

Ainur Karim
Excerpt from her play

CHINS UP! SHOULDERS BACK!

Cast of characters:

LIBRARIAN (Liza)
NEONATOLOGIST (Sofia)
TEACHER (Sara)

Supporting characters (in order of appearance)

STUDENT
EX-HUSBAND
TEACHER'S DAUGHTER
NEONATOLOGIST'S HUSBAND
CUSTOMS OFFICER
THIEF
BUS DRIVER
ORNITHOLOGIST
GYNEGOLOGIST
GIRL
ADULT DAUGHTER

Four female actors and one male actor are required for the play. All the male roles are played by a single actor. All the supporting female roles are played by a single actor as well. The action takes place between 1993 and 2019, and the principal characters are 40 years old at the start of the play.

2019. ONLINE SPACE.

STUDENT appears on a screen holding a cup of Starbucks coffee.

STUDENT: Let's assume that the social subgroup we are studying is 80 percent female, a fact explained by structural rather than psychological factors, since women lost their jobs at a rate two times greater than men after the fall of the USSR, totaling somewhere in the range of 700,000 unemployed women in Kazakhstan alone. However, for purposes of our investigation, we will focus on one subgroup in particular, that is, chelnokí. Many of these chelnokí were educated women who worked mostly as state employees before the state collapsed (apparently the state was the only employer back in the days of the USSR). We will be investigating shifts in the way these chelnokí perceived themselves and the way they were perceived by society, as well as shifts in their value-normative personality structures. We will be considering these women as a source of social capital, as people who actively adapted to the new socioeconomic and political reality. We will also examine how they influenced the transformation of society. So, the year is 1993. In the second and third year of independence from the USSR, a radical change occurs in the socioeconomic profile of the female population in Kazakhstan. The terms "chelnók," "shuttle trader" and "marketeer" come to designate people who travel mainly to China, Turkey and India to purchase goods in bulk for the purpose of reselling them in open-air markets, with or without a license.

1994. TEACHER, NEONATOLOGIST and LIBRARIAN are sitting together in a train.

TEACHER: *(taking out a flask)* We've done it, girls!

NEONATOLOGIST: Success!

LIBRARIAN: I was in such a state, you can't imagine. It's not over yet, is it?

TEACHER: Of course not, don't you know we've got our whole lives ahead of us. But quit worrying already—there's no turning back now!

LIBRARIAN: But this is just temporary, right? Until better times—

TEACHER: Darling, the more things change, the more they stay the same. We need to move on—forget about the past. No more free rides. It's a new day.

NEONATOLOGIST: Oh, stop it! Let her dream a little.

TEACHER: *(continues)* As I said—once you've had a taste of freedom, there's no going back. You dump the goods, you leave one part for expenses, another part goes back into the business, and off you go, free as a bird. You make your own decisions. No men, no in-laws, no bosses. I am my own person.

LIBRARIAN: Well if you ask me, it's no walk in the park, being all alone.

TEACHER: What do you mean, no walk in the park? You're the master of your own destiny!

LIBRARIAN: But isn't it a little scary?

TEACHER: Please, it's only scary in the beginning. Then it becomes your new normal. You'll see, one day, they'll write a book about us.

NEONATOLOGIST: *(laughing)* Oh, right, a book?! The Chelnokí of '93? The Three Marketeers of Almaty?¹

¹ Almaty (Al-ma-Ti) is the largest city in Kazakhstan.

LIBRARIAN: The Almaty Express!

TEACHER: Checkered Bags! Leather Jackets!

NEONATOLOGIST: The Pursuit of Commodities!

LIBRARIAN: The Hunt For Red Merchandise!

NEONATOLOGIST: Three Girlfriends!

TEACHER: The Path of the Chelnok!

NEONATOLOGIST: We Survived Khorgas!²

LIBRARIAN: Three Women on a Train, Not Counting the Conductor!

NEONATOLOGIST: The Lady with the Checkered Bag!

LIBRARIAN: That doesn't count. You already said "checkered bags."

NEONATOLOGIST: That's okay.

TEACHER: I agree, it doesn't count! Come up with something new.

NEONATOLOGIST: Okay, give me a second. How's about "The Chelnok Diaries?"

LIBRARIAN: Already said that one too.

NEONATOLOGIST: What then? Wholesalers' Row?

TEACHER: Why does that ring a bell?

LIBRARIAN: *Cannery Row*, by John Steinbeck?

TEACHER: That's it! Although, after Steinbeck, I'm not sure our novel will be a bestseller.

NEONATOLOGIST: Why not?

TEACHER: Would you buy a novel called *Wholesalers' Row*?

NEONATOLOGIST: Of course I would. It'll be something to show my grandchildren, something to enjoy in retirement.

LIBRARIAN: You think this is something to be proud of? Please!

NEONATOLOGIST: Oh, drop that attitude! We have plenty of things to be proud of.

TEACHER: That's right! You'll see, one day there will be a monument in our honor! C'mon, girls, get up, get up. The monument to commemorate the chelnokí who saved the country from the hunger and shortages of the wild 90s. Everyone, up!

TEACHER and LIBRARIAN stand in the pose of the "Worker and Kolkhoz Woman" statue in Moscow. Then NEONATOLOGIST stands in the pose of the "Motherland Calls" statue in Volgograd.

TEACHER: (*sternly*) I want YOU! For suitcase trading.

NEONATOLOGIST: Let's do "There's No Turning Back..."

All three form a single monument. NEONATOLOGIST stands in the center between TEACHER and LIBRARIAN. TEACHER does not like her spot on the side, elbows her way into the center, switching places with NEONATOLOGIST. The tussle is not very noisy at first, then becomes louder. They move their checkered storage bags closer to their feet. The train stops. They freeze,

² Khorgas (KOR-gas) A city located on both sides of the Kazakh/Chinese border.

startled.

TEACHER: I think we're here. The border.

LIBRARIAN: Oh, no, what's going to happen now? Girls, this is so scary!

NEONATOLOGIST: Stop fussing, everything will be fine.

TEACHER: Just follow my lead...

2019. ONLINE SPACE.

STUDENT is onscreen. TEACHER, NEONATOLOGIST and LIBRARIAN are sitting in front of the laptop.

TEACHER: (*whispering*) Don't tell me she's serious. Who's interested in this stuff anyway?

LIBRARIAN: Haven't you heard the news? The woman is writing a paper on us lady-suitcase traders in the 90s. It's for her gender studies class. Something about the economy.

TEACHER: (*whispering*) And there you have it—your prestigious Western education. What in God's name do they study over there, anyway?

LIBRARIAN: Gender, darling. You know, diversity and equality.

NEONATOLOGIST: (*to STUDENT*) Only no names, please.

LIBRARIAN: That's right, no names. She only wants the details. Just tell her everything you remember, before the Alzheimer's sets in.

NEONATOLOGIST: May you get a pimple on your tongue.

TEACHER: As my late father used to say, I wish a snake would make its nest in your mouth. (*looks at the screen*) Sweetie, we're not going to be using our real names, right?

STUDENT: No last names, but I'd like to use your first names if that's okay. And your professions. So, the year is 1993—

NEONATOLOGIST: There were three of us, friends since grade school. Everyone joked about our names—they were just like English princesses' names. I was Princess Sofia (*points at herself*).

TEACHER: Princess Sara.

LIBRARIAN: Queen Lizabet.

TEACHER: We met in fifth grade, grew up together, then went our separate ways in college. Liza got into the Leningrad Institute of Culture to study librarian sciences. It was the thing to do back then. My grades weren't that great, so I decided to go to the local Teacher's College—they took anybody. And our Sofia had always dreamt of becoming a doctor. Some people are just like that—she knew exactly what she wanted the second she stepped out of her diapers. So she went to medical school.

LIBRARIAN: I became a librarian. Head of the Latin American Literature section. You have no idea how much I loved it. Married a young scientist, we met on a camping trip. Handsome, romantic, played the guitar. He was into birds. Ornithology. Biodiversity, that type of thing. We'd go bird-watching together, and then one day—we were up on Communism Peak—he proposed. We got married, had a son. We also had a dog, a hamster and a bunch of injured birds.

TEACHER: I used to teach middle school math. My husband's father was a part of the local

elite, so to speak. We had it all, well, at least by the standards of those days—an apartment, a dacha, a car. I had a daughter, then a son. Life was good.

NEONATOLOGIST: I was a pediatrician-neonatologist. A neonatologist is a doctor who specializes in children, mostly newborns. After medical school, I fell madly in love with my husband, got married and followed him to his hometown out in the backcountry. I started my career over there and became the chief regional pediatrician. My in-laws took me in as if I was one of their own. We lived in our own house and had a small farm. I learned how to milk a cow and churn butter. We had two daughters. My husband was an ambulance driver. Everybody respected him.

STUDENT: Now let's turn to the 90s. The country is falling apart, and major changes are underway. You're left without a viable livelihood, without any future prospects, so you decide to change course. Get out of your comfort zone. Downshift a bit. Right? What did your families think about all this? Or to be more precise, what did your husbands think?

1993. TEACHER'S APARTMENT.

TEACHER is sitting counting money and writing notes on a pad of paper. The sound of a door opening is heard, and EX-HUSBAND rushes into the room. TEACHER barely has a chance to hide the money under a newspaper.

TEACHER: You startled me! You do know you could've called first—

EX-HUSBAND: I wanted to catch you in the act—

TEACHER: Well, aren't you funny! And by the way, you're my ex-husband. *Ex!*

EX-HUSBAND: Don't worry, I haven't forgotten yet—What is that you're doing there? Grading tests? *(He sits beside her, his eyes glancing around).*

TEACHER: Yes, what else—

EX-HUSBAND: Uh huh—I heard—

TEACHER: What did you hear?

EX-HUSBAND: Well, I came over one night last week—You weren't here. I said, So what's the deal? School's in session twenty-four hours a day now? Nope, kids wouldn't talk—kept their mouths shut like a pack of partisan fighters. But don't worry, I still know how to put two and two together. *(He reaches towards the money, snatches off the newspaper, stares. He picks up the money and slowly starts counting it).* Wow—looks like we've got a millionaire in our midst now.

TEACHER: That was a loan.

EX-HUSBAND: Well, would you look at that! I wonder, do you happen to remember borrowing any money from me?

TEACHER: Have some decency. That measly bit of money you gave us is all gone. It wasn't even enough to cover the food.

EX-HUSBAND: Really? Let's see the accounting then. How many times do I have to ask you to see the accounting? I want to see the records, the receipts.

TEACHER: What receipts? What are you talking about, you want receipts from the bazaar?

EX-HUSBAND: Ever heard of recordkeeping? I thought you knew how to read and write. You

seem to have enough brains to do business.

TEACHER: Who told you that?

EX-HUSBAND: I used my own powers of deduction. In today's day and age, you will agree that if a teacher's not at work, she's at the bazaar. Oh, come on now, yeah—you know that's where you belong.

TEACHER: I'm doing it for the children you abandoned.

EX-HUSBAND: / abandoned? Not that old song again. Really, / abandoned? I did not abandon the kids. I abandoned you. It's your own fault you couldn't save the family.

TEACHER: (*tired*) Listen, why don't you just go? Why did you even come over? To bring the child support? Just leave the money and go.

EX-HUSBAND: Tsk, money—again with the money—Yeah, you know, I wanted to leave you some money, but I can see you already have plenty of your own.

TEACHER: This is operational capital.

EX-HUSBAND: Right, well, you're an entrepreneur now. You've got money coming out of your ears. What do you need child support for, anyways?

TEACHER: For your children. They need to eat, you know. They need clothes, they use the electricity! And sometimes they get a toothache—do you even know how much it costs to go to the doctor now? Communism is over, darling—Your daughter needs new boots, she's she's growing up now and look what she's wearing! She took my last pair from me!

EX-HUSBAND: You see that! If I give you money, you'll just spend it on boots for yourself.

TEACHER: I don't need you for that anymore. I can support myself now.

EX-HUSBAND: You just said "anymore." Just as I thought! That means I was paying for you before!

TEACHER: Stop picking apart my words! You haven't paid for a thing all year! I haven't bought anything for myself. Ask the children if you want.

EX-HUSBAND: You turned the kids against me a long time ago. My own son won't even speak to me. And our daughter—only if she needs something—

TEACHER: They're teenagers—what did you expect? Why don't you leave already? I'm not in the mood to argue with you, I've had enough. Leave the money and—please—just go.

EX-HUSBAND: And what if I don't?

TEACHER: Then why are you here?

EX-HUSBAND: I came to get some money.

TEACHER: Are you out of your mind?

EX-HUSBAND: So you can take money from me, but I can't take any from you?

TEACHER: The children live with me.

EX-HUSBAND: Well, you're welcome to send them over if they get hungry. (*He stands and counts out some money from the table*).

TEACHER: I don't believe this. Are you serious?

EX-HUSBAND: Don't worry, I don't need money from you—I'm just taking what you owe

me—

TEACHER: Don't touch that money! It was a loan.

EX-HUSBAND: You must take me for a fool!

TEACHER stares heavily at him. EX-HUSBAND shows her the money he is taking, then puts it in his pocket. TEACHER pounces on him, they tussle, then fall on the table. TEACHER'S DAUGHTER enters the room, stops. TEACHER and EX-HUSBAND jump up, fix their clothes.

TEACHER'S DAUGHTER: What's going on here?

TEACHER: What are you doing home so early?

TEACHER'S DAUGHTER: *(brightly, throws herself at him and hugs him)* Papa!

EX-HUSBAND: Oh, I just came by for a minute. Brought some money for you guys.

TEACHER'S DAUGHTER: *(sees the money on the table)* Pop, what'd you do, rob a bank?

TEACHER: Yeah, that's exactly what he did, but it wasn't a bank that he robbed... *(to DAUGHTER)* Don't touch anything.

EX-HUSBAND: Well, I'll leave you two girls alone. I've gotta run. Bye now.

TEACHER'S DAUGHTER: Thanks, Pop!

EX-HUSBAND exits. TEACHER slumps to her chair in confusion. TEACHER'S DAUGHTER counts the rest of the money, does a little happy dance, runs out of the room.

Translated from the Russian by Ellen Vayner and Slava Faybysh