

For Office Use Only

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My barber was loved by all of her clients. Her name was Simochka, a lovely young woman with dimples on her cheeks. Simochka carried a suitcase of trade-tools from house to house, cutting hair for various old men and women. I almost forgot to mention—Simochka was employed by Flege, a firm specializing in care for the elderly.

Sometime prior in life she had obtained a philology degree from Krasnodar University and worked as a teaching assistant. But Simochka realized there was no need for Russian philology in Germany, so she took up the profitable job of barbering the elderly instead.

The old men liked Simochka. She was beautiful, amiable, and always beaming. She listened patiently to her customer's long-winded stories about their former endeavors, which bolstered her success. Like all of her male customers, my husband eagerly awaited Simochka's arrival. Upon hearing "Simochka is coming today," he would give himself a close shave, put on a fresh shirt and socks, and feverishly look out the window. Needless to say, I was very jealous. Nevertheless, I also enjoyed when Simochka cut my hair and I listened to some new story from her customer's lives. Simochka was a born storyteller, had a keen eye for detail, a wonderful sense of humor, and would probably have been a decent writer under better circumstances. However, Simochka's life didn't afford her that luxury, so she had to earn a living with her scissors. Each time she came to my house, she would say, "I have a great story for you—you could put it in your book...although, to avoid any harm, you probably shouldn't publish it in Berlin. This is for office use only, so to speak."

One of her favorite clients was an elderly stage director from Moscow, Iakov Borisovich N.N who used to produce popular operetta productions. However, after social upheaval and the death of his wife, he lived on welfare in a small apartment in Berlin, his only respite being frequent trips to the philharmonic. On concert days, Iakov would don a tailcoat and a bowtie, which resurrected fond memories of Moscow. Sometimes, when he attended particularly outstanding concerts, he invited Simochka, who happily accepted his invitations.

The tickets, however, cost money, and the money from welfare was, naturally, insufficient. The 75-year-old Iakov Borisovich was entitled to services from FLEGE—twice a week someone came to wash and cook, and once every two-months a barber came. Once a year a special commission came to determine how many hours of care Iakov was entitled to. The manager of FLEGE, an sprightly Odessian , had promised the director that if they increased the number of care hours assigned to Iakov (thereby increasing the money transferred to the company), then they would pay for tickets to the Philharmonic. Iakov Borisovich took a creative approach to the problem.

“We’ll follow Stanislavski’s approach,” he announced to Simochka.

After some thought, they came up with a brilliant script.

On the day of the committee’s arrival, the dirty, trembling old man, wearing pants with an open zipper, hobbled out from a dark corridor, leaning heavily on his walking stick. His pale cheeks were covered with stubble, his ragged gray hair was sticking out in all directions, and he'd removed his dentures and hidden them. Mumbling from his toothless mouth, the old man muttered a greeting and gestured weakly to invite his guests into the room.

In the center of the living room lay soiled diapers. The committee was taken aback, not knowing where to step. The committee watched while the old man tried to remove the diapers from the center of the room, but instead slipped and barely caught his breath. Luckily, Simochka caught the old man just in the nick of time. The committee gasped, thanked Simochka for

preventing injuries, expressed their regret over the deterioration of the patient's health, and significantly increased the hours assigned to him-- Iacov and Simochka had achieved their goal!

As soon as the door closed, Iakov Borisovich buttoned his clothes, inserted his dentures, scrubbed and shaved, and, donning a gorgeous tailcoat, went to the Philharmonic concert in the evening.

“Your performance was Oscar-worthy!,” chirped Simochka, holding the old man's arm. “Iakov Borisovich, you deserve an Oscar!”