

Lucia Verona

The Nuclear Secret

A Classified Comedy

Translated from Romanian by Daniela Dolgu

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CHARACTERS:

President I:

President II:

The following story is not set in any of the countries of the Earth, and it is not based on real events or on real characters. It is just the fruit of a wicked and tortuous imagination that insists on inventing reality. A reality within fiction, of course. So I will kindly ask the audience not to yield to the temptation to draw comparisons or to consider as allusions certain intricate coincidences (coincidences, you may say, are always simple. Wrong! Simple coincidences are clichés; simple, of course). What you are about to watch is rather a fairy tale. So, never upon a time, there wasn't to be, for if it were to be hi-fi and not sci-fi, a lot of gossip there would be...

The setting figures a very elegantly furnished study, with deep leather sofas and armchairs, with a carved desk and a big, throne-like chair. On a small table, a computer and other appliances that will come into play later. On another little table, in a corner, several glasses. On the desk, several telephone sets, including a red one. On the wall behind the desk hangs a big painting while a map decorates another wall. Also visible are three doors, one of which is double and very tall, while the other two are small. The big door is slightly open. Voices are being heard:

"Hello, Mr. President!"

"Good morning, Mr. President!"

"May this be your lucky hour!"

President I: *(from behind the door)* Come in, Mr. President!

President II: *(from behind the door)* After you, Mr. President!

President I: Oh, no, after you!

President II: No, by no means, after you! *(President I proves more agile and manages to push President II into the room, the latter being overwhelmed by the attention he is given and the elegance of the surroundings. President I follows him and carefully closes the door.)*

President I: Mr. President, I'm well aware our interview should be brief. You are expected in the Tropical Parlor and I'm sure your address will be brilliant. The same as my address was, in its own time: "Dear fellow citizens, we are at a moment of grace in the country's history. Cherishing great hopes and full of confidence, we are turning a new page, on which the words **truth** and **frankness** will feature in big shiny letters..." And so on and so forth. But before that, as tradition goes, I have to entrust you those things the head of state alone has to know. However, what I'm about to tell you is likely to last quite a bit and the guests might become impatient... *(President II gestures in token of protest)* Of course, that is not my business. From now on, you are the host. You will certainly find some explanation, some pretext, a joke or something to assuage their curiosity. Now we'd better sit down. Would you like the armchair? Looks comfortable, doesn't it? Genuine Cordovan. Or you may want to sit at the desk. It's all yours from now on. Still, I think sitting in the armchairs to talk would be the best. Just like that, president to president. Would you care for coffee?

President II: No, thanks.

President I: Oh? A drink maybe? A shot of whisky? A glass of champagne?

President II: No, nothing, thank you.

President I: As you wish, I will not insist. *(He pushes a button, music breaks out and a screen lights up, showing the guests in the Tropical Parlor. Murmuring voices, laughing voices, chamber orchestra.)*

President I: Sir, take it from me, a president's job is quite exciting! There's now a summit, now a mediation, a luncheon, a message, a reception, a protest manifestation, an attempted assassination, an autograph, to cut it short, there's no time to get bored. That, I can assure you, even if sometimes you will long for a spell of boredom, you won't have the time. Except, maybe, at inaugurations and commemorations, when you have to listen

to others' speeches. And some speeches, to be sure! But I have found a remedy for that, too. I think of something pleasant – a beautiful woman, a book, a fine drink, and delight immediately appears on my face. You must know that a president may never appear to be bored. He needs to be permanently keen, to watch over the nation and vouch for the Constitution night and day, without any respite.

President II: *(shyly)* At night, too?

President I: Sure, in your sleep as well, there's no escape. You will dream of Constitution paragraphs every night from now on, throughout your tenure, of course.

President II: And after?

President I: After? I don't know yet. But if you call me one of these days, I'll tell you honestly. But now we have things to attend to. We must talk state secrets. But what's a state secret, after all? What is a secret and what is the state? And why does the state need secrets? *(President II looks at his watch.)* You in a hurry? Why? From now on you are the president of the country for five years. And if you are re-elected, for another five. Five and five is ten, plenty of time.

President II: But what will the guests think?

President I: Your guests? If you have ordered enough champagne, they won't regret your being late and won't get bored. I promise you won't get bored either, in my company. I know you are nervous, that's only normal, trust me, for it's the first time you become president.

President II: Were you nervous, too?

President I: Me? Oh yes, I was nervous, too. Although, I admit, I'm even more nervous now. It's the first time (and the last, under the Constitution) that I hand over the presidential office. The powers, as they say. And, of course, the state secrets. We'll get there all right, don't be so anxious. You will learn everything there is to learn and nothing more. You still don't want a drink? OK, let's be sober. While we can. Because, listen to me, I'm a seasoned man and I can tell you that even a sworn teetotaler takes up drinking in this office. That is one of the secrets I am disclosing to you today. Aren't you taking notes? You'd better, because you'll have a hard time remembering all the formulas.

President II: Don't worry, I'll remember.

President I: Remember? No, Sir, this is not a job for amateurs! Please look at this map, it's not classified, and it shows the international relations of this country. I suppose you remember, from the bibliography for the elections, that international relations are the gist of the presidential powers. Oh, I know you have promised the moon...But let the government do the work while you see to higher things. In fact, your office will be, as a rule, purely representative. All you can do is avoid blunders when you meet with your opposite numbers, which won't be all that difficult since they, too, will see to it. This is first class ballet, classical toe dancing, Sir, each one is trying to maintain balance and he now clings to the other, now pushes him graciously, as if doing him a favor. But don't worry, you'll attend special ballet classes with a specialized choreographer who will come here to teach you the steps.

President II: I'm not much of a dancer. My wife says I've got two left feet.

President I: Don't worry about that, the ballet master will put them right. What about music, do you have an ear for music?

President II: I don't, unfortunately.

President I: But then, how have you become president? What did they think, the people who nominated you? Didn't they know that the tone makes politics? (*He stands up from the armchair*). My folks were politicians and diplomats born and bred, it runs in the family...yet I admit statesmanship is not in the tradition of our State. In the last 25 years we had as president a veterinarian, two engineers or three...and you are...err, yes, I remember, you are a lawyer. An expert in constitutional law, I hope.

President II: No, not exactly.

President I: Criminal law? No? Thanks God! I wouldn't have wanted the office of first magistrate of the country to go to someone who defends murderers. And what lawsuits are you specialized in?

President II: Divorces and separations.

President I: Divorces? That's bad. Very bad. You will have to change your rhetoric completely. The President is the guarantor of the country's unity, and you have made a profession of defending disunity. From here to secession there is but one step and you should be careful not to take it by mistake! (*pause*) Now I really feel like having a drink. Let me first have a look at the map and find something suiting the situation. There's a

drink to each and every situation. You knew that, didn't you? Let's see... here, look, yesterday I was presented with a somewhat special South American drink. When I visited Amazonia, I thought it was quite interesting and since then they send me a bottle now and then. It's made from a plant the fleshy seeds of which are first chewed by women, then spit into a vessel and allowed to brew. It seems the saliva lends them that exquisite flavor. The Bolivian version is called *chicha* and is made from corn, processed again by munching. Will you have some?

President II: No, I...

President I: It would do you good, you've turned pale and I want you in good form. What I am about to tell you is not easy to understand, or to listen to, for that matter. And you have to be very, very attentive. It's about the nuclear code, and there's no joking about it. Come on, have a sip. (*He is pouring the drink. From the monitor comes the murmur of voices, laughs and music. Voices: "It takes too long." "What could they possibly talk about?"*)

President I: Why are you grimacing?

President II: It's too strong.

President I: It's 46° strong, I hope you can take that much. If not, you will meet with major difficulties in your work.

President II: I'm not much of a drinker.

President I: How's that? I can't really understand it. I thought that after so many years we finally have a political class worthy of its name. But, unfortunately, amateurism is rampant. You know, Sir, politics is a pro's job. Good intentions won't do the work, it's professionalism that is needed. Yes, pro-fes-sion-al-ism.

President II: (*rather piqued*) I believe it is honesty and the will to serve one's country that count, above all.

President I: Sure, those are good, too. But can honesty help if, at important political talks, you can't have a drink without grimacing? And the one you are talking to thinks you don't agree with him? He was right who said that if you take up politics you have to eat a toad every morning.

President II: I guess he meant it figuratively.

President I: Of course. But it can be taken literally, too. You will notice it with your own taste buds and your own stomach in some exotic countries I am sure you're looking forward to visiting. Roast snake, dog stew, seaweed mousse with peacock eyeballs...

President II: (*taken aback*) Peacock...?

President I: Yes, sure, why are you staring at me, real little dainty eyeballs from real peacocks. And you'll have to eat, there are no excuses, there is no asking for a steak instead... because you might end up eating a hyena chop or a skunk leg, not to mention the consequences of such impolite behavior on the diplomatic relations between the two countries. So, you have to eat up...

President II: Eat up?

President I: Eat up and love it, too. And drink up to wash it down.

President II: Drink up?

President I: And love it, too. And to spare you later discomfort, I'll tell you now that, just as in Europe they grow pears in brandy bottles, over there in the East they have brandy with a viper in it, poison it is, I'm telling you. How about a sip?

President II: (*hastily*) No, thanks.

President I: It is pure, original, from the source. That, I can assure you, the drinks are best quality. There's always the good part of being a president. Not much, less than you might imagine, but there is something. I'm telling you this to give you courage, particularly because it's clear you aren't aware of the mess you've got into. Luckily, there's alcohol, or else...

President II: I've already told you, I don't drink...

President I: What do you mean? And then you pretend you are the president! By the way, is that really ...you? Please don't take offence at my asking. You'll get it later. Oh, but we've got carried away talking and we do have business to attend to. After all, you're not here on a courtesy call. I might even say I am calling on you. Or something like that, in-between. So, what's on our agenda today? Let's see...

President II: (*impatient*) The transfer of the powers.

President I: Why, sure! I must hand you over the powers, I can't help it, you won the elections, took the oath and now you must have the powers. There's no such thing as a president without the powers. Powers without a president, yes, plenty, but a president is

not a president if he doesn't have the powers. Well, let me give them to you. One by one, not all at the same time, so you won't get indigestion. It wouldn't be good, today of all days...And you've got guests...Well...But you're frowning, and I don't like that. It must be the jitters. Not good. You must smile. Smile! Say cheese! Fromage! Cheddar, Stilton, Parmesan. Yes, you've got homework to do about that smile. I can recommend a few reference works, if you wish. You can find them in the library (*he points to one of the side doors*), on the shelf marked in big letters **Hic sunt leones**, and below, in tiny letters, **A President's How-To**. Everything is well ordered by categories – professionals or amateurs, heavyweight or bantamweight, promising beginners, hopeless advanced, or failed pros, well, you'll have time to find out everything and select whatever suits you best. And by the end of your term or terms I'm certain you will have enriched the collection with your own works. In what class will they be? That's for the Chief Librarian of that time to determine.

President II: So there is a Chief Librarian?

President I: Sure there is. Books, at least, should be kept in order. (*Again the murmur from the Tropical Parlor. Peals of laughter, champagne bottles being opened.*)

President I: It's simple so far, don't you think? Now let's move on. Where was I? Oh, yes, the powers. Well... I have to hand you over the key to the safe and its content. The safe is hidden, just as in English mysteries...

President II: Behind a painting, in all likelihood!

President I: You're right, congratulations. Behind this historical painting, a kitsch, mere doodles, a bad copy of Jean Louis David. Why on earth did I leave it on the wall? Why put up with it so many years? I don't remember. I got it as a gift... or my predecessor commissioned it... or it was bought, in a patriotic lapse, at the flea market or at an auction... I really don't remember. But I remember perfectly well that someone advised me not to dispose of it, for fear of a political or diplomatic incident or something like that. So, let me open the safe... It holds the country's most precious object, the key to our successes, the secret of our accession to all bodies, all alliances, unions, committees and commissions.

President II: (*jumping to his legs*) The nuclear code!

President I: Oh, no, by no means. Here is the complete though not exhaustive list, because you too can make a contribution, not to mention the international situation, quite fluid, therefore the list of cocktails to be made from the drinks of the states on the map I have shown you, with recipes and all. That's minor? But what else did you expect to find in there?

President II: (*disappointed*) You see...

President I: To be honest, a pro will open this safe with a boiled noodle. But you should be more confident about the strategic role of the drink list. I hope you will study it thoroughly, it's worthwhile, I'm telling you. Therefore, besides the list there is a key opening the secret drawer of the desk. The secret drawer is a smaller drawer, as good as invisible, which by yourself you'd have difficulty finding, unless you knew about it. He it is, I have opened it for you, the key works perfectly well, the mechanism has been well oiled. And what have we got inside?

President II: (*leaping up again*) The nuclear code!

President I: No, no, no. A box of cigars. Real, original, genuine cigars. The heads of the states that observe the embargo most strictly have the highest appreciation for them. They are happy that by smoking them here they don't contribute to increasing smuggling and tax evasion, like in their countries. Do you smoke?

President II: Yes, I confess to this habit...

President I: Then you must be careful not to deplete the stock before you have a new batch brought here. Legally of course. A present from... But the chief of procurement will see to it. Don't fire him before he teaches his successor all the shortcuts. OK, that has been attended to. Now what else is there in the safe?

President II: (*jumping*) The nuclear code!

President I: You've got an idiosyncrasy. Nothing like it. A corkscrew, for meetings behind closed doors. I got it as a gift, it's not a house item but a present from my former opposite number in... Poor fellow, his term was cut short. It happens, when people don't understand their powers. No, nothing like corruption. Not even cirrhosis. Too much human kindness, I would say. He was walking in the city, without his security detail, and he felt compelled to administer justice at the corner of the street, that is, he tried to separate a couple of brawlers and they stabbed him between the ribs. The ambulance

people did not recognize him, they took him to a neighborhood hospital and... that's that, they couldn't save him. I'll give you the corkscrew as a present and I propose a toast to the great departed counterpart. Oh, the man he was! A great politician! He could drink a whole bottle of whisky and then go through four hours of talks, negotiating, after which he had one more bottle... Therefore, let's honor his memory with his favorite drink. (*He pours the drink.*) No, not like that, you must drink up and show your respect for the personality of the great departed. The list in the safe also contains a "memorial" cocktail, special for such occasions, a rather odd combination of dark beer, Black and White whisky and blackberry syrup, but since the departed liked it dry...(*he pours the drink.*) Cheers!

President II: Cheers!

President I: Then I must hand you over an indispensable object – the automatic translation machine.

President II: I don't think I need it. I can speak five foreign languages and of course, should the need arise, I can resort to a translator.

President I: So here I am standing face to face with a polyglot! Congratulations! Well, I must tell you this machine will never replace your official translator, whom I advise you to take along on each of your trips. The same as you must not forget to take along your official stenographer, or you may land in the same situation as one of our predecessors: only after the reception ceremony did he realize there had been no one to put down what they had discussed during the negotiations. The automatic translation device, however, is a personal item, just like your handkerchief or your glasses. It's made for three languages – or, to put it better, three idioms - common, wooden and diplomatic. You must admit it is a special achievement, and the design, too, is pleasant.

President II: In the shape of a lizard, as I see it.

President I: No, not lizard but chameleon, which both semantically and stylistically is quite another thing. And the usefulness of this device – but you'll see for yourself. Let's say, for instance, that you receive an invitation that contains this sentence: "We have noticed a great variety of stances versus the troubled international environment in which certain states consider it opportune to defend their interests. We consider it serves

our common interests to do whatever it takes to mediate a solution.” Well? What do you make of it?

President II: Something about the environment, ecology...

President I: No, Sir, this is in no way about environmental science, on the contrary. Let’s see how the device actually works. So here we type the text, just as on an ordinary typewriter. You can type, can’t you?

President II: I admit that...

President I: You can’t? But have you ever worked on a computer?

President II: No, again.

President I: What a pity... Whom do I entrust the country to? But then no one is born a scholar or a president. You have time to learn these things but meanwhile you should type like this, with two fingers. (*President II tries to type the text.*) Good, you can do it. Now let us look at the three option buttons. Let’s select the common language for the beginning, if you don’t mind. Now we push the button and you’ll see how nice it works, the chameleon turns around and moves the tip of its tongue...ready. Now you can read.

President II: (*reading*) “It is necessary that we should identify together a solution to the issue of terrorism.”

President I: See how easy it is? Now let’s see how you would say the same thing but from the rostrum of the conference. We push the “wooden language” button and what do we have?

President II: (*reading*) “Our common interests are seriously threatened by this scourge, unfortunately yet to be checked by the will of the nations and the action of the authorities. An end has to be put to this situation by our combined efforts to build a safer and more stable world for the generations to come.”

President I: Good! You have realized, I hope, that the device has a twofold function. On the one hand, it helps you understand various types of messages and, on the other, it helps you put your own ideas or texts in a language fitting the occasion. As I told you, it’s invaluable. You don’t realize yet how important it is to understand exactly what you are told. Let’s translate a few more sentences, to exercise. By the way, I had a lot of fun during the election campaign when I introduced your slogans and speeches into the machine. Yours and of course, those of your main challenger. I play fair, and so will you

from now on. But, you know, you are really funny. Although at first sight you seem rather rigid and pompous and, excuse me for saying it, rather dull.

President II: Please, Sir, some respect!

President I: Sorry, I didn't mean to offend you! But the things you said, the solemn pledges you made sounded so funny in translation. I remember one of them...

President II: Don't overdo it!

President I: (*laughing*) Luckily only a few people possess automatic translation machines. Not even all statesmen have one. Otherwise... Let's forget it, though. You would better learn how to use the machine. And never treat it roughly, never deal it any blow, for it's not a TV set. Now you should propose a sentence. The first that occurs to you.

President II: The first... Good. I feel we are wasting time and this is annoying me, yet I have no choice but listen to what you say.

President I: Good, let's try. OK, type the text and push the button for the option you choose and we'll see what we get.

President II: (*reading*) "After lengthy and serious talks, we have succeeded, with great difficulty and effort, in identifying certain points of common interest and we have agreed to continue the dialogue until all problems are settled."

President I: Good. It sounds quite polite. You're getting the hang of it.

President II: And, you know, I kind of like it. Let's do it one more time.

President I: "We express our entire understanding, solidarity and compassion for the problems of our distinguished debate partner, but we believe the time has come to reconsider the circumstances and ways whereby we should find a common solution to the issues of general concern and especially to outline the first stands on the problems that bring us here today."

President II: Sounds good.

President I: Yes, thank you for the compliment, I know it's a good sentence. I have been using it successfully for quite some time. The translation? Push the button, please!

President II: (*reading*) No, no! There must be a mistake here!

President I: Oh no, there's no mistake, it's written here: "F-ck you!"

President II: (*offended*) I'm not here to be abused!

President I: You shouldn't take it personally. It was just an example. Well now, I think that will do. I am happy to leave the device to a worthy person. Before going on, we must have a drink, or you won't be able to take it – the thorniest part of our meeting is yet to come. I suggest a drink of what is called “Romanian-Hungarian reconciliation,” that is, a fine, twice distilled plum brandy. I noticed, each time I visited those countries, that their reconciliation is more solid than the French-German one. Though decades have passed since the Elysée treaty was signed, the Germans and the French haven't found yet a common language, in everyday life I mean. In politics they did, but then those are different interests. In that other part, however, though the politics is sensitive, people get along excellently, especially over a glass of plum brandy. But even so there are minor disputes now and then, I won't deny it, they get to cut each other with their knives, but there's nothing ethnic about it, they even cut each other when they're family. (*He pours the liquor*). Cheers! Good, isn't it? (*The other mumbles*). Now we can go on to more serious things.

President II: The nuclear code!

President I: Now I really think you are obsessing about it. No, I have to warn you about a book in the mandatory bibliography. In the library, on the Political Science shelf, you'll find a volume with a dust cover bearing the title *Troy's International Policy in the 20th Century*. I chose it precisely because I want no one to be curious. In fact, I have exaggerated with the precautions. It would have been enough to just put it on that shelf, no one gets near it except the chief librarian who anyway knows by heart all the books there. For the rest, they all read only thrillers, if they read at all. You have no idea about the illiteracy rate in politics.

President II: Our team will radically alter this aspect.

President I: Go on, all for the better. But I have my doubts. I, too, started out, ten years ago, with a team of enthusiastic intellectuals. But let's not go into it, it's not my intention to spoil things for you. Reverting to the library, take the volume I told you about and inside you will find “JFK Among Us,” a true story of the Dallas events of 1963 and their sequel. Reading this book, you will understand that the one of our predecessors who kept referring to the mystery about Kennedy's assassination, in order to explain certain byzantine aspects of his early term in office, was perfectly right. That is precisely

why he received the book – for it was him that received it – the special edition for the use of presidents. The only edition in fact, because the number of copies is strictly limited. Just as the number of presidents, in fact. In brief, from that book one learns that it was not JFK but his double that was killed in Dallas.

President II: Fantastic! What about the real JFK?

President I: He was with his mistress, having the best of time. He even watched on TV his own assassination. And after he was declared dead he could not longer come up and say, “I am the real Kennedy.” So the guys got him out of the city...

President II: What guys?

President I: The FBI or some other suchlike charity, his security detail or whoever guarded him for real. Well, the guys therefore took him, mistress and all, to a secret but very comfortable place, something between Fort Knox and the Ritz. He had plastic surgery done on him, they made him uglier, actually plain, unlike the real man, so he wouldn't attract attention. And he lived there quietly for several years, watching keenly the investigations into his own death, the report of the Warren Commission, and all the rest. His mistress died in a car crash, exactly at the moment when his desire to come out into the open had started to give the guys headaches....

President II: And?

President I: You'll read the rest by yourself. Now we have other things to attend to.

President II: How thrilling! I can hardly wait to read the book, but I don't see the connection...

President I: The matter of doubles is more important and serious than it appears. Do you have a double? Or are you the double? You shouldn't take offense, on the contrary, since there were such cases before. So, whether you are the newly elected president of the country or an ordinary man appointed to replace him in difficult moments, I have to disclose you the Nuclear Secret. But then why should you be the double? Could anyone in your staff foresee a difficult moment? A 15-minute talk was planned. That, on the agenda of your friends who don't really know much about how things work, which will not prevent you from giving them high positions they will prove incompetent for. (*President II gestures in protest.*) I have set aside three hours for the pleasure of talking to you...

President II: Three hours?

President I: And one has already passed. How time flies by! Now I must really insist on a drink. You look scared and I don't know why. I'll offer you something light... What about a Francophone moment? *Mais non, mon cher président*, I had no intention of testing your ability with foreign languages. What I meant was only a chapter in the cocktail list. Let's see... no... this one is too strong... oh, yes, I propose a Francophone kir... straight or royal?

President II: I confess I don't know what the difference is.

President I: I knew it! (*ex cathedra*) Therefore, the kir is a drink originating in Dijon, made of crème de cassis, which is black currant liqueur, and white wine. Or champagne, if it's royal. The Francophone variant I have proposed contains sour cherry liqueur instead of cassis. Good home-made cherry liqueur, prepared by the mother-in-law of my foreign policy adviser, who can mix drinks like no one else, Romanian style. Now you will see how the applied foreign policy machine works. We touch any point on the map within Romania's borders and what do we see? We see on the right a screen with a menu. The menu is alphabetical, running from ale to zinfandel, we are looking for the letter C, this is it, claret, chardonnay, champagne, here it is, cherry liqueur, we push the button once and the cherry liqueur flows into the glass below the screen. Then we start it all over with France, here is the menu, a hardy task now, scores of drinks, hundreds of brands... What champagne will you have? I for one prefer Moët&Chandon, which I recommend for less formal occasions. *Ça va?* The button works, champagne is flowing, here is your kir. Good, isn't it? I will stick to "reconciliation." So, now let us resume our discussion about the nuclear secret. The story begins... Oh, I have almost forgotten to take my egg from the safe!

President II: An egg in the safe? What sort of egg?

President I: The presidential egg I got for Easter. Actually it's made by the Chinese under Japanese license for a multinational company headquartered in Tonga and having subsidiaries in Southeastern Asia. The common model is the "tomagachi," the egg that created such a craze in late 20th century Japan, the egg with the virtual chick that lives and dies although it doesn't exist. You haven't heard of it? I can hardly believe it, it created such a fuss, and debates on whether it was ethical or it announced something

bad... My egg is the presidential version, actually it's one of eight or nine in the world. They were given to the heads of state of the time's major powers. One of them, grateful that I had interceded for him with another... I am digressing – don't you imagine this is the type of mediation the Constitution says you should practice. This is more complicated and I don't know whether we have enough time left for this kind of story – therefore in token of gratitude he gave me his egg. Anyway he didn't need it any longer since his second term had ended and he wouldn't leave it to his successor! It is a personal object, after all. Presidential but personal. Or personal though presidential. I can show you how it works, if you're curious. It won't take long. Do you think your guests will grow impatient?

President II: I would worry more for the live TV transmission...

President I: Never mind the transmission, you won't miss it, they're waiting for you, you alone. They'll fill the space with comments on the ceremony and the building and, of course, on your brilliant election victory, then they'll run some domestic film or folk music... So stop looking at your watch, since anyway you can't leave here before I tell you the nuclear secret. And it won't be anytime soon. I haven't even given you yet the phone numbers of your colleagues.

President II: (*more lively*) Oh, my counterparts!

President I: Yes, your counterparts. I have talked to them and told them to leave you alone one or two days until you get the hang of it and no longer mistake the bathroom door for the library one. (*Pointing to the two small doors.*) Then, they'll call you all right, you needn't worry about that. So you can inaugurate your tenure with a little saving on the telephone bill. Reverting to...

President II: The nuclear secret!

President I: No, Sir, to this presidential egg; it would be such a pleasure for me to give it to you, but I got it in the circumstances I have mentioned, so I have to keep it. It is a souvenir from the time when a world catastrophe was avoided... at the last moment. Now this egg you see here, golden with purple vertical stripes, features a small display on one side. In the popular variant, a chick is born or, well, hatches on the display which then lives and has to be fed, cared for and, after some time – depending on certain factors – it dies. The presidential variant is different. The chick has to be fed not grains but laws,

decrees, government resolutions, statistical data, all sorts of information, and the chick's reaction... yes, you are right, this is the scientific name: virtual nation. Its utilization instructions read – and so far that has been proved in practice – that its response to information can be programmed on the short, medium and long term. Now it's set for six months. This means it provides a very accurate indication of what the state of the nation will be in six months. I'm sorry but I must give you bad news - the prospect is not good at all. If the necessary measures are taken to heal the economy, do you think it can survive much longer? Look at it - it is so skinny and its feathers are falling and its eyes are so sad they almost make you cry. After all, haven't you wondered how you managed to win the elections? Or maybe you think you won them for real, that the people voted you in office? How naïve! You make me laugh! Ha-ha, ha-ha! *(Again the murmur of the Tropical Parlor, where people are dancing a tango. A champagne bottle pops open and waves of froth are springing from it. Laughter.)*

President I: So, let us revert to the object of our meeting. This is a solemn moment not to be missed, since it occurs seldom in one's lifetime... With most of the people it never occurs at all. Here is how things are... Will you have one more drink?

President II: Maybe some Saint-John's-wort tea, if there is any. My liver, you know...

President I: No, sorry, there's no Saint-John's-wort tea, but I recommend some Icelandic aquavit, it has a very special flavor, cumin, much like the tea for babies' tummy ache, if you remember. It is hundred percent pure, distilled in a geyser or so I was told. A sip won't do you any harm.

President II: I'm afraid the liquor has its say on me. I think I'm tipsy.

President I: So what? Is it for the first time? Yes, you're right, it's the first time you are a president. You'd better look sober. As much as possible. Good, let's turn to the serious matters. I'll leave you the diary on the desk, two or three dates are marked, the important meetings. You should call me before, to tell you a few things about your partners and the topics.

President II: I can manage by myself.

President I: As you wish. Here is my card, should anything happen. You can call anytime. Anything else? I suggest that when you proceed with those natural political

purges according to strictly professional criteria, you should retain the chef. I never took an interest in his political beliefs, maybe he doesn't even have any, but his sauces are above any social compact!

President II: The social compact is a very serious matter.

President I: Yeah, sure. How is the aquavit? Superb, isn't it? I'll pour some more. Only a sip. Here you have the phone numbers I have just mentioned. Call anytime the circumstances ask for it. But if you call them too often, they will get a bad impression. So do not overdo it, the same as you should not convene the Great War and Peace Council too often. It suggests instability. What else could I tell you? Shall I wish you luck? Naturally. Except that, rationally, that would be hypocritical of me, having just shown you the striped egg. Well, that's it. You can see me out.

President II: Excuse me, you seem to have forgotten something...

President I: Pardon? What have I forgotten?

President II: The nu... the nuclear secret...

President I: Oh, that, sure. I haven't told you about it, have I? What a mistake! What a mistake! Well, then, I will again sit in this armchair and will again concoct a geostrategic drink and tell you everything. What shall we have this time? Saké-bourbon? Mururoa fizz? Chernobylskaia? Or shouldn't we rather have something merrier and more festive. Champagne, of course. It suits best the object of our talk.

President II: It is rather late.

President I: Oh, no, please do not hurry me! It's bad manners. Sir, before I have handed you the powers, one by one, piece by piece, I still am the president and the Constitution warrants me the right to tell you what I please and as slowly as I please. I didn't mean to treat you with shock therapy. I wanted to handle you with kid gloves. Well, well... I see you are seething with impatience. One could believe you have done all that campaigning effort – speeches, programs, posters, money, meetings and all – only to the end of learning the nuclear secret from me! Weren't you told as a kid not to be too curious?

President II: Yes, I was, but...

President I: So you wish me to tell you the nuclear secret. Piece of cake! You will learn presto all I know about the subject. I must warn you though that you cannot take notes, nor are you allowed to have any recording device... Are you sure you have none?

President II: Positive.

President I: I should better check. Not that I don't trust you, how could I not trust you when 59.7 per cent of the nation trusted and voted you. To be frank, I wouldn't have trusted your opponent as I trust you. Still, one has to make double sure. Off with your clothes!

President II: Who, I? Take off my clothes?

President I: Yes, you, what's all this fuss?

President II: I don't want to...

President I: But then neither do I want to tell you the nuclear secret. For the time being, I am running the show, as the famous Ostap Bender said. What, you don't know him? Quite many gaps in your cultural background, Mr. President! Take off your coat! Good, let's see the pockets... and the shirt... the trousers, too... (*President II is undressing, hesitating after each item of clothing he hands to President I.*) Look here! What's this? What is this Panasonic microcassette recorder doing in your trousers?

President II: I swear on my mother's grave that I had no knowledge it was there...

President I: You had no knowledge? Someone must have slipped it there, but who, Sir, has access to your trousers? Or have you borrowed those trousers, with the recorder and all? Obviously, not knowing it was there. But if, however, these well-tailored woolen trousers, navy with thin gray stripes, belong to you, whose is the recorder and how did it get in your watch pocket? Please don't tell me that your beautiful wife, the distinguished future First Lady, is jealous and wants to keep track of all your moves. I can't believe it! So, let us take the cassette out. (*He puts it on the table and President II tentatively puts out his arm.*) Don't touch it, it's material evidence. Anything else? I mean, is there any other recorder? Off with the shorts! What's the matter, I said "Off with the shorts" not "off with the President!"

President II: (*his dignity wounded*) Sir, I will not allow this!

President I: No, Sir, it's not your anatomy I'm interested in, but the electronic devices. (*President II undresses, turning around*). Nice and easy, the shoes, too. Let's

see... the sole is quite thick, it could hold something. What about the socks? Sure? Well, get dressed, the search is over. You should be ashamed of yourself! Such presidential behavior! And you claim to be the nation's choice! Sir, you are thoughtless, irresponsible or at least idiotic! Whom did you want to sell the country's nuclear secret to? Or should anyone need so badly my cocktail recipes?...

President II: (*now dressed*) I'm sorry...

President I: OK, sit down. Your tie is askew. Good... Are you calm now? I am not. I must have a drink, you have managed to upset me, and you have really pissed me off. Don't you realize you jeopardized the security of the country? Thanks God, I am alert. Otherwise I wouldn't have survived in this position. Now, what am I to do? Can I still trust you with the most important classified information of the State? How can I be sure you will not sell it to an intelligence service or even to some tabloid?

President II: (*hunching in the armchair*) You have my word...

President I: I don't know, really I don't... What a mess! Let's have a drink. Some liquor will clear our minds and we'll find the best solution. What will you have? Vodka? Whisky? Brandy? Gin and tonic? Ouzo? Plum brandy? For me it's whisky.

President II: Same for me.

President I: How moving this solidarity is! (*Pouring the liquor*) Another? I'll have some more. It's vasodilator, it does you good. Ah, life looks different now... Come on, stop worrying, I'm done now. And I won't tell anyone about the recorder. What you tell the one who gave it to you is your business. You are shaking, aren't you? Have some more whisky. Come on, Sir, be your own man, the worse is still to come. Let me tell you the secret....

President II: Oh, yes, please!

President I: Should I? Should I not? Theoretically, I have to give it to you. It's written in the agenda. Transfer of the powers. But what the hell do you need it for? What would you do with it? Anyway, there is no nuclear war in the program that earned you the presidential office. Or is there also a secret program?

President II: No! You have my word for it!

President I: I believe you. More whisky? Cheers! Now, Sir, let me tell you the secret and make you happy. But you must first swear you will tell it to no one except of course,

your successor, when the time comes. So, do you swear? No, not like that. Repeat: **I swear to keep the atomic secret of the country/ and not to disclose it to anyone,/ in writing, by gestures or by word of mouth,/ in direct conversation, by phone or the Internet,/ by audio or video recording/ or by computer program,/ under any circumstance whatsoever, even if my life were in danger./ So help me God!**

(President II repeats each fragment after President I.). Amen. Let us drink to it! Cheers! Good. Now I can tell you the secret. The story begins sometime ago... Hold on! How can I be sure you are the President?

President II: How can I not be? Millions of people elected me!

President I: What if you are his double? Can you prove you are the President? Do you have any identification? No, not the ID card. Something else, some proof you are the very person.

President II: You said it didn't matter.

President I: It matters now. I want to be sure. Let me see your ears. On TV, in close-ups, you had those big, flapping ears. A sorry sight. Yes, Sir. These are your ears all right, there is no trace of surgery and I don't think two identical pairs of such ears can exist. OK, Mr. Lop-Ear, you're about to hear the unheard.

President II: How dare you?

President I: What's wrong with Mr. Lop-Ear? What did they call you in school? Hee-Haw? Bugs Bunny? Auricle? I vote for Mr. Lop-Ear. Let's go about our business. The nuclear secret, that is. First you must know that each state has several secrets and several reasons. Hence, state secrets and *raisons d'état*. One refers to *raisons d'état* when one issues a decree no one understands, when one sets free a terrorist or when one pays a sudden visit to a country one is in conflict with. And so on and so forth. State secrets are of two kinds: temporary and eternal. The temporary ones obviously become simple secrets at some point in time and then are published in the Official Journal, if they haven't appeared in some ordinary paper, in which case the spokesperson issues categorical denials. Eternal secrets are quite infrequent and are so classified no one even guesses their existence. And if by chance the wrong person learns of them it all ends not in denials but in an unobtrusive burial or, sometimes, a state funeral. What I am about to tell you now would normally fall in the category of temporary secrets, but now, for some

reason, the nuclear secret is eternal. It has nothing to do with the infinity of the material world or with the structure of the atom, with fission, fusion, with the proton, the electron or the neutron. For some *raisons d'état*, if you will, the nuclear secret is eternal. Full stop.

President II: Most interesting, as a theory. But when does the serious thing start, the nuclear secret?

President I: Take it easy. It all started some twenty years back, when the first democratically elected president handed over the powers to his successor, the second democratically elected president. They had a nice talk, just as we are having, but then, when they came to the nuclear secret, strange things happened. The incoming president fainted and the outgoing one had a hard time bringing him back to life. Back then they didn't have the drink list in the safe or the respective map. Those were brought here later, precisely in order to help on such occasions. I know the whole story from my predecessor who knew it from his predecessor who had taken part in the talk in point. Are you following me? Listen to me carefully.

President II: (*rather lost*) I'm all eyes and ears.

President I: All ears, you bet, Mr. Bugs Bunny! So, the second democratically elected president fainted when he heard the first democratically elected president telling how he had taken over the powers from the last undemocratically elected president. Is that clear so far? The matter is that during that nice and relaxed talk, just as we are having, the last undemocratically elected president had told the first democratically elected president: "Mr. President, I am well aware our interview should be brief. You are expected in the Tropical Parlor and I'm sure your address will be brilliant. But before that, according to a new tradition, I have to entrust you with those things the head of state alone has to know. But what I'm about to tell you is likely to last quite a bit and the guests might become impatient..." It sounds familiar, doesn't it?

President II: (*happy*) Yes, I know it up to this point.

President I: Further on it's different. "Mr. President, the happiest man in the world is standing before your eyes. You can't even imagine how happy I am I can hand you over the presidential powers and be rid of them for good, notably of that damned nuclear secret which has poisoned my life in the last few years. Mr. President, you are the elect, the nation sent you to office, therefore I have to tell you the truth. I am an impostor. I am

not the last undemocratically elected president. He died eight and a half years ago, in a hunting accident. I was his double, the stuntman ready to die in the place of the beloved president... but it wasn't to be. The two of us were alone in that clearing when the bullet hit him. The others were 20 or 30 meters away. When they rushed to us, I just had to play my part. No problem with that, I am a professional actor and I could imitate him to perfection. No one, not even his wife realized I had got inside my character for good. But it's been eight and a half years of anguish. I couldn't afford being myself even for one minute and, which was worse, I missed the applause. I didn't become a great actor. I had dreamed of playing Hamlet, Richard III... and here I am doomed for life to impersonate a wretched dictator... Tough luck, I looked quite like him and had fun imitating him in the company of friends. But it got out and I almost got into big trouble. Then the secret police, after watching my act, offered me this job. I took it, I had no choice. How was I to know that three months later, when I had just finished the training and I was on my first official assignment, that accident would happen? If accident it was... Because no one had any doubts that the dead man was the double, the stuntman, the actor. They all fussed around me: 'Mr. President, are you OK?' So I acted my part." You see? It is the opposite of what happened in the JFK book. Isn't it significant?

President II: Fabulous!

President I: I propose one more drink while I tell you the rest of the story... (*He pours the liquor.*) Therefore, says the last undemocratically elected president to the first democratically elected one: "...It was terrible. Night and day I had to be careful not to drop any improper word, not to speak in my sleep, not to snore... Yet I think there was someone who knew the truth. My wife. That is, his wife, of course. She even noticed that after that hunting accident I was more of a man... But then she, too, was new to the role of a wife, no, she was not a double, but the late president had married the fourth time to a young woman and they had just returned from their honeymoon when I became president and therefore her husband. So it all ended beautifully. But there was one problem. The nuclear secret. He, the president, had died instantly, he had no time to pass it on to me, supposing he had meant to. Mr. President, I have to let you know the blunt truth - the nuclear secret does not exist. Or it might exist, but I haven't been able to find it out. But no one knows I don't know it. I hope you are aware of the domestic and especially the

international impact, in case this became public knowledge. That, therefore, is the big secret I am revealing to you. Keep it and don't fail. I wish you success." That is what my predecessor told me his predecessor had told him, who had heard the story from the first democratically elected president. Why have you turned to pale? What's wrong, Mr. President, please don't faint, I only have a few more words to tell you...

President II: *(almost fainting)* Water! Water!

President I: Quick, whisky, drink this up, no, it's not too much, just as much as it takes to make you numb. Good... I wouldn't mind a sip myself... What else can I tell you? Well, there's not much left. Only that I am sorry, my dear successor, to have disappointed you. The main purpose of our pleasant little talk cannot be attained. Like my predecessor, I have tried in vain to find out the secret of the nuclear code and then successfully to hide the secret that I did not know this secret. I wish you success, too. Now we must go out together, arm in arm and smiling, with you seeing me to my car. I am about to leave on a cruise, and you are expected in the Tropical Parlor. Let's go!

President II: But how can I tell whether you are or not the...

President I: What? You want to know whether I am myself or a double? Or maybe a clone? I am very sorry indeed but I cannot disclose this secret. We're done now, let's go. Oh my, Mr. President, you're so drunk you can hardly walk! How can you appear this way in public and on television, live? I'll have to let you in on a last secret - the sobering cocktail, made of sour cabbage, black pepper, green pepper, Cayenne pepper, Dijon mustard, chili, a drop of Swedish bitters (no connection to the Swedish economic model), three drops of Tabasco, five chopped mint leaves and Russian vodka. *(While talking, he puts the various ingredients into a shaker that he handles in a very professional manner and then pours the content into just one glass.)* Drink up! *(President II drinks, grimaces, then smiles and sobers up)* Fine...you're as good as new now, aren't you? *(President I makes for the door, President II sees him off and they both go out at the same time through the wide-opened door. The door closes. After a few moments of silence, applause and voices are being heard:*

"Hello, Mr. President!"

"Good morning, Mr. President!"

"May this be your lucky hour!")

President II: *(from behind the door)* Come in, Mr. President!

President III: *(from behind the door)* After you, Mr. President!

President II: Oh, no, after you!

President III: No, by no means, after you! *(President II proves more agile and manages to push President III into the room, the latter being overwhelmed by the attention he is given and the elegance of the surroundings. President II follows him and carefully closes the door.)*

President II: Mr. President, I'm well aware our interview should be brief. You are expected in the Tropical Parlor and I'm sure your address will be brilliant. The same as my address was, in its own time: "Dear fellow citizens, we are at a moment of grace in the country's history. Cherishing great hopes and full of confidence, we are turning a new page, on which the words **truth** and **frankness** will feature in big shiny letters..." *(The voice is fading out.)*

Curtain

Lucia Verona is a Romanian writer and playwright. Her book DON JUAN AND THE OTHERS is available as an E-book both in Romanian and in French translation. You can find them at the following address:

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