

“The Burning Ones” – excerpt

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SCENE ONE

*Ruins of a little square in some city. Trash and dirt. A marble pedestal, where a war monument used to be. Enter a woman with grey disheveled hair, stooping and poorly dressed. All characters have faces painted whiter than normal and cheeks painted red, according to character, age, and social status.*

BEGGAR

*(Looks around. She sees a dirty old doll that's missing one arm. She picks it up)* What are you doing here? *(Takes the doll and sits on the marble pedestal. She sets the doll next to her)* They left you alone, huh? *(Pause)* I'm also looking for my mommy. Have you seen her? *(Pause)* It's been a long time since I came by this place. It's nicer here, after all. It's less crowded. I can't stand crowds. Especially when they gather at the soup kitchen, it feels like you're going to faint. *(Pause)* Today we had peas. *(Pause)* I don't really like peas. I mean, I like *looking* at them, I just don't like *eating* them. *(Pause)* Aren't they cute? I can't bear to eat them. But then again, what am I to do? I eat them with my eyes closed. *(Pause)* Which is bad, of course, because the person sitting next to me gets to eat half of it. But I can't do otherwise. *(Pause)* Do you like peas? *(Pause)* You don't talk, do you? It's better that way. What good ever came to me out of talking? Nothing good has come to me in years. Maybe more. *(Enter a PRIEST, around 45, in a trimmed beard and a grubby black cassock. He looks around and starts picking up some trash)* *(To him)* They don't accept those anymore.

PRIEST

What?

BEGGAR

Those things you're picking up.

PRIEST

Oh, it's you.

BEGGAR

I guess so.

PRIEST

How have you been?

BEGGAR

Okay.

*(Pause)*

PRIEST

I haven't seen you in a long time.

BEGGAR

Not that long.

PRIEST

Years.

BEGGAR

Months.

PRIEST

Years. *(Pause)* Are you sure they don't accept them?

BEGGAR

I've tried it myself.

PRIEST

Yeah?

BEGGAR

You're wasting your time.

PRIEST

I've got plenty to waste.

BEGGAR

Why are you still wearing this thing?

PRIEST

I want to.

BEGGAR

You're defiling it, keeping it dirty like that.

PRIEST

What do you want me to do?

BEGGAR

Wear something else.

PRIEST

I don't want to wear anything else.

BEGGAR

It's filthy.

PRIEST

I wash it once a month. It's already more than enough, what with all the dust.

BEGGAR

Do as you like. No-one cares, anyway.

PRIEST

Least of all you.

BEGGAR

I don't even care about myself.

*(Pause)*

PRIEST

And where will I get the money to buy something to clean it?

BEGGAR

I thought you were a priest. Do some priestly thing. What do they have these days?

PRIEST

Well, no one christens their children. No one gets married.

BEGGAR

People have other things in their minds.

PRIEST

They do die, though. And apparently they need someone to properly send them off to the other world.

BEGGAR

There you go.

PRIEST

But they don't even dig deep anymore.

BEGGAR

They've grown weary. *(Pause)*

PRIEST

You?

BEGGAR

I can handle.

PRIEST

Where have you been all this time?

BEGGAR

Here and there.

PRIEST

Is there something special about here?

BEGGAR

My old school.

PRIEST

I know.

BEGGAR

Then why do you ask?

PRIEST

I was wondering whether there was something else.

*The BEGGAR shakes her head in negation*

Do you go to the soup kitchen nearby?

BEGGAR

Sometimes...

PRIEST

What did they have today?

BEGGAR

Peas.

PRIEST

We had meat.

BEGGAR

What kind of meat?

PRIEST

I'm afraid to ask.

BEGGAR

I wouldn't care. I prefer slaying animals to uprooting plants. I've missed that deep green color of the wild grass.

PRIEST

Potatoes last more.

BEGGAR

I can't eat potatoes anymore. *(Pause)* What are you looking for?

PRIEST

Anything.

BEGGAR

This little girl here is looking for her mommy. *(Pause)* Like me. *(Pause)* And the poor thing won't talk to me, to tell me her name. What's your name, little girl?

PRIEST

She must be shy.

BEGGAR

You should take off that cassock, though. And shave.

PRIEST

But they might recognize me.

BEGGAR

It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter anymore.

PRIEST

Do you think they have forgotten?

BEGGAR

Some don't forget easily.

PRIEST

So why do it?

BEGGAR

Don't. *(Pause)*

PRIEST

You've changed.

BEGGAR

You haven't.

*Pause*

PRIEST

Is that a good or a bad thing?

BEGGAR

I don't like dilemmas.

PRIEST

I've barely seen you three times since –

BEGGAR

Please... *(Pause)*

PRIEST

Where have you been all this time?

BEGGAR

I told you.

PRIEST

Truth is I haven't come to this part of the city in years.

BEGGAR

Then why do you ask?

PRIEST

And I don't know why I came today, either.

BEGGAR

You were looking for something in the trash.

PRIEST

Yes, but I found nothing.

BEGGAR

Keep looking

*Enter a woman, MADAME, around 45, with blonde puffed up hair, smudge make up, wearing a luxurious, distasteful dress. She is holding a stuffed brown dog in her hands.*

MADAME

Are you hungry, baby? We're going home, and I'm going to give you that steak you like so much.

BEGGAR

Here comes the great MADAME.

MADAME

Excuse me?

BEGGAR

I said: Here comes. Are you deaf?

MADAME

I'm not obliged to hear everything.

BEGGAR

Weren't you born with ears?

MADAME

Of course.

BEGGAR

But they are stretched out from all those earrings you wear.

MADAME *starts walking away*

Do you have anything else stretched out?

MADAME

Shut up. Slut.

PRIEST

Don't talk like that in front of the child!

MADAME

Why don't you both shut the fuck up?

BEGGAR

Are you ordering us?

MADAME

You don't know who I am. I can have you arrested.

BEGGAR

Oh no, I'm shivering.

MADAME

You better be.

BEGGAR

Get lost. You feed your goddamn dog with steaks while we are eating feces.

MADAME

Maybe that's what you deserve.

BEGGAR

Get the hell out of here.

MADAME

I won't even bother. You are nothing. Absolutely nothing. You almost don't exist. Just like a little ant. Almost invisible. And definitely filthy.

BEGGAR

I might stink on the outside, but you, you reek of whoredom.

MADAME

Fancy words for a bum like you. Did you go to school? Did your mommy send you? Did you like it? Did your teacher touch your hoo-hee?

BEGGAR

What the hell are you talking about?

MADAME

I don't know why I'm wasting my breath on you.

BEGGAR

- while you could be using your mouth for something more lucrative.

MADAME

Enough!

*Exit MADAME. Pause*

PRIEST

You shouldn't have spoken like that. Do you know who she is?

BEGGAR

I sure do. Notorious old tart. She pretends she doesn't know me. But she knew my mom.

*Her expression changes, becomes imploring.*

Do you think she knows where my mommy is? *(She gets up)* She's gone...  
*(Pause)*

PRIEST

I should be going, too.

BEGGAR

Why?

PRIEST

A friend is waiting for me. We will be chanting together.

BEGGAR

For whom?

PRIEST

For the departed who have been forgotten.

BEGGAR

You can't make money like that.

PRIEST

You've got to make it through the day somehow, though.

BEGGAR

I can't go and leave the little girl alone.

PRIEST

I might come back again.

*The BEGGAR shakes her shoulders in indifference*

It was nice seeing you.

BEGGAR

All right.

PRIEST

Bye, little girl.

*Exit the PRIEST. Pause.*

BEGGAR

Did you see him? The way he smelled. Priests used to smell of incense. Now he smells of wastewater and lice. They have a smell of their own alright. *(Sniffs)*

It's all over the place.

*Pause. Enter a BOY and a GIRL, clean, well dressed, running, laughing. The BEGGAR stands up,*

Mommy... Mommy!

*Exit the BOY and the GIRL, laughing,*

So... I'm going to show you something, but you mustn't tell a soul.

*She takes a small tape recorder out of her bag.*

I got this from someone who didn't need it anymore... You understand.

*She presses a button. Alfred Schnittke's requiem is heard. The*

*BEGGAR closes her eyes. She listens for a minute.*

Isn't it nice? A long, long time ago I wouldn't listen to music that much. There was no need. *(Pause)* Do you remember when we would listen to the birds?

But how can you remember, you are so little. But yes, indeed. *(Pause)* They fly, you know, the birds. Now there's almost none left. *(Pause)* Not here, anyway.

*(Pause)* We loved listening to them. In spring, mostly. *(Pause)* Do you know what spring means? When you see a little color sprouting around you. The little color that's left. For those few days that spring lasts, that's it.

*(Pause)* I'm sure you will like it.

*Silence. She closes her eyes. The BOY and the GIRL pass by again, without looking at her, and leave. The BEGGAR opens her eyes. Enter the SOLDIER. The BEGGAR turns off the music immediately.*

SOLDIER

What's that you've got there?

BEGGAR

Nothing.

SOLDIER

Nothing? Is it yours?

BEGGAR

It is.

SOLDIER

Yeah, right.

BEGGAR

It is, I'm telling you.

SOLDIER

Give it to me.

BEGGAR

But it's mine.

SOLDIER

Sure it's yours.

*He grabs it from her hands. He turns it on. Music is heard*

What shit is this?

BEGGAR

An old tune.

SOLDIER

*Turns off the music.*

Confiscated.

BEGGAR

Now, you, listen here...

SOLDIER

*Takes out a bayonet.*

Go on, tell me...

BEGGAR

Do you think you're going to scare me with this?

SOLDIER

Why, aren't you afraid?

BEGGAR

Afraid of what? Dying? I got over it.

SOLDIER

Then I should kill you.

BEGGAR

Do it.

*Enter the CAPTAIN.*

CAPTAIN

What's going on here?

SOLDIER

This BEGGAR here stole a tape recorder.

CAPTAIN

Where did she steal it from?

SOLDIER

I don't know.

CAPTAIN

Then how do you know she stole it?

SOLDIER

Look at her.

CAPTAIN

I'm looking at her.

SOLDIER

She's a filthy tramp.

CAPTAIN

I can see.

*Addresses the BEGGAR.*

Is the tape recorder yours?

BEGGAR

It's mine.

CAPTAIN

It can't be yours. Where did you steal it from?

BEGGAR

I didn't steal it.

CAPTAIN

Didn't you?

BEGGAR

I didn't steal it. The dead don't listen to music.

CAPTAIN

How do you know?

BEGGAR

Because their ears don't work.

CAPTAIN

If you took a deaf man's tape recorder from him, wouldn't that be stealing?

BEGGAR

Why are you asking such questions to a poor woman like me?

CAPTAIN

How old are you?

BEGGAR

Mind your own business.

CAPTAIN

You look old. But I don't think you are.

BEGGAR

You?

CAPTAIN

Thirty.

BEGGAR

And you want to arrest me?

CAPTAIN

The penalty for stealing is one year imprisonment.

BEGGAR

I didn't steal the tape recorder.

CAPTAIN

You insist.

BEGGAR

I insist.

CAPTAIN

Was there a tape in it?

*The CAPTAIN turns on the tape recorder.*

What's this?

BEGGAR

Old music. Requiem. A mass for the souls of the dead.

CAPTAIN

So they do listen.

BEGGAR

It's for the living, not for the departed.

CAPTAIN

Isn't it some kind of a wish?

BEGGAR

It is.

CAPTAIN

So it addresses the dead.

BEGGAR

It addresses God, perhaps. "Give them eternal rest", it says. And asks for his mercy.

CAPTAIN

And does he offer it?

BEGGAR

That I don't know.

CAPTAIN

If *he* doesn't show mercy to them, why should *I* show mercy to you?

BEGGAR

I didn't ask you for it.

SOLDIER

Let me kill her.

CAPTAIN

Right... Come with us.

BEGGAR

Where?

CAPTAIN

You'll see.

BEGGAR

And the little girl who's sitting here?

CAPTAIN

Let her sit.

BEGGAR

It's not right to leave her all alone.

CAPTAIN

I don't want any excuses. We're leaving.

BEGGAR

Madame sent you, didn't she?

CAPTAIN

What Madam?

BEGGAR

I'm coming. But let us at least leave the tape recorder with the little girl. I don't think you have any use for this old thing.

CAPTAIN

Let her keep it. Besides, it's filthy. Just like you.

*Music from the requiem. The CAPTAIN and the SOLDIER take the BEGGAR away. Light on the doll. Lights out.*

*END OF SCENE ONE*