

THE NATIONAL

by Chris Van Strander

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CHARACTERS

WELCOME WAGON Female, 60s-70s. Adorable babushka lady.

NEW ARRIVAL Male, early 20s.

SETTING

Dockside. Winter.

Dockside. Winter.

NEW ARRIVAL, not dressed for this weather, bag stuffed with possessions, warms himself over a fire in a barrel. Sifts through a preposterously thick stack of government forms, trying to make sense of it.

Pushing a granny cart, WELCOME WAGON sidles up, starts warming herself.

WELCOME WAGON

Land sakes! Bitter, huh, friend? Out here since dawn—wouldja believe?, this time a' year? How else a girl s'posed to keep busy, though, right?

NEW ARRIVAL

(points to something on one of his forms)

WELCOME WAGON

Naturalization Affairs. Yes, you need to—? Wait: were you... aboard?

NEW ARRIVAL

(nods)

WELCOME WAGON

I'm sorry: do you speak our language?

NEW ARRIVAL

Ah, yes! Small.

WELCOME WAGON

Am I—outside Immigration, 'course... the first of our citizens to speak with you?

NEW ARRIVAL

(nods)

WELCOME WAGON

Well! On behalf of all our leaders, local, regional, and national—on behalf of every resident of this great republic: WELCOME, my new fellow countryman!

NEW ARRIVAL

Thank you!

WELCOME WAGON

Thank *you*—for choosing our humble land to make your home! And congratulations for surviving an arduous journey—many haven't, god rest 'em.

(looks around)

Where's the rest of the family?

NEW ARRIVAL

(shakes head mournfully)

WELCOME WAGON

Oh. How 'bout that—something in common already. I'm truly sorry. So what's the trip take these days?

NEW ARRIVAL

No no, I good health.

WELCOME WAGON

No no, uh: Boat. Cross. Days.

NEW ARRIVAL

Oh! Uh—

(thinks, counting on his fingers)

WELCOME WAGON

Oh, I remember my own like it was—Took, uh—

(thinks, counting on her fingers; abandons that)

You're stretching your legs, right? Traveler's thrombosis—don't want an embolism, do ya? Come on!

He does nothing.

WELCOME WAGON

You're shy. 'Least promise you'll do it in private. Here—

(counts out some pills)

Aspirin—stops clotting. And—iron... vitamin A... zinc.

NEW ARRIVAL

No no—

WELCOME WAGON

Oh don't worry 'bout me, I'm an ox! The one trait wish I'd passed to my son. But there y'are. My neighbors? Spend half the night queuing for vitamins—but look: spares galore!

NEW ARRIVAL

No money.

WELCOME WAGON

(puts the pills in his hand)

Shhh. But couldja do me a favor, son? Put your scarf on, huh? Growin' icicles just lookin' at you.

He does nothing.

WELCOME WAGON

You didn't bring a—? Didn't you hear government predicted a hard winter? Where're your gloves? Same place? Back across an ocean in your dresser? What were you expecting? One a' your beaches to just jump in your bag and follow ya? Just like him— infallible, right? Land sakes you're lucky I'm.

(pulls out a man's scarf and gloves, hands them to him)

Go 'head. No use for 'em anymore.

He puts them on; she pulls out a thermos, pours a capful.

WELCOME WAGON

Here: some of my... homebrewed... coffee.

She offers it. He stares, wary. Pointedly, she takes a sip. He takes the cap, drinks appreciatively.

WELCOME WAGON

Nothin' wrong with that, huh, son? Warm now, ain'tcha?

NEW ARRIVAL

Mmm.

WELCOME WAGON

(takes out a bottle)

And for later? Our National Spirit.

NEW ARRIVAL

(mimes crossing himself)

Spirit?

WELCOME WAGON

(shakes head, mimes guzzling)

Spirit. Husband used to say, "Cradle a snifter of this o'er a flame, release its barrel aging, and you will know what it is to be a man of this country."

(mind drifts off, bit of a reverie; snaps out of it, offers bottle)

NEW ARRIVAL

No, no.

WELCOME WAGON

For him.

NEW ARRIVAL

(accepts bottle)

WELCOME WAGON

So what're they serving on the way over these days? Still

WELCOME WAGON

water and soda crackers?

NEW ARRIVAL

Water, cracker.

WELCOME WAGON

Must be fiending for meat. Can't claim to've made these, but.

(pulls out a bag; opens it, shows him)

Spicy smoked lamb samosas. Our National Dish. Both my men's favorite.

(sticks her nose in the bag, sniffs)

Mmmm... coriander. Remember: anytime your tummy growls? Just follow this scent to the nearest line, sure enough there'll be a cart handing these out.

She gives him the bag. He pulls out a samosa, inspects it, takes a tiny test nibble.

WELCOME WAGON

No rush but that'll be a curling stone by the time you.

He takes a bite. Convinced, he devours the rest appreciatively. Offers her some; she waves it off.

WELCOME WAGON

Familiar with our city plan?

(unfurls a map)

Here's us, and here's me—District Six. Friendliest in town, 'specially to a newcomer.

You are planning to settle here, of course?

NEW ARRIVAL

Country. Quiet.

WELCOME WAGON

No no, here! Everything's here: cinemas—you've got to! No one's booked you a train already?

(holds up a key)

Guess what this's to? Your very own room in a lovely little residence. Got one myself next block over; came with the pension. It's not a cathedral, but it's no flophouse either.

Clean, secure—and just the charmingest touches. Central heat, color TV. Shared bathroom, but who are we—oil barons? And tell ya: when you're on your own? Little restroom conversation can be quite comforting. All that for twenty a week, with the subsidy! Find *that* out in the country!

NEW ARRIVAL

(takes key)

WELCOME WAGON

Are you married?

NEW ARRIVAL

(shakes head)

WELCOME WAGON

But you do fancy girls?

NEW ARRIVAL

Fancy?

WELCOME WAGON

Like.

NEW ARRIVAL

(shy nod)

WELCOME WAGON

Well—as a mother, former mother? Someday, when you're ready, you should take a wife from our women. Wisest choice you'll ever make. We're cheery—disciplined—naturally curvaceous—exemplary cooks and launderers. Sure you remember our Miss Universe entrant?, darning socks in high style during her talent competition! But 'til then.

(hands him a voucher)

Just stick this in your pocket. Voucher for some time at our district's premier massage emporium. Now don't get all—it's safe, sophisticated. Best way of introducing yourself to our girls. Sensual expression's tremendously healthy. As I remember.

(thinks)

What else? May've heard you're gonna have an impossible time finding work. That our native-born will try to—

NEW ARRIVAL

Stop me from steal your job? Yes, I hear.

WELCOME WAGON

Well lemme assure you: that's untrue. There's plenty of opportunity. Did you know over fifty percent of our city's clerical staff are your former countrymen?

(pulls out a fanfold paper printout; suddenly halts)

We're none of us native-born here, friend. None.

(back to printout)

So what's your liking? Something steady I'm sure, nothing seasonal, migrant... life-threatening. Ah!

(shows him printout)

NEW ARRIVAL

Mu-nick-i—

WELCOME WAGON

Municipal—

NEW ARRIVAL

Clerk. Board of Election.

WELCOME WAGON

Desk job, right next to the radiator. Oh and they'll advance you two weeks, getcha on your feet. In-district too—fancy you, strolling to work!

(gives him the printout; stares at his paperwork)

Now. Citizenship. See they've started you along. My my—we do love our bureaucracy, don't we? Well I understand. Ensures every one of us his very own personal part to play in the. Sure they didn't tell you though, that 'til they actually slog through all that? Verify every last redundancy of an application to their satisfaction? You'll be six feet under!

(takes his paperwork, drops it right into the fire)

Go to district court—I'll show you—tomorrow, dawn. You'll know which door: be a line just like you. Show this.

(gives him a kind of card)

Judge'll take ya in ten at a time. Just raise your hand, repeat. Outta there in time for breakfast. Might I peek at your passport?

NEW ARRIVAL

Why?

WELCOME WAGON

Why not?

She puts her hand out. He hesitates. Then hands it over. She browses it.

WELCOME WAGON

So handsome. Know you're one of three fellas I ever met, actually looks good in these pictures? You're embarrassed over this? "Reason for emigrating."

(strains)

Oh this scribble.

NEW ARRIVAL

Other.

WELCOME WAGON

"Do you believe in democratic government?"

NEW ARRIVAL

Yes.

WELCOME WAGON

Good. "Have you ever been affiliated with an association advocating assassination?"

Beat; he grabs back his passport.

WELCOME WAGON

I see.

**To read the rest of this play, please contact me at:
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