

Rasa Bugavičute-Pēce

# SONG FESTIVAL\*

Translated from Latvian by Kristīna Guste

## Characters:

Māra (30)  
Linda (73)  
Lāsma (33)  
Nauris (32)  
Madars (35)  
Aleksandrs (43)  
Larisa (36)  
Jānis (40)  
Ēriks (48)

## Setting:

Experimental Stage. Here and now.

Liepāja, 2022.

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\* The Latvian Song and Dance Festival is one of the largest amateur choral and dancing events in the world and an important event in Latvian culture and social life. It is also a part of the UNESCO Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity list since 2008.

*Meeting room.*

*Māra is sitting in the room. She is fiddling with an invitation, slightly anxious. She has been sitting here for a while.*

*She sighs, then straightens her back and continues waiting. She starts humming to herself.*

*After a while, Linda enters the room.*

**Linda.** Hello.

**Māra.** *(With genuine joy.)* Hello!

**Linda.** Hello...

**Māra.** I was getting worried nobody else was going to show up...

*Linda gives her a brief smile. Māra seems to want to say something, but Linda turns away from her, looking for a place to sit.*

*Linda sits down. Awkward pause.*

**Māra.** Excuse me, did you also receive... *(Shows her invitation.)* ...one of these, or did you...?

**Linda.** No, that's right, I got one as well, yes.

**Māra.** Oh, I thought perhaps you knew something more, maybe...

**Linda.** No, no, only what the invitation said.

**Māra.** I see. Let's keep waiting, then.

**Linda.** Yes... So, has it been long?

**Māra.** You mean, me waiting?

**Linda.** Yes.

**Māra.** No! No. Well... A little. A while...

**Linda.** Time is money, after all.

**Māra.** So they say.

*Silence, Linda sees that Māra is holding her invitation in her hand, so she gets hers out of her purse. They smile at each other. Silence.*

**Māra.** Do you perhaps have any idea...?

*Interrupting her mid-sentence, the door opens and Lāsma and Nauris walk in.*

**Māra.** Oh... Hello!

**Lāsma.** Hello.

**Nauris.** Hi-ya.

*Linda smiles at the newcomers.*

**Nauris.** So, then...

**Lāsma.** I guess we should have a seat.

**Nauris.** *(Looking for the best seats.)* Over here?

**Lāsma.** Yeah, sure.

*They both sit down, looking around.*

**Nauris.** So here we are...

*Noticing the invitations Māra and Linda are holding, Lāsma starts looking for hers in her purse.*

**Nauris.** *(Trying to figure out how to settle in the room.)* So I wonder how's it gonna go down? Like, facing...?

*Linda at Māra share a brief look and both shrug their shoulders.*

**Linda.** No idea, I just got here.

**Māra.** I suppose we know as much as you do.

**Linda.** That is to say, you haven't missed anything.

**Nauris.** Right, alright, alright...

**Lāsma.** Right up to the last moment I was wondering if I should even come, like maybe this is some kind of a prank or I don't know...

**Nauris.** I'd say it's good that you came... *(Smiles.)*

**Māra.** Oh, so you two aren't... acquainted?

**Lāsma.** No!

**Nauris.** We are now, we met... *(Gestures shortly to mimic smoking.)* ...outside.

**Māra.** That's nice...

*Madars enters the room, interrupting. He is holding an invitation in his hand. Nauris starts getting up to shake his hand, but... Madars does not even make an effort to introduce himself to the others, so the handshake is left out.*

*Silence. Everyone covertly looking at Madars.*

**Nauris.** *(To Lāsma, silently.)* What a group...

*Pause. After a short while, Aleksandrs enters the room.*

**Aleksandrs.** Hello!

**Māra.** Hello.

**Linda.** Hello.

**Nauris.** *(To Lāsma.)* People can't stop coming now.

**Aleksandrs.** It hasn't started yet, has it?

**Linda.** *(To Aleksandrs.)* No.

*Pause. A moment later, Larisa enters the room. As Larisa is entering, Aleksandrs is looking for a seat.*

**Larisa.** Hi...

**Māra.** *(To Larisa.)* Hello!

**Larisa.** ...yellow. *(Chuckles.)*

**Nauris.** What?

**Larisa.** Never mind.

*Aleksandrs sits down.*

*Everybody responds to Larisa's greeting with a brief smile, nod, or mumbled "hi".*

*Larisa takes a seat, looks into her purse. Silence.*

**Nauris.** *(To Lāsma.)* Should we go for a smoke while we still have time...

**Lāsma.** Again?

**Nauris.** *(Shrugs his shoulders, gets out his phone and tries to search something .)* I mean... *(To Lāsma.)* Do you have reception?

**Larisa.** Does anybody know where the restrooms are?

*Māra and Linda shake their heads.*

**Aleksandrs.** Should be that way... *(Points at the door where they had previously entered.)*

**Larisa.** After all, we don't know how long we will be here, right? I wouldn't want to miss anything!

**Lāsma.** Go on, if something starts, we'll tell them to wait.

**Nauris.** Yes, we'll tell them.

**Larisa.** Really?

**Lāsmā.** But of course.

**Larisa.** Oh my, thank you, so kind of you...

*Larisa gets up, walks towards the door, but Jānis is walking in through it. He enters first.*

**Larisa.** Oh! *(Smiles.)*

**Jānis.** Excuse me.

**Larisa.** Oh no, no worries! *(Points at herself and Jānis.)* Quite the meet-cute, isn't it?

**Jānis.** *(Hesitantly.)* Yes...

**Larisa.** I was... *(Gestures that she wants to leave.)*

**Jānis.** *(Lets Larisa pass.)* Please...

*Jānis goes further into the room, smiles at everyone, nods, looks for a place to sit.  
In the meantime, Larisa is trying to open the door but does not succeed.*

**Larisa.** What is it... *(Continues trying the door.)* Really, how does it...

*Jānis sits down, Lāsmā looks at Larisa, Nauris follows Lāsmā's gaze.*

**Nauris.** *(To Larisa.)* Need help?

**Larisa.** Yes, I suppose... I should really eat more protein! I have no strength at all...

**Nauris.** Easy, easy, we'll take care of it right away.

*Nauris confidently walks to the door, but he cannot open it either.*

**Nauris.** It must have fallen shut.

**Jānis.** I don't think I even slammed it that hard.

*Madars smirks without saying anything.*

**Jānis.** It must have fallen shut... I'm sorry! How silly...

**Lāsmā.** Maybe you gotta press a button or something! Is there a button on the handle?

**Nauris.** That's what you get with these 'smart houses.' I once got stuck in the National Library building.

**Māra.** Does it have electric doors?

**Nauris.** Everything's electric there, except for the books.

**Larisa.** So then, how...

**Nauris.** Siri! *Open the door. (Waits.)* Alexa! *(Waits.)*

**Jānis.** Someone else is going to arrive and it'll get open, right?

**Nauris.** *(Not seeing the door opening.)* No chance... *(Tries to visually establish the reason for the door falling closed.)*

**Jānis.** Someone else must be coming, it can't be just us... *(Quickly counts the people in the room.)*  
Two, four, seven, eight, right?

**Māra.** I also think more people should be arriving.

**Nauris.** That's right! Someone has to be in charge of all this, after all.

**Linda.** What is there to be in charge of...

**Jānis.** *(Ignoring what Linda said, to Larisa.)* I'm sorry, really. *(Sits back down.)*

**Larisa.** Stop it, it isn't your fault.

**Lāsmā.** *(To Larisa.)* Can you hold it in?

**Larisa.** Of course! Of course. No, I just wanted to... freshen up.

**Nauris.** Well... *(Tries the door again, but it is closed, so he shrugs.)*

**Larisa.** Thanks anyway...

*Larisa and Nauris each take their seat.  
Silence.*

*After a short while, the door opens swiftly, Ēriks runs in through it. He knows he is late, so, when Larisa and Jānis get up to tell him to hold the door, it is already too late, and the door is closed again.  
Ēriks is holding an invitation and envelope in his hands.*

**Larisa.** Hold the...

**Jānis.** Well... *(Throws up his arms in defeat – the door is no longer his fault.)*

**Larisa.** *(Realizing she was too late with her warning.)* ...door.

**Ēriks.** Door? *(Trying to get it open, but it is too late.)* What in the...

**Nauris.** I was saying we can't open it.

**Māra.** It is peculiar that you can open it from the other side, but not from this side.

**Ēriks.** I'm sorry, I didn't realize I had to hold something.

**Jānis.** *(Quietly, like a joke.)* At least it's not my fault anymore...

**Larisa.** *(To Ēriks.)* Don't you worry.

**Ēriks.** I'm always late, so I was running and... Forgive me.

**Larisa.** Oh no, it's really alright!

**Lāsmā.** *(Quoting a song.)* It's the final...

**Ēriks.** ...countdown! Yes, that's me every time. *(To everyone present.)* Ēriks!

**Nauris.** *(Reaches for a handshake.)* Nauris.

**Lāsmā.** We haven't really introduced ourselves yet...

**Ēriks.** Oh well, at least I can help with that. *(Shows the invitation and envelope he is holding.)*  
This... I have to give to Māra!

*Silence.*

**Ēriks.** Who here is Māra?

**Māra.** Is that really for me?

**Ēriks.** Are you Māra?

**Māra.** Yes.

**Ēriks.** Is there any other Māra here?

*Ēriks looks at the other women one after another.*

**Linda.** No, I'm Linda.

**Nauris.** And that is Lāsmā.

**Lāsmā.** Lāsmā.

**Larisa.** Larisa...

**Ēriks.** So, then... This is for Māra. *(Hands his envelope to Māra.)*

**Māra.** From whom?

**Ēriks.** *(Shrugs his shoulders.)* It was attached to the invitation. Do you not have a letter for me?  
That's how it should work...

**Nauris.** Why should it?

**Māra.** No.

**Ēriks.** Do any of you other ladies have a letter for me?

*Nobody is answering, only looking at each other.*

**Nauris.** Has anyone else received anything apart from an invitation?

**Larisa.** No...

**Aleksandrs.** No.

**Ēriks.** What do you mean – no?

**Jānis.** (*Jokingly, at Māra.*) Somebody's more equal than others!

**Māra.** Me?

**Jānis.** Well... It's obvious, isn't it!

**Ēriks.** (*About the letter.*) It is odd that this is only for you, but, well... Are you going to take it?

**Māra.** Of course, sorry...

*Māra takes the envelope and examines it, Ēriks is looking for a place to sit.*

**Māra.** I will... read it then.

**Linda.** Of course.

*Māra starts opening the envelope to read the letter, the others are talking in the meantime.*

**Lāsmā.** Stating the obvious – this is all a joke and we're all being punk'd. And this is clearly a casting meeting or something. Nobody's giving these positions away for free. Have you seen the new Netflix reality shows? They're screwing with them from the get-go. Even before that...

**Nauris.** I know 'Too Hot to Handle'... (*Winks at Lāsmā.*)

*Silence. Māra is reading.*

**Larisa.** (*To Aleksandrs.*) I... I work in the Latvian National History Museum archives, with the numismatics department...

**Aleksandrs.** The who?

**Larisa.** Numismatics department! Numismatics deals with coins, coin deposits, money, all the related written sources, oh, all sorts of things... We also have a phaleristics department, they deal with medals and so on... Where do you come from?

**Aleksandrs.** From the Andzeļi Community Center.

*Larisa hesitates, but Māra clears her throat and everyone turns to her. Silence.*

**Māra.** I... guess I have to read this out loud to all of you. At least, that's how I understand this. It says so. (*Pause.*) Excuse me... (*Jumps up, runs to the door, tries to open it, without success.*)



Huh... Heh.

**Linda.** Is something wrong?

**Māra.** I was just checking... I... *(Starts fanning herself with the letter.)*

**Jānis.** Are you alright? *(To the others.)* Does anyone have water?

**Māra.** No, I'm fine! This is just unexpected! So unexpected to... be here.

**Aleksandrs.** *(About the letter.)* What does it say?

**Ēriks.** *(Tries to joke.)* I swear I didn't write that.

**Larisa.** What does it say?

**Māra.** Yes, so... I will read it then. *(Reading the letter.)* Dear Ms. Māra... *(Interrupting the reading.)* My last name is not relevant. *(Continues reading.)* We hereby inform you that you will be heading today's meeting, therefore we kindly request you to read the information contained in this letter to the entire group... *(Chuckles nervously.)* Heading the meeting. I have never headed anything before in my life, and now this...

**Ēriks.** Hold on...

**Linda.** Heading what meeting?

**Ēriks.** I believe there has been a misunderstanding.

**Jānis.** Yes, why are you heading the meeting?

**Māra.** Me?

**Jānis.** Yeah, no offense, it's nothing personal, but I just met you.

**Māra.** I'm only reading...

**Ēriks.** I must be in the wrong room.

**Lāsmā.** So am I... Did you come here for a job interview?

**Ēriks.** No, for a date.

**Linda.** I beg your pardon!

**Lāsmā.** A date?!

**Ēriks.** Yes, a date of secret pen-pals!

**Larisa.** What about the lectures...

*Silence.*

**Lāsmā.** *(To Nauris.)* You come here for a date too?

**Nauris.** Nope. *(To Ēriks.)* You are totally in the wrong room, man.

**Aleksandrs.** Hold on... *(To Māra.)* Please read the whole thing.

**Māra.** *(Reading.)* Thank you for coming. Your attendance confirms your consent to participate in a public argumentation session. The agenda is attached to the letter. Sincere apologies for having to misinform you of the purpose of this event by appealing to your interests; it was done to secure your attendance and form a full focus group.

*Everyone is moderately confused by what it all means.*

**Lāsmā.** That's what you get when you click on all random "agrees" online without reading the fine print, isn't it?

**Nauris.** Yeah, totally. *(Laughs.)*

**Linda.** This is not amusing at all.

**Nauris.** No, it's actually hilarious. I took a day off work to be here, and this turns out to be some meeting! Meetings for every little fucking thing these days, goddamn it...

**Aleksandrs.** Wait, so we were all misled on purpose? I had to get up at half past three in the morning and come here across the entire country to find out that I have been lied to?

**Larisa.** I believe there has been some mistake...

**Lāsmā.** From now on, you're not getting me into any experimental halls even if you paid me!

**Nauris.** That's right!

**Ēriks.** But what about...

**Māra.** *(Reading.)* Once all items of the agenda are fulfilled, you will be free to leave our hospitable premises. *(Looks at the others.)*

**Madars.** *(Under his nose, with contempt.)* Hospitable...

**Larisa.** What if I need to use the restroom?!

*Silence. Everybody looking at Māra, she shrugs.*

*Suddenly, Madars jumps up and walks towards the door. Madars tries to open the door, but it stays closed.*

**Nauris.** I tried already.

**Madars.** Let me out please!

*Silence. The others exchange looks.*

**Madars.** Hello! I would like to get out now! I have not signed up for any experiments! Hello!

*Everyone is looking at Madars.*

**Madars.** *(To the others.)* What are you looking at?! Did any of you sign up for anything?

**Nauris.** No.

**Linda.** No.

**Madars.** What are you standing around for then?

**Larisa.** I don't know, I was coming to...

**Madars.** To be locked in a room for experiments?!

**Larisa.** No, an exchange of experience...

**Madars.** I did not sign up for this!

**Aleksandrs.** Nobody did.

**Jānis.** But it did mention attendance... *(To Māra.)* What was it?

**Māra.** *(Reading.)* Your attendance confirms your consent to participate.

**Madars.** No, I just came here because I got an invitation! To meet a client. An invitation! And now there's no client, no meeting, but some sort of experiment! An experiment! Do I look like a lab rat? *(At the door.)* Do I look like a rat?!

**Nauris.** *(Chuckles.)* Well, that depends...

**Linda.** *(Very emotional.)* Now hold on, he is just a little agitated.

**Madars.** Does anyone have reception? On your phone?

*Several nos.*

**Nauris.** *(To Lāsma.)* So that's why there's no reception!

**Madars.** *(To Māra.)* Who wrote that letter? Who is in charge of this?

**Māra.** I don't know! I just...

**Larisa.** She is only reading what it says!

**Linda.** That's right, so let's hear it all.

**Madars.** *(Attacks Ēriks.)* You! Who gave you that letter?

**Ēriks.** It was attached to the invitation! In the same envelope, I...

**Madars.** Did you write this bullshit?!

**Ēriks.** No!

**Madars.** Secret pen-pal, my ass...

**Ēriks.** I did not write the letter! I don't even know what a focus group is!

**Lāsmā.** That's exactly what the person who wrote the letter would say.

**Nauris.** Yes! *(To Ēriks.)* The more you repeat that you didn't write it, the more I think it's the other way around.

**Ēriks.** I wasn't even supposed to be here! I was not coming to a meeting!

**Linda.** Neither was I.

**Madars.** *(Quickly at the others.)* Ok, who was coming to a meeting?!

*Silence. Jānis and Aleksandrs raise a hand.*

**Jānis.** *(Puts his hand down.)* I mean, I was coming to a different meeting.

**Aleksandrs.** *(Raises his hand insecurely.)* Well, if you consider a festival modeling seminar a meeting, then yes, but...

**Madars.** So each of us came for a different thing?

**Aleksandrs.** *(To Māra.)* What does it say next?

**Māra.** It has... the agenda.

**Madars.** What is it, then?

**Māra.** *(Reading.)* The issue raised today must be resolved collectively by each of you voting for or against...

**Jānis.** Alright, then! We just have to vote. That, we can do. What are we voting on?

**Madars.** Wait a minute, is this some kind of escape room? Some lame theater?

**Jānis.** That makes us an independent expert panel! I get it.

**Madars.** What expert panel?! Experiments, not experts! They didn't even give us coffee or cookies... Not even normal chairs, damnit! A fucking panel...

**Aleksandrs.** Alright, enough fighting, just tell us what we're supposed to discuss.

**Lāsmā.** Yes! The sooner we get to it, the sooner...

**Nauris.** That doesn't always mean finishing faster...

*Lāsmā rolls her eyes at Nauris' remark, he gets slightly awkward.*

**Nauris.** So, what are we deciding?

**Māra.** Huh... Well... *(Nervous chuckle.)* Whether or not... *(Pause.)* the Latvian Song and Dance Festival should exist.

*Silence. Laughter.*

**Larisa.** Could you please repeat that?

**Māra.** *(Reading.)* You have to decide whether or not it is necessary to continue the tradition of the Latvian Song Festival.

*Pause.*

**Nauris.** Haha, of course not. Haha. *(To Lāsmā.)* Punk'd!

**Ēriks.** This is nonsense...

*Ēriks get up and heads for the door to check if it can be opened.*

**Jānis.** Please tell us what it actually says. Read it, please.

**Māra.** *(Hands the letter to Jānis.)* You can read it yourself.

**Jānis.** *(Reads, then turns the other side of the page, as if something could be written on it.)* Uh-huh, uh-huh...

**Lāsmā.** A prank! Told you.

**Aleksandrs.** Hold on, so you are all somehow connected to the Song and Dance Festival movement?

**Linda.** No.

**Māra.** No...

**Ēriks.** No!

**Aleksandrs.** So why should you be deciding on anything?

**Lāsmā.** What's this us and them?

**Aleksandrs.** I am the leader of the Andzeļi Parish Community Center's dance collective 'The Dancing Hedgehogs', so I am at least an interested party.

**Jānis.** So it's like I said, we are independent experts! A panel of experts, this makes perfect sense.

**Lāsmā.** Alright, so what if I watch it on TV every year...

**Aleksandrs.** We only have one every five years.

**Lāsmā.** ...and I participated once.

**Nauris.** Hey, what year? Maybe we've already met!

**Aleksandrs.** That's not the same.

**Māra.** We are obviously all here, we are here to decide whether we as a nation, as... a united whole...

**Ēriks.** Ha, united whole...

**Māra.** ...alright, so a more or less united whole, need for the tradition of the Song Festival...

**Aleksandrs.** And Dance Festival.

**Māra.** ...the Song and Dance Festival to continue. It is, after all, a matter... of the entire nation.

**Linda.** You must be joking!

**Māra.** Me, no, maybe somebody else...

**Linda.** *(To Jānis.)* What else does it say?

**Jānis.** *(Reading.)* The head of the meeting must record the course of argumentation and enter the vote in the box next to each participant's name.

**Madars.** They have our names?! *(Walks over to look.)*

**Jānis.** Yes... *(Pause.)* Once cast, a vote can be neither struck nor corrected, i.e., it cannot be changed. This is required in order for you to comprehend that you are holding the future in your hands...

**Nauris.** Nice.

**Lāsma.** The future, or lack thereof.

**Nauris.** Right.

**Larisa.** Oh stop it.

**Jānis.** *(Continues reading.)* ...each of you must vote for or against on the grounds of a story of personal experience, as the Song Festival, at its core, is about personal and emotional connection, tradition, unity, and freedom of spirit...

**Madars.** Freedom of spirit!

**Ēriks.** Freedom of a locked-in spirit...

*Ēriks walks up to the door again to check if he can open it. He cannot.*

**Nauris.** This is all fake. *Fake news!*

**Linda.** *(To Māra.)* Why wouldn't they simply tell us what this was about?

**Māra.** I...

**Linda.** 'I' what?

**Larisa.** There's no need to be rude.

**Māra.** I don't know! This is the first I am hearing of this too!

**Linda.** But you were here first, before anyone else, and somehow you are the head of the meeting who's received a letter. Why on earth?

**Māra.** You head it then if you want it so much!

**Linda.** All I want is to go home.

**Jānis.** You know what, how about we stop acting based on some piece of paper, right? How about whoever's in charge comes here if they want us to do anything, and then... Maybe...

**Aleksandrs.** No, you are not qualified to make such decisions.

**Jānis.** I believe you are overestimating your own qualifications.

**Lāsmā.** Hey, maybe we should try the door again...?

**Ēriks.** I already checked.

*Lāsmā walks up to the door, tries to open it, no success. Silence.*

**Aleksandrs.** Locked. Alright... okay. *(To Māra.)* It said the door would open once we vote? How about we look at this thing simply. We obviously need a Song Festival. Right?

**Ēriks.** I agree. Let's decide, vote, and leave!

**Jānis.** Everyone has to argue their point.

**Ēriks.** And what does that matter?

**Lāsmā.** *(Reaches for the letter.)* May I?

**Jānis.** Please. *(Gives the letter to Lāsmā.)*

**Linda.** I would never have imagined that an innocent party invitation might turn out this way...

**Lāsmā.** *(Reading.)* Decision-makers! We are called 'decision-makers' in this thing. What a joke...  
*(Gives the letter to Māra.)*

**Ēriks.** You know what, just... let's all raise our hands, vote, and be done with it.

**Jānis.** No, that won't do.

**Ēriks.** Why not?

**Jānis.** Do you also go to the elections and vote however they tell you to?

**Ēriks.** Now wait a minute, that's apples and oranges.

**Jānis.** The same principle!

**Ēriks.** Yes, but...

**Jānis.** Please stop telling me what to think!

**Ēriks.** But I wasn't telling you which way to vote!

**Nauris.** *(Swiftly.)* I abstain. How about that?

**Māra.** *(Emotionless.)* You must vote either for or against.

**Aleksandrs.** Alright! Could we please all sit down, take turns and argue our position... Māra will record, and then, if I got it right, we get to leave. It'll be over in five minutes. Can we do that?

**Jānis.** I agree!

**Lāsmā.** (*Swiftly.*) AGAINST. I vote against.

**Aleksandrs.** Wait, what?

**Lāsmā.** (*To Māra.*) Write that down.

**Māra.** Perhaps I should first hear your arguments, and then...

**Lāsmā.** Do you actually think my 'against' changes anything? That anyone would actually listen to my voice? That I could get to decide if there was a festival? A Song Festival? Come on, people. This is ridiculous.

**Māra.** You must argue your opinion. That is the only way to get out.

**Lāsmā.** We're in here stuck like a bunch of idiots, but in reality somebody's for sure filming us and they'll post this, like, 'Dumb and Dumber, and Dumber, and Even Dumber, and Even Dumber Than That, and...'

**Jānis.** We got it.

**Lāsmā.** And make money off of how we're being huge idiots right now.

**Madars.** That would be a violation of data protection.

**Lāsmā.** Don't even get me started, alright? Sometimes I just can't help thinking that all the problems start with that data protection bullshit. Kids don't even get normal ID numbers anymore, just some random numbers! Data protection. A load of crap. My face is not data, it's my face.

**Nauris.** And a sexy one, at that.

**Madars.** That's what I mean – nobody can show it anywhere without your permission.

**Lāsmā.** I don't care, let them show it. You know how popular those reality shows are? The Song Festival is no match. That festival of ours is no match to a lot of things, really. Just look at what the Chinese are doing. Did you watch the Olympics? Like little soldiers in a row, so pretty...

**Larisa.** But those little children all sang in unison, while our choir are like nightingales...

**Lāsmā.** Anyway, not the point. Moving on, who's next?

**Māra.** I cannot accept your vote.

**Lāsmā.** Why not? Do I have to vote for? If I vote against, don't we get out anyway?

**Māra.** No, you may vote as you wish. (*Reading.*) '...each of you must vote for or against on the grounds of a story of personal experience, as...'

**Lāsmā.** (*Interrupts Māra.*) Yeah, yeah, yeah, argue your opinion. Write it down. That's my vote because that's what I want.

**Aleksandrs.** That is not an argument.

**Lāsmā.** And who's gonna decide if my argument is good enough?

**Nauris.** Babe, listen...

**Lāsmā.** I'm not your babe!

**Nauris.** No, just...



**Lāsmā.** No ‘no, just’, this is precisely my point! Men just assume that all women are babes...

**Nauris.** (*Under his nose.*) Here we go with the feminist bullshit!

**Lāsmā.** ...and Latvians automatically assume that everybody has to be in love with the Song Festival, just like (*At Jānis.*) those up there that this guy mentioned, they automatically accept whatever is best for them, so there’s my reason – everything’s already been decided for us, we’re just little...

**Jānis.** Pawns.

**Lāsmā.** Yes, exactly, tiny little pawns! Little pawns! We’re just here so that everyone can do whatever they have already decided to do, and we just get to watch and do nothing about it.

**Larisa.** But...

**Lāsmā.** There’s no ‘but’. There is no ‘but’. Look around you, people! The world is on the brink of a collapse. Global warming, this never-ending pandemic, the motherfucking vaccines, masks, sanitizers, war! A war, in the twenty-first century! If anyone was using their brain, we would never have had to see this, but no! Those up there only think about their own interests in their... exosphere. And please! Crises all around, food, every single energy source, even fucking chips are in crisis! Crisis of everything – emotional, moral, every single thing. It’s so obvious that the state has to focus on this moment, the present, like, divert all assets to military training, like, victims of abuse or something, not some polka dancing bullshit, right?

**Aleksandrs.** It’s not bullshit, but our folk dancing tradition!

**Larisa.** But...

**Lāsmā.** (*To Māra.*) Listen, is it my turn to speak, or what?

**Māra.** It is.

**Nauris.** Someone has a lot to say.

**Māra.** Please, let us respect our...

**Lāsmā.** Lāsmā.

**Māra.** I was about to say ‘companion’, but that doesn’t sound right, so yes, Lāsmā. Let us respect our Lāsmā and let her...

**Lāsmā.** Thank you. So. I vote against. Because, first of all, I don’t believe this actually has any meaning.

**Aleksandrs.** So you don’t vote in the elections either, then?

**Jānis.** Very good question.

**Nauris.** Hey, a little respect, please.

**Aleksandrs.** I apologize...

**Nauris.** (*To Lāsmā.*) Go on.

**Lāsmā.** *(To Nauris.)* I can speak for myself and continue whenever I fucking please! What even is this?!

**Linda.** Please go on...

**Lāsmā.** I am against the Song Festival. And you'll see, when we all vote against, they will keep on going, that's one.

**Aleksandrs.** Thank God.

**Lāsmā.** And two – if you really think about it, I really am against. 'Cause I think we are now living in a time where we need to be more responsible for the reality around us, for actual real events, instead of pretending that global events don't affect us. I, for one, have joined the National Guard.

**Nauris.** Okay...

**Lāsmā.** How many of you have done the same?

*Jānis raises his hand.*

**Lāsmā.** There you go, this is our reality. Out of the nine of us, only two are thinking about current reality. Me and him.

**Jānis.** Jānis.

**Nauris.** I totally wanted to, it's just...

**Lāsmā.** *(To silence Nauris.)* Oh, just shut it!

*Nauris throws up his arms – he is done speaking.*

**Lāsmā.** So we love talking a big talk about how mandatory service is too expensive and all that, but, in reality, we are willing to pay loads of money to sing a little! We fund all these little hobby groups, don't we, but if they have to go in the trenches, will they be able to do that?

**Aleksandrs.** Hold on, you're mixing...

**Nauris.** Let her speak. *(To Lāsmā.)* Sorry.

**Madars.** *(Under his nose.)* What a fucking group.

**Lāsmā.** So. Instead of raising income for medical staff or teachers, or investing into military security, or helping women escape abusive relationships, we sing. That's not right.

**Aleksandrs.** I will once again say that people like this cannot decide on the future of the Song and Dance Festival!

**Lāsmā.** People like this. Like what? By the way, I have been a participant. So what? I have. And I know that it's all very moving and whatever...

**Aleksandrs.** Patriotic. It's patriotic. It's even more patriotic than being in the trenches.

**Māra.** Aleksandrs.

**Aleksandrs.** That's it, I said what I had to say. Only, from here on out, while we're all voting here, I would like everyone to remember that girl in Azovstal, what was she doing in the middle of all that terror? That's right. She was singing. We can't think of the body alone, we must think of the spirit.

**Māra.** I will ask you to make your point later.

*Pause, everyone looking at each other.*

**Lāsmā.** In conclusion, I vote against. 'Cause unless we don't want the last song we, the great singing nation, sing together, to be a war song, we must prioritize other things, not the Song Festival. So, when times are better, more peaceful and prosperous, then, maybe.

*Silence.*

**Māra.** So is this your final vote? Once I write it down, I won't be able to strike it. I only have a pen, no pencil.

**Lāsmā.** I don't care. Yes. Anybody got a problem with that?

**Aleksandrs.** Not at all! While we're at it, why don't we finally close down all theaters, huh? Let's shut down all the orchestras, maybe we don't need any pesky libraries either. What about sports! What's the point of having bobsledders, for us as a nation to slide down a track, huh? That's right! No point. Just like people dancing our folk dances even in Australia! There's viral videos online, viewed all over the world. That means nothing, right?

*Silence.*

*Māra writes down Lāsmā's vote.*

**Māra.** Thank you for your opinion, Lāsmā.

**Nauris.** I also vote against.

**Aleksandrs.** What is wrong with you people?!

**Linda.** You shouldn't vote this way just because of the previous girl.

**Lāsmā.** *(To Linda.)* What did you say? What did you just call me? I'm no girl.

**Linda.** Well, I...

**Lāsmā.** Not to you, not to anyone else, got it?

**Linda.** Do not take that tone with me!

**Lāsmā.** What about your tone?

**Linda.** I apologize, I simply think that the young man should have his own opinion, his own...

backbone.

**Nauris.** I have a backbone! I'm voting against because that's how I'm voting.

**Madars.** There, backbone.

**Māra.** Let him speak!

**Nauris.** I want to vote against because... I, for one... I don't even get who the Festival is for.

**Ēriks.** What do you mean, who is it for! For everyone! Children...

**Nauris.** I don't have any.

**Madars.** Oh God, your mom, then.

**Nauris.** Okay, my mom's in a choir, yeah, but...

**Aleksandrs.** But?

**Nauris.** (*Emphasizing.*) But. Please understand, my point is that while those couple thousand people get to sing and dance, normal people can't even get tickets to the thing, can they. Who are we even showing it to? Isn't it, like, an imitation?

**Aleksandrs.** What I'm interested in is how we have been selected here.

**Māra.** Aleksandrs, please...

**Aleksandrs.** I mean it! We can't just decide upon the fate of the Song and Dance Festival with these types here and with this sort of reasoning! Imitation, what are you even talking about?! Nauris, do you think thousands of singers and thousands in the audience are an imitation?

**Nauris.** Yes.

**Aleksandrs.** Patterns created by thousands of people in a single stadium, an imitation?

**Nauris.** Yes! Now listen, what I really want to know is where the rolls of tickets to the previous Song Festival went.

**Larisa.** They didn't go anywhere.

**Nauris.** Oh but they did. It was all over the news! In the comments. And they didn't go to ordinary, common people. Just the elite, the cream, whatever, who could afford to buy a single ticket for a couple hundred from scalpers.

**Aleksandrs.** UNESCO heritage! The Song and Dance Festival is UNESCO heritage.

**Nauris.** So I, as a commoner, will say this. First make the Festival for Latvians, not the UNESCOes, and then I'll change my vote.

**Aleksandrs.** Don't think anyone will ask for your opinion anymore.

**Nauris.** They will! You'll see. The government needs to finally change, this regime has to go away, we have to stop fucking around and chasing great powers that have nothing to do with us, and then, perhaps. But now... eh.

**Ēriks.** I find it funny how you're the one speaking about chasing after things.

**Māra.** People...

**Nauris.** Funny, yeah. What about it? I have my own opinion, and this is what I believe. I want the Song Festival to be for the people. So I can just go and watch it. With the choir there, and the common people – there. And the choir going ‘oooh’, and the people going ‘oooh’...

**Larisa.** So you’re voting for, then?

**Linda.** Do you mean for free?

**Nauris.** Yes, for free! Yes. Money’s not a problem for me, but yeah.

**Linda.** Imagine the crowds... *(Shakes.)*

**Nauris.** So what! Let there be crowds! Crowds, everyone buying sausage and beer in cafes, and singing, and everybody singing, not just the chosen ones, alright? That’s how it’s supposed to be. Maybe I want to sing from that stage, too.

**Aleksandrs.** Sing, then!

*Nauris starts singing. He is not very good at it. He stops.*

**Nauris.** If we’re this great singing nation, and I, for one, don’t sing, does that mean that I’m not part the nation? What am I, then? What am I supposed to identify with here?

**Aleksandrs.** Then go to a choir and sing, where’s the problem?

**Nauris.** Don’t give me that, I went to the choir in school, they wouldn’t take me. Whatever. I vote against. I want to have a fucking smoke.

**Lāsmā.** That won’t change anything anyway.

**Māra.** I am writing it down, then. *(Writes.)*

**Larisa.** I vote FOR.

**Aleksandrs.** Oh thank God.

**Larisa.** For the Festival to continue as it has been before. You see, I’m a historian, and I know a thing or two about how things work, how it all repeats itself. History teaches us the interconnectedness of things. And, you see, the Song Festival is a phenomenon that has helped us as a nation to endure incredibly complicated historical situations. Just think, when was the first Latvian Song Festival... That’s right, 1873! It was the czar’s time. Yes, the national awakening had already started, but they still needed to ask for permission to organize it, do you understand? That is why this festival had and still has immense historical and philosophical meaning. It gives power to Latvians. Yes, we can examine how the tradition has come from Germany perhaps, but it has transformed and become immensely Latvian! Throughout the ages, through invasions, through bans on even speaking the Latvian language, you have to understand, despite having to ask for freedom of choice, for...

**Jānis.** Aren’t you Russian?

**Madars.** Russian-speaking, yes.

**Jānis.** Why Russian-speaking? Why is my neighbor Kestutis not Lithuanian-speaking, but a Lithuanian?

**Madars.** Well maybe she's Belarusian or Ukrainian, or...

**Larisa.** I am Russian.

**Jānis.** *(To Madars.)* There you go. *(To Larisa.)* And who did you vote for in the elections?

**Linda.** That's a very private question.

**Jānis.** If you even can vote in the elections. Perhaps you're not even a Latvian citizen.

**Larisa.** Don't worry, I am a Latvian Russian. A Russian of Latvia. And I believe that is exactly why I am here! Why I am supposed to be here. I represent a minority...

**Jānis.** Yeah, right, minority. Tell that to someone in the Eastern part of the country.

**Larisa.** I believe I am here as an example of an inclusive society, I love...

**Jānis.** Answer this please – why do you get out of the 'whatever' annual Nationwide Latvian Song Festival?

**Aleksandrs.** And Dance Festival.

**Jānis.** *(To Larisa.)* It's not yours to celebrate! *(To Māra.)* Why is she here?

**Māra.** What do you mean... she... that is not an appropriate question.

**Larisa.** No, Māra, stop. No silly questions, right? Only silly answers. You see, for me as a person who lives in Latvia, this Festival is fascinating! It is a massive collective prayer! And I am proud of this Festival. And I actually think Latvians should take more pride in what they have

**Nauris.** Now, hold on...

**Māra.** Let her speak her mind!

**Larisa.** And your vote confirms that! You are quick to dismiss that which you should treasure. Did you even know that the Latvian anthem, for example, was written for the Song Festival? Moreover, it was originally written with lyrics in Russian.

**Nauris.** Yeah, right.

**Larisa.** No, really! 'God, bless Latvia.' Can you imagine the strength of spirit it took to do something like that in Russian, in those times? Censorship banned the song at the time, even in Russian, so it was only first performed at the Festival in 1895. But it was performed Because the spirit prevailed.

**Lāsma.** How can you even remember the exact years?

**Nauris.** Yeah, looks like we've found our insider.

**Lāsma.** No, but really, how can you remember all of that? Sometimes I can't even remember if I'm 33 or 34. And here you are, naming dates.

**Larisa.** I don't know, I guess I'm just good with facts, essential things.

**Lāsma.** Why?

**Larisa.** Because I like history, not conspiracy theories!

**Jānis.** In that case, you should know that, historically speaking, you shouldn't even be here.

**Larisa.** My grandparents were sent here not because they wanted to come, but because they were forced. They took them and brought them here as workforce.

**Jānis.** Not to the taiga, but to civilization.

**Larisa.** Still, they did not choose it. However, they learned to love this land and were happy to spend their lives here.

**Jānis.** That's what I'm talking about – at the end of the day, everybody's happy here, even if they keep crying for their motherland...

**Larisa.** I understand now. I understand now that this whole survey or whatever we can call this, it isn't really about the Song Festival at all, but about ourselves in these uncertain times, isn't it? Typical. So let me say this. This is my land, my country, and I am and will always be standing for it. I go on parades, I celebrate Independence Day.

**Jānis.** What about Soviet Victory Day?

**Larisa.** And I am sick and tired of having to prove that I belong, I am tired of being held responsible for offences that I had no part in, and yet I will continue to do so, because I do it for my country. For Latvia, who has been welcoming and warm, able to gather thousands in a single choir to sing together. To sing in Latvian. And, by the way, I have my grandparents to thank for the fact that I can speak Latvian, because they were honorable to realize that you cannot exist without the state language. They were the ones who taught me Latvian. We would walk in the park, and I'd tell my grandpa – look, a *belka*! And he would say – no, little one, that is *vāvere*, a squirrel.

*An inarticulate argument starts because some do not believe Larisa's story, others are defending her.*

**Jānis.** So, you're voting for?

**Larisa.** That was the first thing I said when I got up here, wasn't it. Yes, I vote for.

**Jānis.** Well, then, if you vote for, I will vote against!

**Larisa.** Out of pure spite?

**Jānis.** No.

**Larisa.** This, by the way, is also the Latvian way. What's your zodiac sign – is it taurus by any chance?

**Madars.** (To Jānis.) Are you voting now, or are you just about to?

**Jānis.** I don't know. To be honest, I don't understand why we have to do this openly. In an election, we also vote for what and who we want in those booths, with nobody staring.

**Ēriks.** The rules are different here...

**Aleksandrs.** Yes, here I can say that black is white if I please, and it's starting to look like that's exactly what is happening here.

**Madars.** That's democracy.

**Māra.** I believe we are simply completing a task – we vote, we share our opinions and we record

them, and we will come to a conclusion, and...

**Madars.** *(To Jānis.)* What's your vote, then?

**Jānis.** Against.

**Nauris.** What gives?!

**Lāsma.** You voted against.

**Larisa.** Did you even hear what I just said, why the Song Festival is important to all of us together? Crucially important?

**Jānis.** *Da*, Larisa, I heard you! That's exactly why I'm voting against. At this point, the Festival would only be a provocation, and you just proved that.

**Larisa.** A provocation!

**Jānis.** Yes! Yes, a provocation. Provocation! A red rag to a bull. *(Suddenly breaks into song.)* Like the poem goes '—God, your land is burning'!

**Linda.** *(Scared.)* Oh, lord...

**Jānis.** And that's no metaphor. It is literally burning. If not yet, it will be soon.

**Aleksandrs.** But that's why we need to quench the fire!

**Jānis.** Yes. But we have to be smart about it. Smart isn't screaming and yelling and provoking, and attracting unnecessary attention. That way we only achieve the opposite – soon we'll all be walking around with folksy ribbons around our necks. Look at how we're already taking historical monuments out of the cities. Monuments which were, by the way, created by Latvian artists. Like we don't need them anymore. Bullshit. Do you really believe this will have to consequences?

**Aleksandrs.** What does that even...

**Jānis.** No, this is actually a much more global issue. It's a mindset issue. Lāsma... *(Checks if he remembers the name correctly.)* Lāsma, is it?

**Lāsma.** Yes.

**Jānis.** Lāsma had the right idea. We should pay a little more attention to the world we are living in. We should all start learning from our mistakes for once! Just think about it – are you willing to spend a whole week in a crowd of people? Among thousands, living in poorly-ventilated schools, sleeping on the floor, on little mattresses?

*Linda shakes.*

**Jānis.** Didn't think so. Yesterday 2 meters was too close for a handshake, and now we're just gonna be in each's other's faces! Who is this benefitting? And a week-long festival, well, excuse me, that's just a bender for the masses. Let the people drink, let them drink – that way they'll be easier to round up, right? Like a herd of sheep. Baa... And then, right, we sing our precious songs to celebrate this Festival of Drunks, and we even ask to repeat the biggest one of them all, 'Pūt, Vējiņi.' What's that song about? Drinking!



**Larisa.** It's actually an ancient wedding song of the Livonian people.

**Jānis.** Purely a drinking song! It has literal lyrics about drinking. Plain and simple! 'Prayer.' Please! And let me tell you something else, we don't just have the big Song Festival, no, we also have the Students' Festival, and the School Youth Festival, right? And what goes on there? Same thing. Everybody drinking. Kids drinking, adults drinking, mothers drinking. That's how we groom the next generations. Generations of punks and drunks. Listen to this, I go to Rīga, walk through old town, what do I see? I have nightmares of those hobos! There are too few of us to afford drinking like that, and to promote it! I, for one, quit drinking three days, four months and ten years ago, and I have no intention of starting again. I jog every day, I work out, I stay in shape. 'Cause my father died of liver failure, and I, like, took my life into my own hands and changed it. I refuse to become him. My sons and daughters will not become him. They will not be stinking drunk, lying in their own urine with degenerate brains, covered in vomit, disgusting. Why would they, so their kids could drag them off the streets like that, huh? What for? What unconditional love are we even talking about? We do not owe anything to anyone, we don't have to take care of them, we don't have to look at them hitting their wife in a hangover psychosis 'till she bleeds. No fucking way!

**Lāsma.** Listen, I'm just a little confused, what does this have to do with the Song Festival?

**Jānis.** Everything! If there's a festival, not everyone will be careful, they will drink, provoke someone, get their face smashed in, and that's it. Sometimes keeping silent and not signing is just the smart thing to do.

**Larisa.** Excuse me, who is there to provoke, what are you talking about?

**Jānis.** Everyone. Your people.

**Larisa.** Wow.

**Jānis.** That is just responsible thinking. We have to realize who we're living with and where we are! At this point, the Song Festival is a provocation all around. We're just provoking spreading the virus, provoking an economically crushed nation to lose faith that anyone even cares about us at all, even though we could take the millions we spend on the Festival and give it to social benefit payments. Make Latvia great again! Not to mention how this could all be interpreted as a neo-Nazi thing.

**Madars.** What the fuuuck...

**Aleksandrs.** I will now speak for my collective. Yes, I lead this relatively small collective, 'The Dancing Hedgehogs', at the Andzeļi Parish Community Center. We're called that because of the Hedgehog lake nearby. Yes, I agreed to this crazy idea of becoming the leader of an amateur collective, because, let's face it, I was not expecting to gather enough people. But! I did. And we have eight regular couples, and we have participated in the Dance Festival in 2008 and 2013. Unfortunately, in 2018, we didn't make it, as we did not, so to speak, put our best foot forward at the recital, but we did not let that discourage us. It was crushing, I admit it, I felt like a popped balloon. But there is power in dance. And there is power in dancers. And after that defeat, not eight, but eleven couples showed up to the next rehearsal! Well, ten full couples and three girls, but that's beside the point. What I mean is that, in small parishes like ours, these collectives give hope and perspective. You cannot imagine how often people simply come to join without any previous skills, just because they want to experience the miracle of the Song and Dance Festival! That's what it is, a miracle. It's sweat, it's work, it's enormous

stress, it's endless grand pliés...

**Nauris.** What now?

**Aleksandrs.** Yes, folk dancing also needs a classical base, and millions of times counting to eight, and polkas, and pointed toes, and I get all these clumsy types stepping straight off a tractor, but they do learn! They learn to point their toes and hold their chin up, for it all to come together in the stadium, bright eyes, united rhythm with all the others, dancing the three-step and the polka, and the three-step again, and to hold their head up high and feel the string coming from the spine upwards, up to the sky...

**Nauris.** I have no spine, as we've established.

**Aleksandrs.** That's because you don't dance. To stand up straight as a collective at least once in five years is vital to our nation. As a nation. That, I promise. I see that in my dancers. There's a shift happening in them when they rise, you can't get that from anything else. No, you cannot! That's pride. And you're here discussing people's lives without even realizing how many there are like me, who work with people in the name of an idea and community rather than money, just to preserve that tiny piece of the Latvian miracle, which turns into something colossal as we come together. *(To Jānis.)* You speak of the alcohol problem, yes? But are you aware that such amateur collectives help many stay away from it? We're actually doing the work of missionaries, we are therapists and friends, and leaders at the same time, we keep culture alive in parishes and small towns, do you get that? And culture is what helps us maintain quality of life and it is the reason our countryside is still alive, still thriving, still providing youngsters with an opportunity to stay and feel like they are needed. What happens if all that is gone? Latvia will cease to exist. And yet, there are still certain people who can't take this seriously and think that this work is just a fun leisure activity and hobby. It is not. Anyway, you can vote however you want, we'll keep on dancing! We will keep on dancing, and the next Festival will take place in Andzeļi if need be!

**Nauris.** I would like to change my vote.

**Larisa.** Hooray!

**Māra.** So you're voting for, correct?

**Aleksandrs.** Yes.

*Māra writes it down.*

**Nauris.** Yes, me too! Let them have the Festival. I don't mind. *(At Aleksandrs.)* Look at this guy. Let 'em all sing. Let 'em dance. There's something there... *(To Māra.)* We're striking it, yes?

**Māra.** *(Pause.)* I can't...

**Nauris.** What do you mean, you can't?

**Māra.** The provisions... The letter says we can't do that.

**Aleksandrs.** Listen, who's gonna know if we change something? Who?

**Māra.** But I wrote it down in pen?

**Nauris.** So you made a mistake!

**Māra.** No, I can't, I warned you before specifically that we wouldn't be able to do that, that we only have a pen.

**Nauris.** What kind of a person are you?!

**Māra.** Before, you said you didn't care.

**Nauris.** I do! What I said was my opinion wouldn't change anything, there's a big difference. And now I see that I can change things after all, except now I'm not allowed to! Listen, this is a violation of my freedom.

**Māra.** Still, I will observe the rules. That is the only way we get out.

**Nauris.** Yeah, yeah, you pencil-pushers have no heart.

**Jānis.** What difference does it make what you said, or anyone else. It doesn't matter. Let's just move on.

**Larisa.** I believe it is important that a person wishes to change their opinion and has the opportunity to.

**Jānis.** Of course, it's important to you...

**Ēriks.** Calm down, please! We still need votes from me, (*At Madars*) him...

**Lāsma.** Māra!

*Linda starts speaking.*

**Linda.** Nobody is stopping amateurs from singing, right?

**Aleksandrs.** And dancing.

**Linda.** Nobody is stopping them from dancing either. But they can keep doing that in their parishes, counties, whatever. Personally, I cannot fathom why we would need a festival of this scale.

**Larisa.** Did you not hear a thing I said?

**Linda.** I did. But you didn't mention anything about the dangers.

**Aleksandrs.** What dangers?!

**Linda.** There are dangers. It would be interesting to see statistics on how many people have fainted, broken their legs and arms, how many have gotten food poisoning, alcohol...

**Jānis.** That's right.

**Linda.** ...how many have gotten into fights. Not to mention that I was almost trampled at the Festival in '65.

*Silence.*

**Lāsma.** I beg your pardon?

**Nauris.** Seriously?!

**Linda.** But nobody speaks of that because it doesn't fit the image, right? I was almost 16, and I was almost trampled. Crushed like a bug. And there were people, actual human people that were actually crushed for real in the stampede. Crushed dead. I got lucky. My daddy got us tickets, that was a rare luxury back then, same as now, and I was so excited for it! The Festival, the parade, the emotion, the journey. I can still remember, I had this little polka-dot dress, down to the knee, brand new! My godmother made it for me at nights. And the police just wouldn't let the crowd in through the gate, all the people who had been waiting for this day. Because they were expecting some big shot.

**Jānis.** Exactly what I was talking about, people!

**Linda.** The police were just standing there and not letting anyone in, no explanation. That's it. Everybody was trying to push their way in, someone fell over, I was pulled, I think someone noticed me and was pulling me out only because of the pretty dress. In the end, it got ripped. People were screaming, yelling, crying, but the police wouldn't do anything, they had to wait for the big shot. Nobody should ever have to experience anything like that. Trampling, in the time of peace. *(To Jānis.)* And they we no foreigners, either, those were our people... Just imagine, there are only nine of us here, but then thousands of different people like us come together to join in friendly song when they actually want to rip out each other's throats... This is the first time anyone has ever asked me for my opinion... And I don't even know who is asking... So, there, I think that when we're in a crowd, we forget about the individual, but a crowd is only created through the individual. And I also think – why should I support a festival that others are celebrating, while nobody cares about my celebrations? *(Turning her invitation in her fingers.)* They even make jokes about it! *(Reading.)* Let us celebrate your beautiful birthday... And I was so foolish as to believe someone would actually congratulate me. *(Pause. To Māra.)* Against. Write it down.

*Short pause, everyone looking at each other, suddenly Nauris stands up and starts singing 'Happy Birthday' and any other birthday-themed songs he can think of.*

**Linda.** The greatest gift would be getting out of here.

*Ēriks walks up to Linda and gives her a Raffaello truffle.*

**Ēriks.** For you.

**Madars.** Not so bad, right? Maybe we should focus on the good things! I don't want to sound like a new-age hippy or whatever, but really, perhaps we should focus on the good things. On the fact that the Song Festival allows us to reach a certain sense of unity, solidarity, even friendship, if we just stop making these superficial assumptions about each other. If we could just stop categorizing people. If we could just stop looking for an enemy within, now, when we all share a common goal. Right now, it's to get out. The nine of us have to get out. With this single purpose, we become equal. The Song Festival is also an adventure in which we are equal. It's a purposeful adventure! It makes people in every corner of Latvia join in to achieve a Single Result. Do you get what I'm saying? It's a long and deliberate process that unites people.

Brilliant! Thanks to this Festival, this single goal and result, there is work for folk costume makers, there's work for shoemakers, there's work for collective leaders, there's work for community center people, and so on, and so forth, because all of it, the festival never actually stops, it's a non-stop circle that you can't simply end. Just think about it – how many families have been created thanks to the Song Festival! How many proposals have been made on the stage or in the stadium.

**Jānis.** Yeah, drunk.

**Madars.** Not to mention the participants' party and the number of babies conceived. I can guarantee there's a spike in population every five years. I, for example, have also had a Song Festival fling – one year, I exchanged participant cards with a girl, looked her up online afterwards... Paula Vēberīte.

**Larisa.** Did you meet?

**Madars.** She was all the way across the goddamn country... But that's beside the point. The Song Festival helps us understand who we are! The last Festival... maybe you read online, a baby was born, can you imagine? That mom, despite her husband's concerns, she sang 'till the last moment, in thirty-degree heat.

**Linda.** Oh my, the baby must be five years old now... Time does fly...

**Madars.** Yeah, she'll be five this summer...

**Lāsma.** I'm also a Song Festival baby.

**Nauris.** What?!

**Lāsma.** There was a Festival in '85, and I was born in the spring of '86.

**Larisa.** And you still voted against?

*Lāsma shrugs.*

**Māra.** We should get back to Madars' vote.

**Madars.** She can speak.

**Lāsma.** Well, I... Okay, I'm not gonna lie, I thought for the longest time that the Song Festival has to be the most beautiful celebration in the world, 'cause of all of my mom's stories about the National Awakening and all, but... I went to the Festival in 2003, and I was really expecting a thing, for everyone to sing 'Saule, Pērkons, Daugava', the greatest song, but instead everybody started singing some stupid cheerful piece. Come on, really?! And then the girls are supposed to throw their flower crowns up, but that year some guys started throwing shit off the upper bleachers, even bottles and stuff. I got hit in the head with a bottle right before the epic finale with 'Saule, Pērkons, Daugava'. And so I didn't get that big feeling.

**Ēriks.** Back in my day, nobody would throw bottles. I only tossed a couple of little pinecones. You aim and shoot at a girl, she turns around and you can check – if she's cute, you wave at her. If not...

**Nauris.** Nice...

**Madars.** Okay, that may be, but I still don't get why any of us would have an actual reason to vote against. It's like this sickness with Latvians, when you finally get the chance to voice your opinion, you skip the essence and just think about yourself. We're a small nation, and that is exactly why we need a big celebration. In the early 2000s, I went to the big Festival with my choir, and we were about to sing 'Saule, Pērkons, Daugava' (*To Lāsma.*) the one you never got to sing, but during the song it hit me. I realized it all. The most impressive psychedelic trip I've ever been on. I got everything – how hard it actually was for a nation to achieve having our own country, and that you can't just mess around with it or give it away. Just remember the lyrics, about the sun putting Latvia where opposites meet. Opposites meet. The sea and the land, life and death. Opposites. Counterparts. Plus and minus. Latvia is where opposites meet, it holds the key to the gate. And what is Latvia? It's us. The people who live here. You dip your finger in the River Daugava and you feel, deep in your soul, life and death, 'cause we've been through it all, we have experienced everything, can you even comprehend that? Insane! Rainis, the fucking poet, now, he was a genius! It was so overwhelming, I actually cried. Of course, they filmed me, the camera guys always capture the crying ones, and I admit, yes, I was maybe a bit emotional because I had had a little bit to drink, but... I was singing from my heart, and I felt it with all my heart. Just imagine... Busloads of people coming to Rīga for a whole week to unite in a single breath. Imagine... (*Mimics a choir inhaling before starting a song. Then, to Jānis and Lāsma.*) What are you going to protect in your National Guard if we can throw away our values just like that?

*Silence.*

**Madars.** Life must be celebrated, Latvia must be celebrated, the Song Festival must be celebrated. That's it. Before we got this stupid assignment, we all had a reason to be here, right? We did, didn't we. Some interest, or a desire to be appreciated, or something else...

**Ēriks.** I just... I just wanted to meet people. I don't know how to meet people anymore.

**Madars.** There you go! Now you have that chance. Tell us your story. We'll listen.

**Ēriks.** Māra, maybe you wanted to go next?

**Larisa.** (*To Ēriks.*) Go on, you've already started. We'll all eventually have to speak if we want to get out.

**Lāsma.** What's the count so far?

**Jānis.** Does it matter?

**Nauris.** Maybe it does to someone.

**Linda.** (*To Māra.*) What is it then?

**Māra.** Three for and four against.

**Aleksandrs.** Unbelievable...

**Jānis.** What difference does it make? It doesn't matter. We said what we said. Our opinions won't matter to anyone at the end of the day... Let's just please vote and go home! Maybe we'll even find out who set this thing up. Honest to God, I'll punch them in the...

**Larisa.** (*To Jānis.*) It must be really hard to live with that outlook. You should value yourself more,

then you might be able to be more empathetic and understanding of others, and you'd have fewer regrets.

**Jānis.** I don't have any regrets...

*Larisa smiles.*

**Madars.** *(To Ēriks.)* Please, go on. We're listening.

**Ēriks.** *(Clears his throat.)* I'm from around Jelgava, my father had a house... Still has. And we had this neighbor named Gaisma. A woman with that name, it means 'Light'. She had this skill of drinking... properly. She drank a lot and she could really hold her liquor. Didn't fade out, as my father would say. And so this one time, Gaisma drank so much she forgot she had to feed her cow, named Pile, which means 'Drop'.

**Larisa.** So... a Drop of Light?

**Ēriks.** Exactly. So the cow kept mooing, and Gaisma kept drinking, until finally my mom went over to complain that Gaisma was starving the cow, and Gaisma got upset and just let the cow out so the animal could wander around and find stuff to eat and drink. It was spring already. And so the cow managed to get to a ditch. She was so thirsty that she drank for literal hours, until she was so full she looked inflated, and she just fell over to the side and couldn't move anymore. Gaisma was so pissed at the cow for lying in the ditch all bloated, so she asked her drinking buddy or in-law or someone to pull the cow out. He got his tractor and wanted to throw a rope around the cow's neck, but Gaisma said you had to pull her by the horns! He threw the rope around the cow's horns, put the tractor in gear, started driving, and ripped the cow's head clean off! So, there.

*Silence.*

**Ēriks.** While I was listening to you, this whole story came to my mind in a different... light. You can't get to the point where you're so thirsty you don't know when to stop, 'cause that's how you lose your head. We need the Festival.

**Lāsma.** Wow...

**Larisa.** That was beautiful.

**Māra.** This reminds me of Freud. He said that the masses have never thirst after truth, they demand illusions, and cannot do without them.

*Nauris claps slowly.*

**Māra.** *(With her back turned to the others.)* So, we have four for, and four against. Once again. How interesting!

**Aleksandrs.** Once again?

*Māra is standing with her back turned against the others, then turns around and smiles at everyone.*

**Jānis.** What are you so happy about?

**Māra.** I'm not. I am perturbed... *(After a pause, points to the other door.)* There is another door.

*Silence.*

*After a pause, Madars goes in the direction she showed and finds a door behind a curtain.*

*He opens it. Then he closes it. Then opens and closes it again...*

**Madars.** Have you known about the other door all along?

*Māra nods.*

*Silence.*

**Aleksandrs.** I can still make my bus. Excuse me... *(Leaves.)*

*Silence.*

**Ēriks.** What are we thinking?

**Nauris.** I wanna smoke...

**Māra.** My doctoral thesis is focused on the freedom of consciousness in a setting of restricted freedom which leads to a need for collaboration.

**Ēriks.** *(To the others.)* Any plans after this?

**Māra.** When I was a child, it was very difficult for me to blend in, I would always be on the outside, looking in... I enjoy observing.

**Madars.** Good luck. *(Leaves.)*

**Māra.** The structure of a choir actually mimics that of society, where each voice is a part of a large thing, but the larger unit can only be created when everybody is singing. This is the same. You created a melody of content. Freud once said that the scope of one's personality is defined by the magnitude of the problem which is capable of moving them. In reality, it depends on context. For example, a closed room and a clash of opinions...

*Lāsma gets up and starts leaving. She stops. To Nauris.*

**Lāsma.** You coming?



*Nauris gets up and leaves with Lāsma.*

**Māra.** ...it is fascinating how, today, you told so much more about yourselves than was required. As if you had nobody to talk to. You were under no threat of harm, but you still agreed to participate in this fabricated situation and very quickly assumed and started shaping new circumstances under which each of you had an increasing need of being heard...

*Jānis and Larisa get up at the same time. They share a look as they notice the coincidence.*

**Jānis.** Quite the meet... *(Leaves.)*

**Larisa.** ...-cute. *(Leaves.)*

**Māra.** You tried leaving through the door you entered, but an exit is usually found ahead.

*Māra goes silent.*

**Ēriks.** *(To Linda.)* What are you going to do now?

*Linda does not answer; Ēriks leaves. Linda stays.  
Silence.*

**Linda.** Will this be continued?

**Māra.** Yes. And I have a little gift for you. *(Hands her a package.)* Here you are.

**Linda.** No, thank you.

**Māra.** Please!

*Silence.*

**Linda.** Thank you. *(Takes the package. Pause. She takes out a gift and turns it in her hands with confusion.)*

**Māra.** The Flowering Jasmine.

**Linda.** The moonlight of love...

**Māra.** I'm talking about the song!

**Linda.** And I am talking about the smell. It encourages philosophical reflection and improves the mindset.

**Māra.** Huh. Interesting.

**Linda.** Ask me again.

**Māra.** What?

**Linda.** At the very beginning, when it was just the two of us, you asked me if I had an idea.

**Māra.** Yes, right...

**Linda.** Please ask me that again. Ask if I have an idea.

**Māra.** Alright, yes... Do you perhaps have an idea...?

**Linda.** Yes, I do!

**Māra.** You do?

**Linda.** Yes, I always get out of a crowd unharmed. *(Smiles.)*

*Māra seems to want to say something, but Linda interrupts her and continues.*

**Linda.** I must go. My cat is waiting for me, starving. *(About the figurine.)* I'll bring him this. He'll like it. *(Leaves.)*

*Māra remains in the room alone.*

**Māra.** The sun setting beautifully among the pines.

Someone singing. Singing to be heard,

For everything is not always about a longing

That can be ignored, tucked under a rock. Some things must be spoken to move on.

What if the song, embedded in the code of our essence,

Is about this, the opportunity to honor ourselves.

The sun still setting among the pines.

Nowhere to hurry anymore.

You can breathe easy when your voice is finally heard,

Cherished among others.

The storm of wrongs has finally ceased,

And a sacred happiness sets in,

As each ancient silent wound closes,

Rustling wind, crackling fire, and pebbles under the feet,

These are the sounds that should be mine as well,

As I am standing in a ridge of ploughed soil.

Striding through a meadow filled with morning dew.  
Climbing the dune of a white precipice.  
Running into a freezing sea. Sinking into soft moss.  
Falling into powdery snow.  
Kicking a pinecone on a crooked path.  
Jumping into a puddle under heavy rain.  
Feeling the floor of my grandfather's home.  
These are the sounds that should be mine as well.  
Past distant and foreign houses,  
Along foreign streets and distant paths,  
Through the snow, and the moss, and the seas,  
Over dunes, and meadows, and ridges...  
To return.  
To that which is mine.  
To my longing and my sounds.  
To my voice, which we celebrate.