

Tiger Milk (Part 2)

by David Ackley

Act I

Scene 3

A café, NADIA, MANDELSTAM, and AKHMATOVA seated at one table. At another JACOB BLIUMKIN, alone, with three stacks of paper on the table before him, from one of which he will take a sheet, glance it over, sign it, and place it on another stack. He alternates this with sheets taken from the remaining stack, which he spends more time reading and writing on with occasional glances around, along with expressions and exclamations suggesting he is well pleased with his handiwork, before placing these sheets as well on the second stack. BLIUMKIN has a large head, humped bullishly from the collar of his long, leather overcoat, which is cinched at the waist with a wide belt slung with a holster and pearl-handled revolver.

AKHMATOVA — It's strange what happens to some of these poets when they turn Bolshevik. Take Bliumkin over there. In his younger days he wrote a few quite decent lyrics which he would read at the Poets' Café in a high voice, soft as down, caressing each phrase with a silky tongue. He had a plump, creamy face and if you closed your eyes, you imagined a younger sister, saying her lessons in a flowered dress with a bow in her hair.

MANDELSTAM — I remember it: a pink bow, and black patent leather shoes. Now, with his thick brow and shiny overcoat he's like a bull dolled-up for a pageant.

AKHMATOVA — The minotaur in his novitiate.

NADIA — You knew him well?

MANDELSTAM — Intersecting circles, you might say. Speaking of poet-revolutionaries, Maxim Gorki returns from his Italian self-exile to show us how to run a proper revolution, with large helpings of zealotry and diatribe.

AKHMATOVA — So the old Social Revolutionary has made his peace with the Bolsheviks. I wonder how long that marriage will last.

MANDELSTAM — He'll carry the flag of 'Socialist Realism,' now that poor Mayakovski has subtracted himself from the scene with a self-administered pistol bullet. It seems it's not easy to be yourself and the one they require of you.

NADIA — Do you believe Vladimir took his own life?

MANDELSTAM — There's always doubt, these days. He was loyal though: perhaps he asked Stalin's consent, and it was sadly granted.

AKHMATOVA — Another troublesome poet less for them to deal with.

MANDELSTAM — Gorky has been put in charge of Poets' House with food and clothing to distribute to starving artists.

AKHMATOVA — Was Alexei Tolstoy pushed aside to make room for him then?

MANDELSTAM — He hangs on, I hear, like a wood tick on a stag.

AKHMATOVA — Well, perhaps it's a good thing. Even Gorki might see we qualify on grounds of starvation, whatever he thinks of our work.

MANDELSTAM — Yes, if you had any less flesh on your bones, we'd hear the rattling blocks away. I'm not sure that's sufficient to overcome his revulsion toward me. 'Decadent Aesthete,' was one of his kinder epithets.

NADIA — Perhaps a verse or two in the proper form might make him think better of you.

MANDELSTAM — You don't think he'd detect the hypocrisy...?

AKHMATOVA — I'd keep it brief, just in case...

MANDELSTAM — I give you, my 'Ode to the Tractor.'

Recites, with large gestures.

Perched on his steel steed
He carves from the rich, black earth
Nourishment for the masses
The orange carrot, the noble cabbage,
The revolutionary potato...

AKHMATOVA — You have the gift. It's quite terrifying, how this drivél spills from your lips. Get yourself off to Gorki, while it's still fresh in your mind.

MANDELSTAM — All it lacks is conviction. Do you think it would persuade him to part with a pair of trousers? If these were any gauzier I'd be arrested for indecency.

NADIA — So you're prepared to sing for your supper?

MANDELSTAM — For my supper, no. For trousers, arias from 'La Boheme.' Throw in a belt and I'll dance the mazurka...

Turning to stare at BLIUMKIN as if nagged by his presence or activity.

But what *are* these duties that Bliumkin flaunts? A brave clerk indeed, to display his paper-pushing to the streets. (*To Bliumkin.*) What is it, Jacob, can't they afford you your own desk?

BLIUMKIN glares at MANDELSTAM and resumes his task.

AKHMATOVA — (*Leaning closer.*) Lower your voice. He's always hated you. You don't want your name on one of those documents he initials with such grotesque pleasure.

MANDELSTAM — My God. They couldn't leave such decisions to that maniac.

AKHMATOVA — Yes, he's signing death warrants, right here where all can look on and shudder. The one stack has those ordered by the Revolutionary Committee. The warrants in the other are blank, so names can be added at Bliumkin's whim—old scores needing settling, favors for friends who covet an apartment, a mistress, a fur hat. The author of some schoolboy taunt that still rankles. When Bliumkin serves the warrant, he's been known to carry out the sentence on the spot with his pretty pistol. Like his master, he plots revenge at bedtime and sleeps like a baby.

MANDELSTAM —

Silent, slowly shaking his head.

No. This is impossible. This can't be permitted.

MANDELSTAM stands and approaches BLIUMKIN who looks up with the smile of one who is accustomed to deference, respect, homage. MANDELSTAM snatches up handfuls of the warrants, rips

them apart and throws the pieces in the air, then sweeps the remaining piles to the floor and kicks them away. BLIUMKIN stunned at this audacity this frontal attack on his paper empire. MANDELSTAM backs away, grabs NADIA'S hand who in turn grabs AKHMATOVA'S. They run from the café as BLIUMKIN slowly rises to his feet and, still dazed, fumbles for his pistol. The café in darkness, shots are fired.

Act I

Scene 4

Poets' House, headquarters of the Writers' Union. ALEXEI TOLSTOI, a small dapper man with a waxed mustache, dressed as an aristocratic dandy of an earlier time, at the front desk in a sort of lobby. In the office behind, MAXIM GORKY dressed in his familiar long black coat, and black peasant cap, scarf and gloves, alternately poking at a small smoky stove and blowing on his fingers. MANDELSTAM enters the lobby.

MANDELSTAM — So this is literatura central. What is your official revolutionary title, Count Tolstoi? How low should I bow?

TOLSTOI — You may address me as Comrade in the egalitarian spirit of revolutionary brotherhood. However, for your added information, I hold the office of Administrative Associate General Secretary of the Writers' Union, Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

MANDELSTAM — A title that quite overwhelms the modest work you perform I should think. I understand you have clothing and food to distribute to artists. As you may be able to tell, I need both.

TOLSTOI — What is your name? I'll have to check it against the membership rolls.

MANDELSTAM — Don't be more of an officious ass than necessary, Alexei. You know me well enough. You once fawned over my work when it seemed expedient.

TOLSTOI — Yes, you. Now I recognize you, though barely. Bit worse for wear, aren't we?

MANDELSTAM — A fair enough assessment, Alexei. We don't all have your adaptive gifts. And without abandoning your tailor. Remarkable. Don't the Bolsheviki notice how un-evolved you really are? I'll bet your calling card still says Count Tolstoi.

TOLSTOI — The powers know what is in my heart. They care nothing for surfaces. They know how deep is my devotion to the revolution and the people.

MANDELSTAM — As deep as the skin it saves and not a millimeter more, I imagine. In any case, what must I do to get what I need? What pound of flesh and acreage of spirit will trousers and a loaf of bread cost me?

TOLSTOI — I'm quite sorry, but the little we have is reserved for the members of the Writers' Union, those whose writing abides by the tenets of Social Realism as put forth by General Secretary Stalin. I know of no work of yours that supports the aims of Party and the Worker-State. In fact, I haven't seen any of your work in some time. Do you still write?

MANDELSTAM — Not while I have breath to speak. Written literature has been abducted for the praise of despotism and murder by the members of—I'm sorry; what is this hackery called again?... Never will I take up pen, my only instrument my living voice. Still, I claim on the strength of past works and honors what I need to live.

TOLSTOI — (*Turning his back.*) You waste my time, and your own. Good day.

MANDELSTAM —I think, Poodle, I should address the one in charge.

MANDELSTAM barges past the protesting TOLSTOI into the office of GORKI.

TOLSTOI — No, no, you must not disturb the great Gorki!

GORKI — (*Preoccupied with the stove.*) Count Tolstoi, fetch more coal. The fire keeps dying in this worthless beast. I can't get warm.

TOLSTOI darts from the room.

These aristocrats make wonderful servants, having learned all the forms of servility from their own slaves ...Who are you? Do I know you?

MANDELSTAM — We've never met. Osip Mandelstam.

GORKI — One of the new school, what did you call yourselves, Appollonians or something...?

MANDELSTAM - ...Acmeists, I'm afraid...

GORKI — Yes, well, we're all pompous in our youth... I've read a few of yours. Not so terrible for a decadent aesthete. Couldn't make heads or tails of them, really, but you seemed to know what you were doing. What do you want?

MANDELSTAM — I understand you have clothing and food to distribute to needy artists. I'd like to... this is rather embarrassing, not the conversation I expected to have with one of your literary standing...but as you may be able to tell from the state of this pair, I need trousers. And whatever food you can spare...for my wife and myself.

TOLSTOI returns with a bucket of coal, places it by the stove, pauses as if for recognition, is ignored, exits haughtily.

GORKI — Come and sit down.

GORKI takes his chair behind the desk and offers the other to MANDELSTAM.

So, you are without work?

MANDELSTAM — No worse off than many others, I suppose. I had been doing translations but those seem to have dried up.

GORKI — You are a member of the Writers' Union?

MANDELSTAM — I am not.

GORKI — How can you call yourself a writer then?

MANDELSTAM — I don't. I call myself nothing. When I wrote others were pleased to call me poet. But when the writing stops one must shed the title. Now I'm a former poet in need of trousers and bread.

GORKI — You're a clever bastard, aren't you? You'd like to benefit without contributing, is that it? We don't call this writer, or poet, we call this parasite! This is not the way it works, Mandelstam. First work, then eat. You are able, aren't you? From each according to ability. Where's the *from*, hah? Where are the lines in praise of the free worker sweating in steel mill for the glory of the socialist state?

Where is the joyous ode to the end of tsarist tyranny? Where the sonnet to Stalin's brilliant leadership? No? Perhaps you produce none of these because you do not believe in them and try to hide your apostasy in silence. Is this how it is, Mandelstam, you hide in silence and hope none will notice your resistance? Your treason?

MANDELSTAM — I confess that, unlike you and the verminous Zenkevich, I have no taste for hozannas to atrocity and murder. Or in praise of turning living men to cadavers on the icebound hell of the White Sea Canal.

GORKI —

Rising and leaning over the desk to shout.

Those are not men! Those are dogs, running dogs! Traitors! Counter-revolutionaries! Monarchists! They should be grateful for the chance to repay the state with a great work of construction! Grateful for the mercy of their leaders! To my mind, they all should have been shot!

MANDELSTAM — (*Standing.*) You pitiless little monster. You demean the artist's vocation, even your own work with these words. How does it happen that a great writer supports murder? You've squandered your human warmth. In there (*pointing to Gorki's heart*) is what you brought back from the Arctic Circle, the implacable Ice!

GORKI — (*Calmer.*) Stop hiding, Mandelstam. Silence is not permitted. Be for or against. There is no neutral. Confess. Denounce. Renounce. No matter, but not silence...

Calling toward the door.

Tolstoi, give my friend, Osip, that old overcoat on account. When he chooses to speak, perhaps more will be forthcoming, one way or another.

MANDELSTAM —

Goes out to the lobby where a smirking TOLSTOI hands him a stained and ragged overcoat which MANDELSTAM holds up to inspect.

(*Laughs.*) A literary message of sorts: in Gogol's story, when Akaky receives his new overcoat, his troubles are about to begin.

He turns to leave.

TOLSTOI — Perhaps you could cover your wife with it so her intentions won't be so obvious.

MANDELSTAM comes back to TOLSTOI and slaps him hard across the face. He stares at TOLSTOI, waiting for a reaction. Tolstoi raises his hands to his face and cringes back against the wall. MANDELSTAM exits, the overcoat across his arm.

Act I

Scene 5

A small room with a table to the front and several rows of chairs facing it occupied by a dozen or so listeners. MANDELSTAM stands behind the table fidgeting. Beyond the wall of the room, as in scene 1, the faces of STALIN and GUSEV lit, suspended higher up in the darkness.

GUSEV — (*Pleading.*) We have it this time on very good authority. His treason is ready to pop like a boil.

STALIN — I'm sick of these false rumors. His poetry is so rare, even if subversive who could tell? And no more metaphors from you. You're beginning to sound like one of them. I expect to see you next in a beret, with a book of sonnets under your arm.

GUSEV — (*Weakly.*) They say...

STALIN — Quiet. He's speaking...

MANDELSTAM — There is one more, a new work this time. Which some of you, I feel bound to say, may wish you hadn't heard...for reasons that will become obvious. If anyone would rather leave before I begin...

A few rise and tiptoe out, scarves wrapped over their faces.

One might wish to join them. (*Laughs.*) But—much as you might like—you can hardly abjure your own words. There's a strange imperative with a poem. They seem to want their own way and give you no rest until others have heard or read them. Perhaps it's the times, strange times, wondrous times, when what anyone says or

thinks—or fails to say or think—can have the profoundest consequences. Yet where else in the world is there such respect for poetry? Where else in the world can you be killed for a poem? Only in Russia.

Two more rise and slip out, their faces also muffled in scarf or coat collar.

Well, since you who stay apparently have your reasons, I'll begin.

A long pause.

Our lives are groundless
Ten steps off, we can't be heard.
Our words on lease
from the Kremlin landlord,
the butcher and peasant slayer,
Who eats our meat with his
Blood sausage fingers,
Whose words are icefalls
From his frozen lips,
Whose gleaming boots pine for
The necks of his preening stooges,
Whose laws forged like nails,
He hammers to this one's jaw.
Another's eye. The groin of that.
Whose sons cry out unheard
From the cave of his mouth.

There is neither applause nor sound. In moments, all but the two who join MANDELSTAM at the front have scuttled from the room

STALIN — What Butcher? Who is called Peasant- Slayer?

GUSEV —

Stunned and terrified by what he too has heard, unable or unwilling to speak, only shakes his head.

STALIN —

His hands enwrap GUSEV'S throat.

You did not hear this. There is no poem, no poet, no Mandelstam. Show me your tongue! If word of this gets out, you'll be buried alive with it nailed to your jaw!

FIRST FRIEND — Interesting. Not what one expects from you, Osip. Have you become the anti-Gorki? What do you feel at this moment?

MANDELSTAM — As if I'd just pulled the trigger on a very slow bullet aimed at my head.

SECOND FRIEND — We'll think on Zeno and argue it can never arrive.

MANDELSTAM and his two friends exit, laughing. STALIN releases GUSEV and looks at him thoughtfully as GUSEV massages his throat.

