

AVALANCHE

(ÇİĞ)

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SETTING

A single-story house in a small settlement surrounded by mountains. Through the windows, hanging icicles can be seen. Two rifles are mounted on the back wall. The barrels are facing one another, the stocks apart. They have been hung almost aesthetically.

There's a room on the left. There's a large common room in the middle. On the right is a door that opens to another room. The outside door is opposite that. In the common space there's a primitive fireplace. Next to the fireplace is a neatly-stacked woodpile. There are rugs on the floor and small, tapestry-like carpets hang on the walls.

There's also a drum and its timpani mallet in a corner of the living room. It's as if they're waiting for the day when they can sound out.

In the room on the left side, the YOUNG WOMAN and the YOUNG MAN are sleeping.

In the living room, the OLD WOMAN lies near the fireplace, looking at the ceiling. She abides in a state between sleeping and waking. Next to her, her husband the OLD MAN is sleeping like the dead. He is almost unnoticeable. In the room on the right the MAN and the WOMAN are sleeping. Everyone is on mattresses on the floor.

The sections of the house are not partitioned with walls. The space is not realistic, but symbolic.

Utter silence abounds. This silence will last throughout the performance, until the end. Place changes and other movements should be silent. Actions are measured, almost like a slow-motion movie. The dialogue should be stage-whispered until the end. The audience should be made to sense that the characters are careful not to talk loudly, not to make noise, and gradually, that the characters are afraid.

CHARACTERS:

OLD WOMAN About 70 years old. Though pretty spry, she gives the impression that she can't walk in order to get attention.

OLD MAN He is about 80. He can only walk with the help of his cane.

YOUNG WOMAN She is about 18. She is pregnant.

YOUNG MAN About 20 years old.

MAN About 50.

WOMAN About 45.

MIDWIFE About 40.

PRESIDENT (Male) About 75.

FEMALE MEMBER About 70.

MALE MEMBER About 60.

GUARD #1 About 35.

GUARD #2 About 35.

Time: Today.

Place: Anywhere.

ACT ONE

(The day breaks slowly...There's neither the sound of a dog's bark, nor a rooster's crow. Utter silence reigns. As the day breaks, an incredible white glare enters the space. The silence seems to grow with the dawn.

The old woman is the first to get up. First, she makes sure that everyone else is asleep, then quietly, she goes into the bathroom. She comes back a little later, picks something up in the kitchen area and quickly puts it into her mouth, simultaneously looking around to make sure that she won't get caught.

The Young Woman sits up in the bed with a grimace. It's obvious that she is experiencing abdominal pain. She hesitates for a moment, not sure whether or not to wake her husband. She decides against waking him and quietly gets up. It's obvious that she's pregnant.

The Old Woman, sensing that the Young Woman is approaching, gets back into her bed, her mouth still full. She pretends to be asleep. In fact, in order to make the Young Woman pity her, she pushes the bedcovers off herself.

The Young Woman, walking quietly, first enters the living room, then the bathroom. The Old Woman's gaze follows the Young Woman.

The Young Woman returns to the living room a little later, looking relieved. She walks with the same care as before. She goes to the Old Woman's sleeping area. She covers the old woman, thinking that she is asleep. As the Young Woman goes back to her own room, the Old Woman is both happy to have succeeded, and also quietly chewing the food in her mouth. The Young Woman gets in bed.

This time the Young Man gets up and leaves the room. He passes through the common area and goes outside. The Old Woman pretends to be asleep. Knowing that the Young Man will return, she again pushes the blanket down.

The Young Man comes back a little later. He covers up the old woman then goes to his room, gets in bed.

The Old Woman opens her eyes, blinks; she is left alone with her thoughts, fitfully turning her head from side to side.

The Young Woman suddenly sits up. Clearly, the pain has returned.)

YOUNG WOMAN: *(She pokes her husband.)* Get up.

YOUNG MAN: *(He is groggy.)* What's up?

YOUNG WOMAN: My stomach.

YOUNG MAN: What about it?

YOUNG WOMAN: I'm in pain.

YOUNG MAN: Go to the bathroom.

YOUNG WOMAN: I have.

YOUNG MAN: And?

YOUNG WOMAN: It came back. I'm scared.

YOUNG MAN: *(He is disbelieving.)* What is there to be scared of?

YOUNG WOMAN: What do you mean, 'what is there'?

YOUNG MAN: You're probably sick. (*He is worried nevertheless.*) What else could it be?

(*Silence.*)

YOUNG MAN: How are you now?

YOUNG WOMAN: It passed.

YOUNG MAN: There's nothing to be scared of.

YOUNG WOMAN: For a moment I thought that was it.

YOUNG MAN: What?

YOUNG WOMAN: I thought it was labor pains.

YOUNG MAN: That doesn't make sense.

YOUNG WOMAN: What was it, then?

YOUNG MAN: You're confusing gas pain with labor pain.

YOUNG WOMAN: It kicked. The baby is kicking.

YOUNG MAN: (*He puts his hand on his wife's belly. He smiles happily.*) That's wonderful. It seems it's getting impatient.

YOUNG WOMAN: It needs to be patient for a few more days.

YOUNG MAN: (*He takes his wife's hand.*) Put these fears out of your mind. You have at least a month. There's nothing to be afraid of. There has

never been an untimely birth around here. Didn't my grandmother tell you that?

YOUNG WOMAN: But there *have* been untimely births.

YOUNG MAN: Who did you hear that from?

YOUNG WOMAN: From your grandmother.

YOUNG MAN: But that was a long time ago.

YOUNG WOMAN: What difference does that make?

YOUNG MAN: *(He speaks dismissively.)* That was before we were born.

YOUNG WOMAN: They put the pregnant woman in a coffin while she was still alive.

YOUNG MAN: She told you that?

YOUNG WOMAN: She was telling your mother. I heard.

YOUNG MAN: That was in the past. Nothing like that has happened since then.
Go back to sleep!

(The young woman closes her eyes, trying to fall asleep. This time it's the Young Man's turn to be uneasy. He caresses his wife's hair. He is pensive.

The whiteness outside has reached its peak. However, the incredible silence is still building gradually.)

YOUNG WOMAN: *(He opens her eyes)* What if I had really gone into labor?

YOUNG MAN: It won't happen.

YOUNG WOMAN: Why?

YOUNG MAN: Because the elders have everything figured out.

YOUNG WOMAN: And they're never wrong?

YOUNG MAN: No!

YOUNG WOMAN: Why?

YOUNG MAN: Because mistakes will affect them as well.

(Silence.)

YOUNG WOMAN: But...You were scared, too.

YOUNG MAN: Isn't that natural?

YOUNG WOMAN: Then my fear is natural, too.

YOUNG MAN: I didn't say it wasn't. But that's not the case. Anyway, if it happens two days from now, there will be no danger. Our horses, donkeys, dogs, cows, sheep, roosters, and even the chickens will be brought back. Even if it's only for three months. Then, you will give birth like rifles fired into the air. Our baby will let out its first cry. It won't scare us. It will cry countless times! The others won't be afraid either. Because it won't be dangerous anymore.

(He starts caressing the young woman's hair.)

YOUNG MAN: Everyone will sing songs. Even the oldest will be drunk as a lord and dance in the town square. For exactly three months! This will go on for three months. Then when the first snow falls, you and I will take our baby, climb over the mountains, go away from here. So that we can raise our child without fear. Those who will have returned with their animals will leave the same way. Because horses neigh, donkeys bray, dogs bark, cows moo, roosters crow, and hens cluck. Should I tell you a secret?

YOUNG WOMAN: Tell.

YOUNG MAN: We'll never come back. Just like the kids who have already left. We'll leave and we'll live to our heart's content. Without fear. Until we feel that death is close, only then will we come back here. Just like our elders.

YOUNG WOMAN: We won't come back? Not even when summer comes?

YOUNG MAN: Not you and our son, but I will come, because we have to bring food for the ones who stay here for the winter. What would all these people do without flour, sugar, and salt?

YOUNG WOMAN: You said 'you and our son.' How do you know we'll have a son? Maybe we'll have a daughter.

YOUNG MAN: Maybe. I was just saying it so to speak.

YOUNG WOMAN: But I will want to see my parents, too, I couldn't stand the longing.

YOUNG MAN: What's keeping them here? They can come with us.

YOUNG WOMAN: Then your parents should come, too. If we all go, even if it's temporary, you won't have to come back.

YOUNG MAN: Mine won't come, because my grandfather and grandmother came here to die. Forget about my parents. Let's think about our own child. Our child should grow up without fear.

(The Young Woman has fallen asleep, but he doesn't realize.)

A wise old man once said these exact words: 'In the presence of fear, a person can't develop the capacity for thought. Fear is the most negative influence, distorting and twisting the thinking of man. Don't let your children live in fear!' No, no. I can't let that happen.

(The Young Man realizes that his wife has fallen asleep. He leaves her side quietly, goes to the common area. The Old Woman pretends to be asleep again.)

YOUNG MAN: I know you're not asleep, grandmother.

OLD WOMAN: What's up, son?

YOUNG MAN: I need to ask you something.

OLD WOMAN: Go on.

YOUNG MAN: You were talking to my mother the other day. You mentioned someone who went into labor early. A long time ago.

OLD WOMAN: *(Suspiciously.)* Why are you asking about that?

YOUNG MAN: My wife is very scared.

OLD WOMAN: Why is she scared? She doesn't have that problem.

YOUNG MAN: No, she doesn't. But she's scared. She's young and ingenuous. It got to her. Besides, I'm curious, too.

OLD WOMAN: *(Getting a kick out of it.)* At the time, I was young, like your wife. I was one of young brides. We all got married at a splendid wedding. But our wedding night had to wait at least four months. The elders told us. Three of us managed to stay away from our partners. But one didn't. She started seeing her husband every night. And then? She went into labor three months before the threat of the avalanche had passed. And then whatever happened, happened.

YOUNG MAN: What happened?

OLD WOMAN: The rules are clear. The midwife was called immediately. Everything was in order. The council convened and made the decision we all knew they would make. Our friend was put in a coffin and buried in one of the graves that had been prepared earlier.

YOUNG MAN: What did her husband do?

OLD WOMAN: He wept a lot. He begged them to stop. He pleaded. He even asked the council to bury him, too. But they told him nothing could be done. And they rejected his request to be buried with his wife.

YOUNG MAN: And then?

OLD WOMAN: When the threat of the avalanches had passed, the coffin was opened. Three months later. By then, there was nothing we could do for our friend.

YOUNG MAN: That's cruel.

OLD WOMAN: It was necessary for everyone's survival. They couldn't endanger other lives knowing that an avalanche would hit! What else could be done?

YOUNG MAN: How would I know? Maybe the woman could have been gagged during labor. That way they could have prevented her from crying out.

OLD WOMAN: You know it's forbidden to think like that. It was so in the past, it is now. But us women, without letting anyone hear, have tried that among ourselves. But when? Once the danger had passed when we were giving birth one after the other we all tried to keep silent as though an avalanche could occur...the screams were unbelievable. They echoed through the hills. As if they were calling the avalanche upon us. Even a baby's cry could bring all

of our deaths. Don't forget, even the most draconian rules are in place for human happiness.

YOUNG MAN: What kind of happiness is this? What kind of conscience can explain how burying someone alive can make people happy?

OLD WOMAN: Who put these thoughts in your head? Don't worry about this. What's done is done. They say one incident is better than a thousand admonishments. Maybe that death is why it hasn't happened again in the last fifty years.

(The Young Man is silent for a while, then he goes to the bathroom. In the next room, the Woman wakes up and silently she leaves the bed. Trying not to wake up her husband, she leaves the room as if she is gliding. She looks the Old Woman in the eye.)

OLD WOMAN: *(She points toward the bathroom.)* Your son is in there.

WOMAN: What woke you?

OLD WOMAN: I got hungry.

WOMAN: *(She pretends not to hear.)* Go back to sleep!

(The Man gets up, silently comes over.)

OLD WOMAN: *(She sees that her son has come but pretends not to notice.)* I got hungry, I said. I'm hungry!

WOMAN: You expect a lot from me.

OLD WOMAN: If I could stand, would I ask you?

WOMAN: *(She prepares some stuff, places it in front of the Old Woman.)*

Don't drop any on the bed!

OLD WOMAN: When did I ever drop any on the bed?

WOMAN: I didn't say you have. I said 'don't!'

OLD WOMAN: If I've never dropped any, why do you say 'don't drop any?'

Clearly I'm careful.

WOMAN: You're hassling me for no reason!

OLD WOMAN: I wouldn't hassle you if you didn't ask for it...

WOMAN: All right, hassle away then.

OLD WOMAN: This is too dry to eat!

WOMAN: What do you want now, tea?!

OLD WOMAN: A little water would be enough!

(The Man has patiently listened to the conversation. He gives a scolding look to his wife.)

MAN: *(To his wife:)* We have a lot of work to do. We need to get prepared.

WOMAN: Were you here the whole time?

MAN: Wake everyone up.

WOMAN: *(More quietly.)* If I have any time left after dealing with your mother!

(The Old Woman tells her son with gestures that her grandson has left the toilet.)

OLD WOMAN: Water!

(Grumbling, the Woman gives her water, then walks to the fireplace, stirs the embers silently. The fire flares up quite a bit. She adds more water to the kettle over the fire.

The Man approaches and caresses the Old Woman's cheek. With her eyes, the Old Woman complains about the Woman.

The Man is used to it; he gestures meaning 'please tolerate it.'

The Young Man comes. The Man gestures to the Young Man for his daughter-in-law to be woken up, too.

The Young Man nods, goes in. Bending over, he stroked the Young Woman's hair.

The Young Woman takes her husband's hand. The couple lingers in the pleasant moment.)

YOUNG MAN: How are you now?

YOUNG WOMAN: Fine.

YOUNG MAN: I told you so. *(Silence.)* There's much work to do. It would be best if you got up now.

(The Young Woman gets up. Silently, she makes the bed. She and her husband, who has been waiting, go to the living room. While the Woman and the Young Woman set

the eating area of the floor, the Man and the Young Man bring the rifles down from the wall.

The Man starts cleaning one of the rifles with a cloth from a bag his son brought, demonstrating it step-by-step to his son.

The Young Man cleans the other rifle just like his dad.

The Woman and the Young Woman prepare and tidy up the dining area, moving as though in slow motion. By now, both rifles have been cleaned.

The tea cups are filled.

When the Young Man wants to load the rifle he has cleaned, the Man grimaces and stops him.)

MAN: Not now. It 's not time yet.

YOUNG MAN: I wonder, how is the water in the trough doing?

MAN: *(Demonstrating with his hand.)* There were three fingers of space left.

(They return the rifles to the wall. As the women continue setting the table, the Young Man puts the box of bullets close to the rifles, then pours water onto his father's hands, allowing him to wash his face. The Man dries his face with a towel.)

YOUNG MAN: Should I check the trough ?

MAN: Go ahead, if you feel like it.

(Young Man silently leaves. The women finish setting the table.)

YOUNG MAN: *(He enters. He demonstrates with his hand.)* About two and a half fingers.

MAN: Good. Maybe it will fill up today and we'll be able to fire the rifles. But it will be full by tomorrow at the latest.

YOUNG MAN: Hopefully! As long as it's not late!

MAN: Why the rush? As long as it fills up, let it be late a couple of days! No one's chasing us!

(First the Man sits. Then the others.)

MAN: Why didn't you wake my father?

OLD WOMAN: Let us eat in peace. I'll feed him later. This way he won't bother us. Do you have any idea the kind of man he was? He would not sit in one place. The old folks say you should see the wolf when he gets old. Well, this is what happens to the wolf when he gets old.

WOMAN: May all our friends age so well. He can take care of all his needs.

OLD WOMAN: *(She smiles bitterly.)* That's what you think!

(Everyone drinks tea, careful to be silent. They feed themselves. When the tea cups are empty, the Young Woman refills them.)

When the food in front of her is gone, the Old Woman asks her son for more by poking him. Sometimes it's her grandson. But always wary of the Woman. Suddenly the Old Man sits up in bed.

He looks at those having breakfast without comprehension.)

OLD WOMAN: Come here. *(To the others:)* Make space, let him approach. Why don't you come closer? *(She pulls him with her hand, tries to make him get closer to the table.)* Why don't you come closer?

(The Man also helps. The Old Woman tries to stuff some food into her husband's mouth, as though the Old Man is taking bitter medicine.)

OLD WOMAN: *(He raises her hands in prayer.)* My God! Don't let me this happen to me! When the day comes, take me silently.

OLD MAN: *(He is quieter than others, almost inaudible.)* Everyone left. I left, too.

MAN: Dad, eat your food.

OLD MAN: The young all left and never came back. But what did we do? We came back. We came back at the end of every winter. We came back with all the flour, sugar, salt, barley, and wheat that we worked for and bought all winter. So that all these people could eat during the winter. Every year, we taught you to be a bit quieter and we came back. Now we're here for good. That's why it's my right to fire the rifle first. It's my right every year. It's my right this year. It will always be my right.

MAN: Eat your food, dad.

OLD MAN: The brave man is the one who raises his baby and comes back.
The brave man is the one who comes back knowing the joy of shouting. Is there anyone who has a word to say about my bravery? (*Silence.*) When will we fire the rifles?

MAN: Maybe tomorrow, Dad.

OLD MAN: They look down on me. They say I have come back to my land like the elephants who are close to death.

MAN: Let them say what they want, Dad. Those who know, know. You came back here because you love your land.

OLD MAN: (*He sobs.*) If you want to know the truth, I don't know why I came back anymore. (*He sobs again.*) I no longer take pleasure in eating, or drinking, or anything else. Not even firing the rifles. Your bird doesn't sing, your teeth can't chew! Is this life?

OLD WOMAN: (*To herself:*) Your teeth have always been able to chew! Your bird has never shut up! It's a wash! (*To her husband:*) Come on, stop talking crazy and eat!

WOMAN: (*Very quietly.*) I'm sick of this! I've had enough!

OLD MAN: Friend! If you're alive, your bird must be singing! Your teeth must be able to chew! Only then, would I say that a person is alive.

OLD WOMAN: We've seen the days when your bird was singing! Everyone but me enjoyed it! What did it get me?

OLD MAN: It doesn't get you anything if you don't appreciate it.

OLD WOMAN: If you try to make the bird sing for every meal, of course there's no hunger left! If you eat the same thing every day, you'll get sick of it, too, even if it's honey!

OLD MAN: Others would cause it sing! Look for the blame in yourself a little bit!

OLD WOMAN: I guess you won't shut up about this. Now that I have seen what happens when your bird doesn't sing, I won't grieve anymore!
(He is angry.) Drink your tea! You don't need teeth to drink tea! Even without teeth, stuff goes down to your stomach. *(Quietly.)*
But if your bird can't fly, why even bother!

OLD MAN: *(Ornery.)* For God's sake, woman! Stay out of my business.

OLD WOMAN: Fine. Wallow in self-pity! Cry! Cry! It will relax you, cry!

(As the Old Man quietly weeps, the others continue having breakfast. By now, the room is bright, almost as if the sun is in the house.)

The Old Man drinks his tea, finishes his breakfast, then gets up and goes to the bathroom.

The Woman and the Young Woman start clearing the table.

The Old Man returns and sits down.

As the Young Woman quietly washes the dishes in the kitchen area, the Old Man signals the Woman to give him a cigarette.)

MAN: Give him one!

(The Woman takes a cigarette from a hiding place and hands it to the Old Man. The Old Man takes the cigarette happily. He gestures for his son to light the cigarette. The Man lights his father's cigarette.)

OLD MAN: *(He joyfully takes a drag from the cigarette and loses himself for a moment. To his son:)* You never met your uncle. If he was still alive, he would be by my side now. He was two years older than me. He was an introverted child. He never talked. We were all scared that there would be some noise and an avalanche would fall. but he was more afraid. *(He gestures, indicating the room.)* We used to sleep side-by-side. Sometimes he would have nightmares. He would wake up, sweating bullets. I would ask him what happened in his nightmares. He would never answer. Then one day, after I promised I wouldn't tell anyone, he told me his fears. He spoke of how he felt with his entire being that, any second, it would all end with a bang. 'It doesn't matter how careful you are. What if someone else makes a mistake? One second we're here, and then, boom, we're gone. There's nothing we can do. My God, it's terrible to be helpless!' He was scared and spent his entire life worrying that an avalanche would happen. Fear consumes a person. It eats them up. Fear is a parasite. Another time, after waking from a nightmare, he said this to me: 'I want to go outside and scream. I can't help myself.' I said, 'Are you crazy? Then there will be an avalanche. We'll all

die. Didn't you say you were afraid of that?' He said 'Death comes whether we fear it or not. I'm sick of being afraid. I have no other way to face my fear! It's better to die and stop being afraid than to live in constant fear. One day I will scream at the top of my lungs. Then I will have conquered my fear! I want to scream!' 'Ok' I said. 'You'll have saved us from our fear as well.' I said this but after I got really scared. What if he had taken me seriously and screamed?

(The Old Man suddenly falls asleep. The Man picks up his father's ashtray and puts it away. As the Young Woman washes the dishes, she totters, then grimaces in pain. The Young Man, mindful of her previous pain, approaches her..)

YOUNG MAN: *(Quietly.)* What is it?

YOUNG WOMAN: It started again.

YOUNG MAN: It will pass.

YOUNG WOMAN: I can't take it. *(She moans.)* I can't take it.

YOUNG MAN: You have to!

YOUNG WOMAN: It's out of my hands.

YOUNG MAN: Be patient!

(The Old Woman is suspicious. She watches the two of them. However, she still doesn't understand the situation.)

YOUNG WOMAN: What can I do?

YOUNG MAN: Don't let on!

YOUNG WOMAN: How?

YOUNG MAN: Let's go to our room.

(The Young Woman and the Young Man slowly head to the room. They move quietly, trying to make it seem as though nothing is wrong. The Young Woman is still in pain.)

YOUNG MAN: How is it now?

YOUNG WOMAN: The same.

YOUNG MAN: It will pass.

YOUNG WOMAN: I think our fear has come true. I've never felt pain like this. It can only be labor! *(She begins crying quietly.)* What will happen now? What will we do?

YOUNG MAN: *(He is helpless but hopeful)* It's not labor! You're not due yet! Our first time together was around New Year's Eve. It hasn't been nine months. *(He calculates with his fingers.)* There's at least a month until the birth. It will pass. Don't be so pessimistic!

(The Woman notices the absence of the Young Woman. She looks at the dishes. Thinking the Young Woman left the dishes for her, she gets angry. She starts washing the dishes.

The Man is carving pieces of wood.

The Old Woman is trying to understand what's happening. The Old Man is sleeping

deeply. In fact, he snores gently. The Woman finishes doing the dishes)

WOMAN: *(As she is drying her hands)* Have you seen the Young Woman?

MAN: They went to their room. Why did you ask?

WOMAN: She left without washing the dishes.

MAN: Don't lay too much on the girl. Her labor is near.

WOMAN: I wish I'd had a father-in-law like you. There was no one thinking of me like this.

MAN: Don't worry about the past.

WOMAN: When it's about me, you say 'don't worry!' But now I'm taking care of them. Moreover, both of them.

MAN: And you'll keep doing it! That's your job. And our children will take care of us.

WOMAN: I'm so surprised that you expect that from the kids of today. What makes you think they'll come back? Watch what happens when they have their baby. Once they're gone, you think they'll ever come back? Has anyone from their generation come back?

MAN: My child is different. He will.

WOMAN: Your child will want to come back, but will your daughter-in-law allow it? Look, your son hangs on her every word. As if she's the first woman to get pregnant.

(The Old Woman senses that her son and her daughter in law are arguing. She tries to listen but can't. At the same time, she is trying to see those inside.)

MAN: Don't you start being a mother-in-law again!

WOMAN: When I tell the truth, you call it being a mother-in-law.

MAN: You're dragging it out. We both know what kind of daughter-in-law you were. I remember how you treated my mom. You're still torturing the poor woman.

(Silence. The Young Woman's pain has stopped. The Young Man wipes beads of sweat off his wife's face.)

YOUNG MAN: See? It passed.

YOUNG WOMAN: I hope so.

YOUNG MAN: Let's go back. So they don't get suspicious.

(The Young Man and his wife go into the main area. The Old Woman still hasn't figured out what's going on, but she's obviously trying. The Young Woman walks to the kitchen area.)

WOMAN: *(Sarcastically.)* Don't bother, daughter. I washed them.

YOUNG MAN: She got dizzy, Mom.

(The Young Man sits by his father. He picks up a piece of wood, starts carving. He finishes it. He puts it by the other ones he's finished, and starts another one. The Young Woman covers up the Old Man. She stirs the fire.)

OLD WOMAN: *(Timidly.)* Son, Can you take me to the...

(The Man and the Young Man get up immediately. Clearly, they don't know that the Old Woman can walk. They each take one of the Old Woman's arms and take her slowly to the toilet.)

WOMAN: *(He gets up and closes the door behind them.)* Wretched thing!

YOUNG WOMAN: At least she asks, mother. What would we do if she didn't?

WOMAN: *(Angrily.)* What would we do? What could we do? We put up with it. I wouldn't mind it as much if I had someone saying 'let me help with the work'!

YOUNG WOMAN: I'm sorry, Mother. I have become quite big. Still, I try to help as much as I can.

(The Woman doesn't respond. The Man and the Young Man bring the Old Woman, almost as though they're driving her. They put her in her bed.)

OLD WOMAN: May God bless you! May all that you touch turn to gold! May God give you all that you wish! May God give you a healthy lad like a ray of light!

YOUNG MAN: Hopefully grandma. When the time is right. That way we'll have nothing to fear!

(The Man and the Young Man pick up pieces of wood again. They continue carving. The Old Woman appears to be about to sneeze. She covers her mouth and nose and sneezes quietly.)

THE OTHERS: God bless you!

OLD WOMAN: You, too!

OLD MAN: *(He suddenly wakes up. He continues telling the story about his brother from where he left off.)* I said 'No!' You can't do this! You can't scream! If you do, we'll all die! Doesn't it bother you that we'll all die?' 'It does but I can't help myself. I want to go out and scream in the doorway.' I could tell that he was sorry as he was saying this, because he was crying. He was moaning 'If it goes on like this, I will cause all of your deaths. Dear God, what kind of passion is this! I don't think anyone has ever wanted to scream so much. This is the same as wanting a woman. I want to scream with all my being. I can't give up this thought. I can't help myself.' I was in a difficult situation. Because everyone feared of the avalanche. But my fear was that, one day, my brother would scream. And that was fear of the avalanche, too. I watched my brother constantly. Even in the bathroom I was after him. I always looked into his eyes, silently pleading. Sometimes he would make a fist and open his mouth, but when he saw my eyes he would suppress his need to scream, clenching his teeth. Then one day he said: 'I don't want to scream anymore!' 'For real?' 'Yes,' he said. I can't express how happy I was. I couldn't hold my tears back. Before I could say 'My brother is getting better,' he kept on talking. 'How much can I scream? Screaming won't satiate me. I will fire the rifle. Yes, yes, I will fire the rifle!

Because when I fire the rifle, these mountains will come down on us like nothing else!' Dear God. My brother was really losing it. I went to my dad and explained the situation. 'This is good!' said my dad. 'If we hide the bullets, nothing will happen.' 'But,' I said, 'what if he gets angry? I think when he can't fire the rifle he will inevitably get angry and then he will scream. You don't need to fire a rifle for an avalanche to happen, dad. A strong scream will be enough to end it all. My brother has made up his mind. He will make the avalanche fall on us. You're still trying to hide from the truth in order to protect him! But I'm your son, too! I will die. So will you. Plus, if we don't say anything we'll be as guilty as him. Even if we escape the avalanche. You need to accept this now, Dad. My brother has gone insane. If we don't say something and make them take precautions, and God forbid, he loses it and screams, what will we do? When the avalanche hits, can either of us outrun it? Can we afford mercy? Can we watch everyone die out of pity for one person? You have to report this even though it's my brother, Dad!' My father started thinking seriously for the first time. He couldn't deny it any longer. 'You're right!' he said. He went and reported the situation to the Elders. They listened quietly. They gave no response for a long time. This was the first time a situation like this had presented itself. My father said: 'What will you do to my son? I have a right to know.' After deliberating, the judges said 'Citizen, what choice do we have? It's clear what we must do.' they said. 'Obviously we're not going

to just wait for death! We gag him, bind his hands and feet and put him in a corner.' 'For how long?' 'Until the threat of the avalanche passes. How can we trust someone who has gone insane? What if he screams?' But my father had a point: 'How can a person live without drinking or eating? You're condemning him to death, and you know it.' But they weren't even listening. Immediately, they tied my brother's hands and feet, gagged him and laid him down in the common house. Once in a while the guards fed him. In order to stop him from screaming during the meals, they would stuff food into his mouth, then clamp their huge hands immediately over it. This lasted for fifteen days. Easier said than done, fifteen days. Then one day they came and said, 'Your son died!' We never learned if he died on his own, or if the guards suffocated him. (*He falls asleep.*)

MAN: (*To his son:*) Do you know that story?

YOUNG MAN: How could I not know?

WOMAN: God knows how many times we listened to it!

YOUNG WOMAN: Even I've heard it at least three times.

OLD WOMAN: The first time I gave birth, after the danger of the avalanche had passed, (*to her son*) you were born. When the first snow fell, we left. After we arrived, we were quiet like this for a long time. We stayed in an immigrant neighborhood formed by those who migrated from here. Our customs continued there. We were quiet

and timid. The locals liked us a lot. They wanted us to do every job. Because we never said no, we never reacted. We would take whatever was offered, we didn't begrudge what was not. Come, come. Go, go. Give, give. We did the hardest jobs. The locals were very different from us. They were noisy, belligerent. They could laugh out loud. They really liked us a lot, too, but they wouldn't let us talk about this place. 'We accepted you. What else do you want? Just work! We can't allow negativity!' they said. Then I had my second child. Another boy. But he didn't survive. Then we had a daughter. She didn't live either. Your father began to change. Supposedly, he was sad about his brother. He would come home drunk every night. 'This suffering will kill me!' he would say. I believed it. Then I learned he was seeing another woman. When I asked 'Why are you seeing her?' he said 'How should I know why the pain of the loss of my brother makes me do what I do? Let me be!' Repeating 'Let me be!' over and over, he began visiting all the women in the area. His reasoning was that he could not endure the loss of his brother. 'Let me distract myself! Or this pain will kill me,' he said. How frightfully good women can be at easing a man's suffering! I learned that from my husband. There was a neighbor, an old woman. She knew what a womanizer my husband was. One day she came to our home and she said to me 'There are many ways to make a man come home! Instead of crying and moaning, take care of yourself and welcome your husband with a smile!' I did

what she said, but he didn't even see me. Then she advised that I cook his favorite foods. But he didn't eat when he came home, even the foods he liked the most. Because he came home full. Completely drunk and full--I also learned from my husband how hard it is to feed the full. Finally, our neighbor recommended a third way. The child and I would be ill from time to time. I learned that with illness one can gather the attention of people, especially husbands. 'Just the illness of the child isn't enough. You should be ill, too, so he doesn't hope that you will take care of the kid!' I followed her recommendation and managed to make my husband come home. But at what cost! Don't be fooled by how he is sleeping now! He made me suffer a lot!

(Suddenly the Young Woman starts writhing in pain again. She doubles over. With great effort, she goes to the other room. Her husband notices and follows her--he'd been watching her.)

The Old Woman also sees what's happening. Frightened, she tries to figure it out.)

YOUNG WOMAN: I can't stand it! Dear God! I can't stand it!

YOUNG MAN: What can I do? Have patience!

YOUNG WOMAN: This is labor, get it? Dear God! Do something! Save me!

(The Old Woman tries to tell the Man something. When the Man doesn't understand, she gets up, agitated, and walks to him. When the Woman sees the Old Woman, who she thought could not walk, she is surprised, almost speechless.)

OLD WOMAN: Son! Daughter!

MAN: What is it, Mom?

WOMAN: Your mother can walk!

MAN: Mom! You're walking!

OLD WOMAN: Am I walking? Yes, yes, I'm walking. Forget about that right now.
She's going into labor!

MAN: What are you talking about, Mom?

WOMAN: Your mother can walk!

MAN: Didn't you hear what she said? She says the baby is coming!

(All three go to the next room. For a while they watch, aghast. The others are not aware of their presence.)

The Young Man repeatedly signals his wife to be quiet. The Young Woman, on the other hand, is writhing in pain.)

MAN: What's going on, son?

WOMAN: Did something happen?

YOUNG MAN: It's nothing.

WOMAN: Look.

YOUNG WOMAN: My stomach hurts. *(She tries to hide it.)* It will pass soon.

(They're all watching the Young Woman. She struggles to hide her pain. But she can't endure it any longer and collapses onto the floor.)

WOMAN: It's happening! Oh my God!

YOUNG MAN: It's not, Mom. It's only stomach pain.

WOMAN: Hopefully. Would you like some water?

YOUNG WOMAN: I can't take it anymore. *(She starts moaning.)*

YOUNG MAN: *(He covers his wife's mouth with his hand.)* It will pass soon.

WOMAN: No, it won't.

MAN: What's happening?

YOUNG MAN: Her stomach hurts, Dad.

WOMAN: This doesn't look like stomach pain. I have given birth enough times. This is labor pain. Labor!

MAN: Oh, dear God!

OLD WOMAN: I told you so!

WOMAN: What will happen now?

(The Young Woman's pain is now gone; she relaxes. However, her face is beaded with sweat.)

YOUNG MAN: I told you it would pass. Look, it has.

WOMAN: It hasn't. This is just a break. It will come back soon.

MAN: How do you know?

WOMAN: Who knows better than me? I gave birth six times, even if most of them didn't survive. Let's be clear, this is labor.

(Silence for a while.)

MAN: We have to be sure.

YOUNG WOMAN: It's gone. I had stomach pain, but it's gone.

OLD WOMAN: It's always like this. First there's pain, then it passes. Then there will be pain again, and it will pass again. And then...

YOUNG MAN: How?

MAN: *(Decided.)* Go, call the midwife.

YOUNG MAN: But...

MAN: We have to call her. If this isn't labor pain, then there's no problem. This way we can all relax. It's better to be awake than sleep in fear.

YOUNG MAN: What if it's labor pain?

MAN: Call her.

YOUNG MAN: What if it's labor pain?

WOMAN: Then we will have done what we're supposed to do. There's

nothing else we can do. We have to call the midwife.

(They are quiet for a little more.)

MAN: We can't take responsibility any more. Each passing second counts. We have to follow the rules.

YOUNG MAN: But—

MAN: *(He is decisive.)* We can't endanger other lives. We can't forget that we have to report possible risks. We know the rules. We can't act like we don't. Call the midwife.

YOUNG MAN: No!

MAN: We have to call her!

YOUNG MAN: This isn't labor pain! It happened before and it went away when she went to the bathroom. It's nothing. She's fine now! Let's wait a little longer.

MAN: What will we wait for? For her to give birth?

YOUNG MAN: She won't give birth!

MAN: How do you know? We have to be sure. I said call!

YOUNG MAN: Mom, stop! Let's not panic when there's no need. Wait!

MAN: What will she wait for? You're making us waste time! Don't delay! Go and call her!

YOUNG WOMAN: Wait, Mother! Look, it passed! It passed. I'm fine! I swear this isn't labor pain!

OLD WOMAN: Daughter, if it's not labor pain, why are you afraid? The midwife will decide, then we can relax. Right, my child?

MAN: My mother is telling the truth. We have to be sure. Only the midwife can tell us that.

YOUNG MAN: What if it's labor?

WOMAN: We answered that! Didn't we? Won't we be punished because we didn't report this immediately? Don't you know the biggest crime is to hide a situation like this?

MAN: *(He is decided.)* We have to be sure. Did you sleep together before the right day?

YOUNG MAN: Dad, how could you think I'd be so irresponsible?

MAN: Then why are you trying to stop the midwife from coming? Tell me, why? Why don't you tell me? Tell me! I told you to tell me! Tell me! Tell! Aren't you listening to me? Tell me!

(The Man gets close to his son and tries to vent his anger by squeezing his son's hand and arm.)

YOUNG MAN: It's not what you think, Dad! I swear it's not!

MAN: Then why are you scared, you asshole! *(He continues to squeeze.)* You will destroy this family's honor. You couldn't wait

a month! Would this have happened if you could keep it in your pants? How can we go out in public now? We'll be the family who can't keep it in their pants! Have you no shame? You have endangered everyone with your impatience. My reputation will be worthless! Because of you we'll be remembered as the family who endangered everyone! People will avoid us. They won't trust us! They will ostracize us!

YOUNG MAN: I'm telling you, I didn't do it, Dad!

YOUNG WOMAN: *(She cries.)* We didn't do it, Father! We didn't do anything to upset you!

(The Man hesitates, realizing that he's gone too far.)

WOMAN: *(She eases the Man's grip)* He says he didn't do it. Let him be.

(The Man lets go of his son. He relaxes for a while, calms down.)

MAN: *(He is still decided.)* We have to be sure. Go call the midwife. Come on, don't stop! Don't lose time! Quick!

WOMAN: What should I say?

MAN: *(He stops, thinks for a moment.)* You will say 'We're worried about our daughter-in-law. You'd better see her. We want to be sure.' But don't forget to say that the pain has just started. They mustn't think we wasted time!

(The Woman puts on a headscarf and quietly goes out into the street. The Young

*Woman cries helplessly. She puts on headphones and is listening to a moving song.
The others wait anxiously.)*

CURTAIN

ACT TWO

(The Young Woman, sad and worried, sits in her room. The Young Man sits nearby, thinking, apparently searching for a solution. The Old Woman sits in her place, waiting, her eyes on the door. The Man waits inside the house, looking through the window once in a while. The Old Man is sleeping. The front door opens and the Woman enters.)

MAN: What happened?

WOMAN: I told her.

MAN: What did she say?

WOMAN: She's on the way.

MAN: Why didn't she come with you?

WOMAN: Apparently, she has to report it to the guards first.

(The Woman goes to her daughter-in-law's side. The Woman hesitates for a moment, then strokes her hair to console her.)

YOUNG WOMAN: Is she here ?

WOMAN: She will be. Did anything happen while I was gone?

YOUNG WOMAN: No!

WOMAN: I hope what we fear won't happen.

YOUNG WOMAN: Hopefully.

WOMAN: Maybe it's not labor pain.

YOUNG WOMAN: Hopefully.

WOMAN: You're not angry with me, are you?

YOUNG WOMAN: Do I have a right to be angry?

WOMAN: What choice do we have? We had to let them know as soon as possible. Me or someone else, it wouldn't have mattered.
Someone had to let them know.

YOUNG WOMAN: I know.

(Silence.)

YOUNG WOMAN: I'm scared.

WOMAN: There's nothing we can do!

YOUNG WOMAN: I'm very scared.

(Through the window, the Man sees the Midwife coming. He becomes flustered and goes over to the Woman.)

MAN: They're coming!

(The Man and the Woman open the door.)

WOMAN: Welcome!

MAN: Come in.

(First the Midwife enters, then Guard #1.)

MIDWIFE: Good morning.

GUARD #1: Morning.

MAN: Good morning.

YOUNG MAN: Good morning.

WOMAN: You, too.

OLD WOMAN: Welcome.

(The Midwife kisses the Old Woman's hand.)

OLD WOMAN: May you have many who kiss your hand, my child.

(The Young Man kisses the Midwife's hand.)

MIDWIFE: Thank you, son.

YOUNG MAN: It's not labor pain.

MIDWIFE: Hopefully not.

WOMAN: Would you like something to drink?

MIDWIFE: Time is of essence in situations like this. Let's not delay. If

there's nothing to be scared of, then I will have coffee with you before I leave.

WOMAN: Hopefully.

MIDWIFE: Hopefully. Where's the Young Woman?

(The Woman leads the Midwife to the Young Woman.)

MAN: *(To Guard #1:)* Please sit down.

(Guard #1 sits. The Midwife approaches the Young Woman. She strokes her hair.)

MIDWIFE: *(To the Woman:)* You, out!

(The Woman joins the others.)

MIDWIFE: This will pass, my girl.

YOUNG WOMAN: *(Her voice quivers)* Thank you, ma'am.

MIDWIFE: Let's talk for a minute.

YOUNG WOMAN: OK.

MIDWIFE: But you will answer my questions truthfully. Ok?

YOUNG WOMAN: OK.

MIDWIFE: When did you have your first night together?

YOUNG WOMAN: Middle of December.

MIDWIFE: Did anything happen between the two of you before then? I

mean like kissing or anything. Maybe you were foolish once and went a little too far. If so, you must not hide it from me.

YOUNG WOMAN: But I'm not hiding anything!

MIDWIFE: I'm asking for your own good.

YOUNG WOMAN: I swear I'm not hiding anything.

(The Midwife counts on her fingers. Then she counts again.)

YOUNG WOMAN: I'm really scared, ma'am.

MIDWIFE: There's nothing to be scared of my child. You didn't make a mistake. According to my calculation there's at least a month before the birth.

YOUNG WOMAN: Hopefully.

MIDWIFE: If you were going into labor now, your coupling would have to have been much earlier. *(She calculates again.)* Yes, that's right. But you know, eventually the truth always comes out. If you're not hiding anything from me, what you're feeling isn't labor pain. *(She looks at her face suspiciously.)*

YOUNG WOMAN: *(She sees the suspicion.)* I'm not hiding anything. I swear I'm telling the truth. Plus, how could we have been together? Our families didn't let us see each other, not even from a distance.

MIDWIFE: Can gunpowder and fire co-exist, girl? Especially considering that tragic incident.

YOUNG WOMAN: Did you take care of her, too?

MIDWIFE: No, no. Am I that old? It happened a long time ago. During my grandmother's youth. But nothing like that ever happened again. Hopefully, it never will.

YOUNG WOMAN: Hopefully.

MIDWIFE: I hope you're not scared anymore.

YOUNG WOMAN: *(He is still scared.)* No.

MIDWIFE: Don't be. Fear won't help anything. Let's. In order to be sure. Lie down. Where you are. Come on, lie down.

(The Young Woman lies on her side.)

MIDWIFE: On your back.

(The Young Woman lies on her back with her head toward the audience.)

YOUNG WOMAN: Like this?

MIDWIFE: Yes. Pull your legs up to your stomach. Both of them. Pull up your dress, too. That's it.

(The Midwife throws the Young Woman's dress a little further up.)

MIDWIFE: Raise your butt. Raise it, raise it. *(She pulls down the Young Woman's underwear.)* Good girl. There's nothing to be afraid of. *(She bends over. She inspects with her hand. She gropes her belly. She inspects again and again. She gets up.)* Get dressed.

(The Young Woman pulls up her underwear, gets up and waits with her hands clasped in front of her.)

MIDWIFE: When did the pain start?

YOUNG WOMAN: *(She is clearly lying.)* Just before we called you.

MIDWIFE: *(She is angry)* Don't you lie to me! When did it start? I need to know. Lie to the others if you must, but I need to know! I hope you weren't lying a minute ago!

YOUNG WOMAN: I wasn't.

MIDWIFE: I asked the first pain.

YOUNG WOMAN: Before sunrise.

MIDWIFE: Then?

YOUNG WOMAN: It was gone a little bit, then it came back.

MIDWIFE: Then?

YOUNG WOMAN: It happened again.

MIDWIFE: Then?

MIDWIFE: It hasn't happened again.

MIDWIFE: *(She is silent for a moment)* You know, girl, I know your mother well. We were neighbors for years. Surely, I'm very sorry, but I have to report this to the administrators. This is required by both

the rules and the good of the society. (*Lowers her voice even more.*) Tell them about your latest pain. Understood?

YOUNG WOMAN: I understand.

MIDWIFE: Or the people in the house will be in trouble, too! Don't forget this: You can't give up on God! And - maybe what you are feeling isn't labor pain.

YOUNG WOMAN: (*Desperate.*) Hopefully! Will my mom and dad come also?

MIDWIFE: No! It's against the rules, that's why.

YOUNG WOMAN: Can they at least tell my mom?

YOUNG WOMAN: It is against tradition to do such things. The trial is done in the house where you are. They don't ever allow emotion in matters like this.

(The Midwife quietly joins the others.)

MAN: What happened?

MIDWIFE: Let me wash my hands.

(The Woman mixes boiling water with cold water and pours it over the Midwife's hands.)

WOMAN: Is it?

MIDWIFE: (*As she dries her hands.*) I won't be able to have coffee. I really wanted to but it's not meant to be. Don't be angry with me. This

is the rule. I need to report this. What can I say? Let this all pass.

(To Guard #1:) You wait here!

(The Midwife leaves slowly. The Woman closes the door behind her. Everyone is sad. The Old Man is sleeping. The Young Man joins his wife. The Young Man and the Young Woman hug.)

OLD MAN: *(He wakes up, looks around. He continues talking from where he left off.)* But if you ask me, it was something else. My brother didn't die naturally. They killed him! They ruthlessly got rid of him. *(He suddenly sees Guard #1.)* You guards! You! *(He jabs his hand threateningly at Guard #1.)* You killed him! You! You strangled him, and with your bare hands, too! Murderers!
Murderer guards!

(The Woman silently tries to quiet her husband.)

BLACKOUT

ACT THREE

(They're still waiting tensely. Guard #1 is trying to understand why the Old Man treated him that way. The Old Man has been silenced but he still casts angry looks at Guard #1 once in a while. The Man is pacing in the room , occasionally looking out the window.)

MAN: They're coming!

WOMAN: *(To the Old Woman:)* Well, since you can walk, you get up, too.
That way we'll be as respectful as possible.

MAN: Leave my mom alone!

OLD MAN: They strangled him! Murderers! Murdering guards!

OLD WOMAN: These are not the same guards. You're confused about it all.

OLD MAN: I'm not confused. This was one of them! I know it was you, you were the traitor! Traitor guard! Murderer guard!

GUARD #1: *(To the Old Man:)* Sir, who did we strangle? I didn't strangle anyone! *(To the others:)* What is he talking about?

MAN: *(Quietly to Guard #1.)* My father is very old. He's old enough to believe something that happened years ago just happened.
Don't listen to him!

OLD MAN: *(Sing-song.)* Murderer Guard! Murderer Guard! Murderer Guard!

GUARD #1: Damn it!

OLD MAN: Murderer Guard! Murderer Guard!

GUARD #1: This can't continue!

MAN: *(He looks at Guard #1 with a look that is almost saying 'I'll handle this.' He turns to his dad.)* Shut up now, Dad! Shut up! *(To the others:)* They have arrived.

(The Old Man sulks and shuts up. Everyone, including the Old Woman, goes to the door. The Man opens the door.)

MAN: Come in.

WOMAN: Welcome.

OLD WOMAN: It's a pleasure to have you.

(The Members of the Council of Judges come in: first the President of the Council, then the Female Member and the Male Member. They're followed by the Midwife and Guard #2.)

PRESIDENT: Hello!

EVERYONE ELSE: *(Very respectfully.)* Hello!

OLD MAN: *(He points out Guard #2 to his wife, and in a voice that can't be heard by the others:)* Here, this is the other one!

(The Old Woman signals to the Old Man that the Man will get angry.)

WOMAN: Where would you like to sit?

PRESIDENT: *(He checks around the house with his eyes.)* Let's sit somewhere
sort of high. As this is how these things should be.

MAN: *(He points.)* Would there be acceptable?

(The President looks at the other members. The members nod approvingly.)

PRESIDENT: It's acceptable.

(The President and the members sit.

*The Guard #1 and Guard #2 are standing by the door. The Old Man is carefully
watching the members of the Council of Judges and the guards.)*

PRESIDENT: Bring the coffee table!

*(The Man and the Woman pick up the coffee table and put it in front of the
President.)*

MAN: Is there anything else you would like?

PRESIDENT: Our mouths may get dry as we talk. Bring us a little water! And
enough cups for everyone.

(The Woman puts a pitcher of water and a few wooden cups on the coffee table.)

PRESIDENT: Thank you. Where is your daughter-in-law?

WOMAN: Should she come?

PRESIDENT: Right away! Let's not waste any time.

WOMAN: *(To her son:)* I'll get her.

(The Woman goes into the Young Woman's room. She beckons the Young Woman.)

PRESIDENT: We can't begin without her! *(To the Old Woman:)* Right?

OLD WOMAN: Right!

PRESIDENT: Everyone can have a seat. If we ask you a question, you will stand and answer. Understood?

EVERYONE ELSE: Understood.

PRESIDENT: *(To the other members:)* Shall we begin?

(The others nod.)

OLD MAN: *(Quietly to his wife.)* Finally they will put the guards on trial!

(The Old Woman tries to tell him to shut up with gestures. Like an expert mime, she quietly tells him that the Young Woman will be tried because she will give birth before the day.)

OLD MAN: And now a pregnant woman! Murderers!

OLD WOMAN: Shut up!

PRESIDENT: Before we came here, we stopped by the trough. As you know, when the trough fills completely with water from melted snow, the danger is gone. However, sadly we saw that there's two fingers of space yet to go. *(He demonstrates with his hand.)* That means, later today, or tomorrow at the latest, the trough will be

full and the danger will be over. That is when those who left at the start of winter will come with their kids, flour, sugar, salt, vegetables, meat, and all kinds of food and for almost three months, until the first snow falls, they will be with us. We'll have weddings, births, celebrations, festivals. When the first snow falls, the wives who have given birth and the others will leave here and go. Until the next summer, they will work and save so that the ones staying behind can survive the next winter in comfort. Then they will come again. They will go again. But then, a little while ago, the Midwife came to us and told us of an unexpected situation.

(The Male Member seems about to cough. Everyone gets nervous. Out of habit, the Female Member hands a pillow to the Male Member. The Male Member presses the pillow to his face and coughs quietly. He also clears his throat. He hands the pillow back to the Female Member.)

PRESIDENT: I'm sorry to declare that we're dealing with something that hasn't happened in fifty years. Premature birth. Like the other members I'm troubled by this. But there's nothing that can be done. We'll follow with the rules! Because this is a matter of safety of the people, of life and death!

(The Male Member again seems to be about to cough. One pillow won't be enough this time. The others cover the Man's face with several pillows. A little later, he is still. He has died. They carry the Male Member to an elevated area. Everyone pays their respects.)

PRESIDENT: Now let's do what we have to before losing more time. Let's get down to business. *(To the midwife:)* When were you informed?

MIDWIFE: *(She gets up.)* A little while ago.

PRESIDENT: Your conclusion?

MIDWIFE: I came right away and checked her. I then let you know of the situation. It pains me to say this, but she will give birth very soon.

PRESIDENT: Are you sure?

MIDWIFE: Absolutely.

PRESIDENT: You should double-check.

MIDWIFE: There's no need. All signs indicate that the baby is coming.

PRESIDENT: You may sit. You two! *(The Young Woman and the Young Man get up.)* We have determined that, normally, you wouldn't go into labor for another month. Nevertheless, you're about to into labor before the danger has passed. You know that this is the greatest crime, that it puts others' lives in danger, right?

YOUNG MAN: We do.

YOUNG WOMAN: We do.

YOUNG MAN: But this isn't our fault!

PRESIDENT: What do you mean?

YOUNG MAN: Our elders made the calculation. They decided what day we could be together. That was our first night. Until that night, I was allowed to see my wife only from a distance. We could never even be side by side.

MAN: Mr. President, if you will allow me, I would like to say something.

PRESIDENT: Keep it short.

MAN: My son is telling the truth. We kept them apart until the day.

WOMAN: We didn't even let them hold hands.

PRESIDENT: Do not speak without asking for permission first. Understood?

WOMAN: Understood, Mr. President.

PRESIDENT: Let's assume everything happened as you say. I'm having a hard time understanding where you're going with this.

YOUNG MAN: This will be a premature birth.

MIDWIFE: *(He gets up)* Yes, Mr. President. This will be a premature birth.

YOUNG MAN: That means we're guilty of nothing.

(Silence.)

PRESIDENT: Either way, what difference does it make? We're not discussing whether this is a premature birth or not. We look only at the result. Right now, before the danger has passed, the Young Woman is about to go into labor. That's all we care about.

However, if there were marital relations too soon, in violation of the rules, that would interest us as well. But it wouldn't change the results. What we must do now is clear. *(Tacitly, he seeks the approval of the other member.)* This young woman will be put into a coffin without delay, and then she will be buried in the ground! It will be of consolation to us for you to know that we're sad about this decision.

YOUNG MAN: Mr. President.

PRESIDENT: There's nothing left to discuss. Because this Young Woman may go into labor any second now. Need I remind you of what that could cause? Listen, if the Midwife has an objection to this, the execution will of course be stayed, and the situation can be discussed. *(To the Midwife:)* That's because in this situation you are the only person who has the right to object. Do you have anything to say against this decision?

MIDWIFE: No, Mr. President.

PRESIDENT: Let the rules be applied before more time is wasted!

OLD MAN: They're not trying the guards!

(The Man and the Old Woman signal the Old Man to hush.)

YOUNG MAN: My wife is being punished for something that isn't our fault. For what, because so are the rules. What's more, we have done nothing that was not within the rules. Our wedding, our first night,

all happened at the prescribed time.

PRESIDENT: *(He gets angry.)* We've been through this, son. Beside, this is the first time I've ever heard of anything like this. I don't know if it would do any good for me to remind you why the children of this land immediately get jobs when they go elsewhere? Because they don't object to anything! They continue to act the same way in the places they're staying temporarily. Let's not forget that the reason that in our society, the word for 'unrest' has been stricken from the dictionary is that the rules have been administered without fail! *(He gets really angry.)* What do you mean? Should we discuss the rules and let so many people will die?

YOUNG MAN: *(He is very sentimental.)* Don't let anyone die! But don't let my wife die either!

PRESIDENT: I understand your pain, Young Man. We were young once, too, We have also been in love. But one has to know to sacrifice so that other people can live.

YOUNG MAN: *(He is about to cry)* Birth doesn't just happen suddenly! Please delay for a little longer.

PRESIDENT: Not possible. I can't endanger the whole village. It's either your wife or everyone. All of us. There's no middle ground! If there was a solution that would allow us all to live, do you think I wouldn't implement that? *(He is resolute.)* The execution will happen as soon as possible. The rules will be administered!

What could we do if your wife goes into labor now? A single scream she might let out during birth is enough. What are we going to do about the cries of the newborn baby? Wouldn't the mountains come down on our heads? *(He suddenly becomes stern.)* If you go on talking we may have to make the same decision for you too and administer it! Hush now!

YOUNG MAN: Mr. President.

PRESIDENT: I'm warning you! Don't forget! If speech is silver, silence is golden! This has been our principle for centuries. *(He signals the guards to take action.)*

OLD MAN: They are not trying the guards! They will bury not the murderers, but the innocent!

PRESIDENT: What the hell is he talking about?

OLD MAN: For God's sake, man, you should be prosecuting the people who strangled my brother!

PRESIDENT: What are you saying?

OLD MAN: Prosecute the murderers! If you have the guts, prosecute them! But you can't! Because they would strangle you immediately!

PRESIDENT: Gag him, too!

(As Guard #1 tries to gag the Old Man with a rag.)

PRESIDENT: Hurry up a little!

OLD MAN: *(He tries to stop them from gagging him.)* Now I understand my brother even better. I understand him very well!

PRESIDENT: *(To Guard #2:)* Prepare the other one as well!

GUARD #1: Yes, sir!

(Guard #2 moves to gag the Young Woman.)

PRESIDENT: You have surprised me, Young Man. However, I will blame this on your grief and forgive you.

GUARD #1: *(Has gagged the Young Woman and tied her hands behind her back.)* Done, sir.

PRESIDENT: *(He signals with his hand for him to blindfold her as well.)* Finish the job!

(Guard #2 blindfolds her. She shivers with fear.)

PRESIDENT: All right. *(To the others:)* Nobody leaves! Until this business is finished, you will all stay in your houses. *(To Guard #1:)* You will stay here. *(To the Female Member:)* Come on, get up. We will witness the administration of the rules.

(The President and the other member get up. Guard #2 has a hard time taking the Young Woman, because she is resisting. In fact she is moaning in order to let it be heard that she doesn't want to go. Upon a warning from the President, Guard #2 brings the her toward the door, almost dragging her. Behind them, the President and the other member are slowly walking. As the others wait quietly, the Young Man has

opened the box of ammunition, without anyone realizing and loads a bullet into one of the rifles.)

YOUNG MAN: *(He points the rifle into the air)* Stop now!

(For a moment everyone stops. This is a complete surprise.)

PRESIDENT: What do you intend to do, my child?

YOUNG MAN: I said stop!

FEMALE MEMBER: What is the meaning of this? What is he doing?

YOUNG MAN: Don't make me pull the trigger!

PRESIDENT: How did this happen?

FEMALE MEMBER: Won't the rifle fire if you pull the trigger? When the rifle fires... Oh
my God!

PRESIDENT: But, we'll all die!

YOUNG MAN: Yes. We'll die! Either my wife lives or we'll all die together!

(Silence.)

MAN: Put the gun down.

WOMAN: Do you want to kill us as well?

MAN: Won't we all die together?

YOUNG MAN: Dad, stay out of this.

MAN: How can I stay out of it? Come to your senses, son.

YOUNG MAN: Should my wife die? I have to do whatever I can so that my wife and my unborn child can live!

MAN: What can you do?

OLD WOMAN: We'll all die together!

WOMAN: You're still young. There will be other women. It's in your hands. You can have a child with some other woman.

OLD WOMAN: You will be murdering your parents!

OLD MAN: I'm proud of my grandson!

YOUNG MAN: You don't understand me! *(To the President:)* Nobody move! Go back to your seats. I said go!

(The President and the Female Member go back to their seats. Guard #2 brings the Young Woman back to where she'd been sitting. At the Young Man's signal, Guard #2 removes her gag, blindfold, and bonds. Silence.)

PRESIDENT: My mouth is dry. Can I have some water?

YOUNG MAN: Drink!

(The President drinks water. The Female Member also drinks.)

PRESIDENT: What will happen now?

FEMALE MEMBER: What are we waiting for?

YOUNG MAN: *(To Guard #1:)* You! Dad, you too. Go and check the trough!
Let's see what the situation is! Don't waste time! *(The Man and
Guard #2 leave.)*

OLD MAN: Let's put the guards on trial!

*(The Old Woman quiets her husband. Everyone just waits. The President and the
Female Member are in a state of fear and confusion. After a long while, the Man and
Guard #1 return.)*

MAN: One finger!

GUARD #1: Yes, one finger.

YOUNG MAN: And her pain hasn't returned. Maybe the Midwife was wrong and
this was not labor pain!. But because of your impatience, my wife
almost died. Look! You see? Do you see any pain?

PRESIDENT: What are you saying son? Is the Midwife lying? You may not
care about us, but your mother, your father. They will die! Don't
you have any mercy for them?

(Suddenly the Young Woman starts writhing in pain.)

PRESIDENT: Oh my God!

MIDWIFE: She's going into labor!

YOUNG MAN: *(To Guard #1:)* Gag her!

(Guard #1 gags her.)

YOUNG MAN: Take her to the other room.

(As Guard #1 takes the Young Woman to the other room, the Old Man silently claps in delight.)

YOUNG MAN: *(To the Midwife:)* Go. Mom, you help as well.

MIDWIFE: *(To the Woman:)* Bring a washbasin and hot water! Quick!

YOUNG MAN: Quick, Mom!

PRESIDENT: *(He is terrified.)* What about the baby's cry!

FEMALE MEMBER: *(She is terrified)* Cries!

PRESIDENT: We'll all die!

FEMALE MEMBER: We'll die!

OLD MAN: I came here to die anyway. It doesn't matter. Now I understand my brother even better. I want to scream, too, before I die. I want to scream! Right now!

OLD WOMAN: Don't! Don't you do any such thing!

MAN: I'm your son, Dad!

WOMAN: I guess this is the end of us.

MAN: You'll get me killed, too!

(He covers his father's mouth with his hand.)

WOMAN: *(To her son:)* I raised you. Did I raise you so you could be the agent of my death? I won't give you my blessing!

YOUNG MAN: Shut up!

(The Midwife signals Guard #1 to leave. Guard #1 joins the others. Guard #2 approaches the Young Man stealthily. Just as he is about to grab the Young Man's arm, he is noticed. The Young Man hits Guard #2 with the stock of the rifle, decking him .)

YOUNG MAN: Don't! Don't you try that again!

PRESIDENT: *(To Guard #1:)* You idiot!

YOUNG MAN: Got it?

GUARD #1: Got it.

(In the other room, the Young Woman is lying down with her head towards the audience. The birth is happening silently. The Midwife is gesturing instructions to the Woman.)

FEMALE MEMBER: *(She is scared.)* But...they will have to hold the baby's mouth shut all the time because it will let out one scream after the other.

PRESIDENT: They have to hold the baby's mouth shut until the trough is full.

(The Young Woman's moaning has increased. The hoarse moans come from deep within her. The moans stop suddenly. The Midwife lifts the baby, covering its mouth with one hand .)

The baby slips out of the Midwife's hands into the washbasin. An incredible scream is heard.

As these deafening laugh-like screams are heard one after the other, the Midwife gets a hold of the baby again.

There is a total silence.

The echoes of the screams are heard.

Silence again.

Everyone waits fearfully for the avalanche. Some also pray.

There's no sign of an avalanche.)

PRESIDENT: Nothing happened!

FEMALE MEMBER: I guess there won't be an avalanche.

YOUNG MAN: Shut up!

(More silence.)

(Despite his wife's attempts to stop him, the Old Man grabs the rifle from the Young Man's hands and opens the door. He lets out a colossal scream.)

(A little later, the echo of the scream is heard. Then he fires the rifle. Its echo is heard. The anxious waiting is replaced by displays of happiness. Drumming and pipe music accompany the sounds of rifle fire outside.)

The End