

THE HUNTER'S SON: A ONE-ACT PLAY

THE HUNTER

He is sixty years of age, dressed in animal skins of the taiga forest.

THE HUNTER'S SON

He is thirty-five years of age, dressed in modern denim.

THE BOY

The HUNTER'S grandson, age twelve, dressed like his grandfather.

SCENE

A riverbank in Siberia, near the taiga forest. A teakettle and pot hang over the fire, stage center. Dishes sit on an empty crate that serves as a table. To the rear is a tent. THE HUNTER and THE HUNTER'S SON sit by the fire, each plucking feathers from a wild duck. There is a small radio nearby, and pieces of wood on the ground.

TIME

Summer. The present.

THE HUNTER'S SON: (*putting the duck aside*) No, father, I can't do it. The down sticks to the skin and the meat.

THE HUNTER: Don't pull gently, just rip it off.

THE HUNTER'S SON: (*lighting a cigarette*) It doesn't matter. I can't do it. I never could. Remember?

THE HUNTER: So, one more week and off you go again. And for how long, this time?

THE HUNTER'S SON: Only three years. You know that. It's my job.

THE HUNTER: Couldn't you stay home for a year? You promised. We'll go hunting. You can help me. I'm old and will die soon. You're my only son. What good are my daughters?

THE HUNTER'S SON: We've discussed this so many times! You must understand. I'm a radio engineer. I work at a factory. If I stay here, I'll lose my job. What can I do here? Learn to hunt? Besides, my wife would never live here.

THE HUNTER: You and your generation! Can't even clean a duck! I shoot a dozen wild ducks and they're all wasted. Your sisters can't dress them, either. They can't smoke fish. When your mother was alive, she could do anything.

THE HUNTER'S SON: Yes, Mother knew how to do everything.

THE HUNTER: Do you remember how many chickens we kept? And now we have none. Your sisters can't even mend the *torbasa*, our own native boots!

THE HUNTER'S SON: What do you want, Father? They have a profession. They're teachers!

THE HUNTER: And what can they teach, if they can't clean a duck or mend boots?

THE HUNTER'S SON: They know everything about their own profession.

THE HUNTER: (*looking at the river*) Look how Nicholas handles that canoe! He can do anything, and he's only twelve. I'll teach him everything he needs to know.

THE HUNTER'S SON: He's quite a boy. To this day I can't paddle a canoe.

THE HUNTER: I feared too much for you. You were a sickly child, my only son. So I taught you nothing. Never took you hunting. And yet I should have taught you. Like with the deer—if you don't teach them how to pull the sledge, they won't do it. Ever!

THE HUNTER'S SON: (*annoyed*) But I've learned to do other things. My job is my sledge. I love what I do.

THE BOY: (*entering with a fish in his hands*) Grandpa! Uncle! Look what I caught in the net!

THE HUNTER: What a trout! Now take your knife and skin it. Toss the entrails to the gulls. The rest goes into the pot.

THE BOY: But I want to play now, Grandpa.

THE HUNTER: You can play later. Get to work! When you're in the taiga, you must work.

THE BOY: (*disappointed*) All right. Where's my knife?

THE HUNTER'S SON: Here, I've got it. (*He hands him the knife and THE BOY exits with the fish.*) Why'd you make him a hunting knife, Father? He'll hurt himself, or someone else.

THE HUNTER: It's all right. Let him practice. I'm preparing my successor. Let him become a hunter like me. I lost my chance with you.

THE HUNTER'S SON: It's not right. He must go on learning. He needs an education.

THE HUNTER: To know the woods, the animals, the birds—is education, too! (*THE HUNTER'S SON turns on the radio to contemporary music.*) What kind of music is that? Shouting, screaming, hollering—it's like a bunch of drunks fighting.

THE HUNTER'S SON: It's the latest rock group. Do you like the beat?

THE HUNTER: What are they beating?

THE HUNTER'S SON: They're not beating anything. They're making music . . . to that beat.

THE HUNTER: The devil! I can't stand classical music either. They hold that piece of wood to the throat—what's it called?—a violin. And the noise violates your ears. But I do like that one Frenchman on the radio. He has a good orchestra. He can really play!

THE HUNTER'S SON: Paul Moria?

THE HUNTER: That's him. I used to lie down in the tent and search the airwaves for him, and when I found him, I got the feeling I wasn't alone in the forest. There's everything in that music—the glitter of snow, the murmur of the river, the rustle of the trees. It's like your soul singing.

THE HUNTER'S SON: You're talking about loneliness again, Father. But everyone's soul is lonely.

THE HUNTER: No, son. Your mother and I lived as one soul.

THE HUNTER'S SON: (*turning off the radio*) Then why did you torment her with your drinking?

THE HUNTER: And who doesn't drink nowadays? I didn't drink often, just when I wasn't in the taiga. The forest always cures me. (*A distant splash is heard.*) Did you hear that? Do you know what that is?

THE HUNTER'S SON: How should I know? Just some noise . . .

THE HUNTER: It's the fish playing. Breaking the surface. You have to hear and know every sound in the taiga. It's a science.

THE HUNTER'S SON: (*reluctantly*) Perhaps.

THE HUNTER: Please stay for a year. I'll teach you everything. How to catch muskrat, sable . . .

THE HUNTER'S SON: It's too late for that. I've learned other things.

THE HUNTER: (*with reproach*) You don't like your native land.

THE HUNTER'S SON: (*annoyed*) Here we go again! I love my native land! I often dream of the riverbank. I see Mother and you standing there. But a man needs a job that he likes, and friends with common interests.

THE HUNTER: (*picking up a piece of wood*) So I've cut this birch root for nothing.

THE HUNTER'S SON: (*puzzled*) What's a birch root got to do with it?

THE HUNTER: From the birch root you can make a good handle for a hunting knife. It won't crack in a lifetime. I meant it for you . . .

THE HUNTER'S SON: Why would I need a hunting knife in town? You need special permission to carry one. Better get me some furs instead.

THE HUNTER: (*with a sigh*) I've tried, but you can't get them now. It's easier in winter. What do you want them for, anyway?

THE HUNTER'S SON: A friend asked me to get him one. And what about a bearskin rug? It's so exotic!

THE HUNTER: All that is just whim. Fashion. Look at me. I've taken so many different game animals in my life, yet I still go about in this old deerskin jacket. And my hat is plain. (*He reaches for the kettle*)

THE HUNTER'S SON: As they say, a shoemaker never wears his own shoes. (*He jumps up*) Please sit. I'll pour the tea. (*He pours tea into mugs*)

THE HUNTER: You care for me like a child.

THE HUNTER'S SON: I'm just paying my dues.

THE HUNTER: Don't pay them to me, but to your ancestors—your grandmother and grandfather. You owe your dues to the hunting tradition.

THE HUNTER'S SON: It's too late, Father. It's too late. (*They drink tea*)

THE HUNTER: Well, I've lost you, all right.

THE HUNTER'S SON: Do you remember Victor, Father?

THE HUNTER: Motya's son? Of course. He drowned last summer. His corpse came to the surface on the sixth day, all by itself. They say he was drunk.

THE HUNTER'S SON: He graduated from aviation school but stayed in the village as a tractor mechanic—because of his parents.

THE HUNTER: And so?

THE HUNTER'S SON: We were friends. Right before his death I got a letter from him. Do you think he drowned by accident?

THE HUNTER: Of course. The boat capsized. That's all.

THE HUNTER'S SON: I'm not so sure. He complained in his letters that he didn't like working as a tractor mechanic. He said he'd go away . . .

THE HUNTER: People say all sorts of things. He capsized at full speed, making a sharp turn. His head struck the boat. He was wounded, unable to swim . . . (THE BOY runs in with a kettle)

THE BOY: Grandpa! I've done everything! (*He holds out the cleaned fish*.)

THE HUNTER: Let me see. Good job! Just like a real woodsman! Put it in the pot.

THE BOY: (*dropping the fish into the pot over the fire*) Grandpa! Uncle! Make me a bow! I'll shoot at crows. I won't shoot the gulls—they're good. How they fought just now over the trails of that fish!

THE HUNTER: Ask your uncle. He'll make you a good bow.

THE HUNTER'S SON: What? Why does he need a bow? In the village he'll shoot someone by accident.

THE HUNTER: Never mind. I'll make you one later. You'd better sit down now and clean one of these ducks. See, your uncle hasn't finished.

THE BOY: (*regretfully*) I want to play, Grandpa.

THE HUNTER: Sit down. Sit down. You're going to clean this duck for your mother, and then you'll know how to do it.

THE BOY: For my mother? All right. (*He sits and starts pulling feathers*.) Will they come, Grandpa?

THE HUNTER'S SON: (*puzzled*) Who?

THE HUNTER: (*to his grandson*) They must. Just keep listening. (*to his son*) The she-moose and her young one come to the river this time of day to drink and play.

THE BOY: (*excited*) The baby's so funny—he snorts and stomps. And he gets angry when I call him.

THE HUNTER'S SON: (*curious*) Which fur is better in summer—from a young one or an adult?

THE HUNTER: From the young. It's softer. It won't lose its lacy hair.

THE BOY: (*jumping to his feet*) Grandpa, they're coming! Do you hear the mother trampling the brush?

THE HUNTER'S SON: (*jumping to his feet*) Where? Where are they? I can't see them!

THE HUNTER: They're still in the forest. They'll appear in a minute on the other bank, by that crooked birch.

(THE HUNTER'S SON *slips into the tent and returns with a carbine*. THE HUNTER and THE BOY, *intent on the opposite bank, don't notice him*.)

THE BOY: There they are! What a long face that mother has! So ver-ry long! And here comes the little one!

THE HUNTER: (*to his grandson*) Well, you will grow up, and that young moose will grow up, and one day he'll be your game. I know where they like to go in the taiga.

THE BOY: (*shouting*) Little moose! Little moose! Swim to us! (*A shot resounds from the carbine*.) Oh, grandpa! He's hit!

(THE HUNTER and THE BOY *turn to* THE HUNTER'S SON.)

THE HUNTER'S SON: (*with false modesty*) So. I can do some things, after all. The meat is yours, the fur is mine.

THE BOY: (*in anguish*) He's in pain, Grandpa! He's dying!

THE HUNTER: (*in anger*) Why did you kill that little one? How could you raise a hand to him?

THE HUNTER'S SON: I wanted to prove that I can hunt, too.

THE HUNTER: You're no hunter, you're a poacher! Poachers have no hearts, just big bellies. They spit at the future. They devastate everything. A hunter doesn't just kill—he loves the beasts and birds. He cares . . .

THE BOY: (*crying*) He's not stirring. He's dead! He died, Grandpa! Is that really his mother? She's run away! That can't be his mother!

THE HUNTER: (*to his son*) From now on you're a stranger to us. You can go any time, even tomorrow. And don't come for my funeral.

THE HUNTER'S SON: (*embarrassed*) Father! Wait a minute! Please wait! I . . .

THE HUNTER: Don't call me *father* anymore. You're a stranger. Go! But first, since you shot that little moose, take a knife and dress out its carcass.

THE HUNTER'S SON: But I don't know how!

THE HUNTER: Killing is easy. Now go dress your kill. Don't spoil the hide. Remove the entrails and trim the meat, and bring it here in the canoe.

THE HUNTER'S SON: But I can't handle a canoe! Let me take the boat.

THE HUNTER: Go! And don't touch the motorboat! Any fool can cross a river in that!

THE HUNTER'S SON: This is ridiculous, Father! You never taught me these skills, and now you demand them of me!

THE HUNTER: I never taught you to hunt, but I didn't teach you to kill children, either. Get going!

THE HUNTER'S SON: Ah, well . . . I'll go. (*He starts off, then returns.*) Forgive me, Father! Let me stay for six months. I'll arrange it at work. I'll hunt with you and learn how to do everything. Father, forgive me!

THE HUNTER: Don't beg *my* forgiveness. Ask your nephew instead. It's his game you've stolen.

THE HUNTER'S SON: Forgive me, little Nicholas. (*He takes the knife from THE BOY.*)

THE BOY: Grandpa, I'll go with my uncle and help him.

THE HUNTER: No! Let him do everything himself.

(THE HUNTER'S SON *exits*.)

THE BOY: But he can't paddle a canoe.

THE HUNTER: Let him learn. Puppies can't swim either, yet we put them by the collar into the water.

THE BOY: What if he capsizes?

THE HUNTER: He'll swim. He swims well. I've been capsized so many times—just hold the canoe with your hand and swim for shore.

THE BOY: Oh, no! Grandpa, look! He's turned over!

THE HUNTER: Don't panic. Let him swim out by himself.

Hang on to the canoe! The canoe!

THE BOY: He's lost it!

THE HUNTER: (*alarmed*) Why doesn't he swim? He's just thrashing about!

THE BOY: He's got the knife in his hand!

THE HUNTER: He's diving! What for? Swim away, Son! Forgive me!

THE BOY: There he is! He's surfaced!

THE HUNTER: What's the matter with him? He's diving again! Son!

THE BOY: The nets are in there, Grandpa! He's caught in the nets! He's trying to cut himself free!

THE HUNTER: He's stubborn, that one! And he's keeping silent, too! Quickly! The boat! Let's go help him! (*They exit stage right.*)

Curtain.

VLADIMIR SANGI (NIVKH)

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Vladimir Sangi, born in 1935, is a Nivkh writer, folklorist, and political activist from the Pacific Coast region near Sakhalin Island, where his ancestors have lived for centuries. He was born in the Nabil camp, on the east coast of Sakhalin Island and grew up during World War II. Of his early years he says, "From my childhood I remember two things: hunger and folktales." His mother and grandmother told the children stories to dull the pangs of their hunger. By the age of eight Sangi was hunting in order to support his family, but all of the elders had gone to war and there was no one to teach him the traditional skills. The short story included here, "My First Shot," describes his first hunting experience.

In 1959, Sangi graduated from the Herzen Literary Institute in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg). At that time he had already begun the process of recording the ancient traditions of his people, including the lore of the Bear Feast. His first book of prose, *The Nivkh Legends*, was published in 1961 at Yuzhnosakhalinsk. Later, he went for further training in Moscow, in an advanced literary program, where he became the first Nivkh writer to produce a novel, *False Pursuit* (1965). He also contributed to the creation of the Nivkh alphabet and an accompanying textbook for the Nivkh schools. During his Ph.D. studies at the Gorky Institute of World Literature in Moscow, Sangi embarked on his first folklore

