MAYA: I'll give you his number and you can complain.

IZTOK: Oh... I should've...

MAYA: Yes, you should've done something as soon as the tap started to drip. And who in the world has a water tap directly above the stairs at his entrance? Who, except you?

IZTOK: I told you...

MAYA: I'll have it removed. And if you object I'll remove myself.

IZTOK (*fishing some pills from his pocket*): Glass of water, please.

MAYA (*offers him a piece of chocolate*): Ritter Sport. I promised to bring you some.

IZTOK: Not now... Water, please!

(Maya stuffs the chocolate in her mouth, rushes into the kitchen, returns with a glass of water. Iztok swallows two pills.)

(Iztok suddenly sees the books lying all over the place.)

What's going on?

MAYA: Something you should've done ages ago.

IZTOK: What?

MAYA: Sort the books alphabetically. And thematically. Create a catalogue.

IZTOK: We'll never be able to find anything anymore!

MAYA: Do you know what you have on these shelves? You don't. All mixed up, philosophy with agriculture, mechanics with poetry, crime with economy.

IZTOK: I always find what I'm looking for.

MAYA: I don't. And if you want me to stay, at least one little thing will have to be my way.

IZTOK: The kind of order you're forcing on me is completely at odds with my nature.

MAYA (*picks up the notebook with her list of titles and pushes it in front of Iztok's eyes*): Suppose we get a customer, which is most unlikely, but suppose we do get one, and suppose he doesn't end up with a broken neck at the foot of the stairs but comes in and says: "Do you happen to have Schopenhauer's book *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*?" What would you tell him?

IZTOK: I would tell him: "You've been misinformed, this book was written by Friedrich Nietzsche."

MAYA: All right. I can't remember everything, can I? (*Turns to Iztok.*) I need a teacher.

IZTOK: How can I be your teacher when I know nothing?

MAYA: Didn't Aristotle say the same thing?

IZTOK: Socrates.

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MAYA: You see now how ignorant I am?

IZTOK: Why don't you study normally? Go to college? Pass exams? Get a degree?

MAYA: I have hundreds of Facebook friends with degrees, and not one of them has a job. Much effort for nothing, as Shakespeare would say.

IZTOK: Much ado about nothing.

MAYA: I have caused enough ado in my life. More and more I'm attracted by silence.

IZTOK: I haven't noticed.

MAYA: Silence around me! I didn't mean that *I* should stop talking.

IZTOK: Look... If you want to learn anything you can't read blindly. Reading is like a ship that needs steering.

MAYA: Steer me, then.

IZTOK: First I need to know why you're obsessed with books.

MAYA (*shouting*): Because I want to know myself! If you can't help me, say so. Say it now so I don't waste my time.

IZTOK: Look... I *can* make you a list of books...

MAYA: You mean the one you promised me two weeks ago?

IZTOK: But the list will contain mostly books that meant something to me. There is no guarantee they'll mean anything to you.

MAYA: Let *me* be the judge of that.

IZTOK: What if wisdom is an illusion? And what you're looking for doesn't exist? At least not in books? What if wisdom is something that just unfolds, naturally, over the years?

MAYA: Then I'll catch it from you.

IZTOK: Maya, reading is dangerous.

MAYA: Why?

IZTOK: Because it averts our attention from the real world. It forces us to experience life through words. And then life itself becomes only a word. And remains a word.

MAYA: You sound like a professor. Is that what you were?

IZTOK: Only briefly.

MAYA: Well, don't professors love making lists?

IZTOK: Maya... Listen... Reading isn't much different from being in love. So many feelings, so much hope. And also embarrassment, shyness. It's possible to get married to a book...

MAYA: That's what I did! And that's why I'm here!

IZTOK: I have to lie down. Can you call me a cab?

MAYA: Didn't you come by car?

IZTOK: I can't even move, how could I drive?

MAYA: I'll drive you home.

IZTOK: I had no idea you have a driving license.

MAYA: Too stupid even for that, right? *(Helps him to get up.)*

IZTOK: Slowly!

(Lights out.)

4.

(Maya at the counter. All the books are again on the shelves, neatly lined up, except for five which are lying, one of them open, on the coffee table. Maya is painting a coffee cup. Already standing on the counter are several cups and vases, some painted with flowers, others with birds. The phone rings. Maya answers.)

MAYA: Take Me in Your Hands... Iztok!... How is your essay?... What essay – about Borges's blindness!... You stopped?... Why?... You're quite right, there is no rush... And your back?... Good!... I must say I quite miss your sour face... In the shop? In the shop everything's fine... I've sold fifty-two books... For cash, yes... *(She hears someone coming.)* We have a customer, I'll call you back.

(She replaces the receiver, continues painting the cup. She knows that someone has come but she doesn't look up until the visitor is standing next to her. It's Iztok. Maya grabs at her chest.)

MAYA: You called me from a mobile in front of the door? Not very nice.

IZTOK: Why not? Because I could catch you with one of your exes?

(Maya pushes the vases and cups away and lifts the counter. Iztok enters. Maya closes the counter and pushes the vases and cups back where they were.)

IZTOK: Have you become an artist?

MAYA: Do you like them?

IZTOK: Flowers, birds, butterflies...

TAKE ME IN YOUR HANDS

MAYA (*points with a finger*): This one is 5 euros, this one 8, this one 3, and this one is 10. Because it's the nicest, don't you agree?

IZTOK: I didn't know they were for sale.

MAYA: You've no idea how popular they are.

IZTOK: You're selling them here?

MAYA: Shouldn't I?

IZTOK: Why not? We could sell other things as well. Bonbons, chocolates, toys. Ritter Sport! And why not fruits and vegetables? Something for everybody, could be the new name of the bookshop.

MAYA: Something for everybody, except for me. (*Starts putting vases and cups into her bag.*)

IZTOK: What're you doing?

MAYA: I'm off to the market.

IZTOK: Why do you immediately take offence?

MAYA: Did you ask why I paint and sell vases? No.

IZTOK: Tell me.

MAYA: So I could sell some of your books which no one wants to buy!

IZTOK: I don't understand.

MAYA: I don't understand... That's all I hear from you! From you, who should understand everything. People who buy a cup or a vase get a book for free.

IZTOK: You give my books away to make people buy your vases?

MAYA: No! I sell vases so that people would leave this cellar with a couple of books! Isn't that what the bookshop is for? To make books reach the readers?

IZTOK: But not free of charge.

MAYA: It's *not* free of charge. They pay for the vases.

IZTOK: A very original way to make money.

MAYA: Brilliant, don't you think?

IZTOK: Unsurpassable.

MAYA (*opens the cash register, takes out a wad of banknotes*): How long have you been away? Three weeks. Count it. One thousand two hundred and fifty-five euros.

IZTOK: Why should I count your money?

MAYA: It's not *my* money, it's our profit.

IZTOK: Now I really don't understand.

MAYA: Oohhhhr... And I thought it was me who was stupid. Look... People don't realize they are actually buying the book and getting

the vase as a gift. They think it's the other way round. This is the money for books, not for the pottery.

IZTOK: And the money for pottery?

MAYA: There isn't any.

IZTOK: But these pieces cost something. And your work...

MAYA: Iztok, we have to pay the bills for heating. I had to raise the thermostat otherwise I'd freeze to death. Apart from that we have to earn enough for the rent. Or would you like us to end up on the street? Together with all the books?

IZTOK: We will, sooner or later.

MAYA: What're you talking about? I chose you to be my mentor, and now you're telling me that we have to surrender?

IZTOK: I speak for myself. Your life is ahead of you. You can score victories for years to come.

MAYA: What victories? (*Iztok doesn't respond.*) It must be your back, it makes you depressed, I know how you feel. But I'm going to pull you out of this. (*She reaches under the counter, takes out a bottle of vodka and a small glass, fills the glass.*) Here. This will force some blood into your frozen brain. And then I'll read you a poem I wrote for you.

IZTOK: I've stopped drinking.

MAYA: Good news. But a small glass of vodka will add a very small insult to the injury you've already done to yourself.

IZTOK (*downs the vodka and puts the glass on the counter*): One more? (*Maya refills the glass, Iztok drinks it.*)

MAYA: So. (*Replaces bottle and glass under the counter.*) As of today your drugs are stored here, if you're going to look for them. Now ease yourself into that armchair and relax.

(*Iztok follows her instructions. Maya reaches into her bag and pulls out a folded sheet of paper.*)

Don't really know why I wrote this. Because the whole thing is pointless. But here it is and now you'll just have to listen. Promise me one thing.

IZTOK: What?

MAYA: That you'll stop me as soon as you realize the whole thing is completely stupid.

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IZTOK: Okay.

MAYA (*reads*):

You aren't just like anybody,
You've become quite dear to me,
No idea what it is you have
Because I don't fall for everybody.

You've given me your precious book.
Not just any, but the right one,
So I invite you to my modest home,
Where, especially for you, I want to cook.

Then you'll ask me for a dance
And I will think it's all for real,
We will dance in slow embrace,
You very calm, I with a burning face...

(She looks at him, stops reading.)

IZTOK: Look... Maya... You've rolled into my life down ice-covered stairs.
I don't know what you expected, but you've found an old codger with
an icy heart...

MAYA: No...

IZTOK: Ice is the common thread of this... this... thing of ours...

MAYA: But I'm trying so hard to defrost your heart ...

IZTOK: As for you plans to climb up a staircase of books to some sort of
wisdom, those stairs, too, are covered with ice on which you will slip.

MAYA: You're here to prevent that.

IZTOK: All you saw were the books on the shelves. You didn't see what
was hidden behind them.

MAYA: I wanted to know what was hidden inside them.

IZTOK: Secondhand knowledge, pilfered from other books. There *is* no
originality anymore. All we have are compilations of compilations.

MAYA: I'm too stupid to understand that.

IZTOK: Did you ever check behind which books I kept vodka, tequila
and whiskey?

MAYA: No, I just wondered why you didn't keep them under the counter.

IZTOK: Before you reshuffled the books into the mess you call order, you would've found vodka behind the title *How to Avoid Cirrhosis of the Liver*. And whiskey behind *The Final Stage of the Pleasures of Drinking Is Death*.

MAYA: And tequila?

IZTOK: *From Glass to Bottle to Early Grave*.

MAYA: Oh Iztok...

IZTOK: Those titles were warnings. But they didn't work. As if they were just books to be sold. So I am now in the final stage, with only a thousand glasses separating me from the grave.

MAYA: What're you talking about?

IZTOK: And you've come to me looking for... what? Wisdom?

MAYA: I don't know.

IZTOK: And in your poem, the worst example of amateurism I've heard in my life, you're offering me... what? Love?

MAYA (*produces a handkerchief, dabs at her eyes*): This cruelty of yours... As if you didn't know that I loved you from the very first day... As if years were important... *As if perfection had its domicile in appearance and not in the soul*.

IZTOK (*reacting*): What did you say?

MAYA: Does it remind you of anything?

IZTOK (*evasively*): I may have read something like that.

MAYA (*looking at him*): Read or written?

IZTOK: I wouldn't know.

MAYA: Maybe you are a little strange. That's part of your attraction. But I am strange, too. I know I should be interested in boys of my age, but they're all so... vapid.

IZTOK: Maybe not all of them.

MAYA: I'm interested in you.

IZTOK: Please...

MAYA: For me you're the cleverest man on earth.

IZTOK: Oh Jesus...

MAYA: The only one I'd hate to disappoint. Although you are disappointed in *me* all the time.

IZTOK: Maya...

MAYA: And I don't know why. Since I started to read the books on your list I seem to be making progress I never expected. But you don't even notice how much more clever I am.

IZTOK: What use can you make of that?

TAKE ME IN YOUR HANDS

MAYA: I don't read books because they're useful. I read them because I hope they'll shape me into something that won't disappoint me three times a day. I want to have clever friends. I want people to respect me. Especially you. Why don't we ever talk about important things?

IZTOK: Do you know what's the most important thing right now?

MAYA: Your back?

IZTOK: Our immediate future.

MAYA: Do you realize this is the first you've used the word "our"?

IZTOK: By the end of the week we have to clear the cellar and return the keys to the owner.

MAYA (*in shock*): Don't you have a contract?

IZTOK: That is the problem. According to the contract I have to pay rent once a month. The last time I did so was half a year ago.

MAYA: Oh...

IZTOK: But don't worry, I'll sell a collection of stamps tomorrow and pay you for all the hours.

MAYA: I won't take the money.

IZTOK: You will. You've earned it.

MAYA: Iztok, we have to save the bookshop! We sell books, remember? That's not only work, that's a lot more. That's something... "ours".

IZTOK: I've tried everything.

MAYA: You forgot you have me.

IZTOK: I didn't. And there is very little chance that I ever will. But there is no money.

MAYA: As I said, leave it to me.

IZTOK (*brief nervous laugh*): What're you going to do?

MAYA: Once or twice I thought of selling my body.

IZTOK: Maya...

MAYA: Not all the way, just an occasional blow-job, you know. Then my cousin told me that he can get sex for 40 euros if he takes a weekend package. No money even in that anymore. But if there is no choice... You never know, I might come to like it!

IZTOK: Something must be wrong with my ears.

MAYA: One day I'd like to fly over the city in a balloon! I know it's expensive, but I'd borrow the money, or steal it. And I would go to concerts. And travel the world. I'd come home only to die. To say goodbye to my family.

IZTOK: Maya...

MAYA: Do you know that I often get the feeling this world isn't real? That my life's happening to someone else?

IZTOK: Look, it's going to be like this...

MAYA: No. It won't. It's going to be the way I want it. I'm not leaving here. I have nowhere to go. And how can I take care of your health if we don't have a shop anymore?

IZTOK: *I should've taken care of my health.*

MAYA: What's the name of this greedy landlord? Where does he live?

IZTOK: Why?

MAYA (*produces a mobile*): Give me his number.

IZTOK: There's nothing you can do.

MAYA: Don't be so sure.

IZTOK: Maya...

MAYA (*thrusts out her hand toward him*): Do you trust me or not?

(Lights out.)

5.

(Maya is asleep on the floor, wrapped in a sleeping bag. We hear someone coming. Maya snores. Iztok appears at the counter. He wants to lift it to pass into the room, but sees Maya on the floor. He pauses to stare at her, not very pleased. He gently coughs. Maya wakes up.)

IZTOK: Good morning.

MAYA (*sits up and yawns; looks at Iztok*): What? Haven't you seen a sleeping bag before?

IZTOK: Not in my bookshop.

MAYA: Oh, suddenly it's yours, not ours anymore.

IZTOK: Don't let me disturb you, go back to sleep.

(Maya maneuvers her way out of the sleeping bag. She is dressed in a T-shirt and black underpants.)

MAYA: Take a good look at my behind, might put a smile on your face.

IZTOK: Let me find my glasses.

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(Maya disappears into the bathroom at the back. Iztok sits down at the counter and dials a number. At the back, Maya is dressing and singing to herself.)

IZTOK: Iztok Novak here... About that transport I ordered... Might be a good idea to send two boys after all... There're masses of books, and to get them all out of the cellar... No, they won't all be destroyed, one truck will go to my place... All right, I'll settle that with the boys... Thank you. *(Replaces the phone.)*

MAYA *(pushing her head out through the door)*: Coffee?

IZTOK *(looks at his watch)*: Why not? We have just enough time.

MAYA *(looks out of the bathroom)*: Enough time for what?

IZTOK *(averting his eyes)*: It's cold in here.

MAYA: Doesn't the sight of me warm you up?

IZTOK: Maya, please...

MAYA: Yes, yes... What do they call it? Erectile dysfunction. I checked a few sites on Google last night and was astonished to learn that some guys get this problem at forty. Terrible. Mankind will die out!

IZTOK: Where did you put Borges? The poems.

MAYA *(comes from the back room and points to a nearby shelf)*: Under P for Poetry, under B for Borges. Can you grasp this complicated arrangement? *(Takes the book off the shelf and tosses it toward Iztok. He barely manages to catch it.)* Do you know where it was before? Between Victoria Holt and *The Manual of Metallurgy*. I'm surprised he doesn't haunt you in the middle of the night, this Borges.

IZTOK: Listen. *(Opens the book, finds the right page, reads aloud)*:

It's darkened a bit. Now he is dead.
A fly walks quietly across the flesh.
What good does it do me that that man
has suffered, when I suffer now?

(Closes the book.)

Borges about Jesus.

MAYA: Nice.

IZTOK: And about me.

MAYA: Even nicer.

IZTOK: And about you.

MAYA: Oh really? How can he talk about me if he doesn't even know me?!

IZTOK: Maya...

MAYA: Why did you read me this?

IZTOK: I wanted to... I wanted to let you know that the worst suffering is when we experience it ourselves.

MAYA: Isn't "suffering something we choose"?

IZTOK (*reacting*): What?

MAYA: I read that in a book of wisdom. And you won't believe it: I so desperately wanted to meet the author that I went to the publishing house to ask for his phone number. They told me the book was published under a pseudonym.

IZTOK (*slight unease*): Did they tell you his real name?

MAYA: No. He'd probably be embarrassed if I suddenly turned up in front of him. Don't you think?

IZTOK: Why did you want to meet him?

MAYA: To beg him to pull my soul out of the quicksand into which it was sinking.

IZTOK: Authors and their books are not the same thing.

MAYA: I'm beginning to realize that. (*Walks back toward kitchen.*) Black with two sugars, you said?

IZTOK: When did your ex leave?

MAYA (*off*): Which ex?

IZTOK: The one with whom you spent the night here. And probably not for the first time. Today I just happened to come a bit early.

MAYA (*comes from the kitchen*): You can throw me out right now, but, my dear boss, this was the only place I could spend the night without freezing to death!

IZTOK: What happened?

MAYA: My aunt threw me out of the apartment.

IZTOK: Why?

MAYA: Ask her.

IZTOK: Here, unfortunately...

MAYA: Yes, yes! I know I can't sleep in the shop. I'll move in with this guy.

IZTOK: Which guy?

MAYA: One of my exes.

IZTOK: Why don't you apologize to your aunt and return to the apartment? Because here...

MAYA: Are you going to throw me out as well?

TAKE ME IN YOUR HANDS

IZTOK: In a few minutes a truck will turn up and take all these books away.

MAYA: Oh, how stupid of me! I completely forgot to tell you. We don't have to leave. The owner has given us a reprieve.

IZTOK: When?

MAYA: Last night. I went to see him and I spoke for an hour, maybe more, you know how I can't stop when I start, so it was blah blah blah, and the guy listened as if transfixed, I think he sort of fell in love with me. And he said OK, you can stay for another six months, the debt is written off, and as of now the rent is reduced by half.

IZTOK (*pause*): An excellent joke. Let's start packing. The truck'll be here any minute.

MAYA: Call it off.

IZTOK: Maya, even if what you say is true we'll never sell enough books to cover even half the rent. And what about the heating and other expenses?

MAYA: Leave the whole thing to me.

IZTOK: What're you going to do? Turn the place into a massage parlor?

MAYA: No. A cultural center.

IZTOK (*shaking his head*): Maya...

MAYA: Let *me* run the place for the next six months. OK? And you can finish your essay on Borges.

IZTOK: It's finished.

MAYA: Congratulations.

IZTOK: The rubbish men took it away this morning.

MAYA: Go home and write it again.

IZTOK: Maya...

MAYA: Aren't you glad we can stay? Aren't you glad the debt's written off? Aren't you glad the rent has been halved?

IZTOK: If I knew what you offered him for these privileges...

MAYA: What do you think? My ass, which you won't even look at? And even if I did that, he wouldn't last longer than a couple of seconds. For painting a vase I need a whole hour. And what do I get for one? Ten euros at the most. So what's the problem?

IZTOK: You can't be serious.

MAYA: Don't tell me you're jealous.

IZTOK: Disappointed.

MAYA: Why?

IZTOK: Because I have formed a rather different opinion of you.

MAYA: No shit? You won't let me run the bookshop, but I *am* good enough to be responsible for your illusions about me? (*Starts putting on her coat.*)

IZTOK: Where are you going?

MAYA: You're insinuating that I'm a whore. You wouldn't touch me with the far end of your crutch, but God forbid that I should go with someone else. Whatever I do is wrong. I'm a burden to you.

IZTOK: That's not true.

MAYA: In any case, as you said, the truck will be here any minute.

IZTO: I'll call it off.

MAYA: Too late. Something just died inside me. As you said: everything passes, our dreams, our desires, our will, and finally we ourselves.

IZTOK: Sometimes it's necessary to put up a fight.

MAYA: No shit? Suddenly you want to fight?

IZTOK: I *need* your help.

MAYA: Publish an ad.

IZTOK: I'll pay you every last cent I owe you.

MAYA: Don't bother.

IZTOK: Where will you go?

MAYA: Home, to my parents.

IZTOK: Stay, please.

MAYA (*slowly comes back*): Do you realize that for the first time since I started to work here you actually used the word "please"?

IZTOK: I can repeat it every few minutes.

MAYA: It would have to come from the heart. Which is something you can't really do, can you?

IZTOK (*lowers his head*): All right then. Go.

MAYA: I'll come back if you promise me one thing. (*Pulls a book from her bag and hands it to Iztok.*) Read this book, very carefully, and learn from it. I'm surprised you didn't put it on my reading list. Well, I've read it anyway. Five times!

(*She collects her things and moves toward the exit.*)

IZTOK: Maya...

MAYA: Call me when you figure out what the book is about. Then I'll come back. If the bookshop's still here.

IZTOK: And if it isn't?

MAYA: Then you won't need me, will you?

TAKE ME IN YOUR HANDS

(She leaves. Iztok sits with the book in his hands. Slowly turns the pages, puts it on the counter, reaches for the phone, dials.)

IZTOK: It's Iztok Novak again... That truck that I ordered...

(Lights out.)

6.

(Iztok at the counter, reading the book. Glancing at the phone. Finally decides to dial a number.)

IZTOK: Maya?... I was hoping you were in town... Well, I was hoping that perhaps you could drop in for coffee... Too busy... I understand... Well, call me when you can spare a minute...

(He replaces the receiver, unable to hide his disappointment. With great difficulty, leaning on his crutches, he rises and hobbles towards the armchair.)

(Maya appears at the counter. She is carrying a large travel bag and a fully stuffed red linen bag. She puts the travel bag on the floor and leans the linen bag against it. With arms akimbo she looks critically at Iztok.)

MAYA: Crutches again.

IZTOK: This must've been the fastest journey from your parent's home you ever made.

MAYA: I've been hanging around the bookshop for two days. Waiting for you to call me. You said you would when you've read the book. Did you?

IZTOK: Yes.

MAYA: Then why didn't you call me? Do you know how cold it is out there?

IZTOK: You spent five nights in the open?

MAYA: No. Three with my parents.

IZTOK: Was that all right?

MAYA: Noisy.

IZTOK: You live next to a factory?

MAYA: No, next to my father. I tell you, after two days I had enough. I packed my bags and came back.

IZTOK: To your aunt's apartment?

MAYA: No, she'll be nursing her grudge for a while longer.

IZTOK: And where did you spend the other two days? Here?

MAYA: I wish I did. But don't condemn me again. I crashed out with one of my exes.

IZTOK: Which one?

MAYA: He wouldn't interest you.

IZTOK: Why not?

MAYA: Because he's a loser. (*Approaches Iztok.*) You look terrible. How is your health?

IZTOK: As you can see.

MAYA: I don't mean your back, or your crutches. I mean your liver.

IZTOK: I'm still... a little liverish.

MAYA: How many bottles while I was away?

IZTOK: Too late now anyway.

MAYA: You promised you wouldn't.

IZTOK: You promised you wouldn't leave me alone.

MAYA: And you promised you'd take me seriously. Listen to my suggestions. Accept a few of my plans now and then.

IZTOK: Have you come with a new one?

MAYA: I'll tell you if you promise I can carry it out.

IZTOK: First, tell me what it is.

MAYA: First, promise.

IZTOK: Just like that?

MAYA: Not just like that but because you trust me.

IZTOK: I trust you.

MAYA: Right... So... We're still going to sell books here. But! – (*She raises a forefinger and winks at Iztok.*)

IZTOK: But?

MAYA: I have acquainted myself with the survival strategies of large companies. Have you ever heard the word deversification? That's what we're going to do. We are going to de-ver-sify!

IZTOK: Not by selling washing machines, I hope.

MAYA: We're going to sell lists of books recommended for reading. "A hundred books you have to read before you die." "A hundred books your child must read to awaken a genius in him." And so on.

IZTOK: And who will prepare these lists?

MAYA: You.

(Looks at Iztok, happy and proud.)

IZTOK: I'm not sure I can...

MAYA: Of course you can. One list a day, in two months we'll have sixty, enough for a start!

IZTOK *(cautiously)*: Did you have anything else in mind?

MAYA: Hundreds of things. But the best of all... shall I tell you?

IZTOK: Why not.

MAYA: Based on your book... I mean the book I gave you to read... we will organize seminars for motivational training and personal growth!

IZTOK: Maya...

MAYA: Let me finish. The education we're going to offer will be unique, exciting, and full of energy!

IZTOK: Energy?

MAYA: We will include the principles of *scientific* approach to becoming rich.

IZTOK: Rich?

MAYA: Our seminars, meetings and courses will be aimed at companies, private businesses, secondary schools, colleges. Shall I tell you what our lectures will be about?

IZTOK: Sure.

MAYA: Communications skills and rhetorical excellence. Believing in yourself and improving your self-image. About motivation, excitement and love of work.

IZTOK: And who will do the lecturing?

MAYA: You. And I. Do you know that I've already copied more than a thousand interesting quotes from the books on your recommendation list? For example, the title of one of our seminars could be "How to Create the Impression That You're Witty."

IZTOK: Impression?

MAYA: Isn't life all about creating impressions? Isn't a PhD just creating the impression that you're clever? Things have changed since you were young. Trust me, I've got my finger on them. I measure the pulse of the time. Didn't you ever?

IZTOK: I did. Of a different time.

MAYA: Can you imagine the pride you'd feel if at some party you could deliver the following gem: "To have character means that you do the right thing even when no one is watching"?

IZTOK: That's what you'll teach?

MAYA (*grabs the book on the counter and holds it against Iztok's eyes*): Have you written this book or not?

IZTOK: Does it matter?

MAYA: Don't you know that this book changed my life?

IZTOK: How did you find out?

MAYA: One of my exes heard it from one of his exes who knew someone whose ex used to work for the publisher.

IZTOK: I did make some silly mistakes while I was young.

MAYA (*opens the book and holds it up to his eyes*): You were forty-five when you wrote this book!

IZTOK: Yes, but this is not a book for people who want to sail through life by creating impressions.

MAYA: How else can I survive? You're fine, but I'm still young, I *have* to survive. If pretense is the only way, so be it. Have you a better suggestion?

IZTOK: No.

MAYA: Of course you have! In this book. Which isn't about how to become successful, even I could teach you a thing or two about that. It's about how to live so you don't have to die in shame.

IZTOK: I was...

MAYA: Yes, I know. You were a different man when you wrote this book. Then you fell down the stairs and broke everything that was alive inside you. But the book is here. And now I will take you in my hands, because you didn't want to take me in yours, and I'll teach you everything your book has taught me.

IZTOK: Suppose nothing of that is true?

MAYA (*looks at him sharply*): You wrote a book of lies?

IZTOK: No... There was a time in my life when I thought I could *stand* behind what I wrote. I wrote from the heart.

MAYA: Where is that heart now?

IZTOK: In the same place. It's the spirit that has moved on.

MAYA: Wouldn't it be fair to tell your readers to *where* it has moved?

IZTOK: That's how it is with books. Even the best ones lose their relevance after a time.

TAKE ME IN YOUR HANDS

MAYA: Do you realize that because of this book I was in love with you before we even met? And that now I feel betrayed?

IZTOK: I'm sorry.

MAYA (*as if she didn't hear him*): I came with great hope that here, among all these books, in the heart of all this knowledge, I could leave my cocoon and become a butterfly. Under your guidance, so that nothing would go wrong. And what's the result? I've come to hate books. Especially this one. (*Throws the book into his lap.*) This drivel of yours with which you cheated thousands of readers.

IZTOK: Maya...

MAYA (*fighting tears*): I was looking for something to hold on to because... I keep slipping all the time. Everything, my whole life, is so... slippery. I need support. Who is going to help me now?

IZTOK: Not me. I have already slipped.

MAYA: Do you know that I almost knew I was entering something dangerous? And will end up having to rescue myself? It's more than two months now that I wrote you a good-bye poem, in case I'd have to read it to you one day. (*Rummages inside her bag, pulls out a folded sheet of paper, unfolds it.*) The title is "I Don't Love You Anymore".

(*Starts to read, on the verge of tears.*)

There was a time when you were sheer bliss
And I would give anything for your kiss,
But now I love you no more,
You're a stranger to me, even more than before.

Our paths have now parted forever
I no longer think you're clever,
As quickly as I've fallen in love with you
I will forget you, so off with you: boo!

(*She crumples the sheet and tosses it into a corner. Pulls a piece of paper from her pocket.*) I've added up the hours. You owe me 420 euros.

IZTOK: No I don't. According to my accounts, it's 530.

(*Maya makes a few nervous steps around the place.*)

MAYA: Why can't we live in a different world? *(Pause.)* Still, I can't say I haven't learned anything.

IZTOK: If either of us was a teacher it was you.

MAYA: Yeah, sure...

IZTOK: Unfortunately your lessons came too late. And when you could still have saved me I wouldn't have taken you seriously.

MAYA: No?

IZTOK: I would've dragged you to bed and that's where the whole thing would've ended.

MAYA: Men... Not the slightest idea of what women want!

IZTOK: Maya...

MAYA: Yes?

IZTOK: At the back, in the kitchen, there is a locked metal box.

MAYA: I know.

IZTOK: Did you ever wonder what could be inside it?

MAYA: Pornographic magazines, I decided. Or DVDs marked XXX.

IZTOK *(pulls a small key from his pocket and gives it to Maya)*: Unlock it and put all the contents on the counter.

MAYA *(walking toward the door at the back)*: In case you don't know, most women find hardcore pornography disgusting.

IZTOK: Please.

(Maya disappears into the kitchen and returns with a metal books. Unlocks it.)

MAYA: Some old dusty books. Why are you hiding them?

IZTOK: What's the title of the first one?

MAYA *(takes the book off the top of the pile, blows dust off it and reads the title aloud, literally)*: *En Attendant Godot*. What does the mean? Godot's attendant? Who was Godot?

IZTOK *(speaks the title in French)*: *En Attendant Godot*. It's a play by Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, first published in France, privately, in 1952. The print run was 35 copies.

MAYA: So many?

IZTOK: How much do you think you'd get for it if you decided to sell it?

MAYA *(looks at the book, weighs it in her hand)*: A euro and a half?

IZTOK: Five thousand.

MAYA: Come on, I'm not stupid.

IZTOK: What's the title of the next book?

MAYA (*takes the next book*): This one at least has some weight. And a nice blue cover. *Ulysses*.

IZTOK: This edition was published in Paris in 1922. One hundred copies. All signed by the author. Fifteen years ago I bought it at an auction in London for 7000 pounds. Today it is worth 12,000 euros.

MAYA: Says who?

IZTOK: Rare-book collectors.

MAYA: And you're one of them?

IZTOK: Used to be. The market here is quite modest, so I used to attend auctions abroad. I bought only the rarest and most expensive books. That's why I'm now poor.

MAYA: You mean rich!

IZTOK: There're two more books in the box. The first is Baudelaire's *Le Fleurs du Mal* from 1857. That'll bring you around 3000 euros. Then there is Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, from 1855. For that you can hope to get 13,000 euros. And then there is, right at the bottom, a single sheet. That's a leaf from Gutenberg's *Bible*, the first printed book. It'll fetch around 5000 euros.

MAYA: I have to sit down. (*Sits down on a stack of books.*)

IZTOK: If you add everything up, you have around 40,000 euros on the counter.

MAYA: I don't quite... my head is spinning.

IZTOK: Lock the books back in the box and don't mention this to anyone. Otherwise you'll have burglars here before you turn around.

MAYA: No... That kind of responsibility is too much for me.

IZTOK: These books are a payment for your hours.

MAYA (*rises*): Cirrhosis has obviously infected your brain.

IZTOK (*after a pause*): I don't have cirrhosis.

MAYA (*looks at him*): You lied to me?

IZTOK: I've cancer of the liver. Final stage. With metastases in the glands, spine, bones, lungs, everywhere.

(*Long silence. Maya comes to Iztok and kneels before him.*)

MAYA: Why didn't you tell me?

IZTOK: I was afraid you'd leave me.

MAYA: Even if I did have a place to go to, do you think I would?

IZTOK (*gives her a slip of paper*): Phone numbers of people you'll have to contact if you decide to sell any of these books.

MAYA: I can't sell your books, what're you talking about?!

IZTOK: They're yours now.

MAYA: Iztok, no. *You* must sell these books, *you* need money for treatment.

IZTOK: Too late. Death is standing at the top of the stairs. And it won't slip on the ice, as you and I did.

MAYA (*on the verge of tears*): I shouldn't have removed that pipe.

(She pushes his legs apart, climbs close to him, embraces him, puts her head on his chest and starts to cry. Iztok awkwardly caresses her hair.)

IZTOK: You'll be all right.

MAYA: No.

IZTOK: You'll have your cultural center –

MAYA (*into his face*): I hate culture! I hate books! I hate myself and my little egotistical self! If I think how many times I've hurt you...

IZTOK: Please... You're not a little girl anymore.

MAYA: No. (*Rises.*) I do seem to have matured since I came to this cellar. And you know what? That was the reason I came. (*Looks at him.*) Why did you take me? Were there many applicants?

IZTOK: Around twenty.

MAYA: Twenty! And what was so special about me?

IZTOK: Your faith in the saving grace of books.

MAYA: You had that faith once.

IZTOK: That's why. If I really need help, I said to myself, I better have someone sustained by the same illusions.

MAYA: But why close the shop, when you could've saved it by selling these books?

IZTOK: I wasn't sure you'd want to bother with it once I was gone.

MAYA: Shall I drive you home? To the hospital? Does it hurt? Do you have enough pills? What can I do?

IZTOK: Nothing...

MAYA: But...

IZTOK: What?

MAYA: So unjust. I mean... when we have found a home in this cellar. A home that feels like a womb. Where we could dream of being reborn into a different world.

IZTOK: Do you realize how many people are dying at this very moment?

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MAYA: Promise this won't happen tomorrow? Or the next week? Or the next month?

IZTOK: Can't you see her standing there, on top of the stairs? This kind lady who has come to take me in her hands? And lead me where there is peace? Where I belong? Where we all belong?

MAYA: But I belong here, Iztok. In my life. The fact that it's not very kind to me is another story. My little, personal story. But life itself is a story that belongs to us all.

IZTOK: Would you do something for me?

MAYA: Anything.

IZTOK: Bring me Borges. His poems.

(Maya rummages inside her bag and pulls out a book.)

MAYA: Please don't be angry. I took the book home. I read the poems long into the night. Night after night. Hoping I would learn the secret of poetry.

IZTOK: Open the book. Anywhere. And read.

(Iztok leans back in the armchair and closes his eyes. Maya opens the book and starts to read. She reads with great feeling, as if she had suddenly truly discovered the secret of poetry.)

The writings left behind by those whom
Your fears implore won't save you;
You are not the others and you see yourself
Now at the center of the labyrinth woven
By your own steps. The agonies of Jesus or
Socrates will not save you, nor will the
Strength of Golden Siddhartha who,
At the end of the day, accepted death
In the garden. *(Lights begin to dim.)* The word written
By your hand or the verb spoken
By your lips, these too are dust. Fate has no pity,
And God's night is infinite.
Your matter is time, ceaseless
Time. You are each solitary moment.

(Darkness.)

Take Me in Your Hands

Evald Flisar's drama *Take Me in Your Hands* is a story of life and learning, of love and sacrifice, of hope, despair and death, as well as of the end of an important period in man's recent history. It is neither comedy nor tragedy, but rather a Flisaresque tragicomedy, the label attached to most of his plays by Slovene critic and theorist Blaž Lukan. In this play, too – perhaps in this one particularly – Flisar builds his theater on the classical role of the actor. Visual elements do not have an important role and are certainly not extravagant or spectacular. Without exception, Flisar's characters are established and develop through dialogue. And it is dialogue that is the most intriguing aspect of his dramatic writing: it is quick, sensitive, subtly informative, entertaining and in parts so imbued with hidden meanings that only the smartest can keep up with it. It is never declarative, things and feelings are never named directly: what is really taking place among the figures on the stage is always hidden *behind* and *between* the words.

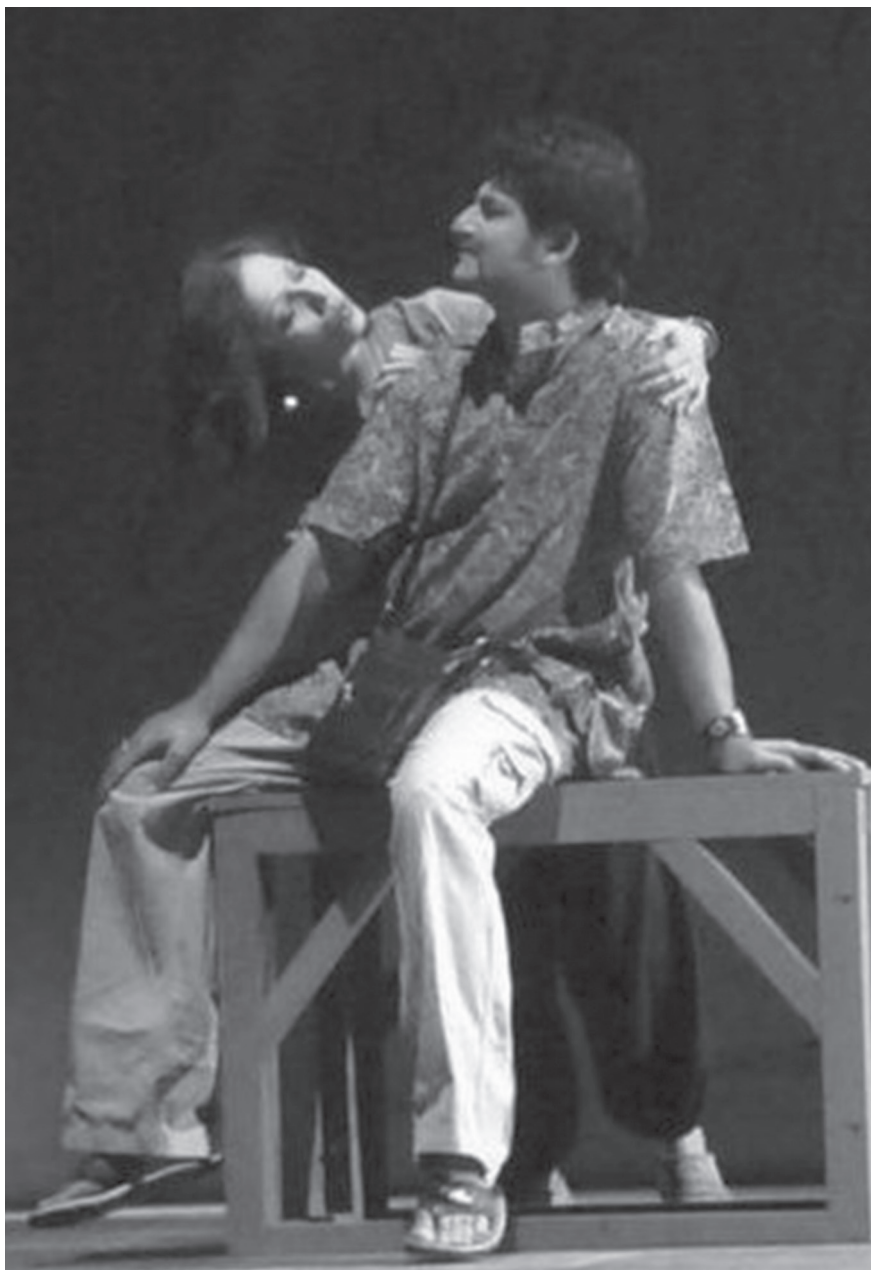
In *Take Me in Your Hands* the two protagonists exchange their relative “knowledge” and learn from each other. In so doing they reach a higher level of awareness: of life and love but, above all, of who and what they are in reality or in relation to each other (which becomes their primary Truth the moment it is established). All the contemporary forms of modern psychology, psychoanalysis, psychotherapy and related kinds of “understanding and healing the soul” emphasize the significance of knowing oneself or looking into oneself, and in Flisar's play we can describe the journey toward this end as striving for the classical theatrical function of catharsis...

The deconstruction of myths is perhaps the main characteristic of Flisar's dramatic writing and he almost always pulls this off with masterful ease. *Take Me in Your Hands* deconstructs the myth of wisdom supposedly brought by age. On another level it *reconstructs* that myth as

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self-awareness. This is achieved by deconstructing the myth of the irresponsibility of youth, which is a mirror image of the “wisdom that comes with years.” By entrusting his fate to his pupil/assistant Maya and her intuition, the father figure Iztok transcends his own suffering and accepts death as well as life, and along with this Maya’s “youthful wisdom” (the wisdom that arises from the need to survive).

Excerpt from the foreword written by Dr. Ossama el-Kaffash for the publication of the play in Arabic.



Soma Dutta, Hillol Chakraborty
Shakuntala, Ganakrishti Theatre Company, Kolkata, India, 2012