

## **Hanoch Levin – The Thin Soldier**

Translated from the Hebrew by Jessica Cohen and Evan Fallenberg

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**The Hanoch Levin Institute of Israeli Drama**  
c/o The Cameri Theatre of Tel Aviv, 30 Leonardo da Vinci St.,  
P.O.B 14033, Tel Aviv 6114001, Israel  
Tel: [\(+972\)-3-6951188](tel:+972-3-6951188), Fax: [\(+972\)-3-6061956](tel:+972-3-6061956)  
Shimrit Ron, Director [shimrit@cameri.co.il](mailto:shimrit@cameri.co.il) [shimrit.ron2@gmail.com](mailto:shimrit.ron2@gmail.com)  
Israeli Dramatists Website: <http://dramaisrael.org/en/>

### Cast:

The Thin Soldier  
The Fat Soldier  
The Crawling Soldier  
The Wife  
The Boy  
The Blind Neighbor  
The Mute Neighbor  
The Dead Grandfather

Scene 1

(Night. A path leading to a house through a desolate field. The thin soldier creeps through the dark toward the house holding a flashlight.)

The thin soldier: When I finally came home from the front after being away for five years and got closer to the village where my house is, I was overcome by such emotion that I couldn't go on. I thought I would fall down and pass out from my heart pounding. God, how familiar and how foreign it all looked. I didn't know if I was awake or dreaming. I could handle the road, the forest nearby, the village, but soon I'd be facing my house – here, I can already see it! – and when I open the door I'll see my wife and son. I'm sure I won't recognize my son; he was three when I left. My wife, I'll recognize. She won't be beautiful like she was, no. The hunger, the longing must have weakened her. I'll find gray hair on her head and wrinkles on her face. But the eyes that look at me, they'll be the same eyes, and when she hugs me, I'll smell her body the way it used to smell, and she'll cry, and I'll cry too, and that moment of our reunion will be worth it all for me. It's good to suffer five years for a moment like this. We'll stand there hugging for a long time and we'll cry over the five years of our lives that we'll never get back. And with the boy, it'll be the beginning of a reacquaintance. He'll wake up in the morning and he'll pin me with his questioning eyes, maybe he even has a toy sword and he'll expect me to tell him heroic tales of glory. "My father is back from the war!" he'll proudly tell all his friends, and for that, I need to tell him stories, me, who only saw the war from my ass, because the whole time I kept running away, and I could hear the mortars and the bullets trying to get me and exploding around me, and I heard the screams of the men being killed and injured around me, the ones who ran away with me. If only I had turned my head back once in a while to see what really happens when you fight. But how could I when I was so afraid?

(He places the flashlight on the ground.)

Well, I think I'll be able to make something up for him. And I'll do it no worse than some others who've also never heard a shot. Anyway, it won't do any harm to rehearse the part. Good idea, Sossya! Try this out: We're in the kitchen, and this flashlight is my boy who pins his eyes on me and gapes, and waits.

(Speaking to the flashlight.)

"Daddy, tell me what happened! Tell me, Daddy."

"What shall I tell, my child, it was very difficult, very difficult!"

"And frightening?"

"Of course it was frightening. Deathly frightening."

"And were you frightened, Father?"

"Not really, my sweet boy. When you're at war you don't really have time to be frightened. You run and you roar and you fire."

"And did you run right at the enemy?"

"I did run, my child, I ran and I fired."

"And did you kill?"

"I did kill, too, my child, what could I do? Of course I killed. If I fired, I killed. Father is good, Father doesn't want to kill, but if someone comes to kill Father, it won't end well for him, Father kills back, and beats him to it, and that way, when someone comes to kill Father, he ends up killed himself."

"How many?"

“At first I counted. Afterward, I stopped counting. One night, eight soldiers turn up, brutes, each one as big as a house. They show up and right away they want to kill. No hello, no how are you, just killing. Father is good, Father doesn’t want to kill, but if someone forces him... so I grabbed one of them, the fattest one, held him to me and shot at the rest. They fired too but they hit the fat one who I was using as my shield. I killed six, the fat one died too, one was left, he gave himself up.”

“What did you do with him?”

“I took him prisoner, what else? Father doesn’t kill when he doesn’t have to, but if he has to...!”

(He hugs and kisses the imaginary child, his eyes well up with tears.)

“I missed you so much, my child!”

(Pause.)

“Tell me more, Father.”

(Wiping away his tears) “Yes, I will. There are so many stories.”

(Unable to control his tears) I’ve been away for so long...!

(He cries. Pause. Pulls himself together and resumes his imaginary dialogue. The Fat Soldier emerges from the house, stands in the background, watching, without the Thin Soldier noticing him.)

“There was also that battle where we stood facing this massive, spread-out city, no exaggeration, even bigger, surrounded by a wall. Our men are here, on the hilltop, in battle formation, and over there, crowded into the valley, is the enemy. Suddenly they shout up to the sky so loud that the clouds echo back, and they start advancing toward us like a wave. But we, just as sharp and brave as them, we sent them packing. At first they got to our front guard, over there; it crumbled. Then they reached our cannons, over there; the cannons surrendered. So now they’re spurred on, they move toward our rifle brigade, and it also clears the way for them. They’re confident now, moving quickly at our main group of soldiers. Our commander looks at me and whispers – he always consults with me – ‘Sossya, should we storm?’ ‘Yes!’ I answer and behind me they all shout ‘Sossya! Sossya!’”

Scene 2

(The Thin Soldier catches sight of the Fat Soldier.)

Fat Soldier: Sossya who?

Thin Soldier (startled, he jumps back, trembling): Who...who...who...who’s there?

Fat Soldier (drawing near): And who the hell are you?! I heard “Sossya”?

Thin Soldier: I’m So...So...So...So...

Fat Soldier: So...what?

Thin Soldier: So...Sossya.

Fat Soldier: You’re Sossya?

Thin Soldier: I...I’m...So...Sossya...and I...I’m not...not a thief...not a mur...murderer...I’m a man....I’m just com...com...coming home.

Fat Soldier: And where’s home?

Thin Soldier: He...he...here. (He points to the house.)  
Fat Soldier: This one?  
(Thin Soldier nods vigorously.)  
Fat Soldier: Your home?  
(Thin Soldier nods vigorously.)  
Fat Soldier: Sossya?  
(Thin Soldier nods vigorously.)  
Fat Soldier: But how are you Sossya if I'm Sossya?  
Thin Soldier: What? You're So...So...Sossya, too?  
Fat Soldier: I'm Sossya, Sossya.  
Thin Soldier: Maybe you're Sossya from somewhere else?  
Fat Soldier: No, I'm Sossya from here.  
Thin Soldier: Maybe from a different house?  
Fat Soldier: No, from this house.  
Thin Soldier: I'm sure there are other Sossyas in the world but in *this* house there are not two Sossyas.  
Fat Soldier: That's what I'm saying: *I'm* Sossya.  
Thin Soldier: And who am I?  
Fat Soldier: I don't know.  
Thin Soldier: So I just told you: I'm Sossya. And you look nothing like me. I'm thin and you're fat.  
Fat Soldier: That's true. I've always been fleshy. That's why I'm Sossya.  
Thin Soldier: That can't be. I've always been thin. That's why *I'm* Sossya.  
Fat Soldier: Maybe you've always been thin, but not Sossya.  
Thin Soldier: Sossya, Sossya.  
Fat Soldier (suddenly slapping his face): Not Sossya!  
Thin Soldier (backing off): Sossya, Sossya!  
Fat Soldier (punching him in the face): Not Sossya!  
Thin Soldier (backing off. Weepily): I'm telling you: Sossya and how! If you move out of the way and let me in, you'll see that my wife recognizes me. And the boy. Maybe the boy won't. He was still little when I was sent off to war. But the wife will remember, the wife will definitely remember!  
Fat Soldier (pummeling his whole body): I've been living here with my wife and my son for a long time! Now get out of here and cut the bullcrap!  
(The Thin Soldier lies crumpled on the ground, whimpering. The Fat Soldier goes over and kicks him.)  
Fat Soldier: Do you still say you're Sossya?  
Thin Soldier: When I've got a fist in my face – I'm not Sossya and I'm not not-Sossya...!

### Scene 3

(The Wife appears from within the house.)  
Fat Soldier: Here is my wife. Talk to her if you want, I won't bother you.  
Thin Soldier: Oh sure, and if I tell her I'm Sossya and she's my wife, you'll hit me.  
Fat Soldier: I won't hit you, why would I hit you? I don't get to be Sossya by might, I'm Sossya because I'm right.  
(The Fat Soldier sits on the side.)  
Thin Soldier (looks at Fat Soldier then at The Wife, hesitates, choked with emotion): Wife...!

(He draws near her, holds his arms out to embrace her.)

Thin Soldier: My wife...!

(She stands motionless. He alternates between laughing and crying.)

Thin Soldier: Here you are, and everything is so very strange. How I missed you, the face I thought about each night, and in my imagination you kept changing, you grew older, more unhappy, I aged you in my mind, I don't know why, there was no need, because you stayed the same, maybe a little whiter, more wrinkled, but you've stayed young and beautiful just like you were, but maybe I'm making you younger now, I don't know, I'm so confused, the familiar face has become strange but familiar, I see you as if for the first time, but there is memory in this seeing, you have no idea how much I missed you...! And you...

(The Wife continues standing motionless.)

Thin Soldier: You haven't even hugged me, your own Sossya. (Pause.) What, you don't want me anymore? (Pause.) Wife, what's the matter? Don't you recognize me? After all, me is me.

You've seen me so much. Look at my crooked face. Look at my nose. Remember the little wart? Here it is. The crease on my left cheek? Here it is. What more is there to say? Here I am. How could you have erased me? Answer me. How did I get erased? After all, me is me.

Thin Soldier (shouting): Wife, either I've gone crazy or you have! Recognize me! Recognize me! (He shakes her.) Recognize me!!! (He lets go, his voice is quiet and tired.) You're looking down.

What's the matter? (Looking around) Everything is desolate. The fields are parched. The hunger? Was it the hunger that made you think that the Fat Soldier, whose name I don't know, is me, Sossya, the Thin Soldier? Did the hunger do that? The deprivation? Was it your tears? The boy's? Who did it, tell me? Were you tormented? Did you suffer? Tell me what made you call that fat guy Sossya, and I'll understand! I know there are good reasons: Five years I was gone, I gave no sign of life, you thought I wouldn't come back, that I was dead! Tell me there's a good reason. It was the world, it was the wars, it was God's ordering of the world that made a fat soldier whose name I don't know be considered by my wife to be Sossya, your husband returning from the war! (Crying) Give me one little kiss! You knew I was alive, you knew I'd come back, that if I stayed alive I wouldn't forget the two of you! Give me a kiss! (He approaches her; she moves away.) I don't understand. He doesn't look like me. How can the boy... How can you... hug him. He doesn't look anything like me. (Sobbing) This fat guy isn't Sossya at all!... He's not me!... I am gaunt and sapped and haggard. I am thin as a belt, I have no belly at all, but I'm your Sossya!...I'm your Sossya! (His crying ceases. Pause.) Where will I go? Where will I put myself? (Pause.) Better I should hang myself right here on a tree.

(Pause. The Wife walks to Fat Soldier, takes him by the arm and moves toward Thin Soldier with him.)

Wife: Look how alike you are. How can I tell who's who?

Thin Soldier (Fatigued, quiet, trying to reason): But you see we're not alike. See how fat he is, and see me. See his long, straight, black hair, and see mine – thinning, almost bald, and what's left has turned white. See his teeth when he laughs, small and sharp and complete, not one missing; and see mine, almost all gone, and the ones left are loose.

Wife: No, I really don't see the differences. See for yourself: you have the same body.

This Soldier: You don't see that he's fat?

Wife: No.

Thin Soldier: And I'm thin?

Wife: No.

Thin Soldier: Good God, what do we do?

Wife: To me, you look like doubles, identical twins. What can I do, that's what I see? (Shouting.) That's what I see!

Thin Soldier: You're shouting – there's still a chance. Come near, look into my eyes... (He draws near her. The Fat Soldier shoves him and he falls.) There, did you see that? He pushed me and knocked me down. If we were identical twins he wouldn't have knocked me down so easily. (He tries again to approach her. The Fat Soldier shoves him again and he falls.) See how easily? How strong you are, friend! Where does a person draw such strength in these times? Everyone is walking around hunger-struck, while you... (He tries again, and again the Fat Soldier shoves him. He falls and stays seated on the ground.) Fine. I won't get up again. Why get pushed and knocked over again and again? I get the idea, the idea is clear. In fact, the general idea of the world is clear to me. I'll keep quiet. (Pause.) Give me something to eat, please.

The Wife (trembling): My husband Sossya won't allow it. There is no giving out food now. Not now. Shortage everywhere. Everything strictly factored. What there is at home is for Sossya and me and the boy.

Thin Soldier: I'm dying of hunger. What I dream about at night you surely know: about you, about the boy, that's clear. But especially about pickled herring in sour cream. Give me something to eat. Bread. I'm simply dying of hunger.

(The Fat Soldier approaches the Thin Soldier, looking down at him.)

Fat Soldier: What are you doing, trying to arouse our pity. What's the matter with you? You fall over as if you have no strength, as if you're thin. You're not thin at all – there's meat on you. (He prods him.) Quite a bit. Right here. And probably even more on your ass. You're not lacking, there's plenty. Especially on the ass. (Laughing.) The ass. You're pretty chubby. In fact, why chubby? I'd say you're fat. Next to you I'm actually a little slim. (He prods himself.) Truly thin. (Poking his own ass.) Nothing on my ass. You know, I'm even more you than you are? (He falls to the ground.) Look, no strength. Falling down. Thin. A fart. Get up! (The Thin Soldier stands to his feet.) I swear, you're the Fat Soldier. You can hug your wife and go inside. I'll stay here like a dog, I'll die of cold and hunger. (Pause.) Go on, what are you waiting for? Here's the wife, here's the house, the boy is inside, the table is set. Go in and enjoy yourselves.

(Pretending to wail.) I'll drop dead outside! Brrrrr. I'm cold! I'm sad! Brrrrr...! (The Thin Soldier hesitantly places his hand on The Wife's waist.) Hug her! (The Thin Soldier hugs her.) Kiss her! (The Thin Soldier kisses her.) Be gone, you two! To the light, to the warmth, to the boundless joy of family! How good it is in there! How good it is to be the Fat Soldier! Cursed be the day on which the Thin Soldier was born! Be gone! (The Thin Soldier and The Wife stand in hesitation.) Be gone! (The Thin Soldier and The Wife look at one another, still hesitant.)

Wife: You don't really mean it, Sossya...

Fat Soldier: "Sossya, Sossya, Sossya, Sossya!" All day long and all night long, "Sossya" and "Sossya"! Who is Sossya for you? What is Sossya anyway? You know I'm not Sossya!

Wife: Not Sossya?

Fat Soldier (Crying): Not Sossya, not Sossya! What gives me the right to be Sossya? To have a warm home? A wife and son? Food? I'm not Sossya! I'm not Sossya!

Thin Soldier (Summoning courage, still afraid): If you're not Sossya...

Fat Soldier: Not Sossya!

Thin Soldier: Then maybe I'm Sossya?

Fat Soldier: Sossya, Sossya!

Thin Soldier: Me?

Fat Soldier: Sossya!

(The Thin Soldier looks at The Wife. She looks down, then moves toward The Fat Soldier, who continues to whimper. She leans over him.)

Wife: I love you, Sossya. I'll never love anyone else. Only you.

Thin Soldier: Wife, why are you saying that to him? You're afraid of the coming winter, you think that the fat padding his body will last longer than my walking skeleton. Why are you lying? Why are you pretending? I don't believe that you really fell in love with him. I am trying to delve into your eyes, penetrate your mind. What's happening there? Let me in, tell me. Never have you had a closer friend and partner than I.

Fat Soldier: Be gone!

Wife: When will I rest? Everything is tiresome. How hard it is in the world!

Thin Soldier: Who are you saying that to, my wife? Me? Him? Who?

Wife: I'm saying it to the air.

Fat Soldier: Be gone! Be gone!

(The Wife gives The Thin Soldier a look of glum consent. The Thin Soldier wraps his arm around The Wife's waist and starts walking with her toward the house. They reach the doorstep. The Fat Soldier whistles sharply and they stop.)

Fat Soldier: Come back!

(They stop and return to him.)

Fat Soldier (To Wife): Give me your hand.

(The Wife gives him her hand and helps him stand to his feet.)

Thin Soldier: On the ground?

Fat Soldier: On the ground.

Thin Soldier: Like before?

Fat Soldier: Like before.

(The Thin Soldier falls to the ground as before.)

Fat Soldier: That was good, huh? Now, enough play-acting. Back to positions. For a moment you thought...

Thin Soldier: I didn't think even for a moment. I was waiting for your whistle, I knew it would come. From behind. My back is always ready.

Fat Soldier: Call me Mr. Sossya.

Thin Soldier: Mr. Sossya.

Fat Soldier: Good. Mr. Sosya. It's not much, if you think about it. Just Sossya. But what's wrong with Sossya? One night in the war about eight huge soldiers came at me, about to kill. I shut my eyes and started to pray when suddenly I got an idea: I grabbed one of them and hugged him like a shield – you get the picture? – the others shot and hit him, he was killed on the spot. I killed another six or so, one I took hostage. Yes, Mr. Sossya, that's me. Right?

Thin Soldier: Right, Mr. Sossya.

Fat Soldier (To Wife): Go inside.

Wife: Yes, Sossya.

Fat Soldier: Why don't you call me Sossya'leh like you always do?

Wife: Sossya'leh.

Fat Soldier: Sossya'leh, that's good. And Sossya'leh-Mossya'leh is even better. (He closes his eyes in rapture.) I was a child, can you believe it? It's unbelievable, I was. This big. Sossya'leh. My mother said, "Eat, eat!" She wanted me to eat so I would fatten up for the future. And I ate. Oh, how I ate. I did not disappoint her. I never disappointed anyone, ever. I fattened up. (He opens his eyes.) Wife, do you like it when I eat?

Wife: Yes, Sossya'leh.

Fat Soldier: I like it when you eat, too. Too bad there's not enough now. That's no good. Our boy doesn't eat, either. That's no good. People need to eat. (He closes his eyes in rapture.) Oh,

how she loved when I ate. "Eat, eat." (Pause.) "Eat, eat, Sossya'leh-Mossay'leh. (He opens his eyes.) Go inside.

(The woman disappears inside the house. The Fat Soldier sits on a barrel. Pause.)

The Fat Soldier (blurting):

Get goat!

(Pause.)

Send sand!

(Pause.)

Keep carp!

Why aren't you saying it with me?

Thin Soldier: What?

Fat Soldier: Get goat!

(Pause.)

Fat Soldier: Keep carp!

(Pause.)

Fat Soldier: Say it!

Thin Soldier: Keep carp!

Fat Soldier: Amass mass!

Thin Soldier: Amass mass!

Fat Soldier: Send sand!

Thin Soldier: Send sand!

Fat Soldier: Spit pit!

(Pause.)

Fat Soldier: Say it.

(Pause.)

Fat Soldier: Say it.

Thin Soldier: Why?

Fat Soldier: You gotta talk. Doesn't matter what. Your tongue wags, you warm up. Trump dump!

(Pause.)

Fat Soldier: Amass mass!

(Pause.)

Fat Soldier: Get goat! Send sand! Grow crow! Keep carp! Spit pit! Plant ant! Throw roe! Stow toe!

Thin Soldier: Did you make all that up, such lovely rhymes?

Fat Soldier: I didn't make them up, I remembered them. Remembering is something, too.

Thin Soldier: Remembering is a lot. Who remembers these days?

Fat Soldier: Say it.

(Pause.)

Fat Soldier: You're not saying it?

(Pause.)

Fat Soldier: Keep carp!

(He yawns.)

Fat Soldier: Well, another day gone. Time to sleep.

(He disappears into the house.)

Scene 4:



(From somewhere in the field enters the Blind Neighbor, feeling his way.)

Thin Soldier: Greetings, neighbor. It's been a long time.

(The Blind Neighbor stands.)

Thin Soldier: How are you? (Pause.) You surely remember me...(Pause.) I am Sossya... (Taken aback, quietly) I am Sossya. I came back from the war tonight. (Pause.) Sossya, remember?

Blind Neighbor: I can't see. I came back from the war blind.

Thin Soldier: Really? What that war's done to us. But you must remember me...my voice you surely remember. We've been neighbors for so many years.

Blind Neighbor: And my ears ring, they don't hear well from the mortar blasts.

Thin Soldier: Bottom line: you don't remember me.

Blind Neighbor: No.

Thin Soldier: But at least you believe I'm Sossya?

Blind Neighbor: No.

Thin Soldier: Believe me!

Blind Neighbor: No.

Thin Soldier: Believe, what do you care? I'm telling you I'm Sossya. Sossya's no great bargain or something so fantastic you can't believe it, so if someone comes up to you and says, "I'm Sossya," why not believe?

Blind Neighbor: Why believe?

Thin Soldier: Because of trust, because someone's telling you, because we're both human beings.

Blind Neighbor: And how will I know?

Thin Soldier: What do you care? Believe! What have you got to lose?

Blind Neighbor: I could lose a lot.

(He exits.)

Scene 5:

Thin Soldier (to himself): Whoever thinks I'm going to quit is wrong. I'll never quit. I'll sit by their doorstep, I'll look in their window, I'll see their shadows moving in the window, I'll hear the sounds of life coming from within. People eating, dishes clatter. With any luck I'll gnaw on some leftovers. Why not? I'll stake out a little claim by virtue of my status as next in line to be master of my house and husband of my wife. I'm the closest one to her after the Fat Soldier.

Scene 6:

(Night. The Thin Soldier is sitting on the ground gazing at the house. The Wife appears, standing over him. He rouses.)

Thin Soldier: Wife?

(She stands over him in silence.)

Thin Soldier: Where's the fat one?

Wife: Sleeping.

Thin Soldier: You came to me in secret to tell me the truth? (She is silent.) Say something. Nod your head. Bat an eyelid. Something. (She is silent. Pause.)

Wife: You're in a sorry state and I pity you.

Thin Soldier: I thank you very much. (He shrinks into himself.) In this position, I probably look even sorrier. (Contorting his face as if crying): And like this? (Tilting his head): And with my

head a little further to the side? And to the other side? (Tilting his head to the other side): And like this? This way's probably really good. This way I arouse a lot of pity, crouching in front of you like a dog. How much pleading and suffering there is in my eyes. Now you really feel sorry for me. I'm cleaving a path to the heart of your mercy. A battered dog with a drooping tail who has nowhere to go. The moments of pride are brief, the hours of indignity long.

Wife (Crying): You're breaking my heart...!

(She disappears into the house.)

Scene 7:

The dead of night. The Thin Soldier lies crumpled on bare ground, trying to huddle into his torn overcoat. The Boy appears from inside the house, silently watching him. The Thin Soldier awakens and looks at him in disbelief.)

Thin Soldier: You? My boy...! (Choking up): My boy...! How you've grown...! (Standing up): You'll remember me. (Pause.) But how, you were only three? I'm your father...! Your papa...! Hug me...! Let me touch you...! How you've grown, unrecognizable...! (Pause.) You are my only hope...! (The Boy watches him in silence. Pause.) Bring me a crust of bread. (Pause.) I'm hungry. (Pause.) When you were little I would sit you on my lap and sing to you. (Singing hoarsely):

It's a sad little ditty, make you cry-chick,

'bout a mother fly and her fly-chick

A fly-chick so loved you could die-chick

'cause the mother gave all she could try-chick...

(He waits for The Boy to join in. The Boy remains silent.)

Thin Soldier:

He lived two days, buzzing, flying and more

Thought his life would be one of parties galore

On the third day discovered to his utter chagrin

He was old, he was tired, completely done in

He spluttered, he died; not a tear was shed

'Cause his mother was long since dead

That's the sad little ditty, make you cry-chick,

'bout a mother fly...

The Boy (finishing the song, a surprise):...and her fly-chick.

Thin Soldier (crying out, emotional): My boy...! (Dancing): My son...! My son...! My beloved child...! (Singing):

A fly-chick so loved you could die-chick

'cause the mother gave all she could try-chick...

(The Boy turns and walks back toward the house.)

Thin Soldier: My boy!...Wait...!

(The Boy does not stop.)

Thin Soldier (shouting): ...and her fly-chick! ...and her fly-chick! (The Boy is swallowed up into the house. The Thin Soldier curls up on the ground, a foolish grin on his face.) It's going to be good. What can I tell you, it's going to be swell. This very night. In a dream. Something electrifying. All the hollows will swell, the bellies will bulge with roasted fowl. What do you know? We'll forget it all. We'll sleep. The entire world will be awed by the greatest trumpeting of joy – the snoring of sleepers and dreamers.

(He falls asleep.)

Scene 8:

(Night. The Thin Soldier sleeps curled up on the ground under his overcoat. From somewhere in the field The Crawling Soldier crawls in; he has an open wound in his belly, his legs are broken, and he makes his way slowly toward the house, talking quietly to himself.)

Crawling Soldier: That's it. I'm finally here, at the house. How I've missed it! I don't think I'll make it through the night. My belly is open, my guts are spilling out and there is no one to stop it. I think my legs are a little broken, too. I just want to see my wife, hug my boy, fall asleep in my bed and die. The last night of my life – in bed. My own.

(He bumps into the Thin Soldier, who is sprawled on the ground. The Thin Soldier awakens with a start.)

Thin Soldier: What...Who's that?!

Crawling Soldier: A wounded soldier. Back from the war. Crawled all the way. Ten days. I'm going to die.

Thin Soldier: Yes, I see that your situation is not exactly splendid.

Crawling Soldier: Not splendid. Not splendid at all.

Thin Soldier: Well, whose *is* splendid these days?

Crawling Soldier: I never believed it could happen.

Thin Soldier: What?

Crawling Soldier: That someone would suddenly come at me with a huge bayonet on his rifle and stick it in my belly. Look, my guts are spilling out. I'm trying to stop them but they're crawling out to see the world.

Thin Soldier: Yes, the war. I'm just back from the war, too.

Crawling Soldier: You didn't get stabbed in the belly. Your guts are not spilling out.

Thin Soldier: My empty gut is not exactly in a splendid state.

Crawling Soldier: But it's not spilling out.

Thin Soldier: No, but it's squirming around like mad inside.

Crawling Soldier: But not spilling.

Thin Soldier: But squirming.

Crawling Soldier: You're going to win this, you have more time on earth to say "squirming" than I have "spilling."

Thin Soldier: But I won't have the urge anymore to say "squirming" when you're no longer saying "spilling."

Crawling Soldier: Do you have anything better to do? I see that you're lying here like a dog in front of my house just looking for an excuse to say "squirming."

Thin Soldier: Where exactly is your house? Did I perhaps hear you say "in front of my house"?

Crawling Soldier: Yes, you heard me well. I came to die in my house, in my wife's arms. I want to see my son before I die. Help me get there. I don't have much time to live.

Thin Soldier: So where is it, your house?

Crawling Soldier: Right here.

Thin Soldier: This one?

Crawling Soldier: This one.

Thin Soldier: What's your name?

Crawling Soldier: Sossya.

Thin Soldier: I don't believe it. Perhaps I didn't hear well? Must be the shell fire that ruined my hearing. What did you say your name was?

Crawling Soldier: Sossya.

Thin Soldier: You said “Shoshya”, but you have such trouble moving your tongue that it came out “Sossya”.

Crawling Soldier: My tongue, I can still move. I can say “shit on a shingle” and I can say “syphilis”. I said Sossya.

Thin Soldier: From that house?

Crawling Soldier: That house.

Thin Soldier: Sossya’s?

Crawling Soldier: Sossya’s, who else? Why are you asking so many questions? Who are you, anyway?

Thin Soldier: Sossya.

Crawling Soldier: Am I hearing right or is my dying destroying my hearing, and you said Chochya?

Thin Soldier: The dying might have spilled your guts out, but it hasn’t hurt your hearing: I said “Sossya”.

Scene 9:

(The Fat Soldier emerges from the house and urinates outside.)

Thin Soldier (whispering to Crawling Soldier): You see the fat guy who walked out of the house and is pissing? He says he’s Sossya, too. And with him, you really don’t want to argue.

Crawling Soldier: Why?

Thin Soldier: He’s hotheaded and he hits without thinking twice. You need another reason?

Crawling Soldier: No, that’s a very good reason.

Thin Soldier (approaching the Fat Soldier): How are you, Mr. Sossya? Out to pee in the snow, are we, Mr. Sossya? We’ve had a lot to drink, warmed up, now we’re peeing, isn’t that so, Mr. Sossya?

(The Fat Soldier goes back inside the house; the Thin Soldier returns to the Crawling Soldier.)

Thin Soldier: You see what’s going on: Inside the house there’s a fat soldier, and he’s Sossya. He hugs the wife and child, eats some soup, warms his hands by the fire, and farts under the blanket. That’s Sossya.

Crawling Soldier: First you said *you’re* Sossya, now you’re saying *he’s* Sossya! But the truth is, *I’m* Sossya.

Thin Soldier: No. The truth is that first of all, that guy, the fat one, is Sossya. But let’s say the fat guy is suddenly gone, he keels over or asphyxiates or something like that – well, in that case, with the path clear, know that *I* am Sossya, so that either way there are two Sossyas ahead of you.

Crawling Soldier: There aren’t two Sossyas ahead of me. With Sossyas, there is no “ahead,” because there is only one Sossya, and if there are a few, *I’m* the first.

Thin Soldier: You are completely mistaken. It turns out the world doesn’t operate the way you thought. It turns out, every person is a few people, and there’s a queue. The fattest one is always the first Sossya. The next fattest is the second Sossya. That is to say, *he* isn’t Sossya and *you* aren’t Sossya, because *I’m* Sossya. But if he’s Sossya and you’re also Sossya, then *I’m* second and you’re after me, first of all because you *came* after me and second of all because you’re skinnier than me. That’s the way it is, even being a Sossya in the world is no easy thing.

Crawling Soldier (shouting): I don’t understand! *I am* Sossya!

Thin Soldier: Yes, I shouted like that at first, too. It takes time to understand. But a punch or two to the face, a kick in the ribs, and suddenly you understand very well.

Crawling Soldier: Listen, you’re a nuisance like I’ve never met before... *I’m* wounded and going to die, I don’t have so much time for all this chatter, help me into my house, already...

(The Thin Soldier sits on the ground and scratches his head.)

Crawling Soldier: What are you doing?

Thin Soldier: I'm thinking: Sossya's shoes were always worn, often torn, so how is it that so many people are fighting to step into that wretched pair of shoes. What is this, I ask you? Are there no other houses and wives and children in our world anymore? Are there no other names beside Sossya? No Shishtawan, no Carpatzula, no Kalapati, no Nini, no Gorka, no Tooleh, or a thousand other names like flies on shit, that everyone clings to Sossya?!

Crawling Soldier: But if you're Sossya, why aren't you shouting?

Thin Soldier: I did. But how much can a person shout?

Crawling Soldier: I'm Sossya, and I won't stop shouting: *I am Sossya!*

Thin Soldier: That's what you think.

Crawling Soldier: *I am Sossya!*

Thin Soldier: You may not know it but your shouts are *already* growing fainter.

Crawling Soldier: I am Sossya!

Thin Soldier: Fainter and fainter.

Crawling Soldier (crying): I am Sossya!

Thin Soldier: Now you're crying out of self-pity.

Crawling Soldier (his voice growing fainter): I am Sossya!

Thin Soldier: You're growing weaker. Soon you'll have no strength left at all.

Crawling Soldier: I am So... (He stops crying and shouting.)

Thin Soldier: See, you've gotten quiet.

(The Crawling Soldier groans in pain.)

Thin Soldier: The pains in your gut are overpowering your being Sossya.

(The Crawling Soldier falls silent.)

Thin Soldier: Now you're curling into yourself in silence and merely thinking quietly, "I am Sossya." (Pause.) Now the first doubt swells inside you like a ripple, and after it, a second, and then many doubts, like mischievous little waves, flood you: "Perhaps I am not Sossya? Perhaps I was dreaming? Perhaps I've lost my mind? Perhaps it's the delirium of my dying?" (Pause.)

Now thought itself is fading in you. Someone else, like me, for example, comes and stands over you, and says, "I am Sossya." And you bow your head and agree. You agree.

Crawling Soldier (feebly): Never.

Thin Soldier: You agree. From time to time, it still stirs in you, like a heavy eyelid lifting, "I am Sossya...I am Sossya..." But the essence, the great doubts, are behind you. You are not Sossya.

Crawling Soldier: Then who am I...?

Thin Soldier: No one. Nothing. Simply nothing. A hungry nothing. Frozen. Wounded. Dying. Dead.

Crawling Soldier: I think I have another few hours to suffer till death.

Thin Soldier: Maybe. Yes. It's natural.

(The Crawling Soldier lifts his head with great effort and looks at the lighted house.)

Crawling Soldier: What's he doing there, the fat Sossya?

Thin Soldier: Living. He says he's got problems, too. That he also suffers.

Crawling Soldier: He doesn't know how I'm suffering out here.

Thin Soldier: Well, he's got his own preoccupations. "Should I stop living," he asks, "just because others are not?" "Shall I stop scratching my balls just because some Chinaman is taking his last breath at this moment?"

Crawling Soldier: And yet, how much injustice is committed by he who breathes freely while another man chokes.

Thin Soldier: Where have you been till now, friend?

Crawling Soldier: I...I'll be dead by morning, but you...what will you do?

Thin Soldier (with a shrug): Don't you worry, I've got my own stake and I've got my own full life. I'm an autonomous man, in the hierarchy of the world I have a place, albeit modest, albeit requiring supreme restraint, albeit could have been much better, but I've stopped complaining, I certainly have my own lot in the world, albeit ephemeral, albeit imaginary, albeit I don't have it bad at all, albeit could have been better, albeit albeit you're right, I've got it very bad, and I'm a lost man, no less than you, why not admit it when you feel like it, and why not deny it when you feel like it, forgive me, I no longer know what exactly I wanted to say.

Scene 10:

(From somewhere in the field enters the Blind Neighbor. The Crawling Soldier is seized by renewed hope.)

Crawling Soldier: Here is my neighbor, he lives next door to me, he will know me! (Calling): Neighbor, it's Sossya! Remember me, Sossya, your neighbor?

Thin Soldier: He was blinded in the war. He no longer sees anything. He doesn't hear well, either. And when you say to him, "Believe me, I am Sossya," he refuses.

(From somewhere in the field enters the Mute Neighbor.)

Crawling Soldier: But here is my neighbor from the other side! He sees! He sees!

Thin Soldier: He sees?! (To the Mute Neighbor): Greetings, neighbor! Remember me? I am Sossya!

Crawling Soldier: Greetings, neighbor! Remember me? I am Sossya!

Blind Neighbor: He is mute. He's shell-shocked from the war, since then he doesn't speak.

Thin Soldier: Neighbor, remember me, remember Sossya!

Crawling Soldier: Sossya! Sossya!

Mute Neighbor: Ah...ah...ah...ah...

(Blind Neighbor and Mute Neighbor exit.)

Scene 11:

(The Wife appears from inside the house followed by the Fat Soldier. The Thin Soldier approaches her, quietly.)

Thin Soldier: He says he's Sossya. He's going to die, his belly is slashed open. He won't live till morning. It would make him very happy if you recognized him as Sossya.

(The Fat Soldier approaches, looks at the Crawling Soldier's wounds. The Wife gives the Fat Soldier a questioning look.)

Fat Soldier: Well, we're not louses. (Gives the Wife a quick nod of confirmation.)

Wife (to the Crawling Soldier, feebly): I know you. You're Sossya.

Thin Soldier: And if you'd place your hand on him...

Fat Soldier: That, no.

Wife (fearful): That, no.

Fat Soldier: Words only: "Sossya."

Thin Soldier (to the Crawling Soldier): You want her to call you Sossya again? (The Crawling Soldier shakes his head no. The Thin Soldier turns to the Fat Soldier.) He doesn't need "Sossya" again, he needs touching.

Fat Soldier: No touching.

Thin Soldier (to the Crawling Soldier): Mr. Sossya says, "No touching." (To the Fat Soldier): He will make do with even a fluttering touch.

Fat Soldier: No.

Thin Soldier (to Crawling Soldier): Mr. Sossya says, "No."

Crawling Soldier: When they ask me in the World to Come what I fought for in this world, I will answer: "To be called Sossya." "But who is Sossya?" they'll ask. "Sossya was someone from a remote village in a remote district in a remote land in such and such remote year, where he lived out his life, the poor man, and one day he was called to war, and when he came back..." "But who was this Sossya, in the end?" Who indeed was this Sossya, a speck of dust in the cosmos, less than that, a gust of wind, what were we fighting over, what were our struggles, what did we spend our lives on, so that in some moment, in some place, the lips of a woman who is not beautiful, not young, not rich, and whose name is as ridiculous as ours – Khloopa or Kifka or Sussita – that those lips will call us Sossya. I don't need to be called Sossya anymore. I am beyond Sossya. I am beyond everything. You people wouldn't understand. You don't see the big picture yet. You're still bickering over nonsense. I'm beyond. (He breathes heavily. Pause. Whimpering, to Wife): Call me Sossya!...Call me Sossya...!

Wife (feebly): Sossya.

Crawling Soldier: I thought I could do without, but I have nothing apart from you, apart from our child, apart from me being Sossya and you calling me Sossya!

Wife: Sossya...

Crawling Soldier: Embrace me...!

Fat Soldier: We told you, how many times do we have to tell you: That, no!

Wife: Sossya...

Crawling Soldier: Protect me and love me,

Protect my body,

No one let it grow infected in the sand,

And when I fell, from dust my mother raised me up

And bathed me, but she died,

And now I'm suffering, you see,

I'm a dying orphan, too weak to

Hold out my hand to you,

Trembling around you like the empty air:

Protect me and love me.

(The Wife lets out a loud, prolonged scream. The Fat Soldier snickers. The Crawling Soldier uses his last remaining strength to look up at the Fat Soldier and tries to make his way to him, to spit at him.)

Crawling Soldier (yelling with all his might): To hell with warm houses! To hell with blazing fireplaces, soft beds, and loaves of bread! To hell with fat men! Death to the fat men! I shit on you! She has no other man in the world but me! Come with me, whore! You hear me?! You're my wife and I'm going to die and the trouble is, I feel like screwing you! I'm suffering! I'm suffering! Have you no mercy for me?! Death to fat men and the whores! Death to fat...

(The Fat Soldier attacks him, tramples him repeatedly under his boots on his face and chest until the Crawling Soldier's entire upper body becomes one big bloody wound. Then he grabs The Wife, presses her to him, pulls up her dress and enters her in front of the others. When he has finished and has cooled down he removes a toothpick from his pocket and picks at his teeth.)

Fat Soldier: I would like to say something about two topics: the fart and the nipple.

Introductions are unnecessary, they are both familiar fixtures. The fart and the nipple. And lo, the fart I can understand. Understand profoundly, I mean. The fart is one of us, a chum, a contemporary and confrere, it is proletarian, a jester, the simple trumpet-blast of a simple life, and it is so natural that if there is an ass there will be a fart, that if there are two hills then the

wind will blow in the valley between them, and what humor, what sparks of life, what understanding of the human spirit and soul! Whereas the nipple, gentlemen, can someone finally explain to me the nipple? What is that there at the pinnacle of the breast? To what end? What's going on here? Why ruin the expanse of smooth skin with an orangey-brown blotch? Why a sort of button that becomes, over the years, as the breast sags, a crushed whistle with a plugged hole, a shriveled, empty pea-pod, why? What a brutish world, phooey!

Thin Soldier: You've got it so good that these are your problems?! (Pause. To the Fat Soldier): Sir...! (Pause.) Sir...!

Fat Soldier: What?

Thin Soldier (obsequiously): Oh, nothing...we were playing around, weren't we, sir?...Weren't we...

Fat Soldier (irritably): Yes, weren't we.

Thin Soldier: Laurel and Hardy, huh? The fat guy and the thin guy!

Fat Soldier: Yes.

Thin Soldier: And the crawling guy.

Fat Soldier: And the crawling guy, no.

Thin Soldier: And the crawling guy, a little.

Fat Soldier: The crawling guy, no.

Thin Soldier (hoisting the Fat Soldier's trousers): Right. Just you and me. The fat guy and the thin guy. Hee-hee...!

Fat Soldier: Yes, hee-hee.

Crawling soldier: Hee-hee...!

Fat Soldier: You don't hee-hee, only I hee-hee!

Thin Soldier: And I hee-hee! We both hee-hee!

Fat Soldier: And my wife, hee-hee!

Thin Soldier: And your wife, of course, big hee-hee!

Fat Soldier: And the boy in the house.

Thin Soldier: Of course, and the boy in the house. And me with you all, hee-hee!

Fat Soldier: Small hee-hee.

Thin Soldier: Small, but with you.

Fat Soldier: Yes, with us, but small, kind of weak.

Thin Soldier: But with you! With you all!

Fat Soldier (pointing to the Crawling Soldier): But not him. Him, not at all. He's oy-oy! Not hee-hee!

Thin Soldier: Yes, he's oy-oy! And we're hee-hee!

Fat Soldier (yawning good-humoredly): Well, I can see that even someone like you has a place. The world is a terrible place, but capacious. And so: there is room, therefore, both for the fart and for the nipple. Although, nevertheless – why the nipple? Lord knows.

(He disappears into the house with The Wife.)

Scene 12:

(The Boy appears from inside the house. He approaches the Crawling Soldier, looks down on him. The Crawling Soldier holds out a feeble hand and tries to sing though he has almost no voice.)

Crawling Soldier:

It's a sad little ditty, make you cry-chick,  
'bout a mother fly and her fly-chick



A fly-chick so loved you could die-chick  
'cause the mother gave all she could try-chick...  
Thin Soldier: No doubt about it, you're Sossya, too.

Scene 13:

(A blast of trumpets. From somewhere appears The Dead Grandfather.)

Dead Grandfather (to the Crawling Soldier): My grandson...!

Crawling Soldier: Who is that? Who are you?

Dead Grandfather: Don't you remember me? Have you forgotten your grandfather?

Crawling Soldier: Oh, Granddad! My grandfather is here! I can't believe it! Granddad, you're alive?

Dead Grandfather: No, my boy, I am dead. But I have come from heaven to help you. What has happened to your legs?

Crawling Soldier: They were broken.

Dead Grandfather: Oh dear me, that's not good. We'll fix them.

Crawling Soldier: And in my belly, there's a hole. All my guts are spilled out.

Dead Grandfather: Oh dear me, that's not good. We'll fix it, we'll fix it. You'll get well and be happy and cheerful as you once were.

(A blast of trumpets. The Crawling Soldier rises to his feet.)

Crawling Soldier: How wonderful! Granddad, you put me back together!

Dead Grandfather: And how! I certainly did!

Crawling Soldier: I'm well, I'm alive!

Dead Grandfather: What do you mean, alive?

Crawling Soldier: How lucky I am to have such a grandfather! And now, you'll bring me lots of bread and you'll get me back my wife and son, too, right?

Dead Grandfather: Certainly, my grandson. At once. You'll get your bread, your wife, your son. Of course you will!

(A blast of trumpets. From inside the house, The Wife and The Boy appear dressed in their finest with a platter full of delicacies.)

Crawling Soldier: Oh, so much food! And my wife! And the boy! Oh, my darlings!

Wife: My beloved, my sweet husband! How I've missed you! I always knew you'd return, you're the greatest hero of them all, I've heard what missions you carried out in the war!

Crawling Soldier: Listen, one night eight brawny soldiers turn up, from the enemy, they want to kill. I don't want to kill. But if I'm forced to...! Suddenly, I get an idea, I grab one of them...

Wife: What courage! And how handsome you are! See how our child has grown!

The Boy (singing; he starts on his own and is joined by The Crawling Soldier and The Wife):

It's a sad little ditty, make you cry-chick,

'bout a mother fly and her fly-chick...

Wife: And now, let us take a walk in the woods and pick mushrooms.

Dead Grandfather: That's right, and for me, it's time to go. But before you go walking in the woods, my dears, I would like to impart a few lovely prophecies: You will be happy. You will have excellent lives.

Crawling Soldier: Always?

Dead Grandfather: What do you mean, always? For eternity! Your lives will never be difficult, not at all. There will be no drought. There will be no war. There will never be hatred.

Crawling Soldier: And "Sossyas"? How many "Sossyas" will there be in the world?

Dead Grandfather: What do you mean, "Sossyas"? *One* Sossya. There is no more than Sossya'leh in the world, my only grandson, my sweet beloved! It will be wonderful. You'll see. (He dances.) That's all. Everyone has seen how good it will be, how joyful. Goodbye. (He exits. The Crawling Soldier, The Wife and The Boy wave farewell to him and disappear somewhere into the field.)

Scene 14:

(Dusk. The Thin Soldier stands before a bundle of stained and torn clothing belonging to the Crawling Soldier. Pause. He bends down and picks them up.)

Thin Soldier:

Three days after the Crawling Soldier died and they removed his body, I kept his clothes for myself, even I don't know why. A dusky sun, mirthful and joyous, in a warm scarlet tone, lit up the frozen earth, upon which the clothing had been placed: the stained shirt, the torn trousers, the boots without soles. This odd sight caused me an inexplicable sadness, and in my soul I felt as though I myself had died, and that life, to which I once clung and which had always appeared to me tremendous and wonderful, now seemed to me so fragile as to shatter. All that had passed, all that was lost, was now closer to me than ever. For a long while I stood gazing at the dead man's belongings, which had lost their owner and their purpose on earth, and at the expanse of ground as it glimmered in the light of the setting sun. I stood in stillness, without breathing, no longer understanding a thing. After a while of standing motionless, uncomprehending, I grew tranquil.

(The skies clear, the sun shines, birds twitter.)

I left that place and began to walk toward the forest, the pine forest that stood near the village. The lone, beautiful trees, which produced a fragrant resin, seemed to be trying to save me from despair. A merciful voice spoke to me from the trees: "Not everything in life is dispiriting, arduous and bleak. Come to us, to us, the forest loves you. In the forest you shall find good health and good spirit and lucid thought. In the forest you shall find consolation." Life gripped me by the shoulders and its wonderful gaze lay upon me. The world looked alive once again. I moved farther and farther from my home and entered the forest. (He disappears into the field. Long pause. The sun sets, it grows dark. The Thin Soldier, now only a silhouette, reappears, shivering with cold.) But several hours later, in the dead of night, I returned. Neither the trees nor the forest nor the sun nor the beauty of the entire world could console me or save me from myself. For once I was here, and once I laughed and embraced a woman and a child, and I ate hot soup, and now someone else is laughing and embracing and sipping soup in my stead. And now someone else is in my place. And no one can uproot that from my mind. Not ever. (He lies on the ground, curls up, tries to find the right position to warm himself and finally gives up and lies still. The Boy appears from inside the house, approaches him, and gazes at him in silence.)

END