**Vitaly Dudko**

**LIFE KEEPS THE SCORE**

**Play**

**Translated from Russian by Troshenko Maria**

**Original title: *Гамбургский счёт***

Vitaly Dudko

LIFE KEEPS THE SCORE[[1]](#footnote-2)

Play

Characters

**Igor**, teenager with Down syndrome

**Denis**, interpreter

**Denis's Mum**

**Igor's Mum**

**Igor's Dad**

**Boris** or **Bob**; Denis's classmate

**Martynov**, Denis's friend

**Julia**

**Julia's Mother**

**Lera**

**Ksyusha**

**Rita**

**Colleague 1**

**Colleague 2**

**Artyom**

**Infectious disease doctor**

**Irina**

**Church guard**

**His wife**

**Their teenage son**

**Museum attendant** in Tretyakov Gallery

**Simultaneous interpreter 1 (a young woman)**

**Simultaneous interpreters** **2, 3, 4** (**men**)

**Natalya Pavlovna**

**Taisiya / Taya**

**Consultant**

**Assistant translator**

**Chairman of the inspection commission**

**Members of the inspection commission**

**Waiter**

**Seller**

**Two female athletes**

**Peacock**

**Sparrow**

**Part 1.**

**Running on the spot.**

**Denis** (*speaking to Martynov* *on the phone*). She was working for Intourist. A tour guide in various museums in Moscow and Moscow suburbs. A nervous, overly excited lady with a passion for paintings. Especially the Italian Renaissance. Medieval Renaissance. Giotto, Titian, Giorgione, Raphael. Overwhelmed with knowledge. An intellectual one. It's my fault. I stepped back. I didn't go into details. I got cold feet. I'm not gonna cope.

*International conference.*

*Simultaneous interpretation booths with signs on them: English, Russian, French, German. Denis is working in the English booth, performing as a pilot interpreter. The other interpreters translate from English.*

**Denis** (*translates in the booth*). During the past several years trams in our countries have faded into the background as a result of double impact: the aging infrastructure on one side and the growing number of private cars on the other side. The lack of funds has led to the delay of modernization programs. These both factors - overload and obsolescence - have degraded the quality of tram service. There is a potential threat of the classic vicious circle.

*The booth suddenly opens,* ***Denis*** *sticks his head out: ''What the hell is ''pogo-oscillation''?*

*“It means related to vibration, like shaking” helps his colleague who is resting there.*

*Denis closes the door and continues working. He is performing simultaneous interpretation with confidence, and French and German booths follow him immediately.*

In spite of the increasing attractiveness of private cars, public transport still plays the main part. Trams are efficient and eco-friendly, therefore, answering the purpose of the clean air strategy. Cities are not so livable if they are only convenient for wheels. It is a municipal railway system that should provide high-quality public transport.

*When* ***Denis's*** *time is over he leaves the booth.* ***Interpreter 1****, a young woman, walks out of the French booth at the same time, sits down on a chair, takes out knitting yarn and starts knitting.*

**Interpreter 2** (*a man, asks* ***Denis***). Whose monkey is that?

**Denis**. I forbid you to call the intern a monkey. She is a Ph.D. and a senior lecturer. She also has three children.

**Interpreter 2**. I don't believe you.

**Denis**. She carried, didn't drop, let them out perfectly. You are just talking rubbish about your respectable colleague.

**Interpreter 2**. Three kids? Ph.D.? You're not confusing things?

**Denis**. Her husband takes care of the children. She is the breadwinner. I haven't seen a more tight-knit family in my life. You should be ashamed. A bully, not an interpreter. I'm gonna kick you out of my team.

**Interpreter 2**. I would never believe it. Plus, she is so pretty.

**Denis**. She is so pretty.

**Interpreter 2**. What a shame indeed. I'd like to apologize. I just hope she didn't hear me.

**Interpreter 1**. I did. I forgive you.

**Interpreter 2**. Thank you. (*to Denis*.) Where is the toilet?

**Denis**. Have an urge?

**Interpreter 2**. The interpreter's rule. Find out where the bathroom is before you're laid back in the booth.

**Denis**. Along the corridor on the left.

*Pause.*

**Interpreter 1** (*into the space*). I was working as an interpreter that day. My cousin and her two children were travelling through the capital. They needed to spend a night somewhere. She called us and talked to my old mother-in-law. She wanted to stay with us for the night. She said that her children were sick with measles and got fever. My mother-in-law got very nervous about it and said she had no right to invite them because measles is contagious. We’ve got three kids too. She told her to call me in the evening when I’m back from work. The cousin didn’t call back. I almost forgot the incident. One day I happened to be in their hometown and went to visit my mother-in-law’s sister. She snapped at me: “I don’t care about your children whether they’re sick or healthy. It’s important for me that you should give my grandchildren a shelter even if their bodies are covered with horrible scabs. I know you were not at home. My sister has to welcome my grandchildren even if they’re leprous”.

*Denis's Mum's apartment.*

**Mum**. I'm his mum. We are living separately. Grown children live separately and do their things. I miss him every day. He comes to me, gives me money, brings food. Anyway, we talk on the phone more often. His life is a mess. He is naturally soft and forgiving, fits for family life. I used to dream about having grandchildren. I love playing with little kids. Then I stopped dreaming. What a sad destiny.

Suddenly my childhood friend showed up: married to a banker, expensive cars, children live abroad. She didn't remember about me for fifty years. I acted meanly. I pretended I didn’t recognize her. We spent all childhood together. We lived in the same block of flats on the same floor. Gone with the wind. All those happy birthdays. Disappeared without a trace. Fighting for a marrowbone. Funny. Childish. Skating in winter, summer in the countryside house where the paint was flaking off. We didn’t know what it meant to be poor. Childhood was bliss. Neighbours’ children, and the wild stream, and dandelions, and all those field flowers. She was always the first. She never hurt anyone. Then suddenly no more walks together, no more boys who were hitting on us... She had erased me from her memory. She was crying on her knees, begging me to forgive her. Even offered me money. I was torn but stood my ground. I remembered every single day of our childhood. We were playing in the sandbox together. We were making jam from paradise apples. They were small, red, and sweet! We were eating these apples washed and prepared for the jam like thieves in the night. Mum didn’t mind. She pretended not to notice. Gone are those paradise apples. Either the apple trees just died or they cut down the garden. My mum is kind. Now people are mean. Especially young girls. There was a farmer who would bring apples to us in his cart. He was playing with us. He would let us stroke his horse but he was always standing right there just in case. The horse was farting loudly so we laughed a lot. We tried riding it too. The horse neighed. We were not scared. The farmer said she was saying hi. She was smiling and snortled a little. So smart. Once we were watching her giving birth. We were so little but it’s printed on my memory. The little foal fell out right onto a straw rug and immediately tried standing up on his weak legs. He tried again and again and still plopped down. The horse was watching him and licking him all the time. Very soon he was already really standing and sucking milk. It was so weird. He had this little face, and the tiny tail and the tiny hooves. So cute, so charming. As he wanted to say: “Look, I’m here!” Two city girls in the village. So many adventures! So many dangers! One of the girls was teasing a butting bull until it was too much. The little bull ran up and threw her away as far as it could. Broke her ribs. So much blood. It was so hot, the girls were only wearing panties, not even dresses. The little bull hit her slim unprotected body. Damaged the tiny child’s ribs... She is lucky with her husband. They say he is such a lovely guy. She didn’t invite me to her wedding. She was hiding him from me. She was scared I’d put a jinx on their happiness. Her mum was always saying: once you’re married, kick your friends out of your life. Mum’s words were like a thorn in her flesh. She has been happily married with children, rich. I was hearing about her from people now and then. I’ve been glad for her. On the left of my chest, where the heart is, I was feeling like a lump was growing. Well, the heart is not actually on the left, it’s supposed to be right in the centre. The lump felt heavier sometimes but eventually stopped bothering me. I live a humble life. My only income is my pension. I’ve heard how rich people are, I don’t get it. Why do they need so much? Then suddenly my legs grew numb. I was suffering. Then they worked again.

*The Ministry's inspection commission. A long table, chairs on both sides and at the top. Assistant Translator* *and Denis are in the foreground.*

**Assistant Translator** (*looking through papers*). Okay. Inklings: not a member of the party, father’s name entry left blank...

**Denis**. Mistake. Shouldn't be a blank. I'll write: single mother.

**Assistant Translator.** Ok, write it.

**Denis**. Or ''No information about father''. Which one do you prefer?

**Assistant Translator**. Both are equally informative. Whatever you prefer.

(*Denis fills in the entry*.) Now you've completed everything. Times change, and people do as well. Please wait in the hall, I will invite you.

*There come veterans - members of the* *inspection commission. They sit down. The atmosphere is tense. The* ***Chairman*** *of the inspection commission sits at the top of the table (to the* ***Assistant Translator****): ''Ask him in''.*

***Denis*** *enters the room.*

**Chairman**. Please take a seat, Denis Evgenyevich.

***Denis*** *sits down also at the top of the table, opposite* ***Chairman****.* ***Assistant Translator*** *puts a folder in front of every member of the inspection commission. Silence. Everyone is reading the papers.*

**Chairman**. Denis Evgenyevich, you are going to take part in the session for the first time. What is going to be discussed there is a matter of principle. A matter of principle for us. Did you have a chance to look at the terminology?

**Denis** (*stands up*). Of course. I've made a set of documents in English and Russian. I am currently forming a card file of the key terms.

**Chairman**. Please be seated.

**Member of the inspection commission.** Do you have any remarks about your previous trips?

**Denis**. No, none.

**Member of** **the inspection commission.** So, all the sessions where you participated were flawless?

**Denis**. Yes, according to the agenda.

**Member of the inspection commission.** Are you well informed about the events on the world stage?

**Denis**. Yes. I follow the media.

**Member of the inspection commission.** Why are you not a member of the party?

**Denis**. I'm on the institute reserve.

**Member of the inspection commission.** You are mature enough.

**Denis**. I'm on the reserve.

**Member of the****inspection commission** (*raises his hand*). I recommend Denis Evgenyevich for the conference.

**Chairman**. Those in favour please raise your hands.

*Everyone raises their hands.*

**Chairman**. Denis Evgenyevich, have a good journey. You're free to go.

*Denis leaves.*

*An openwork gazebo, the main tourist attraction and the symbol of the city.* ***Denis*** *and* ***Boris*** *are sitting inside. Each holds a glass of wine.*

**Boris** (*has a plait in his hair*). Do you remember the gazebo?

**Denis**. We spent all our school years here. Breaks between classes. Playing with snowballs. Going back to classes with hands red from the cold. Fighting with bullies who picked our school as a target. Very cruel fights. A lot of blood.

**Boris**. Do you remember ice blasting on the river in early spring? Huge blocks of ice were stacking and sliding upon each other. The blasters were afraid that the ice will knock down the old wooden bridge bearing. They didn’t let children come close.

**Denis**. Do you sometimes go to the Chekhov Museum on the Luka river? At the end of the 19th century he went there for a holiday with his family three times. Went fishing. Also crayfish. Making porridge on the riverside. Anton Pavlovich[[2]](#footnote-3) was writing a lot. Famous writers and scientists were coming to visit him on the Luka. He was writing about the storm. Psiol is a winding drowsy river. It's so weird that there was a storm. Chekhov's house was on the riverside, close to the Luchanskoye cemetery. His brother Nikolay Pavlovich, the artist, was buried there. He drew his tiny silhouette on Levitan't painting ''Autumn day. Sokolniki''. It was hard for Chekhov to get over his brother's death. Do you know the summer camp for schoolchildren - ''pioneers'' - in one of the houses of the estate? My mum sent me there when I was still in preschool. All the rest of the kids were older. How are you doing anyway? Are you married?

**Boris**. I am genetically single. I'm always by myself. ''I come out to the path...''[[3]](#footnote-4) I exchanged the apartment granted by the state for a small private house. I just sit there and paint. People sometimes ask me to doodle.

**Denis**. How are people living?

**Boris**. People are slaving away. Lack of enthusiasm. Everything is commercialized.

**Denis**. Any classmates left?

**Boris**. Everybody left. Some of them already passed away. Well, you probably know. Even though you don't live here permanently. Does your heart sink when the train stops at the station here?

**Denis**. Sinks and booms.

**Boris**. How long are you going to stay?

**Denis**. For a week.

**Boris**. Not much. Well, right. You see the family and go back. The general conclusion is we are getting older. Globally. The second half of life is round the corner. The dreary half. Still, we share some unforgettable memories. Are we still friends?

**Denis**. Beyond doubt.

**Boris**. You see. You don't give a straight answer. Why did you hide it?

**Denis**. What are you talking about?

**Boris**. We were both growing up without fathers. I am not judging. In the end, everyone is doing their own thing. Everyone's doing what's right for them but it still kinda hurts. Best mates, and all that. I thought we trusted each other.

**Denis**. Stop talking in riddles. Take a shortcut.

**Boris**. When you were a student and came for summer holidays, you always were the life and soul of the party.

**Denis**. Those friends came and went.

**Boris**. We got drunk together.

**Denis**. Moderately. Cheap wine.

**Boris**. Wild and reckless time. You were a student at a prestigious university in the capital but I wasn't jealous. I've always been realistic about myself. I was really looking forward to your coming back for holidays. By the way, Seryoga, Leonid, Gennadiy also used to come home for holidays but for some reason, they rarely joined us. We shared our victories in the amorous department, first of all. It was before your last year.

**Denis**. Is the plait supposed to make you more handsome?

**Boris**. I am a local Bohemian. Can't do without a plait. Don't try and knock me off my topic.

**Denis**. What are you talking about?

**Boris**. You acted like a jerk. We were mates since school.

**Denis**. I agree. We were mates.

**Boris**. As soon as you left I rushed to her.

**Denis**. Safe travels. What do I have to do with it?

**Boris**. And it turned out you've already sneaked in there. You could have dropped a hint before you left …

**Denis**. So, what is it you want to discuss from a philosophical point of view?

**Boris**. You've changed... I suggest that there should be no casuistics between sworn friends. I want the truth. Did it happen between you and her..?

**Denis**. Who do you mean?

**Boris**. Listen, that's really too much. Trying to act the fool? You know very well who I am talking about.

**Denis**. Head over heels in love?

**Boris**. Apparently.

**Denis**. What's the point then in talking about who was the first? Your affection is what matters.

**Boris**. You were hiding it from me! You were covering up tracks!

**Denis**. What, did I have to report to you? I wasn't in there. She was testing you. I don't even understand what we are talking about.

**Boris**. You see, you can't be honest even now.

*At Julia and her Mother's apartment*

**Julia**. Was I well-behaved or naughty when I was little?

**Mother**. You were a gently friendly kid. You could find yourself a pacifier and suck on it secretly.

**Julia** (*laughs*). Sucked on a pacifier! Once I got up very early in winter and got dressed by myself. You woke up, saw me dressed, gave me a spanking, and sent me back to bed. You hardly ever showed any affection. You were just nagging at me every minute. You were constantly in a rush. The most unpleasant memory of my childhood - you are in a rush. Pointless meetings, useless talks. You didn't have real friends, all you had was a bunch of useless things that always kept you busy. All sessions in some teachers' councils and committees. I felt like an orphan, basically. Did you feel like a mother? Do you remember Kostya Lapshin? It was you who kicked him out.

**Mother**. Kostik? Of course. Such a shy and naive boy.

**Julia**. Second rate! Always shabby! Studied hard. Jumped into the middle of nowhere after the university and actually manage to work his way up in the province. Graduated from the Academy of Overseas Trade. They invited him to work for a big company. Now he is a VIP, Very Important Person. A grey cardinal. In charge for some fundamental orders. Got married. God damn it. Lapshin! He brought up two children. A son and a daughter. Rumour has it, his wife is beautiful too. They also say, she’s smart. (*almost crying*) She created a perfect environment for his studies and ambitions. Made sure he’s not spending time with wrong people because he was such a dull-witted silly child. Cheeky lady! Imagine: Kostik comes back from work, takes off his jacket, washes his hands in the bathroom, and she is right there, behind his back, in a fancy underwear! I could also be smart and pretty, waiting for him in a fancy underwear! Why did it not work out? I used to be a leader in many places. They said I was number one. Boys dedicated poems to me.

**Mother**. Why do you even care about Lapshin? It's ridiculous after so many years.

**Julia**. He keeps both feet on the ground. Nothing can knock him off. A second-rate husband is better than none.

**Mother**. Must be tempting to wash socks, and t-shirts, and pants? Smelly ones. An expert in the art of the 16th century.

**Julia**. An expert without a husband? Some can even tolerate humiliation only to have him messing around next to them. Cursing divorces as if they have ever been married themselves. Making up stories about their invisible husbands... What is the smell of your pants? Chanel No.5? Torn all over.

**Mother**. I threw out the torn ones.

**Julia**. I'm dreaming about a scent of a man. I don't want to kick the bucket in the wild all alone. I'd rather be surrounded by family. You are the one who's driving me into this wretched existence. I was scared of you. You didn't read books for me. You never told me bedtime stories. Svetlanka from kindergarten went to bed very early. I was allowed to lie down next to her and listen to Tolstoy's stories, or the fairy tale about the Nutcracker. I guess her parents understood about my orphanage. Only much later I realized I was unwanted... Why don't you love me, mum?

**Mother**. That's not true. I loved you.

**Julia**. You were constantly repeating ''Choose a reliable man''. All the anger that you had for my father who left us was spilled out on me. You've never been affectionate, never even hugged me. Somehow I dragged myself to forty. Through the thickest forests, through impenetrable wilds.... I was somehow making my way, getting wounds and scars all along. Misunderstood by people, misunderstood by mother. All by myself, without anybody's help. How was I supposed to settle down? My collection is a burden. It's only becoming bigger. Tanushka gave me a Belgian stabber from the First World War as a present. She brought it from there. The appraisers from the museum of history took pictures of it for textbooks. I don't hide it from anyone. A nightmarish-looking weapon. The curves and hooks. Just the look of it makes you feel disgusted. Warriors did show a certain level of craftsmanship and inventiveness. Lord forbid one gets stabbed by it! Guts out, and the brain too. Soldiers would march into battle with this thing at the ready? My life is like that stabber. Completely alone. I hate you. You were bullying me. Humiliated me. In summer you just disappeared. Went for a holiday on your own. Men came and went. I was waiting. Who was I waiting for? Am I an outsider? I've been lucky too, quite often. Where did I make a mistake then?

*An international conference again. Simultaneous interpretation booths again.* ***Denis*** *is performing as a pilot interpreter again.*

**Denis** (*translates in the booth*). Natural gas is a mix of hydrocarbons with the largest proportion of methane. It is extracted from special mines or comes as an assist gas during oil extraction. It is widely used for heating buildings, cooking, and for manufacturing goals. Gas for means of transport is pumped through pipelines and gets compressed at petrol stations. Having analyzed the current situation at the market, I feel frustrated. While my left eye is sobbing, the right one is laughing blatantly.

*The smooth buzz of voices stopped. Colleagues look out of the booths.* ***Denis*** *also looks out and nods affirmatively: “That’s the speaker. Translate me!” The interpreters go back to their seats and stick to the microphones. Simultaneous translation is flowing smooth again.*

I'm fed up with interpreting. I have to listen to too much jibberish. Your trivial verbiage. Bitter like gall. Things are still where they started. People used to be cold and hungry, and they still are. They will be poor forever. International authorities are the most sophisticated scoundrels. The right thing to do would be to dismiss you and give the money to hard workers. A peacock screams shrilly. Does it mean it’s happy or angry? Farewell. There is no return. I will never go back to the booth. I don’t want to have anything in common with you. Cynics. Cheaters. Swindlers.

***Denis*** *leaves the booth. The rest of the* ***Interpreters*** *also come out, take their chairs and sit down on them.*

*Everyone leaves except for* ***Denis****.*

***Natalya Pavlovna*** *comes in.*

**Natalya Pavlovna**. Thank you, Deniska. Wonderful. Flawless. The delegates are very satisfied. Are you in a rush? Where do I start... You know... There's an emergency... They bend over backwards in the ministry because of the seminar tomorrow. This event has been organized so messy, and all of a sudden, there's a problem. They've just sent a document, a mandatory one... The seminar can't be held without it. It's basically the topic of the discussion. The minister even allowed me to share his phone number.

**Denis**. What are you talking about?

**Natalya Pavlovna**. About translating around fifty pages tonight…

**Denis**. Bon voyage!

**Natalya Pavlovna**. I didn't expect to have this seminar around my neck. Have some mercy, I'm begging you.

**Denis**. I was working like a mule all day.

**Natalya Pavlovna**. They promoted me to head of the department. Do you think I didn't sweat my up there? We've been working together for so long. You're like family to me. Please don't leave me alone with this. Do you want me to ask you on my knees? (She makes a movement as if about to kneel).

**Denis**. Please spare me this performance. Are you funny in the head?

**Natalya Pavlovna**. The minister promised to pay as much as you say, within a reasonable amount, of course... It's just a little bit left before I retire... I was told off for your ''farewell''. Appealing though... My farewell is around the corner too...

**Denis**. Trying to make me plod away here all night? Want me dead in the morning?

**Natalya Pavlovna**. Please save me, my guardian angel! You are my only hope.

**Denis**. Show me the text. Very fine print. Want me to type as well?

**Natalya Pavlovna**. You will have a secretary to help you. Taya. Taisia is her full name. She is typing pretty fast. She is working for our department but she is still a student. Very diligent and modest girl.

Her mum agreed. My responsibility. You just sit here in the armchair and dictate. You will only look at the text. The first version will work. No further editing. We need at least to grasp the point of view of the report's author. I'll make sure there are enough sandwiches, tea, and coffee for the night. The security guard knows you'll be here. Tomorrow is Thursday, your sacred day. You'll be on time...

***Natalya Pavlovna*** *walks out and comes back with Taya. They are carrying the laptop, sandwiches, a flask with hot water, tea, and coffee.*

**Natalya Pavlovna**. Thank you in advance. My deepest gratitude. I will no longer bother you. (*Leaves*.)

**Denis** (*without looking at the girl*). Well, shall we start? (*Dictates*.) ''Child labour is a problem which is hard to solve. This problem has different aspects and reveals itself to a different degree in different countries regardless of their economic and social level of development. It is a chronic problem that occurs due to many interrelated reasons. It can only be solved in case all these reasons are eliminated. For example, the abolition of child labour is impossible without reducing poverty and increasing the level of school education, and these measures should also be accompanied by creating modern systems of social security''.

*A few hours later.*

***Denis*** *walks around the room and dictates. He stops behind Taisia's back.*

**Taya**. You are a master. A well-heeled one. A perfectionist. Natalya Pavlovna is charmed. People talk about you.

**Denis**. I hope they say something good.

**Taya**. Something amazing.

**Denis**. Natalya Pavlovna is condescending. Can I be honest with you?

**Taya**. I'm anticipating your secrets.

**Denis**. I am a very average interpreter.

**Taya**. What about all those glowing reviews?

**Denis**. I'm a nitpicker, of course, and I'm experienced. However, I'm an average translator.

**Taya**. Please don't stand behind my back. All your little tricks... Games... Where are your advances? You don't pull in… You don't seek out my attention…

**Denis**. Is it a good time to seduce, Taisia?..

**Taya**. Pardon. It just slipped from my lips.

**Denis**. Taya, do you mean flirting?

**Taya** (*clinging on the word*). Yes, yes. I meant flirting.

**Denis**. Is the job urgent?

**Taya**. Very urgent and high-paying. They promised they would pay me well too. (*Looks at her watch.*) Is the coffee break coming soon? You could have tried during the coffee break…

**Denis**. Let's finish this paragraph and take a coffee break.

**Taya**. Coffee break sounds good in Russian as well.

**Denis**. It does when you say it. Only you, exclusively.

**Taya** (*stops typing*). Sweet-talk?

**Denis**. Getting there. Ah, blast it… This paragraph is endless. Coffee break starts right now.

**Taya** (*takes off her sweater*). It's hot. I have the chills… I've got a torch just in case we would like to wander around the dark corridors here. Mum has thought everything through. I always listen to her. I didn’t expect her to let me spend a night with a man. At first she said she wouldn’t let me go. She was too worried. Natalya Pavlovna convinced her. They were speaking in hints. We live a solitary life. Guests visit us rarely. I’d love to be part of some group of young people. I find it interesting. Mum is cautious. This time she made this decision. She weighed the pros and cons and took the risk. She kissed before I went to work. Hugged me. Honestly, as if I was going to war. Funny. I am a virgin...

**Denis**. Not too bad! Everything happens at the right time.

**Taya**. My status doesn't make me feel happy. I don't care. I feel for mum. It's unbearable to live with her. I'll leave.

Day turns to evening, dusk draws nigh,

Deep shadows from the mountain spread,

Clouds darken all the fading sky…

The hour is late. Now day is fled.

Yet I’ll not mourn for day’s decline,

And night’s dark terrors shall not fear,

If only, magic spirit mine,

You’ll comfort and stay with me here…

I’m not scared of the night. It just follows the day. I would wander around dark alleys with you at night. We would have got lost on purpose but still found our way without asking anyone for help. We wouldn’t have been lost forever. My dear big city. Intricate and bulky at the same time. I’ll just stand closer to you. Let me cuddle up to you... Just a moment... a moment.

*She comes up to Denis and squeezes up against him, her hands on his shoulders. He hugs Taya and comforts her. They stand at a huge window. The dawn is about to break.*

**Taya**. It's morning already. A new day.

**Denis**. Upcoming passions, upcoming expectations.

*Institute of Tropical Medicine.*

*At* ***Infectious disease doctor’s.*** *She is a middle-aged woman.*

**Denis**. Are youan infection specialist?

**Doctor.** Yes.

**Denis**. Specialized in tropical diseases?

**Doctor.** Yes.

**Denis**. All these malarias, jungle fevers, gut infections?

**Doctor.** What brings you here?

**Denis**. I’d like a test for amoebiasis.

**Doctor.** What are the complaints?

**Denis**. I've been to the tropics. Africa. They found cysts.

**Doctor.** Cysts don't always turn into microorganisms. Sometimes they are just like a tight envelope. When were you positive for them?

**Denis**. Twenty years ago. I did a treatment course back then.

*The doctor stared at the patient with astonishment.*

**Doctor.** You came back from Central Africa twenty years ago?

**Denis**. Yes.

**Doctor.** What bothers you now?

**Denis**. Practically nothing. I'd only like to do the test again.

**Doctor.** What was the last test result?

**Denis**. Negative after the treatment. Cysts disappeared.

**Doctor.** The doctor prescribed you a treatment. How many tests did you do?

**Denis**. Three. Once a week.

**Doctor.** That's right. So, do you want the control one?

**Denis**. Yes, exactly.

**Doctor.** Easy. By the way, what African country are you talking about? Cameroon, Chad, Central African Republic, Kongo?

**Denis**. One of them. It doesn't matter at all.

**Doctor.** Well, alright. What was your job?

**Denis**. Interpreter. Is it so hard just to give me the form?

**Doctor.** Of course, I will. I will give it to you. We will do the epidemiological study and the blood test. (*To herself, thinking about how to approach this patient.*) So, it's been twenty years... Please tell me about your complaints. Fever, a bit higher temperature, nausea, vomiting? Diarrhea with some blood and slime? Sleeping problems? Do you feel generally weak? Do you feel like you have no energy?

**Denis**. No complaints.

**Doctor.** Very good. Any troubles at work?

**Denis**. None.

**Doctor.** Everything goes on as usual?

**Denis**. Yes, as usual.

**Doctor.** Are you married?

**Denis**. Single.

**Doctor.** Do you trust the woman you are with at the moment?

**Denis**. Please just give me that form.

**Doctor.** Some headwinds take place. Is it their fault to suspect amoebic dysentery?

*She stood up, walked to the door, looked outside, closed the door, and went back to her seat.*

**Denis**. Am I breaking your precious routine?

**Doctor.** There's no one waiting anyway. Let's find out the reason for your condition together.

**Denis**. My condition?

**Doctor.** Somehow you’ve made yourself believe you might have some tropical disease. You are a mature... a reasonable man...

**Denis**. That's right, I'm mature and reasonable.

**Doctor.** Suddenly you've got this weird idea in your head…

**Denis**. Why weird though? Are we going to do the test?

**Doctor.** Of course, we are. But we need to find the reason.

**Denis**. Gut flora first, reasons second. Many things happen for no reason. The infection is hiding. Lying low.

**Doctor.** Ok, let's assume it's been lying low for twenty years. But why did you suddenly feel this horrible infection right now? Besides, it's most probably not even there. Let's find out why.

**Denis** (*very seriously*). The infection doesn't reveal itself. It's just taking a nap at the door. But it's ready to knock on the door. Do you mind just giving me the form for the test without all these surplus and harmful questions?

**Doctor.** Of course. First the test, then the reason. (*Gives him the form*.) Here you go. There are a few tests listed here. You will do it tomorrow, and the day after tomorrow you will get a negative result. Otherwise, we will perform a full medical examination. (*Pause*.) You've made an appointment with a doctor. So please inform me if you find it necessary. Of course, it's up to you. Tropical diseases are harsh and have severe consequences. Sometimes they're even lethal. So, you've got away with it? Nothing to worry about?

**Denis**. It's only basic safety precautions. Wash hands, boil water, wipe fruit with manganese solution, take anti-malaria medicines regularly. I was diagnosed with cysts by the very end. I was the only interpreter with an advanced level of language so our fellow citizens asked for help. I often accompanied the local French doctor. Trust me, I've seen some illness!

**Doctor.** Could you please tell me about one of those incidents? I'm just curious from the professional point of view.

**Denis**. A child hurt his knee, and maggots of a pestilent worm got into the wound. The worm was crawling in circles right under the skin on the child's kneecap, leaving a long trace, a very visible one. The French guy looked at it through his magnifying glass and scribbled a sophisticated wormy diagnosis. He prescribed some pills. The urine is absolutely black after ones takes them.

**Doctor.** Oh yes, yes, I read about that worm.

**Denis**. It makes an impression that if you press the worm enough it will be just squeezed out of there. But the French guy said: ''Rubbish. It can only be exterminated by the pills from the inside. There is no other way to get rid of it''. He was a doctor in Africa for a long time. A very knowledgeable specialist. Thank you for the form. Bye.

**Doctor.** What about the reason? We agreed…

**Denis** (*made up his mind*). Will I not see you again?..

**Doctor.** You never know…

**Denis**. The reason… (*Pause*.) Yesterday was the anniversary… The day when the girl died.

**Doctor** (*almost screaming, shocked*). What does ''the girl'' have to do with it? Where does she come from?

**Denis**. My school love. Died from an incurable disease. I forgot her and never loved anyone else again.

***Denis*** *walks out. The doctor walks to the door again and looks out. Makes sure the patient has left and makes a call.*

**Doctor.** Hi, Irina.

**Irina**. Why don't you ever call me?

**Doctor.** I'm calling now.

**Irina**. Where have you been?

**Doctor.** Irina, I've just had a very weird patient here.

**Irina**. I'm all ears. There's no one waiting.

**Doctor.** I don't have anyone either. He came back from a tropical country in Africa twenty years ago. Suddenly he's got an obsession that he's got a gut infection. Amoebic dysentery.

**Irina**. Shut the front door!

**Doctor.** And you know what made him think of it…

**Irina**. Can't wait.

**Doctor.** It's the anniversary since his school crush died.

*After a long pause there is a hysterical cry:*

**Irina**. My patient! He is my patient! Give him to me!

**Doctor** (*evasively*). Maybe…

**Irina**. Did you forget about my thesis? “A man’s teenage love story and how it affects their married life”. I haven’t come to an agreement with my scientific adviser yet. They write a lot about feminine psychology and psychopathy but ignore men. They are not primitive... They can also be faithful to their loved one until death. I’ve collected a lot of materials about European countries. Give him to me, he is my patient.

**Doctor.** Maybe…

**Irina**. There you go again: ''maybe, maybe...'' (*Pause*.) You keep taking care of his guts, and I'll do the brain. How lucky! A teenage affection, then their ways parted. Apparently, she got married. He remembers her all the way, and then she dies young. His perception becomes a bit biased. It's an amazing example for my thesis! Please, give him to me! I'm begging you! Wait, what else is there? Is he single?

**Doctor.** Yes.

**Irina**. A prominent neurotic. A castaway. Restless. The blood test doesn't have anything to do with it. He is not even interested. He is sure he is negative but deep down he's got this nasty thought. It gets back to him from time to time. School love, old times in Africa... He is trying to cling to something in the past. He doesn't see the point in the present. Is there anything you're hiding from me?

 **Doctor.** Yes.

**Irina**. Do you like him?

**Doctor.** Yes.

**Irina**. Good luck. Call me then.

*Tretyakov Gallery. Levitan's hall. The painting ''Above the Eternal Peace''.*

*There is a wooden church on the hill overlooking the river. Barely visible light in the window. The wind drives clouds across the sky. There are only two people in the hall: The* ***Museum attendant*** *and* ***Denis****.*

**Museum attendant**(*to Denis*). Feeling excited? Comforting news?

**Denis** (*looking at the painting*). Heavy clouds are darker. The upper clouds are illuminated by the sun drifting away beyond the horizon. Sunset.

**Museum attendant**.I didn't mean the painting.

**Denis**. It's windy but the water is calm. There are people living on the island. Do they ever go to the mainland? The boat is carried down by the current. A creaky wooden church. An oil lamp in the window.

**Museum attendant**.Trying to disguise.

**Denis**. They're overcoming difficulties. They're happy.

**Museum attendant**.I'm trying not to contemplate for too long. Contemplation is addictive. I normally just go to the next hall. I'll leave you now.

*She leaves the hall.* ***Denis*** *opens the door in the painting, barely visible, and finds himself in a churchyard.* ***Church Guard*** *is cutting wood and putting it into a wood stack; his* ***Wife*** *is feeding chickens: chuck-chuck! Their* ***Son*** *is carrying water to the house. The* ***Wife*** *pours some milk into an old wooden churn and starts turning milk into butter energetically.*

**Wife**. Natural butter. Delicious. Without this genetically modified crap.

**Denis**. It's perfect here. The sky and the air… Open spaces. Where is Varvara?

**Wife**. She passed. She never left these places. All her life she was delivering posts in these villages. One familiar path for life. In the fields of golden wheat and sunflowers. Walking past the deep ravine, past the birch... Sits down on a rock for some time for sure. Foxes would run out of their holes, look at her, puzzled, and continue doing their thing... they wouldn’t snap at her. Once a boar appeared in front of her all of sudden. Just gave a grunt and ran. She was keeping the house all by herself. She was trying to save a little money. She kept her hardscrabble belongings in the wardrobe: dresses, scarves, socks. Sometimes she would pick over them and examine them. She would always lock the wardrobe when leaving the house. Who on earth would want her stuff? She locked her hut too. Once she went to the police station to ask for salt. The duty officer asked her: “Why did you come here?” She said: “Please give me some salt”. They only recently wired her house for electricity. She was used to candles. She didn’t ask, she didn’t beg. Why would she change anything? She went to bed early and woke up early. She talked to herself. Everyone was used to it. She was like a riddle. Surprised everyone. It took her half an hour less to walk back from the remote village. There was an old little watch with cracked glass. A present from someone. She came home early. Why did it take less on the way back? She didn’t have a man even though there were candidates. Everyone felt for her. She would always repeat her sarcastic saying: “Who survived hunger will survive profusion”. Can we say that her existence was a normal human life? Well, everyone has their own destiny.

**Denis**. How is it related? The village life and the aristocratic salon in Filippovsky alley?

**Church Guard**. Parallel world. Filippovsky alley is not enough for the afflicted ones.

**Son**. Let's go to Moscow!

**Church Guard.** Russia is too beautiful and too luxurious to make one happy. Fell through into a hole. Get out of there, shake off the dust, and keep going until the next pit you're supposed to fall into... Filippovsky alley... What are you talking about?

**Denis**. You live on Earth. You can feel her breath, every time. You rarely come to town. You never visit me even though we invited you. We live on a high floor. Igor likes it.

**Son**. I'll be friends with Igor.

**Denis**. Come.

**Church Guard.** Need to warm up? (***Denis*** *is cutting wood*.) That's enough wood. I do it mostly for fun. They've brought chickens from the village. I’ll build a little hen house. They give eggs every day. There will be enough. Eggs, milk, and butter. Our own churn. Would you like some fried salo[[4]](#footnote-5)?

**Denis**. I'd love some. It's our favourite treat.

***Church Guard*** *brings a metal sheet and makes a small fire on it. He also brings two pieces of dark rye bread, two slabs of salo, and two thin sticks to use as skewers. He gives one to* ***Denis****. Both hold salo above the fire until the fat starts pouring, and they catch it with a slice of bread. The yard is filled with the smell of fried fat. They take a bite while the salo is still melting.*

**Church Guard.** Want a shot?

**Denis**. My pleasure. Just a little bit.

***Church Guard*** *brings two shots of vodka. They drink it.*

**Denis**. Is the village far?

**Church Guard.** Near. They stop by sometimes. They come here and find themselves drowning in this boundless land. (*He looks at the sky.*) It's gonna rain. You're gonna soak through.

**Denis**. I'll stand under the rain. When it's drizzling and playful, anticipating a proper shower. A big strong umbrella. You wrap yourself up in a raincoat and wait for the stormy gusts of wind. Once they gave me a hotel room in the attic with windows in the ceiling. It's incredible how loud the thunder was. Thunder always comes before the stormy flood. They work together. Both come crashing down on you and nature.

I find myself being scared of beautiful princesses. I avoid them. There are those who aren't aware of their beauty. They enchant you and invite you. I've never stooped to the level of begging. I've never been tempted to use some typical men's tricks. Many achieved what they wanted this way. Compassion for the sake of the fleeting possession. Have I ever loved someone truly? I've always wanted to help someone. I wanted to be honest and open. I was invited to be a member of an elite private club. Something for the chosen ones, exclusive. It didn't bring excitement to me. When I was a student I was close to many artists. I've been a regular in this artistic cafe. I bought a painting. A girl standing in a blue dress, holding something in her hands. A narrow face, an elongated neck, long fingers. Modigliani. Looks like a chest or a cassette. I call it “something”. An enigmatic girl is holding something enigmatic in her hands. A sad picture...

When I was young I was thinking I would have enough time to do something big, something high-minded and knightly. There seemed to be so much time ahead for the common universal good. Sometimes I was estimating how much approximately I have left, and it made me feel excited: there was still a significant period of time. I used to aspire for something all the time. I used to be craving something. I didn’t even notice when it all went wrong. I started to feel small and pitiful. It’s like I was postponing something all the time, and I ended up postponing my entire life. I blew it. I can no longer see the land. The reality is veiled. I was going to do something but never had time, and I never will. When I was a student I wanted to publish a dictionary for business communication. Postponed. Never the right time. Terminology cards were prepared. I only needed to make an effort and complete it. At first, I was really into it. Mad about the idea. Still couldn’t dedicate even six months fully. I wanted to have many children. That’s because I was an only child myself. I lacked playfulness in my family. I played football with other boys from the block. Girls were mysterious, and they also returned affection. When I was in the university I had to differentiate between Sartre’s and Camus’ existentialism. Did I actually understand anything about it? I don’t think so. Now I’m even dumber. But still far from senile dementia. I can sense my creative potential. I need a dream or an abstract idea aimed at something. Not a madonna. She is nice and charming. You light up and tremble. The reward is only emptiness inside. Would you like an example of dementia? I started to forget my honeys... I used to be captivated by the power of emotions and delights. Fascinating sentimental travels! And now I am forgetting...

**Church Guard.** I've got my one and only. I don't even need to go through the memories.

**Denis**. A group of teenagers was walking through our playground area. One flirting chick would pretend to accidentally step on the feet of the boy who was walking in front of her. Then she would pretend she's falling right onto him and pressed herself against his back. The boy was extremely serious. He would just look back at her, and she would only raise her eyes to the sky - like, it's not her. Children flirt without even realizing it.

**Church Guard.** How's Igor?

**Denis**. Reading nonstop. Also chattering without breaks. A brilliant student. Teachers praise him.

**Church Guard**. Does he ask you to take him here?

**Denis**. All the time.

**Church Guard**. Do you visit your mother?

**Denis**. When I come to her she stares at me so much. Reviving memories about my childhood? She never has the heart to ask me questions. Acts like a stranger. Accepts money reluctantly... I only transform other people's thoughts. From one language into another. I don't have my own ones. I do but they're unpretentious and trivial. Everything is just a routine. A mess.

*Igor's family's apartment.* ***Denis*** *and* ***Igor*** *are in the room.*

 *The phone rings.* ***Denis*** *answers the phone.*

**Martynov**. It's Martynov. It's a heartbreaking story. I found out. Her baby was born ill. Apparently, she got scared. Someone put the idea into her head. So, she left the child.

**Denis**. Boy or girl?

**Martynov**. They didn't want this information to leak. I paid for it. It's a boy.

**Denis**. Where is he?

**Martynov**. Adopted by a local family. One woman didn't want to let him go. Feeds him. Dedicated herself to the mentally deficient son.

***Denis*** *puts the phone down.* ***Igor*** *is still there.*

**Igor**. I can make sense of family relations. My dad is my mum's husband.

**Denis**. Exactly.

**Igor**. Is he my real dad?

**Denis**. He is your real dad.

**Igor**. My mum is my dad's wife. I am their son. Her husband's father is her father-in-law, and her husband's mother is her mother-in-law, her husband's brother is her brother-in-law, and her husband's sister is her sister-in-law. There are others as well... You are mum's second cousin. Right?

**Denis**. Yes, I am your uncle.

**Igor**. It's nice to have brothers and sisters, nephews and nieces in the house... You can discuss things with everyone. Why does dad love me less than you?

**Denis**. He loves you more than I do. He is strict and thoughtful.

**Igor**. All of you are thoughtful. So complicated.

**Denis**. Here is the new book. The writer's name is Konstantin Paustovsky.

**Igor**. Paustovsky.

**Denis**. It's called ''The Telegram''. What is a telegram?

**Igor**. It's a laconic letter. There are computers though.

**Denis**. They still send telegrams too. (*Opens the book.*) “October was unusually cold and stormy. The roof turned black. The tangled grass in the garden fell, and everything blossomed and could not bloom and crumble only a small sunflower at the fence ... The roads could no longer be passed or passed, and the shepherds ceased to drive the herd into the meadow”.

**Igor**. Enough. I read it. Learnt by heart. Tell me about the fruit salad.

**Denis**. On special days, they would cut various fruit in chunks: bananas, oranges, mango, avocado, apples, pineapples, papaya. They would mix them up and put a portion for everyone on a plate. The scent was amazing. Everyone was devouring it greedily. You just can't stop.

**Igor**. Tell me how you stop talking.

**Denis**. When there is an overly confident member of the delegation, as soon as he starts interrupting and making his comments I just shut up. I give him all the freedom. A minute or two, and he starts getting confused and stumbling, and the discussion goes into the wrong direction, which is totally unacceptable, and everyone goes quiet and looks at me. Then I get back. The restless member doesn't open his mouth until the end of the conference.

**Igor**. Tell me about iron-bound cassettes.

**Denis**. They were demolishing an old five floored building in front of my university. There were no more tenants there. Unfortunately, many of them also got rid of the old furniture.

**Igor**. Are you a fan of old furniture?

**Denis**. It's durable and sustainable. Made from wood. Modern furniture is more elegant but not so durable. I found some ancient chests at the dump site. I chose two decent ones. I wiped them and looked inside. They were solid. Iron-bound. Iron corners too. A truck took them to a popular theatre. They were welcomed by the staff. I saw them in ''Romeo and Juliet''.

**Igor**. It's Thursday today. Are we alone in the apartment?

**Denis**. Are you scared of someone?

**Igor**. Mum is taking too much care… I feel embarrassed… I've grown. It's better be dad.

**Denis**. Shall I tell them?

**Igor**. Yes, please. Why are women beautiful?

**Denis**. That's how God created them.

**Igor**. Are we alone? It's Thursday today.

**Denis**. Yes, it's just us.

**Igor**. Please take me with you. To Tretyakov gallery. You stand in front of the Levitan's painting. They don't ask you to leave the hall anymore. I might be not a healthy person but I'm not stupid.

**Denis**. I don't doubt it. You are reserved. Self-contained.

**Igor**. I like Levitan. Nature, forests, the purple autumn. Have you visited them?

**Denis**. Yes, I have.

**Igor**. Have they wrapped you up for the wind?

**Denis**. It was a lazy wind. It wouldn't knock you off your feet.

**Igor**. Did they make a fire?

**Denis**. They did.

**Igor**. Did you make yourself warm on the stove bench?

**Denis**. I did.

**Igor**. Did you climb there? You are not a good climber.

**Denis**. Even old people can climb up there.

**Igor**. Can you sew? When I was a child you taught me how to pass the thread through the eye of the needle. A thick thread is so hard to pass. You taught me the word “mouline thread”, and also the kindling wood. Oh, and the heavy axe? Wood chopper. For hardwoods or stubs. (*Laughs*.) Did they ask about me?

**Denis**. They said hi. Tried to give me butter. I didn't take it.

**Igor**. I'd eat some homemade butter. Bread and butter. You've never brought it back.

**Denis**. I'll deliver next time for sure.

**Igor**. Did you churn it yourself?

**Denis**. With a woman from the village.

**Igor**. A bowl of borsch with old rancid salo?

**Denis**. They served some yellow long-kept one. Have you tried this borsch?

**Igor**. Not yet. But this is not a real one. Have they treated you to their homemade ham?

**Denis**. No. I would have brought some back otherwise.

**Igor**. It's cool to feed animals and run around barefoot. I tried walking barefoot on grass but never on wet ground. And then you need to wash your feet with soap. They always have a stove, a stove bench, pots and kitchen grips, and this long wooden table. Take it. There is so much water.

*Denis's* ***Mum*** *comes in, then* ***Julia****.*

**Julia**. There is a telegram for you. Please sign here.

*Denis and Julia can't take their eyes off each other. Igor and Mum turn their gaze from one to another.*

**Denis** (*reads the telegram*). ''Happy birthday. Yours sincerely and always your friend''.

**Igor**. Mine sincerely?

**Denis**. The one you studied with.

**Julia** (*takes Igor's hand*). Oh yes. Happy birthday. An exciting day. I am a delivery girl. I work for the Central telegraph. They hired me part-time. (*She obviously has fever.*) I remember. Night... Spluttering, trying to breathe... Then just ordinary grey days. One night doesn't let me go. (*Suddenly.*) A twist in my sobriety. Where is the escape? Shall I wait for someone who can save me? A fly trapped in amber. Trying to flick its wings - all in vain! They grew stiff. It didn't cause any other intelligent being to shudder. No one rushed to me with an open heart. An endless vortex for years and years. Petty quarrels, intrigues, and deceits. I was called people, promising something, they were promising something back, and then betrayed me. My thoughts were still there. Where is my haven? We can't turn back time. We can't reverse what happened. Nothing can be turned back. Vanished. You regret. You punch the air. They say you can’t touch your eye with your elbow. If you want you can.

*Everyone is shocked and staring at* ***Julia****. She walks to the door, then back to* ***Igor****. She kneels before him and strokes his hair.*

**Julia** (*in a trembling voice*). Happy birthday again. You are a good boy. (*Leaves quickly.*)

**Igor**. Wow! What a chaotic lady! Dropped from the clouds on my birthday. I haven't really cracked her. Have you met her before? So much buzzing but what's behind it? It's still the Russian language but so much confusion. Left in a flash of an eye! She actually wasn't even invited here but she let herself in. I can't grasp it. I feel it's somewhere here, the meaning of what she says but it just slips away. She was talking about time. Telegraph! Pfft! Philosophers discuss these things for centuries. Sometimes it is slower, sometimes it's faster. I go to bed with it and wake up too. This heaviness embraces me. When I grow up I will clear up this mystery. There is a viscous cosmic substance. Various phenomena happen, the substance cuts in, and time starts ticking away. I haven't worked it out yet. What was she mumbling about the night? So impertinent! She didn't even cry. When women jabber for so long they normally end up crying. They just can't do without tears.

**Denis**. She will come back with more telegrams.

**Igor**. We started reading the story called ''Telegram'', and we actually received a telegram. I've never got one before. (*To Denis.*) Why aren't you married? Maybe you can be luckily married. Do you need help? I know a lot about women.

*Igor's* ***Mum*** *brings in an ancient basin. It's not just an ordinary basin. It looks weird. There are blades welded on the lid from the inside. On top of the lid, there's a handle to rotate the blades. It's a basin for making berry mousses: raspberry, strawberry, blackberry, and cherry.*

**Igor** (*claps his hands cheerfully*). Mousse! I'm going to have some mousse for my birthday! Finally! They've been hiding this basin from me!

**Mum**. Grandma put the ragman on to it. He got some tin and welded it. The ragman would give my grandma money for not being bothered by these things again. This basin served us well, it’s century-old. My mum also used to take it to the ragman to fix it. He would weld the crack again out of curiosity - to see how long it will last.

***Denis*** *and* ***Mum*** *start their manipulations. They take 6 or 7 eggs and separate yolks from whites; then they add a glass of sugar and 3-4 glasses of strawberry. Then they cover the basin with a lid.* ***Igor*** *presses the lid down with both hands.* ***Denis*** *slowly rotates the handle.*

**Igor**. Can I also twist it a little?

**Denis**. Wait until it rises. It will be easier then.

**Igor**. I remember when I was a kid you would press the lid and I would twist the handle. Where did you hide it?

*Igor twisted it too. The handle turns easily. The whipped cream from eggs and berries has risen high in the basin. The mousse is ready. The lid is open. They bend over the basin and inhale the delicious smell.*

**Voices**. Amazing. What a natural scent of fields and forests.

***Igor’s Mum*** *gives everyone a saucer with some mousse. Julia comes back.*

**Julia**. Let me try some mousse. I haven't tasted it for a very long time.

**Igor** (*looks into the basin*). There's enough for everyone. Cheeky: ''Haven't tasted''. Tries to sound like a sophisticated lady not to be kicked out of here. This cheekiness reminds me of someone else.

**Julia**. Let’s go for a walk. You've got a nice boulevard here. The children’s chorus is singing. Young talents are reading poems.

**Igor**. Why on earth would I go for a walk with a telegraph damsel?

**Julia**. Why am I a ''damsel''?

**Igor**. What do you want from our family? The mystery is in the air. I will dig and find out. I'll read some detectives and find the answer. Go to the boulevard alone. I've grown up here. I know every bush in the alley. Will you lift the veil?

**Mum**. He is not going anywhere with an unknown woman. He has a mother. Mum. And a father. Dad. I am your mum. Don't go with strangers. We've never seen you before.

***Mum*** *and* ***Julia*** *are pulling Igor in different directions. Both are crying.*

**Igor** (*To Julia*). Who are you?

**Julia**. I'm a telegraphist. They hired me to deliver telegrams. They've got too much work to do.

**Igor**. Telegraphist, humourist. You haven't been here for thirteen years, and now here you are. Surrounded. Attacked. Barely torn apart.

***Mum*** *is weeping.*

Now you're crying. Please don't cry. Are you joking? What's happening? Are you trying to drive me mad?

**Mum**. Calm down, my baby. She is leaving. She is a stranger. She is no one to us.

*Both women let go of the teenager's hands at the same time.* ***Julia*** *leaves in tears.*

***The scene repeats itself.***

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***The end of the repeated scene.***

**Igor**. You think you're a good mum? Nearly torn my arm off.

**Mum**. Forgive me, Igoryok. I was scared for you. I was crying. I wasn't aware of what I was doing.

**Igor**. Did the telegraphist scare you so much? Is she really a stranger? You both let me go at the same time. Why at the same time? Why did she run away?

*Four people at the front of the stage.* ***Igor*** *sits on a chair.* ***Mum****,* ***Dad****, and* ***Denis*** *are next to him.*

*Silence settles over, thick and heavy.*

**Igor**. I am mature. I am thirteen. Is the girl pretty?

**Denis**. Pretty.

**Igor**. On a bicycle?

**Denis**. Yes, on a bicycle.

**Igor**. Is not scared?

**Denis**. She is brave. She knows the way home.

**Igor**. Is the city called Geneva?

**Denis**. Yes.

**Igor**. Tiny one? Is it also beautiful? Is there a calm lake with yachts? Is there a powerful fountain? Are there mountains around?

**Denis**. Yes, there are mountains.

**Igor**. Is she cold?

**Denis**. No. She is tough. It's not bitter cold.

**Igor**. Why am I cold in winter?

**Denis**. Many people are cold in winter. In summer you're not cold.

**Igor**. Are the cars endless?

**Denis**. They move slowly, cautiously.

**Igor**. Keeping distance.

**Denis**. Yes, they make way for others. They're happy.

**Igor** (*laughs*). Happy. Happy.

**Denis**. First comes the cyclist, moving as fast as the cars.

**Igor**. Pretty... cyclist.

**Denis**. They open the way to the pretty cyclist.

**Igor**. Are they admiring her?

**Denis**. They open the way and admire her.

**Igor**. They are greeting her and waving to her? I also want to greet her.

**Denis**. I will make it happen. You will say your name. You will tell her: ''You are beautiful''.

**Igor**. Straightforward like this?

**Denis**. Yes, just say it.

**Igor**. First, I'll greet her and then I'll say she's beautiful?

**Denis**. Yes, greet her and then say.

**Igor**. Will she like it?

**Denis**. She will like it a lot. She is a friendly girl. She is also a good translator. She is also very beautiful.

*A peacock making its bright colourful feathers fly is proudly marching across the stage.*

*It makes a continuous anxious and harsh sound.*

**Part 2.**

**Time to love.**

***Artyom*** *is choosing fruit at a local street selling spot.* ***Julia*** *shows up and pushes him slightly with her shoulder.*

**Julia**. Pushing single girls in the prime of life?

**Artyom**. I don't care whether they're married or single.

**Julia**. Messing around the fruit but not buying. Only harming the seller. There's no logic in your actions... in the central streets of the oldest capital. Pushing like a weirdo... Are you a bachelor?

**Artyom**. Imposing your patronage?

**Julia**. Now you fell flat on your face.

**Artyom**. Are you following me? You don't lag behind.

**Julia**. You must be seeing things. Clinging on single women? The pitcher goes often to the well. A trained eye. Catcaller.

**Artyom**. I'm keeping away from women on the streets.

**Julia**. Lady's man. I could tell at once.

**Artyom**. I'd rather say you are a catcaller.

**Julia**. It's your imagination. The next topic is…

**Artyom**. Will you list them all?

**Julia**. There are plenty. There was a preface.

**Artyom**. Turbid utterances.

**Julia**. I went to school too.

**Artyom**. A long time ago…

**Julia**. Not that long.

**Artyom**. The fruit is all trampled down...

**Julia**. They're gonna rot.

**Artyom**. …It's very important to devour them on time.

**Julia**. Aren't you tired of objecting to me? I insist. If it's rotten a little bit then it means it's all going to rot. That's it. I have a lot of practical experience. And you - you are only messing with women. I shouldn’t even come to Tverskaya street. Someone makes a pass straight away. Your wife will show you what is what.

**Artyom**. There's no wife.

**Julia**. Great. Then your girlfriend will.

**Artyom**. Vanished into thin air.

**Julia**. Get one urgently. Then you won't have to shoot your looks everywhere around.

**Artyom**. I can't see well without my glasses anyway. By the way, you pushed me hard the other day as well.

*He comes up to the* ***Seller*** *and whispers something into his ear. The seller turns to* ***Julia****.*

**Seller**. Let me introduce my friend to you… His name is... (*Glances at Artyom*.)

**Artyom** (*whispers*). Artyom.

**Seller**. Artyom.

**Julia** (*beaming*). Nice to meet you. My name is Julia Nikolayevna[[5]](#footnote-6).

**Artyom**. Why Nikolayevna?

**Julia**. That's what they call me at work.

**Artyom**. Seems like they respect you a lot.

**Julia** (*beaming*). A lot. I see the prices are good here. Your friend is generous. Since we know each other now we can go for a walk.

**Artyom**. Where?

**Julia**. Around.

**Artyom**. Have we ever met before?

**Julia** (*evasively*). I don't think so. Can we walk arm-in-arm? Otherwise, I'll fall over.

**Artyom**. Do you often fall over?

**Julia**. In winter, yes, and in summer I sometimes stumble because of my high heels.

**Artyom**. Why do you wear them then?

**Julia**. I'd rather be tall and slim. Do you like slim girls? Flat stomach.

**Artyom**. What about pregnant bellies?

**Julia**. I sometimes watch pregnant women. It's amazing. How do they walk? Eat? Sleep?

**Artyom**. Have we met before?

**Julia**. Sometimes unbelievable things happen. Sometimes you think it has never happened before but it actually has.

**Artyom**. Deja vu.

**Julia**. This expression turns me off. It smells like clinic. Absurd. I am an earthy girl.

**Artyom**. Do you speak French?

**Julia**. Worse than you. But I can easily understand when they speak.

***Artyom*** *frees his arm and stares at the girl.*

**Artyom**. Have our paths crossed before?

**Julia**. I do offer alternatives now and then. Every time we meet...

**Artyom**. Is there another rendez-vous already scheduled?

**Julia**. Another and the next ones… There is no other way.

**Artyom**. Can I invite you for a coffee?

**Julia**. No way! Get married just like that, immediately? It won't be reasonable. Everything needs to be thought through. Of course, marriage is a good thing. A well-wishing twist in life. Beneficial prospects. You are like a bolt from the blue: let's get married!

**Artyom**. I didn't propose to you. I invited you for a coffee.

**Julia**. Oh, I think I've just imagined it. Of course, I agree.

*At a restaurant.*

**Artyom** (*to the waiter*). A salad, black olives, and white wine. As usual. White fish.

**Waiter**. It's expensive.

**Artyom**. I earn enough to get fish.

**Julia**. We'll share.

**Artyom**. Thank you.

**Julia** (*to the waiter*). I don't eat much. Can I please have a glass of white wine, a salad, some bread and butter, fried shrimp, and a cappuccino.

*The waiter brings everything, serves the table, and leaves. Julia smells the wine. They clink glasses. She sips the wine, tries the food, and sips the wine again without raising her eyes. Artyom is examining her closely.*

**Julia**. Thank you. I satisfied my hunger. I'm so pleased that you look at me with admiration. You're probably in love with me. Why am I supposed to accommodate myself to a man? Why am I expected to be understanding and flexible? Elegant. Tempting. Passionate. Fallen. No, not fallen. Sensitive. Patient. Sophisticated. Devil knows what else I should be... I shook off the husk and realized that accommodating myself to someone else is the greatest delight.

**Artyom**. Would you like some wine?

**Julia**. No, thank you. Will we sleep tonight? I mean… have fun in bed?

**Artyom**. Why not. For the sake of solid mutual understanding.

**Julia**. I can see you through. You are balancing on shaky ground. Avoider.

**Artyom**. Did you say forty?

**Julia**. Around that… Time is running out.

**Artyom**. I had my hopes for this age. Wife, children, career… As result, a big fat nothing.

**Julia**. You will see the light at the end of the tunnel with me. The young guy was obsessed with the word ''adequately''. It was all over the place. His Russian teacher suggested some synonyms: properly, nicely, reasonably... The guy still kept saying: ''The watch works adequately'', ''It was an adequate lunch''. (*Suddenly.*) By the way, she had a soft spot for you. Nothing sexual though. Everyone in school knew that. The deputy head teacher was trying to lecture you - adequately... Too emotional. Not appropriate. She couldn't hide it. Too much of that teaching bureaucracy ahead. I felt sorry for her. She was well educated. Tsvetaeva, Pasternak, Brodsky... It's for hard for people like her... Shall we find her?

**Artyom**. Your competitor.

**Julia**. No sex in mind. It's gonna get hold of her. Adequately… The wine is amazing. I ignore strong drinks. I don’t drink fizzy stuff either. I earn well. Saving money for an apartment. I don’t eat soups.

**Artyom**. It is frowned upon by doctors to neglect soup. It's bad for your stomach.

**Julia**. I go without it pretty well. My sexual standards aren't high. I'd rather say I'm indifferent. I'm grateful that you don't dig up my past. It seems like I've known you for ages. I can guess your hidden aspirations. They are noble. Marriage, immediately.

**Artyom**. You need a child, not a husband.

**Julia**. Unfortunately, it's related. My brain is upside down. Slackened. I used to be very cool-headed, and then suddenly I lost it. I've been living quietly. No fussing around. I control my emotions. Women don’t interest me. Is a man able to perform his function?

**Artyom**. He is. She is the boss. She manages things.

**Julia** (*switching to the informal pronoun*)*.* What school did you go to?

**Artyom**. At Schukinskaya.

**Julia**. Me too… Do you remember the farewell party? The director allowed us to invite students from other classes. Under the parents' surveillance. Your tenth grade was tiny. More girls than boys.

**Artyom**. Yes, I remember vaguely.

**Julia**. You asked a girl from the eighth grade to a dance. You chose her from so many girls. There were couples dancing around, disappearing behind the column and coming up again... You were holding her tight. You were not squeezing her, just holding. So young... so nervous... Mum was giving her furtive looks when they were walking back home...

*Pause.*

**Artyom**. You were wearing a green top. A greenish blouse or something.

**Julia** (*casts up her eyes*). Do you remember?

**Artyom**. I remember the dance, the column, and the green top.

**Julia**. I can see changes in you. I can see a glimmer of interest.

**Artyom**. Why is it so urgent though?

**Julia**. There will be complications when I get pregnant.

**Artyom**. Do you want children?

**Julia**. Yes, very much.

**Artyom**. A girl, of course?

**Julia**. A boy as well. And a girl.

**Artyom**. Slow down a bit.

**Julia**. It's alright. Just a year apart in age. I still have time.

**Artyom**. You could have pushed harder when you were younger…

**Julia**. Spare me your jibberish, I'm begging you. You could have as well.

**Artyom**. Well I could… and I did.

**Julia**. Men sometimes don't know if they have children. I need to catch up. I wanted children. It didn't work out. So bad. So unfortunate. I'm considering a romantic relationship. No. I want to marry.

**Artyom**. Who?

**Julia**. You. I like you. I'm in love. Now you decide. (*Leaves*.)

*The* ***Waiter*** *stands next to the table with an expectant expression.*

**Artyom**. A glass of wine.

**Waiter** (*brings a glass of wine*). Don't leave it hanging. The proposal.

**Artyom**. How do you know?

**Waiter**. I can read lips. Go for it.

*A bench in the park. First,* ***Julia*** *alone, then* ***Lera*** *joins.*

**Julia** (*speaks to someone invisible*). My friend's son is a university student. She gave birth when she was eighteen. A plain girl. All her life is taking care of her husband and children. The husband comes from work - she jumps around him like a happy dog. He also shows some affection, in his own male way. She's been too honest. She regretted that she had told me. Too private. Surely, the husband won't leave the family alone without the locomotive. Children were playing a train game with dad. She was at the back of the train. Dad would change into sports clothes, and the children would do the same. They would go to their room and get sports pants, sweaters, and change too. They would kneel and pretend to be a train. They were making sounds like in old times. Dad was a locomotive. He was louder than the others. Once they were walking back home, and some bullies attacked them. They knocked him off his feet and were about to beat him up. Then she fell on top of her husband and covered him with her body. The bullies were so shocked that they just left them alone. Can you believe it? A wife covers her husband and saves him. You don't say anything at all? You are supposed to entertain the lady. She is supposed to listen and tell lie from truth. She is cheeky. She is listening carefully and stripping down all the double-talk. A woman is a filter. She filters. She does save all the flimsy information. It might be useful one day.

*Still talking to someone invisible.*

Hello, Yuri Petrovich. This is my husband, Alexander. Alexander Nikolayevich. He is an engineer at a gigantic factory. I first met you at the negotiations where you were representing your company. I was your opponent. This is my son, a high school student. This my daughter. She is still such a child. The other day she asked me what colour sweet is. I said it must be pink. She disagreed: ''It's most probably red''. ''How about sour?'' ''It's blue''. ''And savoury?'' ''Brown''.

I am not going to waste my breath. They are negotiating... They show affection... Me, for example. I keep the house. If they leave a tie in the wrong place I’ll put it back. Every thing has its place. I’ve recently read a horrible article. A quarter of all girls will never get married. Are they not talented, not educated? No! They’re just not active. Not sexy. At the same time, we see these families where a husband and wife tie themselves in knots when they separate even for a short time. I watched two lovers meeting each other at the airport. The woman was waiting for him. The man gave his passport to the officer and was waiting for permission to pass. She couldn’t even stand still. She was jumping around, waving at him, sending him kisses. It is not *comme il faut* for a woman to be single. A man might be not the smartest, without a car and a private jet, lame but her own. They might be arguing all the time but she thinks about him all day long. They celebrate St. Catherine’s day in France every autumn: it’s a traditional event for unmarried girls. Girls do some fancywork and make extravagant hats. Green and yellow colours are the colours of this day. Green symbolizes their hope to get married, and yellow is for wisdom that comes with age. This special day used to be celebrated everywhere, in every village and settlement, but nowadays it is considered to be outdated. People lose their roots. A woman is tortured by the inferiority complex. She is anxious, she is on edge. What is beyond the edge? Obscurity. Drop-off. She wants a man and pushes him away rudely.

It’s the end of August. It’s stuffy even at night. I’ll sleep on the floor in my clothes. The parquet is warm. Well, yes, I’ll lie down. I’ll take a quilt and lie down. It’s interesting to sleep on a firm surface without being restrained by anything. I’ll roll on the floor as much as I want. I’ll curl up just like in childhood. Exactly, I’ll curl up. Shall I sleep in my clothes or shall I get undressed? I’ve never slept in my clothes before. Am I able to break the rule? I’ll put the quilt on the floor. Right on the floor. I’ve got nothing to do on Saturday and Sunday. I’ll go to the exhibition.

***Lera*** *comes up.*

**Lera**. Hey, old girl, are you getting mad? (*Hugs and kisses her*.) For you, I would give birth to a few more. Act immediately. It's bad if you're not in control. You need a psychotherapist urgently. Or just lie down with a stray man. Maybe it will make you feel better.

 **Julia**. Not tempted by random men. I've got my one and only in sight. I'm not sure whether he is the one from school. The green top will sort it.

**Lera**. You're so silly. Green top. Let the green top go already, and the school memories too. The past should be forgotten. The future is hazeless and radiant. I feel sorry for you! We sat at the same desk. We copied from each other and told each other secrets. Boys were hitting on us. We were both sweet, adorable. We had nice round bums and breasts. Gorgeous girls. They would just stare at sometimes, not even blinking. Not even shy. Teachers didn't interfere. They just waited when the boys come to their senses. Teachers stared at us themselves! They facilitated it. They were gossiping about what the future had in stock for us... Look at you now: the green top...

**Julia**. That's not me though. He remembered it was green.

**Lera**. Well, if he remembered then it's serious. Boys normally don't remember such things. Let's remember too. Well, right, it was green. What was it like? Perfectly green!

**Julia**. Not just green but greenish... Like a shade of green.

**Lera**. Naturally, a shade of green! The man agrees. It's already a victory. He is sure about the shade of green so that's it!

**Julia** (*stares at her*). Even if I don't remember myself?

**Lera**. Bullshit. Whether you remember or not, there was a greenish top. Did he say so?

**Julia**. Yes, greenish.

**Lera**. There was no other top anyway. It was exactly what he remembers. Just go along with it.

**Julia**. Do you think I'm stupid?

**Lera**. I think you're mad. Too much sorrow in mind. Agree immediately. Otherwise you'll spoil it.

Now he is in the grip of madness. He is doomed. It's hard to break free. Seems like he reacts adequately...

**Julia** (*harshly*). Stop saying this word! Don't you dare! Don't you dare say this word. (*Pause*.)

**Lera**. Memories? The green top again?

**Julia**. Have you got everything in abundance: affection, money, confidence in your husband?

**Lera**. Why are you asking?

**Julia**. Are you sincere? Are you confident in him?..

**Lera**. You were supposed to figure it out later. I can't procreate for you.

**Julia** (*crying*). You're cruel… Impudent… Heartless.

**Lera** (*hugs her*). Forgive me, have some mercy. Shall I lend you my husband? Carefully, he won't suspect. Only you and me will know.

**Julia**. You're mad, not me.

**Lera**. Already feeling remorse. I just blurted it out.

**Julia**. Memories are devilish. They are torturing, suppressing, cutting the present into pieces.

**Lera**. I've got a family. I'm happy. Invited him to a conspirative apartment, drove him crazy. It is allowed to resist just a little bit. Don't overplay it. It's hard to stop the roll of anger. It drags you into an abys

*Working meeting. Rita, Ksyusha, and other employees.*

**Rita**. Where is Julia?

**Ksyusha**. She is late.

**Rita**. Only bosses can be late. Instigators can't. This is a very trendy expression: ''risk-based approaches'' in a company. With a hyphen or not?

**Ksyusha**. With a hyphen.

**Rita** (*takes a picture out of her bag*). This is ''L'origine du monde'' by Gustave Courbet. Funny. (*She gives the copy to Ksyusha.*)

**Ksyusha**. Oh, a hairy pubis.

**Rita**. It's not a pubis, it's the motherland of the entire humanity. If there is a womb, something will fill it.

**Ksyusha**. Nothing to look at here. Every woman has it. Let men admire it. They are interested. I don't give a damn. By the way, she apologized for being late on the phone.

**Rita**. To whom?

**Ksyusha**. There's probably a lover.

**Rita**. Your imagination doesn’t know limits.

**Ksyusha**. She keeps it a secret.

**Rita**. Even from me?

**Ksyusha**. Everyone shares only to a degree.

**Rita**. Let's see.

**Ksyusha**. They write letters. They send them by post.

**Rita** (*laughs*). Another madame de Sévigné.

*Julia runs in.*

**Julia**. I'm sorry. I didn't realize the time.

**Rita**. Have you been with your sweetheart?

**Julia**. I have.

**Rita**. Did he get you in bed?

**Julia**. Kind of.

**Rita**. Did you apologize for being late?

**Julia**. He is very punctual. He can't stand it when someone's late.

**Rita**. Is he older than you? You're old.

**Julia**. None of your business. Let's start the meeting.

**Ksyusha**. Yes, let's start.

**Rita** (*to Ksyusha*). Be quiet. (*To Julia*.) I've appointed you to be the company representative so you imagine that you've also got some management functions? You are zero. You dared to open your mouth: “I’m open to discussion”, “You may relax” (*Checks her notebook.*) “Since you’ve kept this phrase in the contract I feel concerned”. Who do you think might be interested in your concerns? Do you imagine you’ve got carte-blanche now? Got yourself a licence?

**Julia**. What licence?

**Rita**. From me, to do whatever you want! All your blah-blah-blah. I am the boss. I am the competent manager.

**Julia**. You've promoted me to the company's official expert.

**Rita**. A fake one. An expert who is not qualified to make predictions. (*Checks her notebook.*) “Let’s put all the remarks under one umbrella”. How metaphorical! Artsy-fartsy. Key players, reactions to market trends, setting goals, communication channels... Who do you think you are? Fancy yourself a great expert? I own the company. You are nothing. Flat-bottomed!

**Julia**. And you are a cute chubby one.

**Rita**. Third size, by the way.

**Julia**. When I get pregnant they will bulk up not bad.

**Rita**. Got yourself a dude?

**Julia**. You're just blabbing.

**Rita**. A manager is supposed to look after the others.

***Male colleagues*** *stand up.*

**First colleague**. You girls go ahead, measure tits. We'll go have a smoke.

**Second colleague**. I prefer medium size.

**Rita**. Blabbing too?

**First colleague**. All sizes are wonderful. Only bastards whine about it. We don't bargain.

***Male colleagues*** *leave.*

**Ksyusha**. I guess a man's word is more important. They know better. They sense it.

**Rita**. Letting yourselves go? I'll kick you all out. (*To Julia.*) Cave-dweller. Laugh before breakfast, you'll cry before supper. Cognitive dissonance! Brain is on strike, vagina is striving. Cognitive dissonance (*Checks her notebook.*) Economical production, audit of the quality control system, benchmarking... Initiated a discussion about the terms “consulting” and “consultation”. Who gave you permission to discuss terminology? Why do you think I sent you there? Your knowledge is shallow. There is an application form for you here. They want you to take part in the symposium. With your level! I’d send you to a horse barn and give you a good scolding!

**Ksyusha**. Oh my god, girls. Don't fly into a rage. You're reaching rock bottom.

**Rita**. Look at her, she can't stand dark chocolate! It's too bitter for her, too much cocoa. Real experts do value it! You've been given a treat so please do us all a favour! Why do some outsiders have to report? Alright. Consider it my cautionary advice. End up in smoke. Let's make an experiment. A guy is walking on the street. Decent one. Respectable. His tool isn’t used though. Jobless. Needs to be fondled. Quick voting.

**Ksyusha**. I'll skip.

**Rita**. Skip what?

**Ksyusha**. Everything.

**Rita**. You can skip everything but this.

**Julia** (*sarcastically*). Fondle? What if I don't fancy him?

**Rita** (*laughing*). We will make sure you do. It doesn't depend on him. We won't even ask for his opinion. We will force him if he keeps being stubborn. This offer is a privilege!

**Ksyusha**. I've got chills down my spine when I listen to you. Exquisite introspective personalities! High society vibes... Stylish girls. Style is something intrinsic. Style is in the way you dress, talk, and act with your friends.

**Rita**. Girls know more slang than many guys do. They were born and raised in a full-fledged family. Mum and dad lived peacefully, and the daughter somehow is choking on her own swearing. Very vulgar words are presented in the western languages, and these ladies from the high society pronounce them without even feeling embarrased, with a cute smile on their lips. The lady is telling her admirer in a dying voice: ''Would you go f... yourself, sweetheart?'' He responds gently: ''Yes, darling, *avec plaisir''*. So many outpourings I've heard at the moment of culmination! The most beautiful, the most affectionate... In school, we think their bones were growing... Progressively we figured it out... Humanity is looking for meaning. For two thousand years already. They had been looking for it before too. Have they found it? Have they found happiness? Have they found anything at all? Money, more money - is that the meaning? Hatred, aggression - is it the meaning too? How about cruelty and immorality?

*The office becomes a two-room apartment.* ***Julia*** *and* ***Ksyusha*** *in the room.* ***Rita*** *comes out of the other room in her underwear. She is out of breath.*

**Rita**. No pleasure without a man's hands and lips. Also it sticks out...

**Ksyusha**. I'll skip. I'll do without it. I'm comfortable enough. I don’t need this a cappella. Neither inside, nor outside.

**Rita**. Do you just object to me again? Just want to argue?

**Julia**. What do you mean – sticks out?

**Rita**. Go check yourself.

*Julia rushes into the room. Then she runs out, outraged.*

**Julia**. You tied it up? It's blue! He will have gangrene.

**Rita**. Gangrene it. He didn't want it so I forced him. Why do you snap at me? Is it not too late?

**Julia**. He is a human being.

**Rita**. I was speaking to him in a very humane way but he kept being obstinate. Honest and arrogant. Haven't I given him a job? I have. Haven't I given him a good salary? We did. What else? All he needed to do was to help his boss - his benefactress - calm down. Soothe her. But, you see, he's got a wife.

 **Julia**. Have you completely lost your mind?

**Rita**. Shut up. I know your true nature. I know about your little sin. You're on the hook.

**Julia** (*screams hysterically*). Аahhhh-аh-аa!!!

**Ksyusha**. Tell me, girls. I missed something. I lag behind. Tell me.

*Julia rolls up her skirt and attacks Rita. She lashes out and hits her full force. Rita fights back. Julia uses some tricks she learnt from martial arts. The fight looks professional: there is a moment when the actresses are replaced by professional fighters.*

**Ksyusha** (*runs around the fighting girls*). Hey girls, stop this slaughter!

**Rita**. I was nurturing a snake in my bosom. That's what you've been doing. To thank me for my generosity.

*The first blood is seen. Rita's nose is bleeding.*

**Julia**. I untied him. Now there are only chains left.

**Rita**. I don't care about him. Asshole! I'll fire him tomorrow. And you too. Merciless creatures.

*They walk to the opposite corners of the room like boxers.*

**Ksyusha**. Come on, girls. What do I have to do with your unfortunate love adventures? (*To Rita*.) You opened a pigmy business, and now who do you think you are? An eastern queen? You are just a show-off. Dumb as a brick.

**Julia**. Shagging everyone but can't get preg herself up.

**Rita**. I’ll clean your clock.

**Julia** (*still in a fighting stance*). Come on, try. You can't get pregnant! I did from the first time!

***Rita*** *stares at* ***Julia****, shocked into complete silence. Then she becomes hysterical:*

*she is weeping, howling, smearing blood and tears on her face. That's when real fighters replace the actresses.*

**Rita**. Liar! I don't believe a word you say! You are lying! Are you kidding me?

**Ksyusha**. I've also got chances to get pregnant!

**Rita**. Аh, you're intact! Or experienced?

**Ksyusha**. I am! I'm high-minded. I deserve the best.

**Rita** (*to Julia*). I won't let you have a child. I don't have one so you won't either. You've been training and never mentioned it. You always look so frail and miserable - one is tempted to give alms to you! I remember your ideas but it's me who has built a career. You are just an apprentice.

**Ksyusha**. Julia, Rita. You are best friends, and now you're fighting so much. Chill out! I never expected you to be like this. It's not far off till you beat up each other to death! You both want a man. It has come to a standstill for now. You've been patient, now you need more patience. It's not like you've been mad about it. Penetration is not necessary... Living undisturbed. He is somewhere far away. You live separately. You are independent, he is independent. You don't think of him for months. Now you're fighting. You had previously agreed... each of you will have enough. No! You're still at odds over this matter.

**Rita** (*crawling to Julia on her knees*). I'll bite you. I didn't manage to knock you out on my feet so I'll do it on my knees. Just so you know my bite is poisoning. (*Julia slaps Rita, and she rolls on the floor.*) Useless high achiever. I always hated those excellent students with their perfect diplomas. They always seemed suspicious to me. Beggar. No husband, no children. Wanna be ahead of me? No way! I am the general director, and you are at my beck and call! Who needs your minge? There are millions of girls, young and craving! (*Stands up on her feet.*) Forward!

*She gets slapped again and falls.*

*(Yells.)* Don't slap me! You've been merciful. Don't slap me. It hurts in my chest. It hurts in my soul. It's a terrible pain in my heart. (*Piercing scream*.) Mum!! She's killing me!

**Julia** (*raises her arm threateningly but then immediately puts it down as if lacking willpower*). Mum? She is no longer there.

**Rita**. She is always with me. I'm going to meet her soon as well.

**Julia**. You won't be late for that. Please don't rush. (*Throws a towel to her.*) There, wipe your face. I won't slap you again.

**Rita** (*hugs Julia*). My sweetheart, my dear girl! I don't have anyone since my mum died. Only you, you are the only one I love.

*A bench in the park. Julia and Lera come up.*

**Lera**. Disgusting stunts?

**Julia**. He escaped.

**Lera**. Who? Where?

**Julia**. Artyom. It seemed like it's well under way, and suddenly no word from him. He stopped calling me.

**Lera**. They are always cowardly at a crucial moment. Do you think you frightened him away?

**Julia**. No idea. He was attentive and courteous.

**Lera**. Did you sleep with him?

**Julia**. It didn't get to that.

**Lera**. It should happen faster, why waste your time? They are horny. They are preoccupied with it.

**Julia**. I'm feeling attached. I've been daydreaming. About where we will live. What we will buy together as a family. Everything's gone.

**Lera**. Do you call him?

**Julia**. Regularly. He doesn't answer the phone. In his office they told me he is on a long business trip abroad.

**Lera**. Do you think it's true?

**Julia**. No way. We were spending time together, walking around the city, and all of a sudden he is lost somewhere on a business trip abroad? Punishment! The sword of justice!

**Lera**. You? Punished? Will you tell me?

**Julia**. Never!

**Lera**. Big deal. Keep on bearing it on your own then.

**Julia**. No way!

*A* ***sparrow*** *lands on the bench and starts twittering passionately.*

**Julia**. He's found me again!

**Lera**. Who?

**Julia**. The sparrow. Can't leave me alone.

**Lera**. Do you recognize this one?

**Julia**. Yes. The voice.

***Lera*** *looks at* ***Julia's*** *face closely.*

**Lera**. Ancient priests were able to predict the future by the way the birds fly. Augurs. Would you like me to find you an augur?

**Julia**. Augurs are scammers. I can guess what he is twittering about anyway.

**Lera**. What is it?

**Julia**. Get a baby! Get a baby! It's gonna be too late.

**Lera** (*stands up*). I'll leave you. I don't feel safe here.

**Julia**. Please don't leave. Let's sit quietly. We'll send the sparrow away. (*Flapping her arm at the sparrow*.) Get lost! I'm sick of you. (*The sparrow flies away*.)

*The centre of Reproductive Medicine.*

*Consultant, a courteous polite woman, and Julia.*

**Consultant** (*fills out the form*). Julia Nikolayevna, my name is Galina Sergeyevna. I have to clarify a few things.

**Julia**. Yes, of course.

**Consultant**. Do you understand in general how it works?

**Julia**. I've read a lot about it.

**Consultant**. Are you married?

**Julia**. No.

**Consultant**. Who is going to help you? Who do you live with?

**Julia**. With my mum.

**Consultant**. Do you trust each other? Is the atmosphere friendly?

**Julia**. It is exactly what it should be at our age.

**Consultant**. Have you made the decision all by yourself?

**Julia**. Yes, only ten years late.

**Consultant**. Let's try and do it.

**Julia**. Do you have children?

**Consultant**. Yes, a little daughter. We think of having a son too. A child should not be revenge to the men who didn't make you happy.... The child will be your happiness. Your utter complete happiness. All the petty troubles will fade out.

**Julia**. I can see my future so clearly.

**Consultant**. I'm not here to preach you. Please don't think I'm trying to look smarter than you. We will discuss the rest of the details later. You are an independent woman. By the way, children tend to get sick often...

**Julia**. I often got sick when I was a child as well. Now I don't complain.

**Consultant**. A child needs communication before he or she is born. They listen and understand. They perceive your intonation. They already know the magic words ''I love you'', ''My sweetheart'', ''Well done'', and so on, the words that you will repeat all their life. It's crucial to be in constant dialogue with your child. Answer their questions. Ask your questions. If you don't give your child enough when they're little, it will surely hit back later. Have you got sexual encounters?

**Julia**. A long time ago.

**Consultant**. Do you have a sexual partner now?

**Julia**. No. I wonder if my relationship with the child will work out.

**Consultant**. You will give them your love. They will love you back.

**Julia**. The child will ask where his or her father is... Or they will demand the father…

**Consultant**. You will be their mother and father. Have you made your final decision? Nobody else is going to decide for you. Men have no say in the matter. They can only give advice.

**Julia**. She will grow up, and we will have our little gossip. A small family assembly. First of all, money matters. She will get married. I will help her. I mean, with her kids, my grandchildren.

**Consultant**. Have you ever been pregnant?

*Pause.*

**Julia**. No.

**Consultant**. When was the last time you were pregnant?

**Julia**. I said no.

**Consultant**. Did it take a normal course?

**Julia**. I said no.

**Consultant**. What happened? Did you give birth or did you terminate it?

**Julia**. I said no.

**Consultant**. Alright. Extracorporal fertilization means insemination *in vitro*. Then the embryo is transferred into the womb. The most important thing is that the embryo should establish. The number of successful operations is persistently high. Donors are selected thoroughly. We take into account their individual physical and physiological characteristics. Are you nervous?

**Julia**. Yes, very much

**Consultant**. Everything will be alright. Don't worry. This is going to be the landmark event of your life.

**Julia**. I don't care about the operation. I'm worried if I am able to give everything that is needed.

**Consultant**. Have you made your decision?

**Julia**. Yes. I'm positive.

**Consultant**. Please sign here. You should not try and find the donor. It is required by the law.

**Julia**. I'll sign it.

**Consultant**. Excellent.

*A group of people walks out from behind the left wing: it's pregnant* ***Julia*** *with a big belly and two men - her colleagues - guarding her in front.*

***Rita*** *and* ***Ksyusha*** *appear from the right. Both groups come closer to each other slowly.* ***Rita*** *takes a gun out of her bag.*

**Ksyusha** (*terrified*). Put it away right now. You're out of your mind.

**Rita**. Don't panic. It's fake. Just to scare them.

**Ksyusha**. Hide it now. I'll leave.

**Rita**. Don't you dare.

*The two groups are coming close, and the men are standing shoulder to shoulder, making a circle - a living shield - to protect* ***Julia*** *and take the heat.*

*For a moment both groups stop close to each other.* ***Rita*** *is trying to look into the centre of the circle above the men’s shoulders.*

**Rita** (*shouting*). My precious, my lovely friend. Your boy is going to be strong and clever because you really wanted him.

***Julia*** *dashes off and tries to rush out of the circle. The men hold her. A male voice says strictly:*

 Keep it cool. You're gonna give birth soon.

*The colleagues turn around and move with their backs forward.*

*The two groups walk further from each other.*

*The gun banged.*

***Julia's*** *group froze for a second.*

***Rita*** *who committed suicide is lying on the ground.* ***Ksyusha*** *is bending over her.* ***Julia***

*walks towards* ***Rita*** *accompanied by her colleagues and, with difficulty, bends over* ***Rita*** *too. She kisses her forehead. The men hold her by the arms.*

**Julia**. My darling… My sweetheart... My soulmate...

**Colleague**. Go away. No need for the crowd.

***Julia*** *leaves with the second colleague.* ***Ksyusha*** *and the first* ***Colleague*** *stay next to Rita.*

*Undiscovered space.*

***Julia's Mum and Ksyusha.***

*Other* ***Women*** *come up.*

*The villager-* ***Church Guard's wife*** *- comes up.*

***Church Guard's wife***. Home-made butter. Delicious and healthy. Dark rye bread. I've brought a knife too. Help yourself. I'll put it here on the bench.

***Denis's Mum*** *comes up.*

**Denis's Mum**. My childhood friend shows up unannounced. I cried. I've forgiven her. For the fifty years' absence. It's time to forgive.

***Lera*** *comes up.*

**Lera**. I've made my relationship with my husband extremely simple. He is the one who speaks and I only agree. I threw aside all my judgements. I never tell him I can't stand his worldview. I never tell him that he should take my opinion into account, and all that crap. As soon as he makes a hint about sex I just stop doing whatever I was doing and go to bed with him. I never have these complaints about migraine or melancholy like other chicks who tend to be moody exactly at that moment.

***Simultaneous Interpreter*** *comes up*

**Simultaneous Interpreter**. What's my fault? My mother-in-law got too scared and didn't let those contagious children come close to her grandchildren. My husband is confused and doesn't take anyone's side. Who shall I ask for advice? My university friends got divorced. Some of them have kids, some didn't even have time for that.

***Consultant*** *comes up.*

**Consultant**. The operation went well. We are friends now.

*Three naked* ***pregnant Graces*** *come up: they are happy and exhilarated. They are all expectancy. They look closely at each other, giggling and touching each other's bellies gently. Then they disappear.*

[Optional inset.

*Someone is reading* ***Pasternak*.**

Rendez-vous

The snow will dust the roadway,
And load the roofs still more.
I'll stretch my legs a little:
You're there outside the door.

Autumn, not winter coat,
Hat-none, galoshes-none.
You struggle with excitement
Out there all on your own.

Far, far into the darkness
Fences and trees withdraw.
You stand there on the corner,
Under the falling snow.

The water trickles down from
The kerchief that you wear
Into your sleeves, while dewdrops
Shine sparkling in your hair.

And now illumined by
A single strand of light
Are features, kerchief, figure
And coat of autumn cut.

There's wet snow on your lashes
And in your eyes, distress,
And your external image
Is all, all of apiece.

As if an iron point
With truly consummate art,
Dipped into antimony,
Had scribed you on my heart.

Those modest, humble features
Are in it now to stay,
And if the world's cruel-hearted,
That's merely by the way.

And therefore it is doubled,
All this night in snow;
To draw frontiers between us
Is more than I can do.

But who are we and whence,
If, of those years gone by,
Scandal alone remains
And we have ceased to be.

The end of the optional inset.]

**Ksyusha**. What takes them so long?

**Lera**. She is a calculating person. She was hiding everything for so long.

**Consultant**. It's the right thing to do.

**Simultaneous Interpreter**. Endless traffic jams on the roads.

**Ksyusha**. It's especially bad after lunch.

**Church Guard's Wife**. I'm scared of Moscow. Hustle and bustle. Clatter and chatter. Does this mean go with the flow? I'll spend the rest of my life in the village.

**Simultaneous Interpreter**. Accidents at every crossroad. Terrible scenes. They will be alright. It's this special day.

**Denis's Mum**. A lot of various scammers, swindlers.

**Ksyusha**. My mum would say: ''Time goes slow when you're waiting''.

**Lera**. Something happened along the way, they would have already been here otherwise.

**Consultant**. She saved enough money for a flat. I've already visited her.

**Denis's Mum**. It's cheaper in the suburbs.

**Consultant**. The buildings are right there in the forest, among birch trees and rowan-trees. People are enthusiastic there: they plant flowers and organize flowerbeds. Wild roses and lilacs everywhere. Fresh air. Pretty playgrounds.

**Julia's Mum**. Children grow up quickly, especially when they're not yours. As soon as you stop breastfeeding they can already walk and then run.

**Lera**. Or use the potty-chair by themselves. Tidy up their bed and put away their toys.

**Denis's Mum**. Or eat with a spoon.

**Julia's Mum**. And pronounce their first words.

**Simultaneous Interpreter**. Kids cry at night. They confuse night and day.

**Lera**. Sometimes it feels like it's close but the road is endless. When will it end already?

**Consultant**. The perception of distance is subjective. Sometimes it's the same distance but the time is dragging. Boring. Especially when we are waiting for something meaningful to happen.

**Ksyusha**. A meaningful event should be celebrated.

*Suddenly there is a gust of wind, a harsh one, a brutal one. The wind howls and throws the leaves up in the air. The women huddled together, protecting each other. All of a sudden, the wind quietens down.*

*Everyone looks in one direction, worried:*

- The bus is here…

- She isn't there.

- She is there! Stuck between the doors…

*A loud male voice:*

*-* Help the woman with the child.

***Julia*** *comes up with her 3-year-old son.*

**Julia**. Here we are.

*She picks up her son. The child wraps his little arms around his Mum.*

*The song ''Sympathy'' by British Rare Bird (1969) is playing.*

*The lyrics should be printed in the theatre program.*

Sympathy

And when you climb
Into your bed tonight
And when you lock,
Of the door
Just think of those
Out in the cold and dark
'cause there's not enough love to go round

And sympathy
Is what we need my friend
And sympathy
Is what we need
And sympathy
Is what we need my friend
'cause there's not enough love to go round.

*Curtain call. All the characters are on stage. They kneel down.*

*The actors and the spectators look each other in the eyes.*

*Julia is holding her child in her arms. She is standing above all the other kneeling* ***Women****.*

THE END

1. For the older audience. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Chekhov's first name and patronymic [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. The first line from a famous poem by Lermontov [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. A Slavic delicacy: cured slabs of fatback (or rarely pork belly) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Russian patronymic, a name derived from the name of the father. Used in formal communication. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)