

Ksenia Dragunskaya

THE HOUSE OF CONCEPTION

(A play about motherland and about childhood)

Characters:

*Nochlegov, Yegor* — a young man of indefinite occupations, landlord.

*Sky* - a wealthy lady some thirty years of age.

*Autumn Archer* — a man who lives in the garden.

*Father Eviogy* -- a monk serving as a parish priest in a local church.

*Commissioners, rescue squad* — three people.

The stage-set is Nochlegov's house and garden, the time is late autumn. The house and the garden are Nochlegov's patrimony, his motherland, his country. They are a single entity, so the big bed, the dinner table or the sewing-machine can be placed in the garden and inversely, a swing can be hanging indoors or a tree can be growing in the middle of a room. In Nochlegov's garden there are many old black apple-trees. An octagonal pavilion — a teahouse - is clad with ivy. Laundry lines, put up ages ago, are now drooping and shabby. Overgrown flower beds, benches with broken legs. Everything is covered with leaves, the leaves rustle. Nochlegov's garden slopes down towards the river.

A badminton set, a bicycle, a samovar and a swing should be constantly present on stage as permanent elements of life in a country house.

Scene I.

*(Late evening. Nochlegov and Sky are having dinner at the opposite ends of a big table).*

*NOCHLEGOV (pointing at an enormous portrait of an old man with a peevish face).*

That is my grandfather. Member of the National Academy of Social Sciences. Twice awarded the rank of Hero of Socialist Labour. A hopeless Marxist. When he became old the poor fellow turned quite wild, and it became impossible to get him into the bathroom for a clean-up. We had to organize serious hunts. From the front Father's chauffeur would advance upon him. From the back the cook was prepared for action; he had some sort of a politicized name: either Mayfirst or Sicklehammer. Some relative would cover grandpa from both sides. Together they would then shove him into the bathroom. And finally a special nurse and the housemaid Polia would give grandfather a proper treatment there. Start washing and cleaning him up. And he just screams and fights. Terrible... Have some of these pickled mushrooms. *(An anxious, long-drawn cry is heard).*

*SKY (frightened):* What's that?

*NOCHLEGOV:* Someone is being cut to pieces, I suppose. *(looks at Sky, chuckling).* Jays. Here they always cry like that in autumn. Why aren't you eating the mushrooms? Don't you like them?

*SKY:* You have a sewing-machine? That's great!

*NOCHLEGOV:* You mean you know how to sew?

SKY. Only pillow-cases. But I'm very quick at those.

NOCHLEGOV. You seem a bit too shaky. But it's OK, sleep on it and don't worry. Here the pillows are stuffed with magic herbs. My nanny stuffed them... Let's go to the garden.

SKY. It is dark and terrifying there.

NOCHLEGOV. It is dark and terrific there.

*(Nochlegov and Sky are in the garden. It is dark. A lantern in Nochlegov's hand is trembling in the wind. Sky stands with her hands hugging her shoulders. She is cold.)*

My garden, this garden, my everfresh paradise... My beloved river... And not a light around here. And here is autumn. It is empty, empty in my garden, only the Autumn Archer wanders around, gathering a harvest of sweaters.

*(Again a long-drawn, anxious cry of a bird is heard).*

## Scene II.

*(Morning. Nochlegov and the Archer are having breakfast. Nochlegov is looking at himself in the mirror).*

NOCHLEGOV. What a face... Those tufts of gray hair on my head. Here and behind the ears. Strange. Just the other day I was a child and suddenly -- a grown-up fellow. Now that's a question — thirty years, what does that mean? A kid, or a grown-up? I don't want to be a grown-up, nor a child. I want to be a boy, ride a bicycle, collect herbs...

ARCHER. Tell me the truth, Yegor. I am getting tired of burying those birds. Tell me why are they dying in your garden.

NOCHLEGOV. My garden has nothing to do with it. Birds die everywhere. That's just the thing about this place. Some historical or geographical law.

ARCHER. And when you were little? Were they also dying in mid-air?

NOCHLEGOV. When I was little it hardly ever rained. And the rain would stop right away. And sunshine would always follow.

ARCHER. But how did you manage to grow up here? In a garden where birds die like flies?

NOCHLEGOV. Far and wide doth chemistry's arms touch the deeds of man.

ARCHER. What?

NOCHLEGOV. That's **Lomonosov**. *On the benefits of chemistry*. Well, chemistry is across the river. Some small plant puffing away. While before that there was a forest, fields of wild strawberries...

*(The priest Eviogy enters. Father Eviogy is a tall, bearded man, very thin, dressed in a black frock and a pair of heavy black boots. His head is covered by a small black monk's cap, and his hair is tied back into a knot. Archer and Nochlegov jump to their feet).*

ARCHER and NOCHLEGOV. Good morning, father! How nice to see you!

(Archer and Nochlegov bow and come up to the priest for a blessing. Father blesses them. One after another they kiss the blessing hand. Archer presses his lips against it ardently, producing a loud smacking sound. The priest frees his hand with some effort).

PRIEST. So, my friends, I was just going to Tolstokoshkino to give the last rites to an elderly lady and decided to stop by here on my way. Would you happen to have a spare metal saw?

NOCHLEGOV. We will look for it, father, in the shed.

ARCHER. Won't you sit down with us, father?

NOCHLEGOV. Some wine? There is red.

PRIEST. I don't drink, thank you.

ARCHER. And you abstain even during the Holy Week?

*(The priest smiles and nods. Archer and Nochlegov look at the priest).*

NOCHLEGOV. Help yourself to some food, father.

ARCHER. Have some of these French sausages. They are often written up in the paper.

PRIEST. Thank you, but I don't eat meat.

ARCHER. Then at least try this cheese.

*(The priest smiles and shakes his head).*

NOCHLEGOV. Why, you fool, why do you keep offering father all this rich food? Can't you see he's a monk, you dummy? Help yourself to some of this melon, father.

ARCHER. Aha, you said "dummy"! And cursing is a sin!

NOCHLEGOV. "Dummy" isn't a curse. But to condemn thy neighbour—now that's a sin. Right, father?

*(The priest, sunk in thought, is eating a piece of melon).*

ARCHER. What was your rank at school?

NOCHLEGOV. Well, I was the president of the Club for International Friendship.

ARCHER. Well, *I* was the head of the pioneer council. So I am the boss, is that clear?

PRIEST. And me - I was the leader of a young pioneers' squad. (Deep in thought, he finishes his melon and starts eating a pineapple. Archer and Nochlegov, resting their heads on their arms, are looking at him with love in their eyes. Archer tenderly removes a mote from the priest's robe. Nochlegov is just smiling warmly at him. The priest stops eating).

What's wrong, guys?

*NOCHLEGOV.* What beautiful hands you have. And all covered with scratches. That's because you're all on your own — restoring the church with your bare hands.

*ARCHER.* How would I like to be as slim and as educated as you, father!

*NOCHLEGOV.* I remember that you, father, promised to bless my house. So now, please, do it; you can't imagine what's happening here. Only yesterday three strange hallucinations came by, stole a few small things...

*ARCHER.* And do bless the garden as well, because there are dead birds there.

*PRIEST.* I also saw a dead bird when I was walking through the park.

*ARCHER.* We have a Lady living here with us as well. She is out now, riding a bicycle. Maybe you could hear her confession some time, father.

*NOCHLEGOV.* She's not the type to go to confession!

*ARCHER.* I opened my heart to her, and she hit me with a chicken leg...

*(The priest shakes his head with regret).*

*NOCHLEGOV.* A woman ill-treated by life.

*ARCHER.* Here we are under the same roof, and we don't even know her name. She only uses this funny nickname...

*PRIEST.* I will talk to her. I promise. And now let me bid you good bye. I still have to get to Tolstokoshkino to give last rites for that bedridden woman.

*NOCHLEGOV.* Please stay a little longer, father. Your old lady won't get away, being bedridden and all...

*ARCHER.* We don't know either her name or her occupation. She just races around on that car of hers. And she knows how to use a gun. Did you read in the papers about those bankers?... It's her doing. *(The priest rises from the table).*

*NOCHLEGOV.* Come on, stay a bit more, father. What Tolstokoshkino are you talking about? You won't find a village of that name on any map.

*ARCHER.* And also, also, father, she is working on that sewing machine all the time, because she's neurotic....

*(SKY enters. She is walking with a limp. Her knee is hurt, her face and clothes are covered with mud).*

*SKY.* Damn it, the wheel fell off at full speed, so I dropped into the very middle of a ...

*(She sees the priest and is frozen still).*

*ARCHER.* What's wrong with you? Say "hello" to the father.

*(The priest stands up to greet Sky but becomes motionless).*

Come closer for a blessing. Put your hands together. Like that. The right one on top. “Bless me, father...”

*NOCHLEGOV (in a plaintive voice). Bless me, father! (Sits on the swing, rocking back and forth).*

*(Neither Sky, nor the priest make any moves, but just keep looking at each other).*

*ARCHER. Try to get a good confession out of her, father. I want to marry her, but she’s just impossible. She had this lover before, he lived in Leningrad. She was in Moscow and he - in Leningrad...*

*NOCHLEGOV (flying very high on the swing and shouting). The usual story!!! A-ha—ha-ha-ha-ha—ha!*

*ARCHER. At least ask her what her real name is, father. Why, what was it now - Sky? Is that a name? Well, come on and tell us your name. You hear me? Tell the father your real name! Speak up, what is it!*

*PRIEST. No need. I remember it.*

*NOCHLEGOV (from the swing). Father Evdogy, time for those last rites.....*

*PRIEST. The days are bright and filled with pain. Close me in, you gentle rain. The time you ran was to insane. We’ll meet again, we’ll meet again...*

*(The sound of an approaching helicopter is getting louder. The rest of what the priest says is drowned out. He stretches his hand towards Sky but does not touch her. The helicopter is flying very low. Its shadow covers Sky, the priest, Archer, Yegor and the whole of Nochlegov’s*

A few candles are burning in the dark. ~ochIegov, Archer, Sky and the priest are sitting together.

*NOCHLEGOV. The helicopters keep flying and flying... Where to? What for?*

*ARCHER. The electricity is gone. Outrageous. And it seems they also cut off the gas. It’s cold.*

*(Everyone is sitting around Sky, clinging closer to her, feeling her warmth. The priest puts his head on her shoulder).*

*NOCHLEGOV. Abandon your monastic vows, father.*

*ARCHER. He’s right, father Eviogy. Become Aliosha again, it is good to be Aliosha.*

*NOCHLEGOV. I am so happy that you are here in my garden. Now everything is working out. Leave your monastic vows, Eviogy, marry Sky. Have a religious wedding. I’ll hand over the house to you. I can do it right now. The garden...*

*(The sound of the helicopter is heard very close and suddenly stops).*

Or better it becomes a refuge for people of my generation? Let them all come. Let Valerka Niurin come as well. It doesn’t matter that he was killed in action in Kirghizia. Let him come. He’s a good fellow. Of my generation. Starting with the letter “g”. We’ll clean the windows, switch the lights on and have a big party. In the evening people will stroll on the road and see my windows glowing... Everyone is welcome. We will drink, sing and weep... let’s play a game. Tag! Father Evlogy, can you play tag? Close me in your gentle rain, Sky! Let’s go into the garden right now...

ARCHER. A helicopter (*quietly*). There's a helicopter in the garden.

*(The door creaks. Sound of footsteps. A creature in a gas-mask appears, dressed in overalls and an anti—chemical outfit with antennae. A walkie—talkie hangs from its waist, transmitting noise, crackle, fragments of conversations and some melancholy, beautiful, unbelievable music. The creature takes off its gas-mask. Now we can see a tired human face. He is a member of the rescue squad).*

RESCUE SQUAD MEMBER. Give me something to drink. (*Drinks quickly*). What's wrong with you, fellows? You can't stay here. A very serious accident at the chemical plant. We are undertaking an immediate, total and irrevocable evacuation...

*(Archer starts the music-box. It is playing. No one is moving. Other people in protective clothing with antennae appear. From the gate they tear off Nochlegov's note that says "House of Conception for rent". A steel fence is being built around his house and garden. Hammers hit the steel fence - new notices are being hung. The notices say, in cyrillic letters: "OCCUPATION PROHIBITED!" The music-box is playing).*

*Curtain.*

"Now things are going to work out, - rejoices Nochlegov. – "Now the priest and Sky will get married and will live here, in the House for Conception."

But a helicopter lands in the garden, people in special anti-chemical costumes arrive — there has been an accident on the neighbouring chemical plant and the place *is* no longer fit for living.

It is a play about childhood and motherland, a touching, sad, sometimes funny story much in the mood of Anton Chekov's "The Cherry Orchard".