

BELGRADE TERMINAL

A one act play by Andrew Gunn

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CHARACTERS:

Rowan Stark, female, late 20s/early 30s

George Ellory, male, early/mid 60s

Stephen Royce, male, mid/late 30s

Bartender, non-speaking role, can be adapted to the venue

SCENE:

The restaurant car of a train approaching Beograd-Glavna Station in Serbia. The set comprises a table and two chairs near the bar.

PROPS:

1x newspaper

1x briefcase

1x water jug

3x whisky glasses (one on the table, two served at the bar)

1x soluble tablet

1x straw

5x decorative candles on the bar

1x address book

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GEORGE ELLORY sits at a table, back to the bar. He folds and reads a newspaper. In front of him: a glass of whisky, a small jug of water. Under the table: a black briefcase.

ROWAN STARK enters, goes straight to the bar, catches the BARTENDER's eye:

STARK

Hello. Um . . . English? Français?

The bartender hesitates—

ELLORY

Name your drink.

(turns to Stark)

Name your drink.

STARK

Whisky. Whisky.

The bartender serves Stark. Ellory re-folds his newspaper. Stark approaches his table.

STARK

Thank you. Didn't know how to ask him for ice . . .

ELLORY

Good. Murders the flavour. Might as well add lemonade, or an olive.

(re: the water jug)

Try a splash of this. Swirl it around—but gently.

Stark adds a dash of water, swirls her glass, takes a sip.

STARK

Hm.

ELLORY

Why don't you give that chair something to think about?

STARK

(sits)

Funny, bumping into an Englishman.

ELLORY

I'd remember a bump. I think what happened was, I gave you some advice. For a young lady abroad. Ask the barkeep for a drink and you let him do his job. Ask him what languages he speaks, you overcomplicate the transaction and you make him feel bad.

STARK

Now that I know how to do it, can I buy you one?

ELLORY

(checks his glass)

Oh, it was free advice. We're almost at Belgrade, anyway.

STARK

I've never been. I'd like to see the Old Sava Bridge. You know the story?

ELLORY

The Germans wired it for demolition when they fled the city in Forty-four. It was the only bridge left standing for about seventy miles, and they had the Soviets and the Yugoslavs after them. They were still crossing when an ironmonger who lived nearby went out onto the bridge and cut the wires.

STARK

He was a schoolteacher. Not an ironmonger.

ELLORY

Happens to us all.

STARK

Happens to us . . . what?

ELLORY

I'm sorry. Memory. What I meant to say, "My memory's not what it used to be."

STARK

. . . Happens to us all.

ELLORY

That was a joke.

STARK

. . . All right, so:

ELLORY

What? You heard me. "He was a blah-blah-blah," "My memory's not what it used to be," "Happens to us all." We covered it.

STARK

I'd rather not joke.

ELLORY

Perhaps you'd rather not laugh.

STARK

I think there's enough at stake without having to deal with each others' sense of humour.

ELLORY

Oh, relax. First time in the field, is it?

STARK

Because I don't know how to order a drink.

ELLORY

Didn't. Didn't know. You do now.

STARK

Thank you for the education.

ELLORY

Enjoy the spoils.

Stark sips her whisky.

ELLORY

You gave yourself away when you came in and went straight to the bar. Didn't look around, didn't look at my English newspaper. Too purposeful. What kind of a young lady has such purpose, twenty minutes from the end of the line?

STARK

You're rather an old man, aren't you? Perhaps we shouldn't be talking so much.

ELLORY

Perhaps not. Still, it's an important bit of business. Be a shame to conclude it without ceremony.

STARK

You can light a candle after I'm gone.

Stark reaches for the briefcase. Ellory hooks it closer with his foot.

ELLORY

Think how it would look to our fellow travellers. You sit down, we talk for two minutes and then you run off with my briefcase. We ought to give the scene some credibility.

STARK

I could slap you in the face and call you an old leech.

ELLORY

That would do the job. But you're not the type to strike a superior officer.

STARK

How do I know you're a superior officer?

ELLORY

Because we're civil servants and you're a young lady and I'm an old leech.

STARK

Let's talk about something else. Let me buy you that drink. You can tell me a story. Tell me what's happening at home.

Stark goes to the bar. Ellory unfolds the newspaper.

ELLORY

Well—there was one scandal, caught my eye. The minister, Prendergast. Results of the inquest.

STARK

(to the bartender)

Whisky, please.

(to Ellory)

Yes?

ELLORY

Suicide.

STARK

Naturally. Found dead folded up in a suitcase in the boot of his car, inside his garage. Suitcase was locked, his car was locked and his garage was locked.

ELLORY

“A riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.”

STARK

(pays the bartender)

Thank you.

Stark leans on the bar, checks Ellory is still turned away from her. Stark unpockets a small tablet.

ELLORY

A box within a box within a box.

STARK

Like Russian Dolls. How do they explain it?

Stark drops the tablet into the glass of whisky, stirs it with a straw as it dissolves.

ELLORY

The garage could have been shut from inside or out. The car would have locked itself automatically after a while. And some experts found a way to get the padlock on the suitcase from the inside. That sounds like a fun assignment.

(beat)

There was a rather morbid note in his study. And of course they found drugs in his system.

Stark pockets the straw, sets the whisky on the bar next to a candle—the tablet still fizzling—

STARK

What kind of drugs?

ELLORY

There's a chemical name which I'd need an evening course to help me pronounce. Fatal, in any event. The official line is: he took this stuff and then had the presence of mind to prepare his corpse for easy disposal.

STARK

That's thinking inside the box.

ELLORY

(turns)

You *do* make jokes.

Stark lifts the glass—tablet now dissolved—and brings it to the table.

STARK

What was in the note?

ELLORY

Two columns. The Advantages of My Death—put an end to the misery, free my children, “an awfully big adventure” and so on. The Disadvantages of My Death—the only thing in that column was “I won't make it to Paris.”

STARK

Well, I'd hate to be the naïve young thing that fell for the cover story, but that doesn't sound like something an assassin would plant at the scene. Sounds like a man with a genuine case of the suicides.

ELLORY

Oh, I don't know. Depression, certainly. Foreknowledge of his own death . . .

Stark sits, puts the glass on the table next to Ellory's first, nearly empty, glass.

ELLORY

Could have been the first draft of his manifesto. Turn his life around. Finally get to Paris. What's it like to live there?

STARK

—

ELLORY

You asked the barman if he spoke French. You don't have a Marseille tan, but you dress like a city girl and wine's not strong enough to calm your nerves—so that puts you at one of our stations in the capital.

STARK

We shouldn't be discussing that kind of—

ELLORY

What's the harm? We're in a box. Suspended animation until we step off at Beograd-Glavna. Let's enjoy ourselves.

STARK

(raises her glass)

I'll drink to that.

ELLORY

Is it the embassy, or the atelier?

STARK

Would that make a difference?

ELLORY

Only to your career path and social life. The back-stabbing, gossipy, shallow cess-pool of diplomacy . . . or the grubby, whore-infested cobbled streets of La Pigalle? I have an idea, but I think it would be rude to share it.

STARK

(lowers her glass)

I know as much about you. George Ellory, ostensibly a travel writer, and our man in Budapest for the last thirty-odd years. Unmarried. Studio flat overlooking the cemetery in Josephtown. Poker nights with politicians, academics and industrialists. Never learned Hungarian.

ELLORY

Would rather blow my cover. It's an impossible language.

STARK

Could have retired a couple of years ago.

ELLORY

I suppose so.

STARK

Why haven't you?

ELLORY

You mean, let the next generation have a go? By all means, pension me off to an Andalucian villa; I'd play poker with some ex-pats and pretend to write. Might as well do the same thing at a living wage and be useful.

STARK

What about the sun and the siesta?

ELLORY

Are you offering me a redundancy package?

STARK

Just making conversation.

ELLORY

With the same finesse you employ when you buy a drink.

STARK

I'm not angling for your job or anything. But this running around Europe, meeting on trains, exchanges—it's all very old fashioned. You gather all this local intel. How much of it do you think is actually used?

Ellory drains his original glass of whisky, adds a splash of water to the second.

ELLORY

You can't just turn up at the right place at the right time. You have to work your way into the right place and wait there. Wait for years. Then one day the professor with a full house talks about his PhD student, invented some widget. The tycoon with two pairs and a smile agrees to give the young fellow a job. Now, having apparently done nothing, I have the student's name, I know where to find him, I know what his widget does, and I know his price.

STARK

You recruit him.

ELLORY

I don't break cover. I tell someone else. They watch the boy for a while, influence him. He makes his own decision. He comes to work for us. On Pegasus, for example.

STARK

Pegasus.

ELLORY

(nudges the briefcase)

The reason you're here. Highly classified stuff, for the time being anyway. The Holy Grail of military intelligence. Tell me your name.

STARK

Why?

ELLORY

(raises his second glass)

Diversity and equality.

STARK

Rowan Elizabeth Stark.

ELLORY

Lovely. Full-bodied, regal and bleak.

STARK

This Prendergast affair:

ELLORY

—your name, not the whisky.

STARK

Understood. You know, there's a Budapest connection.

ELLORY

Oh?

STARK

Seems he had a mistress there. A Russian. Every time he was in town for a conference, they'd book connecting rooms in the Hotel President.

ELLORY

(lowers his glass)

That's not in the newspapers. That's insider stuff. Why share it?

STARK

Just making conversation.

ELLORY

You don't make conversation, you drop it like a tray of drinks.

(beat)

A Russian mistress in Budapest.

STARK

Yes.

ELLORY

I had a feeling this exchange was a pretext. If you were sent here to quiz me about Prendergast, you're—

STARK

I wasn't. I know more about him than you do. For example, the Russian wasn't only his mistress. She was his handler. They were part of a ring. Double-agents playing poker with our intel. She collected traitors. Including Prendergast.

ELLORY

All right. So who killed him? Us or them?

STARK

You read the inquest. They got the verdict right but the method wrong. It was suicide by betrayal.

ELLORY

You're starting to live up to your promise, aren't you?

Stark sips her whisky.

ELLORY

Suicide always struck me as a bit like performance art. You know, those awful people who dance naked in front of pictures of war crimes, or stick things in their various orifices. Self-expression with no regard for the witnesses.

STARK

I suppose that's why most suicides don't bother leaving a note.

ELLORY

But he did. "I won't make it to Paris." What *is* it like to live there?

STARK

It's like living in London, except the food's better, and the architecture, and people know how to dress.

STEPHEN ROYCE stands from his table at the far end, carries his empty glass to the bar.

ELLORY

Well, this Prendergast fellow had a mistress and a favourite hotel in a beautiful city, not to mention the extra cash that comes with a double life. And ten years ago he was a junior minister from Sutton Coldfield. Why would he regret not making it to Paris? Who cares? Sight-seeing? Or perhaps he meant something else, more specific, like a rendezvous.

STARK

Perhaps he did. Or perhaps his note was just a really big anagram. Has anyone checked?

ELLORY

Something to do on my return trip.

At the bar, Royce orders a refill with a gesture—

STARK

Let's get back on track. We're bleeding intel through Budapest. It's an open wound and it's your beat. So I came to ask you. Can you give me *anything*? Can you give me a *name*?

Ellory sits back in his chair, turns the poisoned whisky glass round and round.

ELLORY

I might know the Russian's name.

STARK

Yesterday's news. Her name's Evdokia Nuorteva.

ELLORY

Oh. So you'd like a different name.

STARK

Yes, please.

ELLORY

There is someone. I'll need to check my address book.

STARK

Who?

ELLORY

Friend of Eva's. A fellow President habitué.

(stands)

STARK

Wait:

ELLORY

. . . it's in my cabin. In the next car. I won't run off.

Ellory leaves, closes the door behind him. Stark watches his silhouette move past the windows along the corridor.

Stark stands, goes to the bar. Royce doesn't meet her eyes. They speak quietly—

ROYCE

We don't have time for all this.

STARK

What did I put in his drink, sir?

ROYCE

I told you, it's just Pentothal. Think of it as an aide memoire.

STARK

Doesn't have any unexpected side effects, does it—like death? Death and extreme agoraphobia?

ROYCE

We had nothing to do with Prendergast. And I don't appreciate your implying we did. "Suicide by betrayal"—

STARK

He wasn't taking me seriously.

ROYCE

We need Ellory's guard down, not up. You shouldn't have let him go like that.

STARK

You shouldn't even be here. You said you'd wait back in the other—

ROYCE

Yes, yes . . . because I didn't want you worrying about me looking over your shoulder on your first job. But if he's cornered, he's going to have to get out through you.

STARK

He's not dangerous.

ROYCE

Don't you believe it. He's mixed up in this and he's about to come back in and prove it. He doesn't know what I have from Urquhart. He doesn't know that we know.

STARK

Mr Royce . . .

ROYCE

Don't use my—

STARK

Sorry. But look: that stuff from Urquhart—we haven't done the background on it yet. If that's the basis for a wet job and I'm the patsy—

Royce puts an arm around Stark and quick-steps her into a corner—

ROYCE

Listen to me. Listen to me. First of all, you'll do what you're told. Second of all, do it faster. You don't need to ask all these questions, and you're giving away more than you're getting back. Just flirt with him like he's your daddy and get him to drink the bloody drink.

Stark pulls out of Royce's grasp—

STARK

Is this a wet job, sir? Is that why you brought me in on this?

ROYCE

He'll be back any second. Sit down.

STARK

Yes, and then what? We toast our exchange, he steps off the train and vomits his spleen onto the platform? Or does he just keel over in his chair while I'm sat there like a golddigger before the wedding?

ROYCE

Don't worry your pretty little head about the consequences. There are no ethics in field work. It's nice like that. But if you choke on your first assignment, you'll be back listening to pirate radio at the numbers station while good men risk their exposure cleaning up your mess.

STARK

I don't plan on choking, sir.

ROYCE

Then sit down. You have five minutes to get something out of him, or I'll come over and do it myself.

Royce shifts, puts a hand to a bulge in his jacket.

STARK

Did you bring me here to kill him, sir?

A silhouette at the windows. Royce sees it, turns back to the bar.

ROYCE

Get back to work . . .

Stark returns to the table, hovers. Ellory comes in, a finger hooked in his address book.

ELLORY

You look like you've forgotten me already.

STARK

Stretching my legs . . .

ELLORY

Yes. Don't take your knees for granted. These intercity jaunts are murder. I've been stuck on this train since bloody Skopje.

STARK

I got on at Niš.

ELLORY

(sits)

Ah. So we could have done this hours ago.

STARK

We have our instructions.

ELLORY

We do. Instructions.

STARK

Be glad to go for a walk around Belgrade. A proper walk.

ELLORY

We're coming through the suburbs now.

STARK

Perhaps I really will see that bridge.

Ellory opens his address book. Stark gulps some of her whisky, circles the table.

ELLORY

Before I sully a good man's name, or at least an unsuspecting man . . . what do you know about this ring?

STARK

The intel's been coming from five cities. Prendergast was the man in London. But there's also Paris, Munich, Prague and Budapest. The Russian, Eva, seems to be a go-between. I'd like to know who she knows.

ELLORY

She knows me.

STARK

Who else does she know? Who might have some lucrative secrets in the back of his kitchen cupboard?

ELLORY

There's a man at the embassy. His wife just bought a new car. One of those flash little topless sporty things.

STARK

All right.

ELLORY

—the car, not the wife.

STARK

Understood.

ELLORY

This fellow gambles a bit. Has an eye for Eastern European women—an expensive species, and one to which his wife does not belong. I like him. I wouldn't like to see him face-down in the Danube because I gave a young lady his name.

STARK

(sits)

We follow protocol. Everything's verified twice over. And he wouldn't end up in the Danube. We'd talk to him.

ELLORY

Don't tell me about protocol. I know how these things are done. Everything's verified twice over if you have the time and the inclination, which nobody ever has. And any facts that turn up by accident are bent to support the official line.

STARK

We want to *talk* to him.

ELLORY

His life won't be *improved* by the conversation, correct?

STARK

Not from his point of view. Not if he's been compromising our work. Yes, correct.

ELLORY

. . . Fine.

Ellory turns the book, points to one of the entries. Stark absorbs the information. Ellory closes the book, puts it in his pocket.

Stark drains her whisky, puts down the glass.

STARK

Anybody else?

ELLORY

Well, of course, there's me. I met Eva at some university bash about a year ago. She's a lecturer. I think she wanted to seduce me, but I'm terrible at these things so she gave up, probably out of pity. Beautiful girl. We became friends. We have coffee and pastries at the *Centrál*.

STARK

Did she ever ask you a professional question?

ELLORY

Yes, she asked about the gerund. To this day believes I'm a travel writer. Once she found out we don't learn grammar in English schools, she stopped asking.

STARK

Did you volunteer anything about the service?

ELLORY

She doesn't know I'm in the service.

STARK

She sounds rather unassuming for the fulcrum of a spy ring.

ELLORY

Like all politically compromised souls, she's an idealist, and an idealist will always believe only what she *wants* to believe. She wants to believe I'm a good man. Dull and socially impotent, curiously uneducated in my vocation, but good.

STARK

What does she talk about?

ELLORY

Academia. It would be unbearable if she was a dog. She's not a dog.

STARK

Did you try to get anything out of *her*? I mean, any intel?

ELLORY

No. I didn't know she was a spy until you told me.

STARK

You gave her name up quickly enough.

ELLORY

No, *you* gave up her name and I didn't disagree. I'd have given you a name from a Tolstoy novel and hoped you didn't recognise it.

STARK

You would have given me a false name.

ELLORY

No, a fictitious name. Yes, a futile gesture to protect her honour. The gesture itself, you see, presupposes the honour.

STARK

So what you're telling me is: the black widow in a spider-web of double-agents, posing as a lecturer, likes to have coffee and cake with an English spy, posing as a writer, and neither one of you suspected the other.

ELLORY

I suppose we must be very good at what we do.

STARK

Well, now that you know.

ELLORY

Yes.

STARK

Can you help us to bring her in?

ELLORY

Of course.

Stark lifts her glass, realises it's empty, puts it down.

STARK

What about her honour?

ELLORY

She's a spy.

STARK

Simple as that?

ELLORY

Yes, of course.

STARK

Are you in love with her?

Ellory lifts his whisky, pours a half-measure into Stark's empty glass.

ELLORY

Yes, of course. But she's a spy.

(sits back, raises his glass)

We're coming into the station. Join me in a toast.

STARK

. . . to what?

ELLORY

To the vagaries of our job. You sat down thinking I was a double. Now you've been disabused of the notion, you have a lead, and I can help you get to Eva. Santé.

Stark raises her glass. Ellory clinks it, puts his glass to his lips. Stark puts her glass to her lips. Ellory hesitates.

ELLORY

The Paris thing troubles me, though. "I won't make it to Paris."

Stark lowers her glass. Ellory keeps his half-raised.

ELLORY

Suicidal, depressed or just brain-storming, that's the only downside of his death that he could think of.

STARK

Perhaps he was going to meet Eva there.

ELLORY

Eva wasn't just a city break to him, she was business. What other business would he have in Paris?

STARK

. . . are you leading me?

ELLORY

Yes.

STARK

Well, I don't know.

ELLORY

You would have let me take this, wouldn't you?

Stark stares at Ellory. Ellory lowers his glass.

ELLORY

Young ladies don't buy old latches a drink. Otherwise, well played. You'll go far. If they ever ask me, that's what I'll tell them. They probably won't ask me, though.

Stark looks around the car, avoids looking directly at Royce—who half-watches—

ELLORY

The ringleader's based in Paris. Prendergast told us—in the end his morals caught up with him. Went to Urquhart, told him he would go to Paris under surveillance. When he turned up in his own luggage, Urquhart set a canary trap instead. Do you know what that is?

STARK

I think so.

ELLORY

We know we have a traitor but we don't know if they're in the embassy or the atelier. We send out messages on the wire, look like they've gone to the wrong place. "George Ellory's on a train with the Pegasus file, make the exchange." The embassy's version says I'm going from Sofia to Niš. The atelier's says Niš to Belgrade.

STARK

Whoever turns up for the exchange . . .

ELLORY

. . . and here you are.

STARK

(raises her glass)

That's why you were going to let *me* drink this.

ELLORY

Why on earth would you drink that? You spiked it yourself. No, that was a test. And you passed.

STARK

It's only a truth drug. You know, Pentathol.

ELLORY

If it was, you'd be the ringleader sitting there taking the chance. But you're not the ringleader. You're a patsy.

(beat)

You were admitted you came from Paris, which means you didn't see the message yourself. But you know Eva's name. You said "help *us* bring her in". And of course you have the enthusiasm of the un-seasoned.

STARK

Is any of that a compliment?

ELLORY

The test was a compliment.

Royce steps over from the bar, reaches for a bulge in his jacket. Stark springs out of her chair, gets in his way, arms around him—

STARK

Mr Royce. Mr Royce. Don't do it.

ROYCE

I told you, don't use my *name*.

Ellory stands, turns to face them—

ELLORY

Royce from the atelier, isn't it—?

Royce struggles. Stark pushes him back to the bar—

ROYCE

That's . . . that's all just a lot of waffle, Stark. He's told you a *story* and you've fallen for it like a *débutante*. You've screwed this up.

STARK

Calm down, sir.

ROYCE

Let go of me.

STARK

Calm down.

ROYCE

Get your hands off—

Royce shrugs her off, glares at Ellory.

ROYCE

Urquhart wouldn't deal with you on this.

ELLORY

Not just me. Our man in Belgrade, too—he's waiting out on the platform.

ROYCE

It's garbage, Stark. You saw the background. This man's the leak.

STARK

I don't think so.

ROYCE

He's tight with the Russian. Said so himself. The rest is smoke and mirrors.

STARK

Then have a drink with us, sir. It's just Pentathol. Tastes a bit peaty.

ROYCE

(to Ellory)

You can't accuse me of being a double. You can't accuse me of anything. You're a dinosaur, you're just something we left behind in Hungary after the Cold War, like an old tank. You've been pensioned off and you don't even know it. You're a joke.

(to Stark)

And you're not even a joke, you're an administrator, you're nothing. This was a career opportunity. Give you a kick up the backside. If I say "jump" you don't say "well, actually I'm afraid of heights". What are you doing *thinking*, for Christ's sake? You don't think and moral your way through this, you do what you're told and you figure out *why* afterwards.

STARK

We're at the end of the line. The man's waiting for us. We'll all go to his office together and call Urquhart. We'll call Urquhart and he'll tell us what went out on the wire and who's telling the truth. Because the only other way to settle this is for you to have a drink.

Royce looks at them. Ellory lifts a glass from the table, puts it in Royce's hand.

ELLORY

I've rather enjoyed working with you, Stark.

STARK

Don't rush to judgement. Wait until we're all off the train.

ELLORY

What do you mean?

STARK

"Suicide by betrayal."

Stark turns, walks out. Ellory follows, closes the door behind them.

*Royce looks at the glass of whisky on the bar, stares for a moment, then gulps it down.
Royce walks slowly to the door and slumps through.*
