

## These Moments of Shine

—EXCERPT—

By Camille Pavlenko

### Characters

TAMARA Nikolayevna Polyakova, 44

Zinaida (ZEENA) Pavlovna Kurlyenkovichnaya, 45

VEEKA Ivanovna Andreyeva, 16

SHAA, 100

### Setting

All scenes take place in various locations around the small Siberian village of Bahktia, on the shores of the Yenisei River, over the course of one year.

Scene One. January.

*Real Siberian darkness.*

*Rustling.*

TAMARA. Is it “on”?

ZEENA. (*Scoffs.*) It is obviously not “on”.

TAMARA. Well, I don’t know. It could have been “on”.

ZEENA. Give it to me. I will make it “on”.

*ZEENA slips.*

TAMARA. Careful!

ZEENA. I am full of care, Tamara!

*Careful rustling.*

TAMARA. It still seems like it is not “on”.

ZEENA. Let me concentrate, would you?

VEEKA. Could I see?

ZEENA. Shh, Veeka! It’s Christ-knows-when-o’clock and we can’t see *anything*, that is the problem.

TAMARA. She has young eyes, though.

ZEENA. Young eyes—?! Veeka couldn’t see out here if she had a thousand baby eyes!

VEEKA. I still think—

TAMARA. Just let Zeena figure it out, dear.

ZEENA. SHH! Now, what is *this* bit?

VEEKA. That’s the... power cord, um—I don’t think it’s plugged in.

ZEENA. You haven’t plugged it in, Tamara?

TAMARA. Me? I didn’t want to mess anything up.

ZEENA. How would plugging it in mess it up?

TAMARA. All of the electronics and everything.

ZEENA. Why did we haul the longest extension cord in Siberia from my house, then!?

TAMARA. Don't act like you know about so much about plugging in.

ZEENA. Oh. I know about plugging in. I know about all kinds of plugs. I could plug circles around you, Tamara Nikolayevna.

TAMARA. *(Sniffs)* At least I have the humility to say when I don't know something.

VEEKA. *(From a distance)* There! Did that do anything?

TAMARA. I don't know.

*Pause.*

See? I did not know the answer to Veeka's question, so I said, humbly, "I don't know."

*ZEENA sniffs.*

ZEENA. Yeah, and nothing happened.

VEEKA. Did you turn it off and turn it—

*A beep.*

*The women collectively gasp.*

TAMARA. I think that it's doing a thing!

ZEENA. SSSSHHHHHH!!

*More beeping.*

ZEENA. Yes, it is definitely doing a thing.

SHAA. There is a little red light.

ZEENA. Oh Christ Jesus, Shaa! Where did you come from—Hey! Tamara!

TAMARA. I'm just trying to get a look at the thing.

ZEENA. Well, don't just grab at it. You are going to make me drop it!

VEEKA. I think there's a button on the...

*Light. ZEENA and TAMARA are revealed wrestling a video camera between them.*

*It is a 90s era Camcorder with an abundance of cords and a tripod attached to it. The case and accessories are scattered on the ground, along with a long, yellow extension cord.*

VEEKA repositions the flood light she's just switched on.

*The hoot of an owl.*

VEEKA.            There.

VEEKA plugs things together. SHAA bends down next to her, curious. She looks at the videocamera's manual with VEEKA.

TAMARA.        Ok. Veeka, why don't you put it over there?

ZEENA.         In front of you.

TAMARA.        In front of all of us.

ZEENA.         The most in front of you...

TAMARA.        Are you going to be like this all night?

ZEENA.         It's taken us all day and evening just to get the little light to happen. We haven't even gotten it to turn on yet.

VEEKA.         I think it is on.

ZEENA.         Christ preserve us!

VEEKA.         It isn't recording though. Do you want me to start recording?

ZEENA.         Are you telling me that I have said so many wise little tidbits today, and none of it has been recorded!?

TAMARA.        Oh, the wisdom the world has lost forever.

ZEENA.         I know!

VEEKA.         I'll just start the tape then.

ZEENA.         Oh Christ! What am I going to say?

TAMARA.        Just what we talked about. Exactly what we've been talking about all this time.

ZEENA.         And if it is...not very good, we can just start all over again, right?

TAMARA.        *(Visibly relieved.)* Yes, of course. "Tape over" it.

VEEKA.         Are you allowed to do that in a documentary?

ZEENA.         Of course! What if you completely flub it up and look foolish?

VEEKA.         Isn't that part of it? It's not supposed to be perfect?

ZEENA. *(Flustered.)* But what if—what if—

TAMARA. *(Flustered.)* Yes!—

ZEENA. What if Tamara completely flubs it up and looks foolish?

VEEKA. Recording.

*VEEKA presses the record button and steps back into frame. The women arrange themselves.*

TAMARA. Uh, hello, or good evening, Mr. Herzog. My name is Tamara Nikolayevna Polyakova. Thank you for your time in viewing this film.

*TAMARA shifts to look at ZEENA.*

ZEENA. Hello and good afternoon, Herr Werner Herzog, I am Zinaida Pavlovna Kurlyenkovichnaya, deputy-vice-mayor in absence of the village of Bakhtia.

*She bows formally.*

VEEKA. Hello Mr. Herzog. My name is Veeka Ivanovna Andreyeva. Um, thank you for watching.

*Pause.*

*Everyone looks at SHAA.*

SHAA. I am Shaa.

*ZEENA looks sharply at SHAA.*

TAMARA. Mr. Herzog, you may not remember us. We live in the village of Bakhtia, on the shores of the Yenisei in Siberia. The people of our village were the subject of one of your documentary films—

ZEENA. The one that was set in Siberia.

TAMARA. As you... probably expect, it is difficult for us to get to see films and Hollywood entertainment. Especially brand-new ones... and we have only recently been able to watch your documentary on us.

ZEENA. Not that it was on us.

*An awkward pause.*

Herr Werner Herzog.

TAMARA. We mean to say, there was indeed a good focus and very good story telling—

VEEKA. Great story telling.

TAMARA. When it came to the—

ZEENA. Trappers.

TAMARA. Right, the trappers in our village.

SHAA. Men.

TAMARA. Who are all men, yes.

ZEENA. All burly, strong men. Up in the manly wilderness.

VEEKA. Showing everything he must do to prepare for winter.

SHAA. Always preparing for winter.

TAMARA. Yes, your movie showed all of the work that goes into each trapper's huts and outposts in the Taiga very well—

*The women's lines start running together.*

VEEKA. And you did show every season, just like the title said. "A Year in the Taiga". Every season, every ritual that is so very important that we must do.

TAMARA. That they must do. Mr. Herzog, your attempt at showcasing the lives of those of us who live in Bakhtia and must live off of this...uncompromising land—

ZEENA. There's no SuperClub Max-Grocery Market here. We make—*by hand*—everything we use. Everything you see!

*She's conscious of a camera accessory in her hand. She hides it.*

Basically. It's been passed down from craftswoman to craftswoman for hundreds of years.

SHAA. In tradition—

TAMARA. For thousands of years—

SHAA. A kind of blood right—

ZEENA. For a million years. For millions of years.

VEEKA. Which is why we wondered, as spring turned to summer—

SHAA. And summer to autumn—

TAMARA. And then to winter. A good, Siberian winter—

**SHAA.**

**& VEEKA.** *(Simultaneously)* A proper winter.

**ZEENA.** Where were we? In your big, fancy, Hollywood documentary about all the—the—big brave men who live in the harsh, unforgiving Taiga, what about all of us? Our faces never even went on your big, expensive “highly-definition” screen. Where’s our documentary crew? Where’s my movie tape with the tiny leaves on the cover? I thought all you Artist-types were modern thinking. Now we see you’re all idiots too!

*Pause.*

...Herr Werner.

**TAMARA.** We realize how costly it would be for you to come here again. So. We have all come to the decision that we will do you a favour, Mr. Herzog. We are going to make our documentary...parts...uh....

**VEEKA.** We’re going to shoot our own footage and mail it to you. So that you can maybe add it on to the first film—

**ZEENA.** It will be its own film! And you may sell the other film with it as something “extra” for the audiences. But, Herr Werner, I think you will find that it will gain so many sets of tiny leaves on its cover that you will have to sell it all by itself.

**TAMARA.** Because I don’t think you understand what seeing this did to us...

**SHAA.** Do you know what there is to look forward to in Bakhtia every year?

**VEEKA.** Labour day.

**ZEENA.** Victory day.

**TAMARA.** Christmas.

**ZEENA.** That’s it! So, how do you think we feel when a movie is made—

**TAMARA.** A real movie—

**VEEKA.** With music! And titles! And it’s about—

**ALL.** *(Simultaneously)* Us!

**SHAA.** Right here by the Yenisei.

**ZEENA.** That river had more screen time than the women of the village did.

VEEKA. It was embarrassing, telling everyone you were there when some of the scenes were shot—

TAMARA. Seeing that your husband is in it—

ZEENA. Your son is in it.

VEEKA. Your father and brother are in it—

ZEENA. Your stupid, drunk Yeni neighbours are in it!

*SHAA silently turns to look at ZEENA.*

*ZEENA clears her throat.*

TAMARA. You have gone away from the Taiga, Mr. Herzog, but the Taiga is not done with you, it has something to say...and we are here to let it speak.

*Pause.*

*VEEKA shuts the camera off.*

ZEENA. I think we sounded... good. Most of us.

TAMARA. Yes. Most of us did not wish him a "good afternoon".

*TAMARA gestures around to the obvious dark around them.*

ZEENA. That is because I recalled a little thing called "time zones".

TAMARA. Zeena, why did you call him "Herr Herzog"?

ZEENA. He sounds German.

VEEKA. My mother says you should never assume people are German. It's rude.

ZEENA. Oh, don't you just know everything? Well, I suppose with this, you do seem to know a thing or two.

VEEKA. Thank you.

TAMARA. Is there a way of taking all of this apart?

VEEKA. It's alright. I can do it myself.

*Pause.*

...You can all go home if you want.

*ZEENA exits.*



*The other two women stand about awkwardly. VEEKA makes notes in a soft, coil-bound notebook.*

VEEKA. I'll be fine. I promise.

TAMARA. Goodnight, Veeka.

*TAMARA nods to SHAA and exits. SHAA lingers, holding the videorecorder manual.*

VEEKA. Shaa. I... think I can cut out um... what Zeena said... before...

*SHAA looks up.*

...About her Yeni neighbours.

SHAA. And make the woman look better?

VEEKA. No—well, I guess... but it wasn't right that she said that.

SHAA. Let her be wrong, then. Keep it in. You know how to use this?

VEEKA. I think so... I mean, a bit.

SHAA. You know more than them.

VEEKA. Uh... I don't know. I went to visit my cousins in Lviv last summer. They have the internet.

SHAA. Did you... go in it?

VEEKA. A little! You go "on" it, I guess. I think. Hmm. That doesn't sound right. There was... a lot happening... but there were a lot of people doing videos. That they'd made. And I don't think any of them are smarter than us, so...

*SHAA hands the manual back to VEEKA.*

Do you want me to walk with you? It's really dark.

*SHAA smiles.*

SHAA. No. I like the dark.

*VEEKA watches SHAA exit.*

## Scene Two. March.

*The Vernal Equinox.*

*VEEKA has a hurried, last-minute consult of her notebook. She handles the Camcorder deftly; she turns it on.*

VEEKA. Hello!

*She puts the camera on a slightly different angle.*

He-llo.

*She tries a cool camera sweep.*

*(Under her breath)* YouTube.

*Somewhat unnaturally:*

“Welcome to my channel, guys.”

*She tries to get some background into the shot.*

This is spring in Bakhtia! It probably looks like winter to all of you in America, but this is actually a pretty nice day.

*Some arctic wind blows. VEEKA shivers.*

I’ve heard people say that spring should be a birth. That’s mostly the kind of talk I hear in poems, though. Our spring is not like poem-kind of spring. Our spring is like a crusty pair of eyelids slowly opening.

*She acts out the eyelids. They are in pain.*

It’s...like melting. It’s when the Yenisei starts to thaw.

*She gestures in front of her.*

This becomes the fierce running river again, but it has to start with that one single drip. Do you ever think about that, Mr. Herzog? The first drip of a year’s new river... I think about that sometimes. I bet that first drop is scared.

Like:

*She acts out ice melting.*

“Ahhhh I’m getting warm, should I do it? Should I go, guys!? How come you guys aren’t going ahhhhhit’shappeniiiiiiiiing!”

*She makes a droplet sound.*

There’s never been a woman trapper in our village before.

Father says there never will be one either. He says the Taiga is “not somewhere that soft things like girls belong”. He won’t teach me what his father taught him. He doesn’t know that I watch. And I learn. I learned how to cover my tracks and I’ve been following him, and he’s never found me out! Do you want to know a secret, Mr. Herzog? I’m building my own koolyomka trap. It isn’t half done yet and I have to use scraps to make it, but it’s in my own territory past the tree line.

*VEEKA looks around and notices the thaw, the dripping water, the birdsong.*

Spring is when bears start to thaw too. They’ve been asleep all winter, and it’s been safe for us. All 300 of us. That sounds like so many people to me. You must think that’s so funny.

This is the time of year to be too careful; there’s no telling when the first bear will wake up; *now* everything is dangerous. Going into the woods is dangerous. Ice fishing in the morning is dangerous. Getting drunk and daring your friends to go outside in the snow—not like *go*, but like *go*—is really dangerous. If you have friends.

When I first went into the Taiga alone, I didn’t know any better and I went too late in spring and some of the bears had woken up already. I’d never seen one that close before. I’m the tallest one in my age, but I knew then that I was actually so small. All the little bones in the back of my neck crunched together as I looked way up at its face. A mass of...bear.

Then I saw its eyes, and it saw my eyes. Bear and Veeka in the Taiga. We were so close... and I knew I was going to die.

*Pause.*

Which, is a pretty super cool way to die.

But I kept looking anyway. Kept seeing its eyes as it looked at my eyes. And like that... something came out of my body, Mr. Herzog.

It started like ham-radio static in my belly and moved up up up until something like a thought and something like a breath escaped through my mouth?

*A gasping intake of breath.*

A sound. A (*she hums*). I don’t know where it came from, but I felt—I knew there was more and—

*(she opens her mouth and a curious music comes out)*

More came.

*(A kind of music. Again.)*

In the empty of the Taiga, I made this speech like music. It was thunder-loud but there was no echo. Can you believe it? The bear, who I knew would kill me, got down on all her four paws then. And then... nothing. I was alive. I'm alive.

But something passed between us... and I knew that she wouldn't hurt me. I was in her territory, but I was allowed. I'd... asked... permission somehow. I realized, after, I could build my koolyomka there and maybe my trappers' hut and all I needed to do when I saw the she-bear again would be to look at her eyes as she looked in my eyes... and let the... the bear-notes slide out from my throat.

*Pause.*

She doesn't hibernate at that place anymore. But sometimes I miss her, so I leave a little smoked pike around the mouth of the old den... and I call the bear-notes, and she always finds her way to me.

Fish. Notes. Always.

*Pause.*

Father says there are no woman trappers anywhere. Mr. Herzog, if it's possible, could you find a book with pictures of women trappers and send it to me? You might have to go in the internet. Maybe my father would believe it then, if there were photographs.

Thank you, Mr. Herzog, and Hollywood audiences.

*VEEKA moves to stop recording.*

*She reads from her notebook:*

*"Remember to smash that subscribe button!"*

*VEEKA turns off the camera and exits.*

**—End of Excerpt—**