

VENUS IN FUR

a play by

David Ives

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Contact:
Peter Hagan
Abrams Artists
275 Seventh Avenue
New York, NY 10001
646-461-9383

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This play is for Walter Bobbie.

Venus in Fur had its world premiere at Classic Stage Company in New York City (Brian Kulick, artistic director; Jessica R. Jenen, executive director; Jeff Griffin, general manager) on January 26, 2010. The production was directed by Walter Bobbie, with set design by John Lee Beatty, costume design by Anita Yavich, lighting design by Peter Kaczorowski, and sound design by Acme Sound Partners. The production manager was La Vie Productions. The production stage manager was Christina Lowe.

Thomas.....	Wes Bentley
Vanda.....	Nina Arianda

Venus in Fur was subsequently produced on Broadway by the Manhattan Theatre Club (Lynne Meadow, artistic director; Barry Grove, executive director; Florie Seery, general manager), opening at the Samuel J. Friedman Theatre on November 8, 2011. The production was directed by Walter Bobbie, with set design by John Lee Beatty, costume design by Anita Yavich, lighting design by Peter Kaczorowski, and sound design by Acme Sound Partners. The production manager was Joshua Helman. The production stage manager was Winnie Lok. The production moved to the Lyceum Theatre, opening there on February 7, 2012.

Thomas.....	Hugh Dancy
Vanda.....	Nina Arianda

(A clash of thunder and a burst of lightning reveal THOMAS in a bare rented studio. End of an afternoon. A few old metal chairs. A table with a clip-on lamp and a stack of headshots. A ratty prop divan. A metal stand with a coffee-maker and some paper cups. In the middle of the room, an iron pipe disappears into the ceiling. A fuse box hangs on a wall.)

THOMAS

(pacing, into his cellphone)

No. No. Nothing. Nobody. It's maddening, it's a plot. There *are* no women like this. No young women, or young-*ish* women. No beautiful-slash-sexy women. No sexy-slash-articulate young women with some classical training and a particle of brain in their skulls. Is that so much to ask? An actress who can actually pronounce the word "degradation" without a tutor?

(A roll of thunder.)

Honey – Honey, in the book Vanda is 24, for God's sake. Back in those days a woman of 24 would've been married. She'd have five kids and tuberculosis. She'd be a *woman*. Most women who are 24 these days sound like six-year-olds on helium. "*And I was all like whatever and he was all like, y'know, and I go like whatever and he's like all, y'know?*" No, I don't *know*, I don't know anything except that I saw thirty-five incompetent actresses today, and even the ones pushing retirement didn't have the stuff. Anybody who does is either shooting a series or she isn't gonna do this for a nickel a week. And the *stupidity*. They bring along props, whole sacks full of costumes. And whatever happened to femininity? Bring along some of *that*, please. Young women can't even play feminine these days. Half are dressed like hookers, half like dykes. *I'd* be a better Vanda than most of these girls, all I'd have to do is put on a dress and a pair of nylons. Well, our Vanda's got to be out there somewhere. But at this point...

(Thunder and lightning. The lights in the room flicker.)

Hello? Hello? Honey? Honey, are you there?

VANDA (O.S.)

Knock knock knock!

(VANDA ENTERS, in steep high heels, wearing a soaked coat. She carries an enormous bag, a purse, and a battered black umbrella.)

VANDA

Am I too late? I'm too late, right? Fuck. *Fuck!*

THOMAS

If you're here for *Venus in Fur*, everybody went home half an hour ago.

VANDA

God, I'm sorry, I am so, so sorry, I got caught like way uptown and my cell went out. Then my fucking heel gets stuck in one of those sewer-cover-thing-whatevers. Then there's this guy on the train, I don't even want to tell you about him, rubbing up against

my ass the whole trip. Then it starts to pour. I get soaked through to the fucking skin. Fuck! Fuck!

(She throws herself into a chair.)

God. Just my luck. Fuck... *FUCK!*

THOMAS

Can I run out and refill any prescriptions for you?

VANDA

I'm okay. Just my usual luck is all. Thank you, God, once again! Hi. I'm sorry. Vanda Jordan.

THOMAS

Vanda...?

VANDA

See what I mean? I've even got her name! How many girls in this town are named *Vanda*? Actually I'm Wanda but my parents called me *Vanda*. Anyway, I'm like perfect for the part and the fucking train gets stuck in a tunnel while this guy's trying to penetrate me. Talk about fate. And you are?

THOMAS

Thomas Novachek.

VANDA

Hi. Hey, wait a minute. Thomas Novachek? You wrote this!

THOMAS

Yes, I did. Well, I adapted it.

VANDA

And you're directing it, too, right?

THOMAS

Within an inch of its life.

VANDA

God, I love your plays! I mean, the ones I know. *Anatomy of Shadows*? Like, wow. *Anatomy of Shadows* was *amazing*! I saw it twice!

THOMAS

I didn't write *Anatomy of Shadows*.

VANDA

Right, right. I mean, you know, the other one. God, this is embarrassing. Anyway, *this* play is sure amazing. I mean, the parts of it I read. Pretty wild stuff.

(She takes off the coat, revealing a studded patent-leather top, a short black leather skirt, and a silver-studded dog-collar.)

Really sexy, huh. Or like, erotic, if you're into humiliation. Oh, by the way, I don't usually walk around in leather lingerie and a dog collar. Usually I'm really demure and shit. Just thought I'd kinda get into the part. I mean it's basically S&M, right? The play?

THOMAS

Not exactly. And it does take place in 1870.

VANDA

Mm. I guess this isn't too 1870, huh.

THOMAS

No.

VANDA

Who knows, maybe S&M-ers dressed just like this back then.

(She digs a battered, crushed photo out of her purse.)

Anyway, here's my headshot. I know the resumé's kinda skimpy. But I'm good. I'm like made for this part, I swear to God. I was amazing as Hedda Gabler.

THOMAS

(looking over her resumé)

The Urinal Theatre. I somehow missed their season... You had an appointment?

VANDA

Yeah, two-fifteen. It's like hours ago, right? Well, better late than whatever.

THOMAS

(checks the day's appointment sheets)

Vanda...?

VANDA

...Jordan. People always say is that *real*? "Vanda Jordan"?

THOMAS

I don't see your name.

VANDA

Really? My agent said they set it up and everything. I'm not down there? Two-fifteen. Shit. Thank you, God, once again! Anyway...

(She strips off her top, revealing an amazing bra.)

Geronimo.

THOMAS

Wait wait wait. What are you doing?

VANDA

(stripping off her leather skirt, revealing black panties and garters)
I brought some costume stuff.

THOMAS

No – Vanda...

VANDA

It'll just take me a sec, I swear. I found this great dress. Real period shit.

THOMAS

No. Really. Don't bother...

VANDA

What. You mean don't read?

THOMAS

I mean don't read.

VANDA

Yeah, but. Long as I'm here, I might as well like give it a go, right?

THOMAS

There's nobody to give it a go with. The reader's gone home.

VANDA

I'll read with you. It's always an honor to read with the actual author.

THOMAS

Adapter.

VANDA

Getting the play straight from the horse's mouth is always so cool. Come on, what've you got to lose? I'm already –

THOMAS

Stop. *Stop*. To tell you the truth, Miss, um...

VANDA

Vanda.

THOMAS

We're looking for somebody a little different.

VANDA

Yeah? What are you looking for?

THOMAS

Well, somebody with a little more, how should I put this...

VANDA

Somebody who's not *me*. I'm too young. I'm too old. I'm too big, I'm too small. My resumé's not long enough. Okay.

(She bows her head and starts to cry.)

Okay. God, I'm sorry. I'm sorry. It's been like really stressful today. Anyway, how do *you* know who I am or what I can do? Fuck... Fuck...!

THOMAS

We're going to be scheduling more auditions sometime soon...

VANDA

Yeah, but I'm here. Right? Couldn't you try me out, save yourself the time tomorrow or whatever? And save me the time getting here from the middle of nowhere?

THOMAS

Look, Vanda, it's been a very long day. I'm exhausted. I'm kind of frazzled myself, to tell you the truth. I also just auditioned a living panoply of outcasts for this part, including one girl who had steel teeth. You don't *want* to audition for me now.

VANDA

(putting on her skirt again)

Okay. Yeah. Okay.

THOMAS

This time of day I always unravel a little anyway.

VANDA

(putting on her skirt again)

Okay.

THOMAS

I also have someone waiting for me for dinner.

VANDA

(putting on her raincoat)

No. Sure. I understand.

THOMAS

This'll be a lot better when I'm fresh. Thank you very much anyway for coming in. Congratulations on the outfit. Very striking. And we'll see you again.

(VANDA heads for the door with her stuff, but stops short.)

VANDA

Yeah, I don't think so. Thank you for saying so, though. You seem like a really nice person. It's just – the business, you know? The goddamn fucking *business*. Plus I had to put out ten bucks at Screaming Mimi's on the fucking dress.

(Takes a long white fancy dress out of her big bag.)

I mean, isn't that real 18-whatever?

THOMAS

It is very 1870-whatever.

VANDA

Isn't that *her*? Like, total Vanda? I figured she'd wear one of those long-ass dresses because everybody hated their body back then.

THOMAS

Actually, that's a common misconception about the 19th century.

VANDA

Well, can't I just show it to you, how I look? Please, God, please, pretty please?

(Thomas's cellphone rings.)

THOMAS

Excuse me.

VANDA

Great!

(She quickly strips down again, to get into the dress.)

THOMAS

No – wait – Vanda –

(Into phone:)

Hi, honey. Yeah, I lost you, must be the storm.

(To VANDA, waving to her to stop:)

No! *No!*

(VANDA keeps on dressing. Into cellphone:)

No, not you, somebody just walked in. Mm-hm. No, I doubt it. Listen, I'll be heading out in a couple of minutes. I'll pick something up on the way. No, I got the book. I love you, too. Ciao.

VANDA

Could you do me up back there?

(Thomas does her dress up.)
Oh, wow. Reading with *Thomas Novachek*...

THOMAS
I'm not an actor, so you're not doing yourself any favors. This part needs a real actor.

VANDA
Come on. You're perfect. You *are* Kowalski.

THOMAS
Kushemski.

VANDA
Kushemski. You're *him*.

THOMAS
Not quite.

VANDA
(as Thomas finishes)
Thank you, kind sir. So where do we start? I'm up for it, whatever.

THOMAS
Why don't we try the first scene. You have the sides?

VANDA
(digging in the big bag and taking out a ragged script)
Yeah. It got kinda destroyed on the way.

THOMAS
That's the whole script. How did you get that?

VANDA
I dunno. It's what my agent sent me.

THOMAS
How did your agent get it?

VANDA
Wasn't I supposed to get this? What is it, like, top secret or something?

THOMAS
Doesn't matter. Have you read it?

VANDA

I kinda flipped through it quick on the train. So what can you tell me? This is like based on something, right? Besides the Lou Reed song? *Venus In Furs*?

THOMAS

This is based on an old German novel called *Venus In Fur* – singular – by Leopold von Sacher-Masoch.

VANDA

I bet you read German. I bet you read it in German.

THOMAS

I did, actually. Anyway, the book was a huge scandal in 1870.

VANDA

Well, sure. Basically it's S&M porn.

THOMAS

It's not S&M porn.

VANDA

You don't think it's porn? Or porn-*ish*...? For medieval times, 18-whatever, I mean?

THOMAS

Venus in Fur is a great love story. It's a serious novel. It's a central text of world literature.

VANDA

Oh. I thought from the play it had to be porn. Anyway, you don't have to tell *me* about sadomasochism. I'm in the theatre.

THOMAS

The word "masochism" comes from Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, because of this book.

VANDA

"Masochism," "Masoch," I shoulda seen that. Wow. So S&M is like *named* after the guy! Cool!

THOMAS

I'm not sure that's what Sacher-Masoch had in mind.

VANDA

Sure. He thought he wrote a serious novel, everybody else thought it was porn. So like where like are we, like?

THOMAS

We are "like" at a remote inn somewhere in Carpathia, on the eastern edge of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

VANDA

The *Austro-Hungarian Empire*... Remind me?

THOMAS

Well, it's complicated.

VANDA

But the place is beautiful, right?

THOMAS

It's a health spa for the rich. It's fantastic. At lights up Kushemski is reading in his room while having his morning coffee. And knock-knock-knock Vanda enters.

VANDA

And that's symbolic, right. For his character? I mean, he's reading?

THOMAS

You know, some people do read, even today. Sometimes pages made of actual paper.

VANDA

Ouch. You got me. Oh – is it "Severin" or "Severin"?

THOMAS

Severin.

VANDA

Severin.

VANDA

And this Kushemski is what. Throw me some, like, adjectives.

THOMAS

He's one of the shiftless rich of his day. Well-traveled. Cultivated. Literate. Intelligent.

VANDA

All in his head.

THOMAS

If you will.

VANDA

"If you will." I love it! I mean when's the last time I heard that? So he's *deestangay*. Kinda like you.

THOMAS

Don't you want to know about her?

VANDA

Oh, I think I know about her. But sure, if you want.

THOMAS

I'd say Vanda is a typical young woman of her time, in spite of her professed principles.

VANDA

In spite of...?

THOMAS

Her professed principles. She's outwardly fairly proper. Probably quite poised. Also cultivated.

VANDA

Well, all that's pretty clear from the pages. What else? Got any like insights about her? Anything I don't know? Never mind, I'll work on it. So I guess this is the so-called divan.

(The iron pipe:)

And what's this? A maypole? Phallic symbol?

THOMAS

The remains of a heating system from when this building was a sweatshop.

VANDA

Oh, wait a minute. Wait a minute.

THOMAS

What.

VANDA

(digging in her big bag)

My fur. She's wearing a fur stole when she comes in, isn't she?

THOMAS

She is.

VANDA

(takes out a thrift-shop shawl and puts it on)

There. Okay. Fur. Soft fur. Soft fur... So where am I, where do you want me?

THOMAS
Whatever's comfortable.

VANDA
No, tell me.

THOMAS
Why don't you stand there.
(She does.)
Further left. No! Further *left*.

VANDA
Oh, *stage* left.

THOMAS
Is there any other kind?

VANDA
Sorry.

THOMAS
Do you want to read the scene over?

VANDA
Nah, let's wing it. How far should we go?

THOMAS
Just to the bottom of page three.

VANDA
That's all? Then you'll kick me out, right?

THOMAS
Let's find our way through this first.

VANDA
In other words, yes. Oh, hey, last thing. These words on page like zero, here? This quotation?

THOMAS
The epigraph.

VANDA
Yeah. "*And the Lord hath smitten him and delivered him into a woman's hands.*" What is that?

THOMAS

It's quoted a couple of times in the novel. It's from the Book of Judith.

VANDA

Is that the Bible?

THOMAS

Yes, the book of Judith is from the Apocrypha of the Bible.

VANDA

Sorry. Not my area. Anyway, it's pretty sexist, isn't it? "*The Lord hath smitten him and delivered him into a woman's hands*"...?

THOMAS

I'm only quoting Sacher-Masoch's book.

VANDA

Yeah, but you included it here on page zero like it's the whole point. Never mind, never mind. None of my business. I'm just an *actrice*. Kinda bright in here. You mind if I change the lights? I hate fluorescents.

(A roll of thunder.)

THOMAS

No. Please. Make yourself at home...

(VANDA turns off the fluorescents, goes to the fuse box and adjusts the lights.)

I didn't realize there was a whole system up there.

VANDA

There. More dramatic. Oh, hey, last thing. It's eighteen-whatever, do you think Vanda has one of those phony transatlantic accents? Never mind. I'll just try something.

(She shakes herself out for a second, doing vocal exercises.)

KAAA! KA-KA! KA-KA! INK. SPOT. INK! SPOT! Okay, I'm ready. Turn around. Go on, turn around. You're reading and having your coffee, you don't see me.

(THOMAS turns his back to her.)

Okay. Morning in Transylvania. Morning in Transylvania.

THOMAS

Whenever you're ready.

VANDA

Knock knock knock.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

Come in.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

(a perfect, polished accent)
Herr Doctor Severin von Kushemski?
(THOMAS turns and "sees her.")
I am Vanda von Dunayev. I'm staying in the room above yours. I'm sorry to disturb you. I found this book in the birch grove last night.
(Holds out her script.)
A copy of Faust, with your bookplate inside. It was sitting at the fountain by that statue of Venus.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

Thank you, I was just asking the maid about that.

VANDA

I would have sent it by Maid, but I also found this rather provocative bookmark inside...
(Takes a "card" from the "book.")
Is it a Raphael?

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

It's a Titian. "Venus With Mirror." A favorite painting of mine.

VANDA

Yes, your Venus is as well-thumbed as your Faust. Is she faithful?

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

I'm sorry?

VANDA/DUNAYEV

To the original.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

To my mind, that woman is Venus. It's a faithful copy of the painting, if that's what you mean.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

I can certainly understand your fascination. The plush red velvet. The dark fur outlining her naked body. The bracelets cuffing her wrists. Her golden breasts. The picture's ravishing. But is Venus covering herself with the fur – or is she opening the fur to reveal her glories?

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

We'll never know. Both, I suppose. Well, thank you for returning it.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

I also couldn't help noticing this intriguing poem scrawled on the back. "To Venus In Fur." Did you write this poem?

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

It's just a bit of doggerel...

VANDA/DUNAYEV

Doggerel. Hardly...

"To love and be loved – ah, what bliss!

And yet there glows a greater joy:

The torment of that woman's kiss

Who makes us her slave, her footstool, her toy,

Who renders me a cringing cur,

My goddess, my dictator, Venus in fur..."

Interesting sentiments. I'd guard this bookmark well, if I were you.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

I appreciate your discretion.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

Here's your Faust with your Venus, all safe and sound. And behold. You're complete again.

(A pause.)

Well...

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

Would you like to sit down, Frau Dunayev?

VANDA/DUNAYEV

Thank you.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

May I take your fur?

VANDA/DUNAYEV

That's very kind.

(He takes the shawl off her.)

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

It's Tartar, isn't it. Caucasian sable. Probably from Kazakhstan.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

Caucasian sable from Kazakhstan. Precisely. – Kushemski stands there staring at the fur in his hands.

(She waits for him to stare at the shawl.)

You're trembling, Herr Kushemski!

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

I'm sorry. May I ring for something?

VANDA/DUNAYEV

Some coffee would be lovely.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

You can have mine.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

(mimes taking off gloves)
How nice. Two sugars, thank you.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

(mimes pouring)
He pours her coffee.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

I hope I haven't disturbed you, trodding across your ceiling with my heels.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

Not at all. Trod with your heels as hard as you like.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

So you're a poet, Herr Kushemski. A dreamer.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

A dilettante, if anything. In my life I've stretched a score of canvases but painted nothing. You might say I live the way I paint and write poetry. As an amateur.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

Your knowledge of fur seems more than amateur. You knew my stole intimately and you two had only just met.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

The love of fur is innate. – I'll skip all this.

VANDA

No, read it, read it.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

(mechanically speeding through)
The love of fur is innate. It's a passion given by Nature to us all.

VANDA

Come on, get into it.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

The love of fur is innate. It's a passion given by Nature to us all. Who doesn't know the addictiveness of stroking a thick, soft fur? That peculiar tingle. That electricity. What is a cat but a walking galvanic battery with claws?

VANDA/DUNAYEV

Well said. Yet somehow I suspect there's more to this love of fur than Renaissance aesthetics. Perhaps your mother swaddled you in sable as a baby. I'm sorry. I'm prying.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

Actually, I had an aunt who was very fond of fur...

VANDA/DUNAYEV

Well, there. That explains everything.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

We're all easily explicable. What we're not is...easily extricable.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

Extricable from...?

(A pause.)

That's the bottom of page three.

(A roll of thunder.)

THOMAS

Right. Right. That was good, Vanda.

VANDA

I was just stumbling around, trying to get into it.

THOMAS

You didn't seem to be stumbling.

VANDA

(Southern drawl)

Well, that's good actin' for ya! I tell you, I'm a pro.

THOMAS

It was *very* good.

VANDA

Aw, shucks. Now I'm all embarrassed.

THOMAS

I'm not saying it was *perfect*...

VANDA

No. Sure.

THOMAS

Let's read on a little. There's his big speech. And we skip to...

VANDA

No, read it. Do you mind? It'll rev me up. You're a good actor, Thomas.

THOMAS

I'm just faking it.

VANDA

No, you're really good. Do you have a guy to play Kushemski?

THOMAS

Not yet. We have a few possibilities.

VANDA

You should play him.

THOMAS

Right.

VANDA

No, I mean it. You'd be terrific.

THOMAS

This is hard. I can't believe I put actors through this.

VANDA

You're a playwright. You're a director. It's your job to torture actors.

THOMAS

First-time director.

VANDA

You'd never know it.

THOMAS

I'm only doing this because no director ever seems to get things exactly *right*. Having lived through one misguided production after another...

VANDA

That's why you're so perfect. You can *make* it right. You can guide it.

THOMAS

I've got it all plotted out, too. I'm going to use Alban Berg's *Lyric Suite* for transition music.

VANDA

Yeah! Great!

THOMAS

Do you know the *Lyric Suite*?

VANDA

No! But you see? You understand this stuff from the inside, and these people. But maybe for Kushemski you should try a little, I don't know, an accent or something...

THOMAS

Be more continental.

VANDA

Be more continental. Exactly.

THOMAS

("continental")
Something continental. Is this continental, or is it idiotic?

VANDA

That's it! It's a little idiotic, but it's great.

THOMAS

You didn't bring a frock coat along, did you?

VANDA

I did! You want to try it on?

THOMAS

I was only kidding.

VANDA

No, come on, try it on. It'll help you.

(Digs a black frock coat out of her bag.)
Here, see if it fits.

THOMAS

It's beautiful. Is it real?

VANDA

They said it's vintage.

THOMAS

(checks the label)
"Siegfried Mueller, Vienna, 1869"?

VANDA

I didn't even notice that. Three bucks. Not bad, huh?
(She holds it open for him and he slips the coat on.)
Whoo! Looks like it was made for you, too. How's it feel?

THOMAS

It feels good. Perfect fit.

VANDA

Sure looks good on you. *Hello, gorgeous!*

THOMAS

How much did the dog collar cost you?

VANDA

This? This is left over from when I was a prostitute.
(Pause.)
I'm just kidding! Just kidding! Anyway, let me give you a run-up. – *Somehow I suspect there's more to this love of fur than Renaissance aesthetics. Perhaps your mother swaddled you in sable as a baby. I'm sorry. I'm prying.*

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

Actually...

VANDA

And this is hard for him, right?

THOMAS

It should be.

VANDA

So give it a shot. - *I'm sorry. I'm prying.*

THOMAS

Actually...I had an aunt who was very fond of fur...

VANDA/DUNAYEV

Well, there. That explains everything.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

We're all easily explicable. What we're not is...easily extricable.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

Extricable from...?

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

What we are. What the world has made us. And the thing that fixes us only takes an instant. "The overturning of a dragonfly's wing," to quote one of the Greeks. One innocent instant and you are different, forever... How's the coffee?

VANDA/DUNAYEV

I've hardly tasted it, but it's excellent so far. – And that's symbolic, right? I mean, he's the coffee. She's only had a sip, but he's got her like all intrigued.

THOMAS

Aw, shucks. You saw right through me.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

Did you have an "innocent instant," Herr Kushemski?

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

I did, actually, very early on. But this is of no interest to you.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

No, I'm enthralled. It's like one of those English mystery stories. I await the mysterious aunt who was fond of fur.

THOMAS

I really can skip this next speech.

VANDA

No, read it, I want to hear. – I await the mysterious aunt who was fond of fur.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

*I was an impossible child. Sickly as an infant and spoiled by my parents. I spent my childhood reading in the library and tormenting the servants – and our cat. Then when I was twelve, an aunt of mine came for a visit. The Countess was a regal woman. Voluptuous, imperious, and terrifying. She refused...in a...
(He breaks off.)*

VANDA

What.

THOMAS

Nothing. It's just... It feels different, actually saying the words. Out loud. It's not like tapping the words onto a screen at 2:02 a.m.

VANDA

No, you're doing fine, you're doing good. Your aunt's come for a visit. And she is...what...?

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

A regal woman. Voluptuous, imperious, and terrifying. She refused in a thousand ways to indulge my moods, and I took against her for her majestic disdain. I needled her rudely, I insulted her, I called her Messalina. Well, she took her revenge. My parents went off one day and my aunt comes striding into the library. She's wearing an enormous Russian cape of black fox fur. On her head, a diamond tiara. And in her hand, a length of fresh green birch. The cook and the scullery maid follow close behind. My aunt throws off her fur and rolls up her sleeves revealing sleekly muscled arms. I try to escape, but the other two women grab me, overwhelm me, they fling me down onto the fur and pull down my pants. I try to be heroic, but those two hold me hand and foot while my aunt lays into me with the cane. The birch whistles in the air again and again as the blows descend. The backs of my legs and my naked backside are on fire, the lashes are like acid eating into a copper etching plate, each stroke laid on by a true artist. Meanwhile the servant women urge her on and mock me. They call me a little girl and laugh at my tears. I struggle, but it's no use. My aunt keeps whipping until I'm weeping outright, sobbing and begging her for mercy. When she's done, she forces me to kneel and thank her for punishing me. Makes me kiss the very rod with which she chastised me. Then, threatening to return for more, she takes her leave. All of this witnessed by the two laughing servants – and our cat. From that hour forward, a fur could never be just a fur, nor a length of birch an innocent switch. You see, in that moment, in that room, by that woman, I was made.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

And did she return?

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

You might say she did. For every night thereafter my Countess-Aunt visited me in my dreams, wearing a black fox fur and carrying a birch cane to continue her punishment. Each night she visits me still. An exquisite despot.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

You poor, poor man.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

Am I? In a way, I couldn't be richer, knowing all I know, having been taught at her feet.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

What have you learned?

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

That there can be nothing more sensuous than pain or more pleasurable than degradation. The Countess had become my ideal, you see. Ideal woman, ideal mate. An avatar of the goddess of love herself. I've been on the hunt for her double ever since – and for a woman of her delicious cruelty. And on the day I meet that woman, I shall marry her.

VANDA

Thomas, that speech, it's brilliant.

THOMAS

Thank you. I spent enough time on it.

VANDA

So, actually, this play is, like, all about child abuse.

THOMAS

What? No, this play is *not* about *child abuse*. Jesus Christ! This idiotic urge these days to make everything about some trivial social issue!

VANDA

Child abuse isn't exactly trivial...

THOMAS

No, it's not trivial, but you are being *trite*. Let's not be *trite*, all right? This is not anthropology, or sociology. This is a play.

VANDA

Yeah, but –

THOMAS

Don't generalize. There's a lot more going on here than "corporal punishment issues."

VANDA

Okay. Sorry.

THOMAS

This stupid, impoverished world we live in! Why are we so eager to diminish ourselves? Why do we want to reduce ourselves to *examples* of something? As if we were nothing but proof of Freud, or proof of whatever dime-store psychology is in People Magazine this week. What are you going to throw at me next, "*race, class and gender*"?

VANDA

You oughta write all that up and send it to the Times.

THOMAS

I did. They didn't print it. Anyway...

VANDA/DUNAYEV

Well, you are certainly unique, Herr Severin von Kushemski. But I'd be careful if I were you. When you obtain your ideal she maybe crueller than you care for.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

I'm willing to take the risk. In any case, there you have me. Whatever that makes me.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

I know what you are. You're a supersensualist. An ascetic voluptuary.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

And you, Frau Vanda von Dunayev, who or what are you?

VANDA/DUNAYEV

I'm a pagan. I'm a Greek. I love the ancients because they're not the moderns, who live in their mind, and because they're the opposite of the Christians, who live on a cross. I don't live in my mind, or on a cross. I live on this divan. In this dress. In these stockings and these shoes. I want to live the way Helen and Aspasia lived, not the twisted women of today, who are never happy and never give happiness. Why should I forgo any possible pleasure, abstain from any sensual experience? I'm young, I'm rich and I'm beautiful, and I shall make the most of that. I shall deny myself nothing.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

I certainly respect your devotion to principle.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

I don't need your respect, excuse me. I will love a man who pleases me, and please a man who makes me happy – but only as long as he makes me happy, not a moment longer.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

To a man, there's nothing crueller than a woman's infidelity.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

To a woman, there is: the enforced fidelity of men. – Can I move around?

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

Yes, move.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

In our society, a woman's only power is through men. Her character is her lack of character. She's a blank, to be filled in by creatures who at heart despise her. I want to see what Woman will be when she ceases to be men's slave. When she's men's equal in education and partner in work. When she becomes herself. An individual. – God, old Vanda's seriously ahead of her time, isn't she.

THOMAS

Leopold von Sacher-Masoch was. Vanda, how did you learn all those lines?

VANDA

I dunno. I'm a pretty quick study.

THOMAS

A quick study, flipping through it on the train? You know it by heart!

VANDA

But hey, you said Vanda's proper in spite of her, what was it, professed something.

THOMAS

Her professed principles.

VANDA

Yeah. So you don't think she believes all this?

THOMAS

She says she does. Women's rights, yadda yadda.

VANDA

But you think she's only putting on a show or something? Like she's lying? I was just wondering why you said "professed principles" and not just, y'know, principles.

THOMAS

It must have been all those beautiful p's.

VANDA

Sold your soul for a mess of p's, huh.

THOMAS

Guilty.

VANDA

Secretly, Thomas? You are *evil*.

THOMAS

Guilty.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

In our society, a woman's only power is through men yadda yadda yadda I want to see what Woman will be when she's men's equal in education and partner in work. When she becomes herself. An individual.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

You only say that because you yourself are so individual.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

A man usually says that to a woman whose individuality he is about to undermine.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

If you don't mind my saying so, you are not only a Greek and a pagan – and an individual. You seem to me to be a goddess.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

Really? Which one?

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

Venus.

VANDA

And Vanda really *is* Venus, right? Am I crazy? She's like Venus in disguise or something, come down to get him. To, like, torture him.

THOMAS

Well... Not really... Or not exactly...

VANDA

Okay, I won't ask. You probably wanted it to be, like, ambivalent.

THOMAS

Ambiguous.

VANDA

Right, right.

THOMAS

Actually, it's the same story as *The Bacchae*, isn't it?

VANDA

Yeah! What's *The Bacchae*? Just kidding. It's an old play, right?

THOMAS

It's an old play.

VANDA

“Citizens of Corinth!” One of those plays? *“Behold this mortal man, Testiculus, cursed for his offenses to the gods and totally fucked for all eternity!”*

THOMAS

Yes, it's one of those plays. The god Dionysus comes down and reduces Pentheus the king of Thebes to a mass of quivering feminine jelly in a dress.

VANDA

Sounds hot.

THOMAS

The crazed women of Thebes – the Bacchae – tear Pentheus to pieces and Dionysus leaves triumphant.

VANDA

Oh, yeah, yeah, I think I saw that.

THOMAS

Except here it's not Dionysus, it's Aphrodite.

VANDA

Right! Remind me...?

THOMAS

Aphrodite is the Greek version of Venus.

VANDA

The same person.

THOMAS

Same goddess.

VANDA

Hail, Aphrodite!

THOMAS

Hail, Aphrodite! Am I insufferably pedantic?

VANDA

Yup. But it's kinda cute. What are we doing?

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

You seem to me to be a goddess.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

Really? Which one?

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

Venus. But could Venus's pagan principles work in our more civil century? And without slaves? The Greeks only lived as freely as they did because they had slaves.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

Then I seem to be in need of one. Would you be my slave, Herr Doktor Kushemski?

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

Happily. Give me a woman honest enough to say, "I am Pompadour, I am Borgia, I am the mistress to whom you are bound" – and I'll kneel to her.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

But where would Aphrodite find her master today?

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

No man is worthy of dominating a goddess. He's only worthy of being subjugated by her.

(He kneels.)

Subjugate me.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

What, in love with me already?

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

Profoundly. And suffering as if I'd known you all my life.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

Stand up. Stand away from me.

(He moves away and stands.)

I must say you do intrigue me. I like your earnestness and your clarity of thought. Your great knowledge, your depth of feeling. Physically you are not unattractive. But when a man submits to me, I see a trick.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

This is no trick. Only love me.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

You see? Orders already.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

Marry me.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

I'm a frivolous woman, Herr Kushemski. You'd have to be very brave to love me. I've told you my principles and how I live.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

I only know that I want you to be my wife.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

You don't really know a thing about me.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

Dominate me.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

It's absurd.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

In time you'd only try to wrest power from me, as every lover does. Why waste time in the struggle? I hand all power over to you in advance, now and forever. Unconditionally. Dominate me. Do with me what you will. Beat me if you like.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

Well, this is certainly novel.

THOMAS

Stand over there.

VANDA

What?

THOMAS

Stand next to the divan.

VANDA

It feels better from here.

THOMAS

Well, I think you should be over there. You're taking power. Take a power position.

VANDA

(stands next to the divan;)

This is certainly novel. – No, it feels all wrong.

THOMAS

Stay there and try it. – *I hand all power over to you in advance, now and forever. Unconditionally. Dominate me. Do with me what you will. Beat me if you like.*

VANDA/DUNAYEV

(flatly)

Well, this is certainly novel.

THOMAS

You're not trying.

VANDA

You wanted me here, you got me here, I'm saying the line. And hey. It's an audition.

THOMAS

It's also an audition to see if you can take direction. Now *stand there*.

(She does.)

I hand all power over to you in advance, now and forever. Unconditionally. Dominate me. Do with me what you will. Beat me if you like.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

Well, this is certainly novel. – God, you're so right. This does feel better.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

This is the future of men and women. Let the one who would kneel, kneel. Let the one who would submit anyway, submit now.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

What do you want, in your heart of heart of hearts?

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

To be less than nothing. To have no will of my own. To be your property and vanish in your sublime essence. To dress and undress you, to hand you your stockings and put the shoes on your feet.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

You call that love?

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

Of the highest sort. The kind that most people reserve for their god. In love as in politics, one partner must rule. One of them must be the hammer, the other the anvil. I willingly accept being the anvil. – Should I stop?

VANDA

No, I love it. I love it. God, the insight. Especially about women. Thomas, you really understand women.

THOMAS

Years of study. Where was I?

VANDA

Being the anvil.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

Yes! Great love is born of opposites. Vanda, I seek pain and you pleasure. And you who seek pleasure must never defer to anyone's feelings. You must enjoy without pity, indulge yourself ruthlessly. You must use a lover as he would use you. You must rule him, you must wring him dry.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

You're fantastic.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

If you won't take me as your husband then take me as your slave. Treat me with divine cruelty. Punish me simply for being what I am and because as a goddess you have the right to.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

Why would I ever mistreat a man who loves me?

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

Because it will make me worship you even more.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

I don't want to be worshipped.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

That's the first lie that's passed your lips. Every woman wants to be worshipped, just as our Creator does. So create me. Ruin me! Annihilate me!

(Cellphone rings.)

Excuse me.

(Into phone:)

Hi. No, I'm still here. No, everything's good, everything's good. I don't know, maybe in a few minutes. I'll call you when I'm leaving. Great. Ciao, doll.

(He hangs up.)

So—

VANDA

Excuse me.

(Has taken a cellphone from her purse. Into phone:)

Hi. No, everything's cool. The audition went okay. We'll see. Anyway, I'm at the temp agency, they think they might have something for me. Yeah, dictaphone typing. A night job, typing till morning. Some legal firm, they gotta get the contract in before morning, blah blah blah. I dunno. Well, that's too bad, isn't it. I said *too bad*. 'Bye.

(Hangs up.)

Jesus...

THOMAS

Your significant other?

VANDA

Does anybody still say that?

THOMAS

Sorry. What's English for "significant other" these days?

VANDA

“Asshole.”

THOMAS

Doesn't matter.

VANDA

You're wondering how come I lied, right?

THOMAS

It's none of my business.

VANDA

What does Vanda say? "Why should I deny myself anything?" I got other fish to fuck. To coin a phrase.

THOMAS

So you're the hammer and he's the anvil.

VANDA

What am I supposed to do, say, yeah, okay, honey, anything you say? Get led around by the nose? This ain't about love. It's about getting a piece of me. You want the piece, you gotta put up with the rest of me. Isn't that what this play's all about?

THOMAS

Is it?

VANDA

Are you kidding?

THOMAS

I don't know. Am I?

VANDA

Come on. Kushemski loves it, getting led around.

THOMAS

Does he really?

VANDA

Will you *stop* it? You're so goddamn *coy*. It's like being on a fucking dance floor with you.

THOMAS

Do you want some coffee? There's still some made, though it's probably tar by now. I can pour you some. Do you want some? What?

VANDA

You're not coming on to me, are you, Tom?

THOMAS

No, I just wanted to know if you wanted some coffee.

VANDA

Is it "symbolic coffee"?

THOMAS

No, it's real coffee. It's live coffee.

VANDA

You think your wife would approve of you offering me some real, live coffee?

THOMAS

(pouring two cups of coffee)
I'm not married.

VANDA

I thought from the phone...

THOMAS

That's my fiancée.

VANDA

Same difference. What would *Fiancée* think? Aren't you the guy who once said in some interview, "Working in the theatre is the world's greatest way to get laid"?

THOMAS

I was a kid. It was my first interview.

VANDA

You never been married?

THOMAS

Nope.

VANDA

Living with Mom all these years?

THOMAS

No, I just have this very old-fashioned kink.

VANDA

Fox furs?

THOMAS

I have to fall in love.

VANDA

That's a pretty serious kink.

THOMAS

The thing is, when I do fall...

VANDA

You go the whole nine yards, huh.

THOMAS

Instantly. Bells and whistles. Spots in front of my eyes. Chaos. Thunderbolts...

(Lightning flash.)

Speak of the devil.

(Holds out a cup of coffee for her.)

So – coffee, or no coffee?

VANDA/DUNAYEV

I could imagine giving myself to one man for life, but only if he commanded my respect, if he overpowered me with his strength, if he enslaved me. I'd kneel to that man and bend my neck to him and be his slave... So it seems we're not a very good match, are we? We cancel each other out.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

And I say we're created for each other. Don't you feel that, Vanda? Don't you feel it, too?

VANDA/DUNAYEV

Let me propose a trial. A business deal, if you will. I'll give you one year to prove that you're the man for me.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

A year is a long time.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

Ah. So you're dictating the terms now?

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

I beg your pardon.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

Within that year, since you so rashly give me the choice of husband or slave, you will be my slave. Men being what men are, I'll draw up a contract defining the terms. – So, wow, she's like ready, huh. I guess she was always ready, before she even got there.

THOMAS

Was she?

VANDA

Will you *stop* that? You wrote it, you tell me.

THOMAS

I don't know if she was "ready," as you say. And I'm not being coy.

VANDA

I guess you wanted it ambivalent.

THOMAS

Ambiguous.

VANDA

Ambiguous. Or is she just so horny she doesn't care how she gets off?

THOMAS

"Horny." I hadn't thought of it that way.

VANDA

Or, is she cutting him a tougher deal – be my slavey for a year and *then* you get to fuck me? You were trying to be ambivalent.

THOMAS

Ambiguous.

VANDA

Ambiguous.

THOMAS

From my perspective – Kushemski's perspective – you may be my last chance. Maybe my only chance.

VANDA

I am? At what?

THOMAS

At life. A life that feels normal to someone like Kushemski.

VANDA

Yeah. Basically, he's got this beat-me-whip-me kink and he wants to see if she's up for it. He's auditioning her.

THOMAS

She's auditioning him, too.

VANDA

He's an oddity. She's a commodity. Like all women in eighteen-seventy-whatever. What.

THOMAS

Who *are* you, Frau Vanda Jordan?

VANDA

I'm a pagan. I'm a Greek.

THOMAS

No, really.

VANDA

You're coming on to me again.

THOMAS

Where in the world did you come from? What's your program bio?

VANDA

I'm an army brat. I'm from nowhere.

THOMAS

Where, what city, what state?

VANDA/DUNAYEV

Since you so rashly give me the choice of husband or slave, you will be my slave. Men being what men are, I'll draw up a contract defining the terms. Do you consent?

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

To anything you demand.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

Here's my hand on it. – They shake hands.

(They mime shaking hands from a distance.)

There's a Greek who's come to town.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

A Greek...?

VANDA/DUNAYEV

A real Greek. He rides a snow-white stallion and wears high black leather boots and usually has a pair of Negro servants in tow. I want you to find out where he comes from, everything about him. I'm going to let this handsome animal pay court to me.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

But Vanda—

VANDA/DUNAYEV

What's this? Insurrection already?

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

Forgive me.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

Wait for me tomorrow in the birch grove, by the statue of Aphrodite.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

At what time?

VANDA/DUNAYEV

You can wait for me until I decide to arrive. And don't come unless you've found out about this Greek. Kiss my foot.

THOMAS

(without doing so, just inclining his head)
He kneels and kisses her foot.

VANDA

I love this moment. Just, bang, "Kiss my foot." – Now you may put my fur on me.
(He wraps the shawl around her but lingers, gripping her shoulders from behind.)
Severin, where will all this end?

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

That is in your power, Frau Vanda von Dunayev, not mine. When next I see you, will you...

VANDA/DUNAYEV

Will I what?

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

Will you wear this? Will you wear fur?

(A roll of thunder.)

VANDA/DUNAYEV

Thank you for the coffee. Slave.

(A pause.)

Now I really do need some. Coffee, I mean.

(She turns the fluorescents back on and pours herself coffee at the stand.)

Wow. Old Leo was pretty intense. All they have to do is shake hands and it's like *steamy*.

THOMAS

The joys of a more repressed age. When conversation itself was erotic.

VANDA

When conversation was all they *got*. But this isn't how it happens in the book. I mean...

THOMAS

So you know the book. You've read *Venus in Fur*?

VANDA

Okay, so I found a copy and I kinda glanced at it.

THOMAS

And you were lying before. "So this play is like based on something or something?"

VANDA

Okay, so I wanted some brownie points. And you say it's not S&M, lemme show you my copy.

(Digs a book out of her big bag.)

High-heeled patent-leather boots and a riding crop and a babe's bare ass. That ain't exactly Titian. It's S&M, babe. It's porn. Put that on the poster, you'll sell out.

THOMAS

Your *Venus* is as well-thumbed as your script. You didn't just happen to find this and glance at it, did you. That was a lie, too.

VANDA

Okay, so I kinda knew the book. How come you didn't put in that scene with Venus? When she appears to him at the beginning? Naked under a fur in front of a fireplace?

THOMAS

I didn't know how to fit it in.

VANDA

Just stick it in at the top – so to speak – before he meets Vanda. You can't do *Venus in Fur* without Venus. You could even have the same actress play 'em both. I'll do it. Naked onstage? Fuck. I'll take a freebie.

THOMAS

I'll think about it.

VANDA

Why? We can improv it. Maybe you'll get some ideas. Okay, I'm Venus now.

(She undoes her dress and steps out of it so that she is again in bra and panties.)
Imagine me totally naked.

THOMAS

You're not coming on to me now, are you, Vanda?

VANDA

Come on, you're a big boy. Just think of me as *Fiancée*, and improvise.

THOMAS

I've never done this before.

VANDA

That's what all the girls say.

(A roll of thunder.)
Just bullshit, in character. Okay, set the scene, where are we. Top of the play.

THOMAS

Well. Kushemski's room. The middle of the night...

VANDA

Okay. Middle of the night. Two-oh-two a.m...

(She turns the fluorescents back off, goes to the fuse box, and adjusts the lights to nighttime.)
Maybe there's just one candle burning.
(Lights the clip-on lamp on the table.)
And the fireplace going, stage left.

THOMAS

Stage right.

VANDA

Stage right. Good. And Kushemski is, what.

THOMAS

I don't know. Reading.

VANDA

Of course.

THOMAS

Too trite?

VANDA

If he's gonna be reading when he meets Vanda, he can't be reading here. Just hand out library cards, why dontcha.

THOMAS

He's writing in his diary.

VANDA

I like it. He's sitting at the desk with his back turned. Maybe the fireplace flickers up and we see Venus in the raw curled up like a cat, draped revealingly in a fur.

(She lies back on the divan.)

So drape me. You're the director.

(He comes over and drapes the "fur" over her, then starts away.)

Revealingly.

(He comes back and re-drapes her, more slowly, lingering a moment.)

Now go to your desk. Go on. *In character.*

(Thomas "assumes character" and goes to the table.)

Write in your diary. Write something.

THOMAS

I am.

VANDA

Out loud. This is *theatre*. How else we gonna know what you are? It's the top of the show, the lights are just coming up. All we hear is the sound of an old clock. Tick. Tick. Tick. *TICK...*

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

"October 22nd, 1870. 2:02 a.m. I am staying at a springs surrounded by woods and wilderness. There's no moon tonight, nothing but darkness and silence..."

(VANDA does a bird whistle.)

"No, wait. I hear..."

(She whistles again.)

"...a sparrow."

VANDA

A nightingale.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

"A nightingale."

(VANDA screeches.)

“...and the howl of a love-sick cat. I don’t know why, I feel so terribly alone, and lonely. So sick at heart, so unfulfilled. Will no one draw me out of this abyss that bears my name? Severin von Kushemski.”

VANDA/VENUS

Guten Abend, mein Herr.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

Well, well. Have the Germans invaded again?

VANDA/VENUS

I hope I do not disturb...

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

Not at all. Hail, Aphrodite!

VANDA/VENUS

Zo, you haff not forgotten me?

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

Forget you? My oldest and dearest enemy?

VANDA/VENUS

You are zo sweet. You don’t vant to kiss my hand?

(He does so.)

Nice. Ja, but Thomas... – Did I say Thomas? Whoops! – Ja, but Severin. It’s so cold in here. Every time I visit you I am catching cold.

(Sneezes.)

You see? Already I have pleggum in ze tubes.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

Maybe if you didn’t fly around naked all the time.

VANDA/VENUS

Ja, but I am Venus. I must be all ze time naked, or who knows me? You don’t want to take those off those scratchy clothes and come cuddle? There’s room here – under my mink.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

No, thank you.

VANDA/VENUS

But I brought this mink especially for you, from Olympus. It’s heavenly. You see ze label? “Made In Heaven.”

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

Why would I be so interested in your mink?

VANDA/VENUS

Oh, Severin, I know your little hobby. Your predilection for fine pelts. It's disgusting. You don't want a woman, you want her coat. You ought to marry a raccoon.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

Better a raccoon than any woman I've ever met.

VANDA/VENUS

Ja, but ziss mink und me, ve make you ze perfect wife.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

Yes. And then you and your mink leave me to cuddle with some other man. Like any mortal woman would.

VANDA/VENUS

Ja, but if – under my mink – I open my thighs...you would not have me?

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

This isn't Pompeii, you know. This is civilization.

VANDA/VENUS

And what is that, syphilization?

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

Civilization means that we don't spread our thighs to just anyone. We have principles.

VANDA/VENUS

Ja, ja, you modern men, you want your principles by day, but by night you want to dance naked around a fire. Und me you turn into a demon, you are so afraid of love.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

Love. Is that what you're offering?

VANDA/VENUS

Eh-heh.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

Power, that's what you want. You want to have me, and then put your foot on my neck like every petty tyrant in Pompeii. Well, I have a civilized duty to resist you!

VANDA/VENUS

And you still think you can? You think you will not bend to me?

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

Never.

VANDA/VENUS

You dare to resist me?

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

Yes, I dare.

VANDA/VENUS

You little piece of nothing! You dust! You dare to resist a goddess?

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

The same way I've resisted you for years. Ever since one of your sex first taught me the cruelty of women.

VANDA/VENUS

Severin, I will have you crawling to me on your knees. I will have you begging.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

Never.

VANDA/VENUS

You are mine already, and you will be mine for all time to come.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

Never!

VANDA/VENUS

Ze proof, as they say, is in ze pudding. Auf Wiedersehen, mein Freund. I'll be back. – And then, poof, she vanishes!

THOMAS

Wow.

VANDA

Not bad, huh.

(VANDA changes the lights back.)

THOMAS

Wow.

VANDA

You could write that up and stick it in just like it is.

THOMAS

So to speak.

VANDA

I thought I'd add a little Marlene Dietrich...

THOMAS

No, it was great. It was brilliant. This is a totally different side of Kushemski.

VANDA

Yeah, here he is with Venus in the middle of the night and he's all, *No, no, you bitch*. Next morning with Vanda, he's like, *Take me, pleeeeeeze*.

THOMAS

You could bring the lights down on that, lights back up to morning, knock knock knock, and there's Vanda. Like Venus in disguise.

VANDA

Taking her revenge.

THOMAS

It's great.

VANDA

So is it you?

THOMAS

What...

VANDA

This. Is it you? Kushemski-Novachek, Novachek-Kushemski.

THOMAS

No, this isn't me.

VANDA

Or maybe you're Vanda.

THOMAS

This play doesn't have anything to do with me.

VANDA

Uh-huh. You're just peeping over the fence. You're just the writer. Sorry. "Adapter."

THOMAS

Why do people always think a playwright has to be the people he writes about?

VANDA

Because playwrights do that shit *all the time*. You put me in a play, I'll fuckin' kill you.

THOMAS

Can't I just write characters?

VANDA

Sure. And you just *happened* to find these characters in this ancient German S&M novel, Herr Doktor Novachek.

THOMAS

It's a famous book.

VANDA

So you didn't have an "innocent instant" when you were twelve?

THOMAS

No.

VANDA

In the library?

THOMAS

No.

VANDA

With a cat?

THOMAS

No.

VANDA

Maybe you're still waiting for your big moment.

THOMAS

Look. I thought this relationship was fascinating. Very rich, very complex.

VANDA

Okay.

THOMAS

I thought the story was dramatic. Naturally theatrical.

VANDA

Methinks the lady doth protest too much. No, okay, go on.

THOMAS

Mostly, I loved the size of these people's emotions. Nobody has emotions this size anymore. Outsized emotions. Operatic emotions. Kushemski and Vanda are like Tristan and Isolde, they're Paolo and Francesca. Nobody's in total thrall like this anymore. Nobody's overcome by passion like this, or goes through this kind of rage.

VANDA

Meet some of *my* friends.

THOMAS

All right, fine. Maybe it's me. But there are others who don't know people with emotions like these. Don't we go to plays for passions we don't get in life?

VANDA

I thought we're supposed to go to *life* for passions we're not getting in life.

THOMAS

All right. Fine. I don't know anything.

(Throws himself on the divan.)

VANDA

So when you go home, *Fiancée* doesn't tie you to the bed and take out a whip?

THOMAS

No.

VANDA

You should ask her, see if *Fiancée* is up for it.

THOMAS

Could you stop calling her *Fiancée*?

VANDA

Sorry. How does your Significant Other feel about this play?

THOMAS

She's not crazy about it.

VANDA

She's probably worried you've got this whole kinky side and she doesn't want you to put this play on because people will think this might be you. Or her.

THOMAS

It isn't. Her *or* me.

(VANDA pulls a chair over to the head of the divan, like a psychoanalyst.)

VANDA

But let me guess about...

THOMAS

Stacy.

VANDA

Stacy. She's a little younger than you. Good family. Grew up in one of those nice old stone houses. Maybe Connecticut.

THOMAS

Massachusetts, actually.

VANDA

Southwestern Massachusetts, near the Connecticut border. Twenty minutes from Litchfield. Am I close?

THOMAS

I have to admit.

VANDA

She's tall. Maybe a little bossy, in a nice way. Lots of hair, long legs, big brain. Probably went to Stanford. Am I close?

THOMAS

UCLA.

VANDA

Maybe even a Ph.D. Well?

THOMAS

She's finishing her doctorate.

VANDA

She's got a dog. Let's see. Maybe a Weimaraner. That you like okay but could secretly do without, named something like...something traditional, something Old Testament and manly. Like...Seth. Ezra.

THOMAS

Noah. I thought you didn't know anything about the Bible.

VANDA

I bet she's the breadwinner, too. I mean, a room with a pipe in the middle of it? Not exactly the big bucks on Broadway. She probably came with money, but while she

finishes up her thesis she's working some nice investment job. Or day-trading and making a fortune. Am I right? I'm right. But hey, you're an artist. She loves that about you. And she just knows you're going to be a great big success someday. Plus she appreciates you for your sensitivity. Maybe you're the first guy she met who's got any. She reads a lot. Same books you do. Likes the opera and the ballet and shit. Like you. At night you talk about what's going on in French philosophy and what's new in the New York Review of Books, then you have some nice quiet sex. And nice quiet sex is fine. Though there's this rumbling at the back of your head. This voice that wants something else. I don't know what that is, but... *Rumble, rumble, rumble*. Anyway, hey, you're happy. You *like* her. You really, really like her and you two are going to have a nice life talking about French philosophy and what's in the New York Review of Books and maybe have a couple of kids who can do that when they grow up. And then you'll die.

THOMAS

Are we that transparent? I don't mean Stacy and me.

VANDA

What does the play say? "We're all explicable. What we're not is extricable." Or didn't you believe that when you wrote it? That line's not in the book. I checked. And you're not Kushemski.

THOMAS

No.

VANDA

Should we read on?

THOMAS

Yes, let's read.

VANDA

When they meet the next day? The birch grove?

THOMAS

Sure.

(A rumble of thunder. She gets into her dress while he rearranges chairs.)
This is the fountain and we'll make the pipe the statue of Venus.

VANDA

Hail, Aphrodite!

THOMAS

Hail, Aphrodite!

(She turns her back for him to do up her dress. He does so. Pause.)
Do you want to look the scene over?

VANDA/DUNAYEV

No, Severin. No. No. No. It's not right. All this talk of subjugation and slavery. You've corrupted me with all your talk.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

I believe that in your heart of hearts you would enjoy controlling a man.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

No.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

You might even enjoy torturing him.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

No.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

Admit your nature.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

It's not my nature.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

See what your nature is. Or change your nature.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

Can I not make you be reasonable?

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

It's not reason that I'm after. You said you would forgo no possible experience.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

And you would have me eat my words.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

I'd have you prove you meant them.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

Severin, don't you see? Don't you understand you'll never be safe in the hands of a woman? Of any woman? – Now this part is so sexist it makes me, like, scream.

THOMAS

It's not sexist. What's sexist about it?

VANDA

"You'll never be safe in the hands of a woman"?

THOMAS

That *is* from the book.

VANDA

I don't care what it's from. It's sexist. The whole thing's really kinda trite, when you think about it.

THOMAS

What's trite?

VANDA

He gets spanked one day and bingo, he's into whips and chains?

THOMAS

Apparently it happened to Sacher-Masoch.

VANDA

Did it happen to you?

THOMAS

No.

VANDA

So how do you know?

THOMAS

To me, this is a play about two people who are joined irreparably. They're handcuffed at the heart.

VANDA

Yeah, joined by his kink.

THOMAS

No. By their passion.

VANDA

His passion.

THOMAS

You're denying *her* passion. That's sexist, too. She's as passionate as he is, and this play is about how these two passions collide.

VANDA

What age are you living in? He brings her into this, and *she's* the one who gets to look bad, she's the villain.

THOMAS

There are no villains in this piece. It's a plea for people to understand that. This is a chemical reaction. Two people meet and ignite each other. It's not making some general statement about men *or* women.

VANDA

Sex, class, gender, pal.

THOMAS

It's about a woman who recognizes something in herself – possibly – and about a man who until he meets her is forced to hide his true self away.

VANDA

Yeah. This *prig*.

THOMAS

Why are you putting him down like this?

VANDA

She's this very nice, this *innocent* person who comes wandering in.

THOMAS

You don't understand, you don't understand.

VANDA

She *says*, "You've corrupted me."

THOMAS

Is she innocent? Or was this desire for domination always there? Maybe Kushemski just brings it out of her.

VANDA

Yeah, maybe she's just a woman. This is like some old Victorian Teutonic tract against *Das Female*. He forces her into a power play and then he blames *her*.

THOMAS

That's not it all, that's not what this play is about at all.

VANDA

And *the play* blames her.

THOMAS

It doesn't blame her.

VANDA

You don't *see* that?

THOMAS

How does it blame her?

VANDA

It's blaming her on every page, in every line! What happens at the end? She humiliates him one last time, she gets Count what's-his-name to slap him around, she leaves Kushemski there with his dick in his hand, and she gets blamed like it was all her fault! Like he didn't want it in the first place! Like he wasn't asking for it! I think old Kushemski's hot for the Count, that's what I think.

THOMAS

How can you be so stupid? Really? How can you be so good at playing her, and be so fucking stupid about her? And about everything else in this play. You fucking idiot. You fucking idiot *woman*. Yes. Idiot *woman*. Idiot *actress*.

(Pause.)

VANDA

I think you owe me an apology, buster.

THOMAS

I'm sorry.

VANDA

Excuse me?

THOMAS

I'm sorry. I got a little carried away.

VANDA

Well. Can't take back what's been said.

(She takes off the dress and gets into her leather skirt, packing up her things to leave, wearing her leather skirt and bra.)

THOMAS

You might say this play is about...beware of what you wish for.

VANDA

Because she might come walking in the door. Don't fuck with a goddess is what it's about.

THOMAS

If you will. Sorry. What's modern for "if you will"?

VANDA

"Whatever."

THOMAS

Whatever.

VANDA

Good thing there's no such thing as a goddess, or you'd be fucked, boy.

THOMAS

All right. Yes. You're right. I take all your points. Could we read on? Would you mind? Vanda?

VANDA

Don't you understand you'll never be safe in the hands of a woman? Of any woman?

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

You and I are adventurers, Vanda. We're explorers of the spirit. We're expanding the limits of human nature.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

Your nature is diseased. It was poisoned by the Countess. Now you're reaping the effects.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

You adore the effects, just as I do.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

No.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

You love having me in your power.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

No.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

Tell me anything you would have me do, anything in the world, and it's done.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

I called you a dreamer, but dreamer is too petty. You're a fanatic. You're a mad visionary. You'll go to any lengths to realize your dreams.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

You are my dreams.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

Break off with me, Severin, before it's too late.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

Do you love me?

VANDA/DUNAYEV

I don't know.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

Find out. Prove that you do.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

How?

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

By doing what all lovers do. Hurt me.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

No. I find it repulsive. And I despise play-acting. I'm not your Countess-Aunt. I am I.

THOMAS

Try that line again. Defy him.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

I'm not your Countess-Aunt. I am I.

THOMAS

Again. With fire.

VANDA

WHAT DO YOU WANT FROM ME, THOMAS? I AM NOT YOUR FUCKING
COUNTESS-AUNT, I AM I. WHAT DO YOU WANT?

THOMAS

I don't know.

VANDA

Because I don't think we're talking about this play anymore.

THOMAS

I just want more, is all.

VANDA

Well, I'm not her. I'm just a stupid bitch who walked in here looking for a job. And *I am not your Countess-Aunt, I am I*. How's that?

THOMAS

It's good. It's very good.

VANDA

Look, I don't think I can do this. I'm sorry. It's too much.

(She starts to gather up her things to go.)

THOMAS

Stay, Vanda. Stay. Really.

(She stops.)

VANDA

Say please.

THOMAS

(drops to his knees)

Please.

VANDA

You are evil.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

Don't you understand? You have me completely in your power.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

Liar. You're not in my power, I'm in yours. You say that you're my slave but you're the one who's mastered me. You're more insidious than the greatest temptress who ever lived. It's like some wicked plot. – It's really true, isn't it.

THOMAS

What...

VANDA

He keeps saying she's got all this power over him. But *he's* the one with the power, not her. The more he submits, the more control he's got over her. It's weird.

THOMAS

It's intricate.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

Here's the contract we spoke about. It says that you will show me slavish submission and will follow all my orders without contradiction. That you renounce your identity completely. That your soul and your honor and your body as well as your mind and feelings and spirit belong to me. That you are in short a chattel in the possession of Vanda von Dunayev – forever. Sign on the bottom. Well?

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

I thought my service was for a year.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

Who is drawing up these terms, you or I?

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

May I read the contract?

VANDA/DUNAYEV

Why? Don't you trust me?

(He "signs.")

Good. You will address me from this moment forward as "Madam" and you'll speak to me only when spoken to. You'll bring me all my meals and wait in the hallway for my orders. In the mornings you'll dress me and at night undress me. You will hand me my stockings and put on my shoes. And from now on I'm going to call you "Thomas."

THOMAS

It's Gregor in the script...

VANDA

I've changed it. – From now on I'm going to call you "Thomas." I want you in my footman's livery, wearing my coat of arms.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

As a gentleman—

VANDA/DUNAYEV

As a gentleman you're bound to keep your word. Did you not just sign a paper swearing that you're my slave?

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

Your slave, not your butler.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

I fail to see the distinction.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

Is this a game?

VANDA/DUNAYEV

This is what I am. I'm stubborn and I'm willful and I'm greedy, and when I start something I finish it. The more resistance I come up against the more determined I become.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

But at heart you're noble by nature—

VANDA/DUNAYEV

What do you know about my nature except what you've decided about it?

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

Forgive me. I am despicable.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

Give me your passport and your money. Give them.

(He gives her his wallet and she tosses it into her big bag.)

We leave tomorrow for Florence. I'll travel in first class, you in third, as my footman.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

Third class...?

VANDA/DUNAYEV

When we arrive you'll eat and sleep in the servants' quarters. I believe you're going to need this.

(She takes a servant's jacket from her bag and holds it out to him.)

Well, Thomas? What is it?

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

Where will all this end?

VANDA/DUNAYEV

End? It hasn't even started.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

But Vanda...

(She mimes slapping his face.)

VANDA

She slaps his face. — Who gave you permission to call me that?

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

Yes, Madam. Thank you, Madam.

VANDA

She kisses him.

(She mimes kissing him, coming close to him but not touching him.)

She strokes his cheek.

(She mimes stroking his cheek.)

Did that hurt very much, darling?

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

Exquisitely.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

So. Did you find out about this handsome Greek?

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

The man's name is Alexis. At Athens, he's a Count.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

He's beautiful, isn't he.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

He's very attractive.

VANDA

I told you Kushemski's hot for the Count. He is down for the Count. – Get me a box near his at the concert tonight. I'm going to let Count Alexis meet me. Indeed I'm going to let him do whatever he wants with me. What's the matter? I'm free to do as I like, aren't I? Well, slave?

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

You electrify me.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

Silence, you dog! Fetch me a birch cane.

THOMAS

He brings her a birch cane and she whisks it in the air.

(He mimes getting and giving her a "birch cane." She "whisks" it in the air.)

VANDA/DUNAYEV

Do you hear that whistle? That sound makes my nerves vibrate like tuning forks. Everything inside me wants to see you writhing under the lash. To hear you beg for mercy. To see a so-called man reduced to womanly tears. My heart is in my throat. The air is red. What have you done to me, slave? Well? What have you done to me?

(Mimes "whipping" him.)

What have you done? What have you done? What have you done? What have you done?
Blah, blah, blah, blah...

THOMAS

What do you mean, blah-blah-blah.

VANDA

What, suddenly Vanda turns into the Wicked Witch of the West? "*My nerves are tuning forks. The air is red.*" The air is purple, maybe. Look, Tom. I like you. I mean, I really, really like you. But I don't think this is gonna fly.

THOMAS

It has to. This is it. This is *the play*. My play. A very good play. And nobody's going to make me think otherwise. You're not a playwright and you're not going to take this play down whether you're in it or not. So fuck you.

VANDA

Okay. It's your call.

(Lightning and a rumble of thunder.)

She takes out a knife and holds it to his throat.

(She produces a knife out of nowhere and holds it to his throat.)

VANDA/DUNAYEV

My God, I despise you.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

What is this, Vanda, what are you doing?

VANDA/DUNAYEV

Do you think I don't understand your scheme? Do you think you could bring me into your little game and use me? Did you think you could subjugate me?

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

I swear I never meant that, Vanda. I swear.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

If you knew how delicious this is. Not just to have some random man in my control, some fool. But a man who's smitten with me, no less.

(Throws the knife aside.)

Y'know, I oughta talk to Actors' Equity. Because if you don't know *by now* if I got the part...?

THOMAS

I'd love to give you the part.

VANDA

That's what you say *now*. Do I get the part? And will you put that in writing?

THOMAS

(cellphone rings)

Excuse me.

(Into phone:)

Hi.

VANDA

Go to hell, Stacy!

THOMAS

(turning away so that Stacy can't hear)

Hi. No, I'm still here. I'm just wrapping some things up.

VANDA

He's fucking me, Stacy! He's got me on the floor and he's fucking me up the ass!

THOMAS

(into phone)

I don't know yet, pretty soon.

VANDA

He's fucking me like a Weimaraner!

THOMAS

(into phone)

Why don't you go ahead and eat. I'll call you. Ciao.

(Hangs up.)

VANDA

How dare I, right? Or something like that.

THOMAS

How dare you is about right. What was that all about?

VANDA

Excuse me.

(Into her cellphone:)

Hi. Yeah. I don't know yet. I *told* you, I don't know. Well, listen, go fuck yourself, all right? I'll come home when I come home. 'Bye.

(Hangs up.)

Sorry about that.

THOMAS

There was nobody on the other end, was there.

VANDA

What?

THOMAS

You were faking that. You weren't talking to anybody.

VANDA

I was talking to my *significant other*.

THOMAS

So who is this guy?

VANDA

Who said it's a guy?

THOMAS

Why did you do that?

VANDA

Why is right.

THOMAS

I guess you didn't like me talking on my phone.

VANDA

So, like, *woman's revenge*. For being ignored.

THOMAS

Something like that.

VANDA

Blame the woman.

THOMAS

I'm not blaming.

VANDA

You know, most playwright-slash-directors woulda had me up-ended on the floor by now.

THOMAS

I guess I'm not like most playwright-slash-directors.

VANDA

Bullshit. You wouldn't fuck me on the floor if you thought you could get away with it?

THOMAS

No.

VANDA

What if I gave you permission?

THOMAS

How do you know so much about Stacy?

VANDA

We met at the gym. She seemed really nice. Gorgeous, too. Wow. Anyway, we're getting undressed, we get to talking – *girl talk*, in the shower – she said she had this boyfriend, a writer, kinda hard to know. I told her I used to be an actress, now I'm an operative – or trying to be – so she paid me a little to come here and look into you. Find out what you're made of, see if you really love her. Kind of a premarital fact-finding mission. Plus bank accounts, credit, and so on. I'm supposed to meet her at the hotel, do a full report. Beautiful body, by the way. Congratulations.

THOMAS

You are a magnificent creature.

VANDA

A man usually says that to a woman whose magnificence he's about to undermine.

THOMAS

Touché. Stacy doesn't shower at the gym.

VANDA

Doesn't she? She looked pretty wet the last time I saw her. – So let's go to the end. You'll need your footman's uniform.

(She throws the servant's jacket at him. He puts it on. Then:)

Thomas! *You've kept me waiting.*

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

I'm sorry, Madam. I was polishing the silver.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

Don't you look dapper in that footman's jacket.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

Thank you, Madam.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

Turn around. Show me.

(He does so.)

Oh, yes. Quite irresistible. You could make me lose all sense of rank. You could make me forget that you're nothing but a lackey. But I think that something's still missing...

THOMAS

Where is that? That's not in the...

VANDA

I'm improvising. – I think that something's still missing, Thomas.

(She takes off her dog collar and puts it on him.)

Oh, yes. The pièce de résistance. Very fetching. How does it feel?

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

It feels good, Madam.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

I might just fall in love with you, wearing that. What's the matter, why are you looking at me like that?

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

Does that mean that you don't love me?

VANDA/DUNAYEV

Oh, you bore me. Whimpering all the time. You bore me.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

Is it the Count? Are you love in love with the Count?

VANDA/DUNAYEV

(throwing herself on the divan)

Can I help it that he followed me to Florence?

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

(kneeling by her)

That man doesn't love you. He wants you the way he's wanted a thousand others.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

So what if doesn't love me. Console yourself with that when I take him into my bed.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

Your heart is a vast stone desert.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

(kicking him away)

Insolent swine! How dare you speak to me in that tone? Bring me my other shoes!

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

(rising and heading for the table)

Yes, Madam.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

Not over there. In the bag, you idiot.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

Yes, Madam.

(He gets a pair of thigh-high, steeply heeled patent-leather dominatrix boots from Vanda's bag.)

VANDA/DUNAYEV

From now on, Thomas, I want you to call me "Mistress." It's more degrading.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

Yes, Mistress.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

Would you like to put my shoes on?

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

Yes, Mistress.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

I mean on me.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

Yes, Mistress.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

You may.

(He does so. When the boots are on her:)

*Maybe tomorrow I'll tie you to that post in the yard and prick you with golden hairpins.
Or harness you to the plow and drive you with a whip. Would you like that?*

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

Yes, Mistress.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

You're doing very, very well, Thomas. I might take you on as my servant permanently.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

Will there be anything else, Mistress?

VANDA/DUNAYEV

Yes. One more thing. – Call Stacy and tell her you won't be coming home tonight.

THOMAS

I can't do that.

VANDA

Oh, no?

(Pulls hard on the dog collar.)

You can't?

(He takes out his phone and starts dialing.)

And you can't tell her why, either. No excuses, lame or otherwise.

THOMAS

(into cellphone)

Stacy, it's me.

VANDA

"I won't be coming home tonight."

THOMAS

(into phone)

I won't be coming home tonight.

VANDA

No excuses.

THOMAS

(into phone)

I can't tell you why.

VANDA

Say goodbye.

THOMAS

(into phone)

Goodbye.

VANDA

Now hang up and turn off your phone.

(He does so. She throws the phone across the room.)

Isn't it wonderful.

THOMAS

I'm sorry...?

VANDA/DUNAYEV

Isn't it wonderful. Here, I mean. It's so much cozier than a hotel. Having this place all to ourselves. So nice and secluded.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

I hardly know where I am, quite frankly...

VANDA/DUNAYEV

Why, you've got a whole new life ahead of you now. We do. Minus all those other people. All that chaos. Here all alone where I can do what I want with you, undisturbed. Just the two of us.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

The two of us – and your friend the Count.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

I do wish you would stop harping on him. I've been too nice to you, Thomas. That's the problem. I haven't disciplined you sufficiently. And now look what you've said, look what you've done – just when I was about to take you into my bed.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

You mean, you would have me...?

VANDA/DUNAYEV

Yes, I would have you.

(She reclines on the divan.)

Come. Come here. Place your arms around me.

(He lies in her arms and does so.)

You see? For an hour I can let you imagine you're a free man again. That you're my beloved, you simpleton. At some point it will dawn on you that you're nothing. That you are in reality whatever I want you to be. A person. An animal. An object. An empty pistol. A blank to be filled in. A void.

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

(pulling away)

I won't. I won't do it. I won't allow it to happen.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

I beg your pardon...?

THOMAS/KUSHEMSKI

I've written you a letter.

VANDA/DUNAYEV

A letter? Ah, yes, breaking off with me, no doubt. Because suddenly you find the degradation you yourself begged for too much to bear. – I can't get this bit, I don't have a handle on this scene.

THOMAS

It seems pretty straightforward to me.

VANDA

How should it go? No, really, in your head, how does it go?

THOMAS

What's the cue line? What does he say?

VANDA

"I've written you a letter."

THOMAS/DUNAYEV

A letter? Ah, yes, breaking off with me, no doubt. Because suddenly you find the degradation you yourself begged for too much to bear. Well, Thomas, I have a contract. You've probably carried this letter around for days, afraid to show it to me. So? Where is it? Show me this masterpiece. I could use some entertainment.

VANDA

That's good, Tom. That's fantastic. Listen. You do her.

THOMAS

No...

VANDA

Yes. You be her. You've got more of a hand on her than I do. You created Vanda. You know her from the inside.

THOMAS

I don't know the part...

VANDA

Of course you do.

(Lightning and a rumble of thunder.)

THOMAS/DUNAYEV

Take this off of me and bring me my fur.

(VANDA takes the jacket off of him.)

Carefully, Thomas.

VANDA/KUSHEMSKI

I'm doing the best I can, mistress.

THOMAS/DUNAYEV

Well, your best as always is not good enough.

(VANDA puts on the footman's jacket.)

VANDA/KUSHEMSKI

(ceremoniously wrapping the shawl around him)

Your fur, mistress.

THOMAS/DUNAYEV

Prepare a bottle of champagne and two glasses. The Count will be here any moment.

VANDA/KUSHEMSKI

But, Mistress...

THOMAS/DUNAYEV

If you don't like my service, then leave. Get out of my sight! You bore me, do you hear?

VANDA/KUSHEMSKI

Will you take the Count for a husband?

THOMAS/DUNAYEV

I won't lie to you, Thomas. That man makes me tremble.

VANDA

Beautiful. Cross down.

THOMAS/DUNAYEV

I find him in my thoughts and I can't shut him out. He makes me suffer yet I love the suffering.

VANDA

Stop there and turn.

THOMAS/DUNAYEV

If he asks me to be his wife, I will accept.

VANDA

You're gorgeous.

THOMAS/DUNAYEV

You know he's jealous of you? I've told him everything about us.

VANDA/KUSHEMSKI

He probably threatened to kill you.

THOMAS/DUNAYEV

He made his feelings perfectly clear.

VANDA/KUSHEMSKI

He struck you, Vanda? You let him strike you?

THOMAS/DUNAYEV

Yes. And I enjoyed it.

VANDA

More.

THOMAS/DUNAYEV

Yes. And I enjoyed it.

VANDA

More! Give it to him!

THOMAS/DUNAYEV

Yes! And I enjoyed it!

VANDA/KUSHEMSKI

Once you were a goddess. Now you'd settle for this mannequin, this imitation man?

THOMAS/DUNAYEV

You have no right to accuse me of anything. You wanted cruelty and I've given it to you. And didn't I warn you time and time again? Did I ever hide how dangerous I am, how insane it was to surrender to me? If I enjoy torturing you, that's your doing. Not mine. I am not this. You made me this. And now you blame it on me?

VANDA/KUSHEMSKI

If I can't have you, no other man will have you either.

THOMAS/DUNAYEV

What melodrama are you quoting?

VANDA/KUSHEMSKI

If you marry him, I'll kill you. I'll kill you both. I'll cut your hearts out and throw them to the dogs.

(From nowhere, she produces a pistol and points it at his heart. Lightning and thunder.)
God damn you! God damn you!

THOMAS/DUNAYEV

Kill me, Thomas. Kill me. I love this fire in your eyes. I always knew you had it in you. I always knew you were a man. My God, I adore you. Have you had enough of your ideal now? Is this goddess excused? Are you willing now to take your wife? Your honest, faithful, and submissive wife?

VANDA/KUSHEMSKI

(tossing the pistol aside)
My wife...? You mean...?

THOMAS/DUNAYEV

Would you still have me? I don't know how you could love me, I've been so awful to you.

VANDA/KUSHEMSKI

Vanda, you mean you were never serious? It was all an act?

THOMAS/DUNAYEV

My darling little idiot – didn't you realize?

VANDA

Kneel.

THOMAS/DUNAYEV

(kneeling)
Didn't you see how hard it's been for me to hurt you? I played my part better than you ever expected, didn't I? I did all this to save you. To show you how much I loved you. To cure you. I'm the one who should be subjugated. I'm the one who should be bound and whipped.

VANDA

Nice.

THOMAS/DUNAYEV

Oh, Thomas, Thomas, how I love you. I've loved you and wanted you since the first moment I saw you. I couldn't tell you because – I'm not what I seem. I'm weak. I'm so lost, you see.

VANDA/KUSHEMSKI

From now on you're going to call me master.

THOMAS/DUNAYEV

Yes, master.

VANDA/KUSHEMSKI

I think I'll tie you with a pair of your stockings. You want that, don't you?

THOMAS/DUNAYEV

Yes, please, master.

VANDA/KUSHEMSKI

Go fetch them.

(Lightning and thunder. THOMAS goes to her bag and takes out a pair of black stockings.)

THOMAS/DUNAYEV

Now do with me what you will. Only promise you'll never leave me.

VANDA/KUSHEMSKI

Stand over there.

(THOMAS stands against the pipe. VANDA ties the stocking to his collar and wraps it around the pipe, affixing him to it.)

THOMAS/DUNAYEV

Promise me you'll never leave me.

VANDA/KUSHEMSKI

I'll never leave you. I promise.

THOMAS/DUNAYEV

I told you I wanted someone I could bend my neck to. Now I've found him. In you.

VANDA

Good. More.

THOMAS/DUNAYEV

I wanted this from the moment I first saw you. Humiliate me. Degrade me.

VANDA

Yes, good good good. Very good. Fantastic. But you know the problem here, Tommy? Any way you cut it, any way you play this, it's degrading to women. It's an insult. It's pornography.

THOMAS

What are you talking about...?

VANDA

Just look at you. Maiden in distress. A mass of quivering feminine jelly. This helpless cunt submissively offering herself to a man. *Beat me, hurt me, I'm just a woman.*

THOMAS

But Vanda –

(She slaps him.)

VANDA

Say thank you for that. *Thank you.*

THOMAS

Thank you.

VANDA

(another slap)

Thank you what?

THOMAS

Thank you, mistress.

VANDA

(forcing him to his knees)

How dare you. How DARE you! You thought you could dupe some poor, willing, idiot actress and bend her to your program, didn't you. Create your own little female Frankenstein monster. You thought that you could use *me* to insult *me*?

(Lightning and thunder, louder.)

THOMAS

No, Vanda, I swear...

VANDA

We dance to the glory of the gods!
We dance to the glory of Dionysus!
Hail, the Bacchae!
Hail, the Bacchae!
Hail, you brave women of Thebes!

(Lightning and thunder, louder. She goes to the door and locks it, then lowers the lights at the fuse box.)

THOMAS

God damn it...

VANDA

(shining the desk lamp into his face)

How's your world now? Not quite so diminished now, is it?

THOMAS

Fuck. *FUCK!*

VANDA

Strong emotions. Good. Very operatic.

THOMAS

Why did you come here?

VANDA

Was I ever here?

(She takes a real fur stole from her big bag and puts it on.)

THOMAS

Who are you?

VANDA

You know who I am. Now say it. *Say it.*

THOMAS

Hail, Aphrodite...

VANDA

Louder, please.

THOMAS

Hail, Aphrodite!

(Lightning and thunder, louder. She takes a triumphant stance, facing him down the room with her feet planted, legs spread, hands on her hips.)

VANDA

“And the Lord hath smitten him and delivered him into a woman’s hands.”

THOMAS

HAIL, APHRODITE!

VANDA

Good.

(LIGHTNING, and A DEAFENING CRACK OF THUNDER. BLACKOUT.)

END OF PLAY