

TOP SECRET

An Opera in One Act
Donald C. Dilworth

Cast:

Dudar, a fugitive, tenor
Vera, a farm girl, mezzo
Usko, her father, baritone (can be doubled)
Tro, a farmhand, baritone
Amhras, an official, bass
Chorus, 4-8 farmhands (double as extras)

Time: The future.

Scene 1: The Fugitive: Edge of a field, a cliff rising on one side, bushes here and there.

At rise: Vera is wandering about, looking at the cliff.

VERA: Where? Where? I know it's here. It was here! Right here! ... Where is it?

Maybe this is the wrong place. Maybe it was.... No! It was here. I know it. I used to play here. I used to hide in it. I remember. What fun. It was fun. Oh, where?

I remember....Oh! Tro! That monster! He grabbed me, and I was on my back. He held me down. He kissed me and I bit him. Tro! My blouse. Oh! I hate him! Disgusting Tro!

(She keeps looking around.)

But it was here. I was walking right here, right in this spot. There was a warm sun, just like now. I came here for a few minutes, just like now. I wanted to be alone, for just a few minutes, just like now. When there is nobody looking and nobody listening, and you can see the stream that is always there but nobody cares, and you can take off your shoes and splash in it, and nobody cares.

I loved my cave; it was quiet. The walls were kind, over here and over there. Strong and quiet. The sweet smell that stands still and never changes and it will still be there next time. My friend. My cave. If I ever had to hide from someone, that would be the place! Where?

Right here. I was walking this way, toward my cave, when all of a sudden that horrible Tro burst out and grabbed me. I remember; it was right....

(Vera pulls at some bushes covering the cliff, and they fall away revealing a cave. Dudar bursts out. He is filthy, dressed in rags, carrying a club. She screams and runs.)

Help! Help! Go away! Father! *(She trips and falls, twisting her ankle.)*

Ohh! Ow! Don't touch me! Ouch! *(Sobs. Dudar catches up with her.)* Don't touch me!

(Dudar pulls off his shirt and wraps it around her ankle.)

You're not Tro! Who are you? Who are you?

DUDAR: Who is Tro?

VERA: Never mind! Who are you? What were you doing in my cave! Oh! *(Holds her ankle in pain.)*

DUDAR: Hiding. I'm sorry. I didn't know it was yours. I had to.

VERA: But why? Who are you?

DUDAR: I can't tell you. I'm sorry you hurt yourself.

VERA: It's your fault! Bursting out like that. And that club! What did you think I would do?

DUDAR: I didn't know who was there. Does the name Dudar mean anything to you?

VERA: No. No ... I never heard it.

DUDAR: Okay, you're not one of them, so I'll tell you. It's not my fault; it's the Committee. They got the police after me. I have to hide.

VERA: Police? What for? Did you do something?

DUDAR: No, I didn't. But they don't care. They have been chasing me for almost a year. I'm tired of running.

VERA: Well why? Tell me. What do they want you for?

DUDAR: I'm not really sure. That's the funny part. Here I am, sleeping in caves, under leaves, eating what I can find. Or catch.

VERA: Catch?

DUDAR: Rabbits are easy to snare. And I can get porcupines with my club. They don't taste very good, at least not raw. But I can't make a fire or the smoke would give me away. So I eat them raw.

Sometimes I hear the dogs coming, and I have to move fast. You're not going to turn me in, are you?

VERA: But what did you do?

DUDAR: Last year, at the farm; my family has this very old farmhouse where I used to live. It caught fire. I wanted to save what I could, so I ran inside and grabbed some books. Nobody had ever read them, I'm sure. Behind the books I found a box and grabbed it too. We lost a lot of stuff. But I saved that much.

Later, I looked in the box, and there was a piece of paper, rolled up. I never saw anything like it. I showed some friends, and they did not know what it was either. *(Pulls a scroll partway out of his pack, then shoves it back in.)*

A few days later, one of them came running and said the police were after me. He said to run or they would kill me. I don't know why they would, but I ran. It's like that almost a year. When I found your cave I needed to rest, so I put some bushes in front of it. Have you heard the dogs?

VERA: No. But sometimes I hear them. I don't know whose dogs they are. You look awful.

(Usko runs up. He is a poor farmer, 50's, wild hair and smoking a pipe.)

USKO: Vera! I heard a scream. Are you all right? Vera?

VERA: Father! Yes, I'm okay. Except for a sore ankle. I'm okay. I was just startled, that's all.

USKO: You don't scream like that every day. And who in Heaven's name are you? Vera, get away from him.

VERA: That's Dudar. Don't be afraid. That's why I was startled. But he's not as bad as he looks. He's actually very nice.

USKO: Dudar Syak? You? *(Steps back from Dudar.)* Vera, get away from him.

(Dudar grabs his club and stands back. Dogs are heard in the distance.)

He's one of them! Vera! Don't go near him, and don't talk to him. Don't touch him. Don't say you ever met him. I'll get the police.

(Dudar blocks Usko and raises his club. Vera runs between them.)

VERA: Father, don't! I don't think he did anything wrong. He seems like a nice boy. Don't turn him in. Please? He won't hurt anyone.

USKO: It's the law! I won't have a criminal here. Stand back!

VERA: Please! Father, for my sake. Let me talk to him. He needs food. Please? He has no home, and we must give shelter and comfort to the weary. Remember?

(Vera kisses her father, and he relents. The dogs get louder.)

USKO: All right. You! Follow that stream. About a half mile, there is a clearing. Look for a path on the left. Go a mile more, and there is a farmhouse. Find the cellar.

DUDAR: Thank you, sir. And could I have a pinch of your tobacco?

USKO: What for?

DUDAR: If I sprinkle a pinch behind me on the path, the dogs can't follow my scent. I've learned a lot in a year.

(Usko gives him a pouch of tobacco. Dudar runs off to the right. Police arrive and question the two. Usko points to the left, and the police exit left.)

END OF SCENE 1

Scene 2: Amhras: Outside a farmhouse. Farmhands are storing crops, Tro among them. Dudar is helping.

CHORUS:

Blessed we that blessed be
By our God most Heavenly

Reap and sow; here below
Doth our Father goods bestow.

Thank we here our Father dear
As His bounty doth appear.

DUDAR: But this is curious: If the harvest is good, you thank your god. But if it is a poor harvest, do you *blame* him?

(Silence)

TRO: *(Whispering)* what did you say? *(Looks Dudar over suspiciously)* ... I think you're one of *them*. *(To the chorus)* He's an Outcast!

CHORUS: What? What do we do? (*Quietly*) An Outcast... kill him. Outcast; kill him....

VERA: (*Runs between them.*) No! He is not one of them! Don't be offended, please. It's just his way. He is always thinking. He can't help it. He tells me the most amazing things. I never heard any of it in school. You should listen to him. I know him better than you. He doesn't even believe in Satan! (*The chorus freezes.*)

(*Tro wanders over to Vera and runs his fingers through her hair. She pushes him away. Amhras enters, whispers to Usko.*)

USKO: No! I haven't seen him. What does he look like? (*Runs over to Vera, and they huddle, frightened.*)

AMHRAS: One of you is ... (*looks over the farmhands*) One of you....

... is the fugitive. The one who vanishes. A whisper. A snowflake that, caught, is not there anymore. An idea that, formed bit by bit from unconnected pieces dredged from the strange places of your mind, when at last assembled and robust, when you circle around to examine it from a different angle, you squint at it and it is not there. Where is Dudar?

(*Amhras inspects the farmhands. They point to Dudar. Amhras then puts his arm around Dudar and draws him aside.*)

You know, you were hard to find. I've been looking for months, and you leave no trail. Congratulations! But I know someone on the Committee. When one has more than two ears one can hear.... (*Vera joins them. Amhras looks her over, then frowns at Dudar.*)

DUDAR: (*Quietly*) He knows. Keep quiet.

AMHRAS: As I will. Both of you keep quiet. Like snowflakes. Like an egg, before the chick learns to peck its way to the light that will in time see its head severed. Do you know why I'm here? I'll bet you know less than anyone. How could you? They have pushed your mind into a teacup. I am Amhras.

DUDAR: I know nothing! Every time I slept on the snow or ran from the dogs I asked myself: Why? What have I done? If you know, tell me!

AMHRAS: It's not short or pretty. But it's the truth. Today you must overturn rocks or search dusty corners for it. Come over here. (*They move away from the others, who go back to their work.*)

Before you were born, Vera, things got messy. Do you know anything of politics, of religion?

VERA: Religion for sure! They teach us that all the time in school. But politics? Oh, I know! That's how they select the next Supreme Leader, right? God tells them how, right? That's what our teacher said.

AMHRAS: So they think. Vera, you could not know – and that's the pity. They have cut you off. Imprisoned you in a pig's bladder! All you see is the narrow wedge in which you are confined; the girdle, the shipping container that blocks out everything except the skirts of those who mislead you. No light penetrates where the sightless have no use for it, in their simple, satisfying, demented and frivolous pursuit of earthly certainty.

Before you were born, Vera, there was a "Great Ushering". Have you heard of it?

VERA: No.

AMHRAS: I thought not. They tell you what they want you to know. Control the schools and you control everyone. That was when the trouble began. It started slowly, with Fundamentalists and their friends getting more and more seats in Congress. Then the President was a Fundamentalist. After a few years there were five on the High Court. There was a law, making Fundamentalism the official religion.

Protests! One would think the Devil was fighting with himself! There was a rule against the "establishment" of a state religion. But lawyers convinced the High Court that it was okay. They were easy to convince! Their religion was already established centuries ago, and all they did was to *recognize* it. No rule against that! So it became law.

When they did that, the rest of the judges resigned in protest, and the President appointed replacements – all Fundamentalists. That's when the shooting started. All political parties were abolished except the Fundamentalist Party, and all members of Congress who were in other parties were expelled. Everyone else was labeled one of the Outcasts, and outlawed.

There was blood. Tree limbs dripping red, like amputated arms or slit bellies; snowy alizarin footprints from puddles of blood that no one could avoid. But the military came in. They were all Fundamentalists too, by that time, certain of their mission, and with their firepower they quickly overcame the resistors. Ranks of soldiers, chanting about god and shooting. They were treated as heroes. Those who survived had to go underground.

VERA: Nobody ever told us about that! All our textbooks talk about is the Supreme Leader, and how we must obey him. He speaks for God, you know. We are lucky to know what God wants. Everything he says is Revealed Truth. We have been chosen to receive it.

AMHRAS: You were taught nothing. But we cannot defeat the Fundamentalists; they are too strong. I cannot understand how ignorance makes people so strong! Even knowing this history is illegal. Vera, you are now in danger yourself.

VERA: I was better off before I knew.

AMHRAS: You are never better off if you are ignorant! Happier, yes, but that's different. And that scroll Dudar found! You really upset a lot of people. Like the chickens when a raccoon gets in! You don't know what it is, right? (*They nod.*) They declared it Top Secret. Even to look at it was a crime. They found every copy they could and destroyed it. Wiped out, burned, torn up, vanished. Like the memory of someone who was dear to you but whose name you forgot. Like the laughter at a party when years have removed the revelers to their coffins. And then you came along! That scroll is probably the last copy in the world. So of course they set after you. I can't believe you were never caught.

VERA: Are you one of the Outcasts? Yes! I think you are! But they didn't catch you. How come they never caught you?

AMHRAS: I take care of myself. The True Believers are stupid. Their minds go round and round on that hamster wheel of Faith, rushing like rodents toward what they wish were true, and getting nowhere. And the excuses! If you want to believe something badly enough, you will. Sometimes I even lead their prayers. I have a special white collar I got from a costume store, and as long as I wear it, they believe anything I say.

Fools! I can make them do anything I want. Just read a passage that tells them to, and they do it! If I want them to do the opposite, I just read a passage that says the opposite. They are sheep! And proud of it! (*Sarcastically*) and I am their shepherd. Baaaaaaa.

CHORUS: Blessed we that blessed be....

VERA: But they wouldn't teach us lies!

DUDAR: Why do you believe that?

VERA: Because it's true! That's what the teacher says.

DUDAR: And if they had taught you something different, would you believe that instead?

VERA: Stop it! They told us not to ask that kind of question! You don't understand, Dudar. There are things that are just true, and you can't figure them out for yourself. That's what our teacher says.

CHORUS: Reap and sow

(All exit except Amhras)

AHMRAS: (*To himself*) Theology! That steaming box of cat litter, where contradictions have the moisture sucked out until they can be discarded, harmless and desiccated, on the roses.

END OF SCENE 2

Scene 3: The Bargain: A village square, town people. Vera and Dudar enter, he disguised as a woman. They carry baskets of produce and place it on a stand.

DUDAR: Everyone in the market works so hard, and they are tired. I can see that. But what a joy to be here! This work is so easy. And I don't have to listen for dogs now. Vera, you.... I never used to like farm work – but now ... it's the purest pleasure. Pleasure, work, pain, fear – they are all different sides of the same coin. The only thing different is death. Then there is no coin. And hiding, not daring to think, lest some overwhelming idea burst out and make a noise. Do you think anyone will recognize me?

VERA: Not likely. Everyone is busy with something. Little things. But to them, they are big. They are not looking at us very hard.

DUDAR: And your father? He has been getting short-tempered lately. I'm afraid he doesn't want me here anymore.

VERA: Better stay away from him. He doesn't want to hurt me, but he thinks you are an enemy of God. For him, that's important. What if you had to hide again?

DUDAR: Many times I have stared at the sky through branches I placed where I could hide, and wondered what other people were doing. I am no different from them, but they are content and some are getting fat, while I eat the bark from trees, and frogs if I can catch them. Does it make sense to you? Why are people who are not different so different? Is it something real, important, ... or something only imagined? Something I can't see? Can you see it? What do they teach you in school? Do you understand?

VERA: I understand a lot about God. But I do like you.

(Tro enters, carrying some bags. He approaches Vera much too closely, brushing her breasts. He looks at Dudar and drops his bags.)

TRO: You! Don't think you can walk around like that with Vera without asking me! And ... such a pretty dress! Wait until I tell the others!

VERA: Tro, get lost. I will walk anywhere I want.

TRO: With a criminal? You are asking for trouble. I can get you in a lot of trouble – or get you out of it. What if I turned him in? I would be rewarded for that. I don't get much reward here at the farm. And even less from you!

VERA: You won't do that! You like me, and I would be hurt if you turned him in. You don't hurt people you like, do you? If you turn him in, they will kill him.

TRO: And they should! All this chattering. Talk, talk, talk. He's full of blasphemy; he won't believe our Holy Book, our blessed Holy Book! He doesn't know it's inerrant and it's the word of God. Everything that God wants us to know is in there. All the clergy will tell you that, but he's too stupid to know it. It's my duty to turn him in.

DUDAR: Tro, don't turn me in! What have I done to you?

TRO: You are an insult to God. That's enough.

DUDAR: Then let god punish me.

TRO: He will – through me.

(A government official enters, and Tro approaches him.)

VERA: Tro! Don't! I beg you! *(She runs to him and whispers.)*

TRO: You will?

VERA: Anything! Only don't say anything.

TRO: Do you mean it?

VERA: Anything!

DUDAR: Tro! Think of what you are doing! Can't you think at all?

TRO: Better than you! I don't question the Leader. You can't understand that, can you? *(Whispers to Vera)* Okay.

(Amhras enters, wearing a clerical collar. He approaches the official, whispers to him. The official exits.)

VERA: How did you convince him to leave?

AMHRAS: See this collar? As I told you, they believe anything I say. I made him feel good. I said his opinions are very important. After that he couldn't question me. That's all it takes. Those who judge with their feelings only need to be handed the feelings they want.

TRO: *(To Vera)* do you really mean it?

(Vera nods. Amhras blesses Tro. He falls to his knees and kisses the robe of Amhras.)

END OF SCENE 3

Scene 4: Betrayed: The clearing by the cave. A campfire. It is dusk. Vera emerges from the cave followed by Tro. She is in her underwear. Tro adjusts his belt.

VERA: I can't stand it! You are the most repulsive, slimy, stinky, disgusting rat I ever saw! I hope you are happy now. You're disgusting! How can you be so ... like an animal? And you're so pious! What will God say about you now?

TRO: He will reward me. I follow His will. He tells me what to do, and I do it. The Children of Israel were commanded to rape the Midianite girls, and they did. Why not me? I am as faithful as they. I am more devout than anyone you know. So don't criticize me. You know so little.

VERA: You worm!

TRO: And now God commands me to purify myself with his blood.

VERA: Whose blood?

TRO: Dudar's, of course. He was arrested yesterday, after I turned him in.

VERA: "Worm" is too kind! You are so low, so ... oh! Abomination! You are the most vile trash heap in the world!

(She falls to the ground, weeping) Dudar! I tried! I really did. I did what I could. I did everything I could! Dudar! Why? You didn't hurt anyone!

TRO: Oh, but he did. His questions were not good for their souls.

(Amhras and Dudar enter. Dudar is dressed in peasant clothes, Amhras in his clerical collar. Vera is astonished.)

VERA: Dudar!

AMHRAS: You may welcome him home. And blessings to you, Tro. You will need it.

VERA: But how?

AMHRAS: It was not difficult. First, I copied some hymns onto a piece of paper just like the one that Dudar found. Then I substituted that one for his. The committee trusts me, so they weren't looking very closely.

Then, and this was really dramatic, I showed the scroll to them, with a flourish, and asked the chief inquisitor to read it. They were flabbergasted! And then (I was of course wearing my white collar) I blessed them and we began praying, and I told them that God would reward them for their kindness if they let him go. Which they did.

I could have convinced them that the Earth was flat! They asked no questions. All I needed was this collar – and a kind, firm-sounding voice. “My friends, be assured that in His infinite goodness, our everlasting God will find a special place for you....” What fools!

Were they born fools, or did their wet-nurse change them? Capture their tiny minds and compress them into a sugar cube and sprinkle holy water on it to make it vanish? Never ask questions. Just believe. Surrender their brains to a costume! And they feel so good about it! That’s why.

And all for this! (*Draws scroll from his coat pocket.*) Why is this piece of paper so feared? (*Hands it to Vera.*) It was not written by their Prophet. It has ideas that are not in their Holy Book. They want it crushed out of existence so only their Word is left. They want no competition. Then nobody will ask questions.

VERA: “We the People of the United States of America, in order to form a more perfect union....” It’s beautiful. What’s wrong with it?

AMHRAS: Reading it will get you a death sentence. (*Takes the scroll and puts it on the fire.*) Now you are safe.

END OF THE OPERA