

DISTASTEFUL MISCHIEF

by P.R.Berton

Cast of Characters

YEONG-JA, a woman in her early 30s.

MAXIMILIAN, YEONG-JA's husband, in his early 40s.

MORITZ, MAXIMILIAN's brother in his late 30s.

APPENDIX, YEONG-JA's mother in her late 50s.

ARIADNE, a friend of YEONG-JA in her mid-20s.

DEPRILIE, a woman, indeterminate age.

Places

A bedroom and a living room of a fancy apartment in Vienna

A boat at sea

A spacious room in a lighthouse full of chairs

A snow-covered mountain

Time

Now

SCENE 1

A bedroom with contemporary decor. MAXIMILIAN walking around restlessly. YEONG-JA sitting on the edge of the bed with her head down. A long window with the curtain closed.

MAXIMILIAN (*exalted*)

Rabs!

(Stops in front of YEONG-JA and lifts her chin with his hand. Trying to calm down.)

I've told you a thousand times that if you have to leave here, the comfort of home, to buy bread, do it somewhere else. This one... Frau Bolte is a xenophobe!

(Accelerated.)

And she can't call you a foreigner: you don't have a long beard, you don't go screaming down the street talking on your cell phone in a strange language, much less wrap yourself from head to toe in those weird black cloths.

(Goes to the mirror and ties his tie. More restrained.)

I asked you all the time if you really wanted to come to Vienna with me, another country, on the other side of the world, freezing in winter, without your mother's bap and kimchi and away from the sea. You said that it was natural for a wife to accompany her husband.

(Short pause.)

Actually I think so too and I think it's good that you do too. Your natural is my normal. It reassures me.

(He takes the suitcase in a hurry.)

Pay attention, I asked Mo to take care...to help you with whatever you need. You can count on him. Maybe he's not the most suitable person with that conceited intellectual attitude, someone more practical would be better, another woman like you, the subjects are the same, they understand each other better, but he's my brother, and family is everything.

(Going to YEONG-JA.)

And your mother doesn't count.

(Picks her up and gives her a quick kiss on the cheek. Looking at her.)

Rickeracke, Rickeracke, I don't know when I'll be back, but you'll be fine without me. Yeong-ja is a brave girl after all, isn't she?

SCENE 2

A living room in an old apartment with sophisticated decor. APPENDIX sitting on a sofa impatiently leafs through a gossip magazine. YEONG-JA sitting on a wing chair watches APPENDIX. ARIADNE sitting on a wooden chair, next to YEONG-JA, looks out of the window with a lost look.

ARIADNE

(to YEONG-JA almost whispering.)

I'm going to the bathroom. I'll be back.

(Leaves.)

(APPENDIX drops the magazine on the coffee table and looks at YEONG-JA.)

APPENDIX

Do you need to announce that you are going to the bathroom? That husband of yours calls me an Appendix. Appendix!

(Looks out the window.)

As if everyone is not someone's appendix!

(To YEONG-JA.)

I always told you to be careful with these Westerners, foreigners, whatever you want to call these people different from us, and you insisted on going to the same places as them, the bars, the parties, the vernissages. And it finally resulted in this. Married to one of them. And on top of that with a diplomat who gives you no choice but to go after him wherever he goes.

YEONG-JA

I don't regret my...

APPENDIX

(To YEONG-JA)

Hostage of one of them! Yes, because since I arrived I haven't seen you leave this apartment for a minute, just to buy their hard bread. Even in the market, it's the maid who goes.

(Scanning the room with a condemning look.)

Old place. Cold. A prison.

YEONG-JA

(making a move to get up.)

If it's cold I can fetch...

APPENDIX

(indicates with the palm of her hand for YEONG-JA to remain seated.)

I can handle it. And if you need to, we ask that immigrant who works here and who doesn't speak a bit of their language, unlike that friend of yours, to bring a coat.

(Going to the window.)

How can they allow people who can't even communicate properly to stay here? In Korea there is no such thing.

ARIADNE

(returning, sitting on the wooden chair and looking at YEONG-JA.)

What kind of thing?

(APPENDIX turns and gives ARIADNE a reproachful look.)

YEONG-JA

(trying to control her laughter with her hand.)

Mom, in Korea only two percent of the population are immigrants, here in Austria...

APPENDIX

I don't care about this shitty country. I don't want to have to eat sausage every day anymore, I need meat. Of food with taste. I need the sea. Or seeing a Buddhist temple when I'm in the backseat of his car, which is

(drawn and irritably.)

neither a Hyundai nor a Kia.

YEONG-JA

In Austria...

APPENDIX *(with authority.)*

And much less a SsangYong!

(Short pause.)

YEONG-JA

But you are a Christian.

ARIADNE

Really? Look, how curious!

(Short pause. APPENDIX shifts her shoulders uncomfortably and tries to open the window.)

ARIADNE *(a little embarrassed.)*

Sorry, it wasn't an ironic comment, it was cultural ignorance, I thought that everyone in Kor...

APPENDIX (*confused.*)

I meant...to be able to see a Buddhist temple. See with my own eyes.

YEONG-JA

(*standing up.*)

Do you want me to call Ivanka?

APPENDIX

(*forcing the window angrily.*)

I don't need a Yugoslavian to open a window.

ARIADNE

Yugoslavia no longer exists. She is Bosnian.

APPENDIX

(*turning to ARIADNE and giving up on opening the window. To YEONG-JA.*)

Wow, it sounds like that husband of yours talking about things that don't concern me. Or his idiot brother.

(*She tries the window again.*)

They make a good pair, a damned pair.

(*Opens the window.*)

In my school days it was Yugoslavia and it always will be.

YEONG-JA

Didn't you say you were cold?

(*YEONG-JA's cell phone receives a message. She checks the message.*)

YEONG-JA

It's Moritz.

APPENDIX (*with mockery.*)

Your bodyguard?

YEONG-JA

That's kind of him. He is under no obligation. He's already going up.

APPENDIX

(*leaving the room.*)

I'll then go to my room.

YEONG-JA

(*smiling to herself.*)

Almost inside.

(MORITZ opens the front door. APPENDIX stops in amazement and looks at him. MORITZ closes the door and puts the key away.)

APPENDIX

(to YEONG-JA.)

But does he have the key too?

YEONG-JA

Too?

MORITZ

(to APPENDIX in a cordial but unenthusiastic way.)

How are you?

APPENDIX

Missing my homeland and appalled by your presence.

(Leaves.)

(MORITZ nods to ARIADNE and sits in an armchair opposite YEONG-JA and ARIADNE. He takes his eyeglass case from his bag, opens it, takes out a cloth and cleans the lenses. YEONG-JA watches MORITZ. ARIADNE watches YEONG-JA. MORITZ looks at YEONG-JA who immediately looks away and rearranges the books and magazines on the coffee table. MORITZ puts his glasses on his face, puts the case in his bag, stands up, indicates with his finger that he is going quickly to the bathroom and leaves. YEONG-JA turns to ARIADNE.)

ARIADNE

Your mother is a hurricane. Before he comes back, to finish our earlier conversation...my answer is no.

(Short pause. Thoughtful. Staring into YEONG-JA's eyes.)

No man is our friend. No man can be a friend.

YEONG-JA

None? So? Definitely?

ARIADNE

Either they love, or they ignore. The middle ground, what we women understand as friendship, for them, does not exist. Either they go for the conquest, which inevitably involves intimacy and sex, or they turn away, light a cigarette and look for the football result.

YEONG-JA

So the friendship between a man and a woman is an illusion, pe...

(MORITZ enters the room.)

YEONG-JA

...riod?

(MORITZ looks at YEONG-JA. ARIADNE goes to the window and looks out. MORITZ sits in the armchair.)

YEONG-JA

(straightening up in the wing chair, takes a book from the coffee table and with a falsely disinterested tone.)

I think you forgot this one yesterday.

(MORITZ stretches out, checks the book with his eyes, leans back in his armchair.)

YEONG-JA

The subject seemed interesting.

MORITZ

(picking up the gossip magazine from the coffee table.)

Boring. Common place. Cliche.

(YEONG-JA looks at MORITZ. ARIADNE turns to YEONG-JA. YEONG-JA looks at ARIADNE.)

MORITZ

I kind of got tired of these cultural themes. I need other themes. I need some air.

(YEONG-JA looks down, bites her lips, puts her hands together and puts them between her legs.)

ARIADNE

(making a move to leave.)

Maybe I...

MORITZ

They seem to be the tireless and only obsession of an allegedly globalized world.

YEONG-JA

(to ARIADNE.)

Stay.

MORITZ

You can keep it with you.

YEONG-JA

Who with?

ARIADNE

(going to YEONG-JA.)

You'll be fine without me.

(Kisses YEONG-JA's cheek and leaves.)

(YEONG-JA looks at MORITZ a little worried.)

MORITZ

(downloading the magazine and looking at YEONG-JA for a few seconds.)

Today, now, what interests me is the form... the discursive epistemology...

(Short pause in which the two look at each other.)

YEONG-JA

I don't have anyone to talk to, apart from Ivanka who weaves soliloquies about the price of apples and my mother who, as your brother says, doesn't count. And besides, your affairs *really* interest me. It's not any form of personal proselytism, I'm not asking for pity. I am aware of my condition in this place, in this city and in this country. And in that armchair, facing yours. With a coffee table separating us. I like to hear you talk about the books you've read, less when you exude resentment, more when you exude debauchery. Even if I don't agree with everything.

MORITZ

If it is a dialectical, non-vengeful disagreement, as in a good Hellenic agon...

YEONG-JA

I see your brother once a week, maybe twice. One. Or none. I say all this to thank you for coming here every day. It's a breath of... air.

(APPENDIX bursts into the room.)

APPENDIX

The heating in the room is horribly hot, the maid can't find the spices I asked for, this gray sky so far from the sea depresses me, that's enough, I want to go home,

(ironic to YEONG-JA.)

Would you be so kind as to buy me a ticket online??

(Looks at MORITZ.)

Or are you still busy with the visitor who hasn't left yet?

SCENE 3

The lifeboat from the play Out at Sea by the Polish Slawomir Mrozek. Around the boat, the sea. YEONG-JA and MORITZ are sitting on one side of the boat, MORITZ with his arms resting on the side of the boat. ARIADNE, huddled and cold, sits opposite them.

YEONG-JA

(to MORITZ.)

Here we don't live...

(to ARIADNE.)

we survive.

MORITZ

Aber wehe, wehe, wehe...

YEONG-JA

And it wasn't the first time, was it?

ARIADNE

No. It had happened before when I had just arrived and was working on that farm. The owner there accused me of having sacrificed some chickens and even her rooster. She said that where I came from, people killed animals just because of religion.

YEONG-JA

I get appalled when that happens...

ARIADNE

In a developed country, right?

MORITZ

HDI does not count culture.

ARIADNE

(to YEONG-JA.)

Be glad it's a little different with you.

MORITZ

Because she doesn't look like...

YEONG-JA

...a foreigner? This is not Frau Bolte's opinion.

MORITZ

For me you...

(MORITZ and YEONG-JA stare at each other as ARIADNE speaks.)

ARIADNE

The madwoman came after me with a huge wooden spoon.

(Shudders.)

Later, when I came to Vienna, I went to work for that disgusting tailor who touched my ass when his wife wasn't there.

YEONG-JA

(to ARIADNE.)

Was he tall with long legs?

(To MORITZ.)

For you I...?

MORITZ

(with his hand in the sea water.)

Meck, meck, meck...

ARIADNE

And now this professor.

YEONG-JA

(to ARIADNE.)

And it was in front of the whole class?

(To MORITZ.)

This doesn't happen to me because your brother protects me, no, according to my mother, he isolates me. He cages me.

MORITZ

(going to the edge of the boat between YEONG-JA and ARIADNE.)

Has he been sending any messages?

ARIADNE

Yes, they insist on humiliating, mocking, showing that they are superior.

MORITZ

I mean Max.

YEONG-JA

(standing up.)

Moritz!

ARIADNE

And they tell us to read things that don't make the slightest sense.

YEONG-JA

(to MORITZ.)

I don't want to lose you... in this rocking sea...

(MORITZ and ARIADNE look at YEONG-JA, who is struggling to balance on her feet.)

YEONG-JA *(undecided.)*

...ahm...to see you fall...in the middle of that immense sea.

ARIADNE

The language is already horribly difficult and that's why he cursed me like that.

MORITZ

(sitting down.)

Nicht allein das Abc bringt den Menschen in die Höh.

YEONG-JA

You understood me, right?

(MORITZ and ARIADNE look at YEONG-JA. Short pause.)

ARIADNE

A play. Do you believe it? Old. Archaic. Their best tradition.

YEONG-JA

Moritz understands a lot about drama. He could have helped you if you'd asked.

MORITZ

Nicht allein im Schreiben, Lesen, übt sich ein vernünftig Wesen and I'm very busy taking care of my sister-in-law...

ARIADNE

Really? I thought he studied...um...worked...

MORITZ

...and putting up with her mother, Mrs. Appendix...

ARIADNE

...researched, anyway

(laughing awkwardly at MORITZ.)

sorry, I actually never knew what you really do.

MORITZ

...who should be named Cliché.

(To ARIADNE.)

Nothing.

(ARIADNE looks awkwardly at YEONG-JA.)

YEONG-JA

(going to sit next to ARIADNE and in a hurried voice.)

He actually...

MORITZ

We don't do anything. We think about many things, we use figures of speech, we interpret the world that we help to destroy, we develop precious metaphors and, to set a civilizing example, we welcome those who are suffering.

ARIADNE

(to YEONG-JA.)

He's so funny, I would have fun with a brother-in-law next to me all the time, it makes me forget what I went through there at the Volkshochschule.

YEONG-JA

All the time? He...

MORITZ

Our playwrights have always liked to treat reality with a good dose of sarcasm and mockery. Because reality wasn't always as perfect as it seems to be today and because wisdom is always best conveyed with Vergnügen.

(Takes a long metal pipe from inside the boat.)

YEONG-JA

You're not going to smoke in here, are you?

(MORITZ looks at ARIADNE with a sarcastic smile.)

MORITZ

Das Vergnügen. Viel Vergnügen! Aber sicher, mit Vergnügen!

(DEPRILIE emerges from the boat being raised onto a platform. The other three watch her as she enters. She has a superior air that becomes frightened as the platform rises too high. The platform stops, tilts and knocks DEPRILIE into the boat.)

MORITZ *(with mockery.)*

Aber das war kein Vergnügen.

DEPRILIE

(getting to her feet, cleaning herself, irritated.)
What a bad joke this is.

ARIADNE
(to MORITZ.)
Ich vergnüge, du vergnügst, er vergnügt.

YEONG-JA
(to ARIADNE.)
Mich.

DEPRILIE
(to ARIADNE.)
And why not *she* vergnügt sich instead of he?

MORITZ
(to the audience.)
Voluptas. Gaudendum! Sed certe cum voluptate.

YEONG-JA
(to MORITZ.)
Love, love, love.

MORITZ
(to a bewildered YEONG-JA.)
But that's not from a Volksstück. This is Chekhov.

YEONG-JA
For me it's the best fit.
(She turns her back to everyone, rests her chin on the edge of the boat and places her hand against the current of the sea water.)

DEPRILIE *(quickly.)*
I don't understand much of what's going on here with you, much less what this immense sea as far as the eye can see is doing in Vienna. A city complexed by being far from it.

YEONG-JA
That sea story again?
(Not understanding.)
Far from whom?

DEPRILIE
(wondering YEONG-JA's behavior.)
From it.

YEONG-JA (*disinterested.*)

Ah.

DEPRILIE

(*sitting down between the two. To ARIADNE.*)

I came running as soon as I could. We need to do something. We can't let this Krämpel guy...

ARIADNE

Herr Lämpel.

DEPRILIE (*screaming.*)

Ah! The name doesn't matter. In the background they are all the same. Straight white men. Europeans. Caucasians. Colonizers. Sexists and misogynists. The perfect portrait of this patriarchal society that I, you

(*looks at YEONG-JA.*)

she

(*looks at MORITZ for a few seconds and looks back at ARIADNE.*)

need to fight.

YEONG-JA

(*to MORITZ.*)

Isn't this a bit over the top?

MORITZ

Do you know what a Posse is?

(*Short silence.*)

ARIADNE

(*in a low voice to DEPRILIE.*)

Professor Lämpel is gay.

DEPRILIE

(*Stands up in surprise. To the audience.*)

It doesn't make much difference. He remains everything else. Chauvinistic pig, scoundrel and abuser. He must have tried to get a hold of you, didn't he? After having oppressed you, having highlighted your subordinate status, the toxic testosterone must have spoken louder.

(*Closes eyes with a triumphant expression.*)

ARIADNE (*embarrassed.*)

Deprilie...he's gay. He... doesn't have much interest in... women...

DEPRILIE

(*opening her eyes. Disappointed, her voice slurred.*)

So he didn't take advantage of your condition as a woman and a foreigner?

(ARIADNE shakes her head.)

DEPRILIE

As an exilde, as a refugee, as a ... as a ...

ARIADNE

The worst thing was that he made me read that accursed text...

YEONG-JA

(to DEPRILIE.)

A drama.

DEPRILIE *(exalted.)*

Of course this is a drama, it is an unacceptable situation, a manifestation...

YEONG-JA

No.

DEPRILIE *(indignant.)*

What do you mean?

(Laughing mockingly.)

Of course, it's very easy for you, who are yellow and not black like Ariadne, to say no. Because an Asian woman is not a foreigner, they come from a rich country and even more so marry a European, belong to a world of white privileges, avoid public transport, despise popular supermarkets, don't think twice before spending more than a hundred euros to watch an opera and spend the winter in some ski resort alongside the remaining barons and dukes of this devastated and decadent monarchy.

(Silence.)

MORITZ

(to YEONG-JA.)

It has almost become a consensus. You are not a foreigner.

YEONG-JA

(to DEPRILIE.)

The *no* was an attempt to explain that the text that Ariadne had to read was a play.

(DEPRILIE looks at YEONG-JA, then at ARIADNE and finally at MORITZ.)

YEONG-JA

That is, a drama.

(A school of thirty-seven sharks passes in front of the boat, only their pointed fins can be seen. Deprilie's cell phone rings, she answers it.)

DEPRILIE

Yes?

(Pause.)

No, I used the reference from the first translation.

(Pause.)

Yes, I know the last one is more reliable but I...

(Pause. Shakes her head impatiently.)

ARIADNE

(in a low voice to MORITZ and YEONG-JA.)

She is very involved with this article. I don't even know how she found the time to show up here today.

MORITZ

What does she write about?

ARIADNE

She researches Wittgenstein.

YEONG-JA

I've never read anything by him.

(To MORITZ.)

Have you?

MORITZ

Yes. He is a European philosopher. Tout court.

ARIADNE

(head down.)

Austrian and white.

DEPRILIE

Now I can't.

(Hangs up and puts the cell phone away.)

I can't stand this.

(To ARIADNE.)

Honey, I'm sorry, I have a little problem to solve, but we'll talk. These Austrians cannot continue to jeer at foreigners and denigrate non-hegemonic identities.

(She throws herself into the sea. She swims away.)

YEONG-JA

(to ARIADNE.)

Austrian, white, but at least gay?

MORITZ

(takes an envelope of tobacco from his clothes.)

At least? Sinnen aber schon auf Possen.

ARIADNE

I haven't the slightest idea about this, although it would be more coherent... now, as fascist as he is, to accuse Herr Krämpel of having tried to get a hold of me... that's already...

MORITZ

(fills his pipe with Tobacco.)

Schlichen sich die bösen Buben.

ARIADNE (amusing.)

...a Vergnügen.

YEONG-JA

(to herself.)

Amamus, amatis, amant.

MORITZ

(lights his pipe with a lighter.)

Voluptas!

(Short pause.)

YEONG-JA

Love.

SCENE 4

The spacious room of the lighthouse from the play The Chairs by the Romanian Eugène Ionesco. Several chairs piled up in one corner of the room. MORITZ is sitting in a chair by an open window. YEONG-JA sitting on another next to MORITZ.

MORITZ

And that's it. The story ends here.

YEONG-JA

Boys will always be boys.

MORITZ

Poor Uncle Fritz. We were bad boys.

YEONG-JA

You were?

MORITZ

(smiling.)

You quickly learned to play with words.

YEONG-JA

It is actually na affirmation, otherwise I would have said, 'aren't you anymore'?

(Gets up and goes to the pile of chairs.)

Uncle mustn't be na easygoing person either. I'm still faced with the inconsistency of Deprilie.

(Stops midway, turning to MORITZ.)

All right, she won't let it go. She helped Ariadne get away from that VHS teacher for a while.

(Goes to the pile of chairs.)

But with so many options in her identity chart...

MORITZ

(gets up and looks out the window at something in the distance.)

Identity chart?

YEONG-JA

That's what happens when you get in touch with the academy. With the post-structuralist critique. With deconstruction and its per...

MORITZ

(turning towards her and leaning against the wall.)

... petual becoming. Hey, I thought Max had ordered you not to leave the house.

YEONG-JA

Online. Today a lot, if not almost everything, is online.

MORITZ

A pity.

YEONG-JA

I think so too.

(Goes to the window where MORITZ is.)

Contact between human beings is disappearing. Everything becomes virtual.
And we exile each other.

(Short silence.)

MORITZ

Where did the Chekhov from before come from?

YEONG-JA

Korea is not far from Russia.

MORITZ

Nor Austria. Did you read Ostrov Sakhalin or did you go there to feel what he felt? If you say close...

YEONG-JA

(turning to MORITZ.)

Do you know what text the teacher made her read?

MORITZ

Some Posse.

(Embarrassed, he goes to the pile of chairs.)

Nowadays, everything is nothing but Possen. Even without Gesang.

YEONG-JA

Chekhov comes from a course I took on Russian literature. Drama including.

MORITZ

No cancellations on the agenda?

YEONG-JA

The one that I like most of all of his characters is Varia.

MORITZ

(pushing some chairs to the floor as if looking for something.)

On the other hand, I am interested in the anti-dramatic structure of the four acts.
The end that happens in the middle. The characters don't interest me.

(YEONG-JA walks over to MORITZ and watches the chairs overturn.)

YEONG-JA

But I prefer Turgenev. Without him we wouldn't have Chekhov and his drama.

MORITZ *(concentrated.)*

I don't think so...

YEONG-JA

A world of established and almost unbreakable polarities. The woman and the man. The servant and the mistress. The old and the young. Those who are local and those who are outside. Those who come and go and those who always stay.

(MORITZ climbs over the chairs that are still piled up.)

YEONG-JA

I always stay. Natalia Petrovna also stayed.

(Fifty-five beetles fly past and out of the open window.)

YEONG-JA

I've already lowered myself too much. I hate drama. I took all these courses just to have a subject that interested you and thus gain your attention. This whole discussion about being a foreigner or not just makes me tired. Listening to your childhood pranks and mischief was the way I found to be able to take a closer look at you. I'm just a human being who needs another human being.

(MORITZ stops standing on a chair that is not firmly on the mound and looks at YEONG-JA.)

YEONG-JA *(in a slightly artificial voice.)*

I have only one way left to earn your respect again: frankness, absolute frankness, whatever the consequences. This is the last time we see each other and the last time we speak. I love thee.

(MORITZ hurries down awkwardly from his chairs, runs to the window and throws himself out.)

SCENE 5

The vast immensity of the snow-covered mountain in the last act of the play When We Dead Awaken by the Norwegian Henrik Ibsen. YEONG-JA standing in the middle of the white landscape. APPENDIX enters in a hurry, wearing dark glasses, with difficulty pulling a suitcase on wheels by the hand, three bags from designer stores hanging from one arm, a purse on the other and high heels. APPENDIX stops at a distance from YEONG-JA, opens one of the bags and scatters golden seeds on the snow. Immediately exits after crossing space. YEONG-JA watches the seeds for a few seconds. ARIADNE enters the same way APPENDIX had entered and stops. A gosling with seventy-seven geese enters the opposite side of ARIADNE's and scrambles to peck at the seeds. The geese leave.

ARIADNE

He didn't have the heart to come to say goodbye.

(YEONG-JA collapses sitting in the snow.)

ARIADNE

He only spoke three sentences.

(YEONG-JA dumps snow crumbs over her head.)

ARIADNE

Bosheit ist kein Lebenszweck.

(YEONG-JA lets herself fall onto the snow.)

ARIADNE *(in a choked voice.)*

Das kommt...

YEONG-JA *(with a deep and sinister voice.)*

...von dumme Witze.

(ARIADNE runs out crying from the side she had entered. The snow is falling. Long silence.)

YEONG-JA

(practically covered by a fine white snow.)

Was geht mich das an?

THE END