PLAYS

Somebody Else’s Candlelight

A Comedy in Two Acts

Cast:

Alla

Alexandrina Dmitrievna

Act 1

*Part of Alexandrina Dmitrievna’s large apartment. General disorder. On the floor, and on the armchairs and the chairs are empty picture frames, boxes in disarray, wrapping paper. Dishes can lie right on the floor, etc. Especially striking is a large overturned vase with a bouquet of roses.*

*The front door is wide open. A mop is tacked with two big nails right onto the door of the bathroom.*

*Alla is sitting in the bathroom at the edge of the bathtub, elegantly dressed, with either black and blue bruises or make-up running down her face.*

*Silence. Alla stands up (she moves like a robot), she’s listening, leaning her ear to the door. Suddenly with a shout of despair: “Alex!” with all her strength she knocks open the door: she takes a running start as long as it is possible in the spacious bathroom and knocks the mop off.*

*The door flies open, Alla flies by inertia into the corridor and falls down. Momentarily she jumps up and runs out of the apartment shouting “Alex!” She returns, rushes about the apartment, looking into every corner, she finally stops, lowers herself onto the floor, pounds her head on the floor and... howls. She notices the telephone, crawls toward it, dials the number, makes a mistake, dials again... Finally she manages to dial it right.*

ALLA. (*into the receiver*) This is the salon? Is this the salon? Tanya! Ask for Shelgunova! It’s urgent!!! (*she sobs*) Tannie? It’s you! It’s Allie! (*she sobs choking*) Wait... wait... I’m gonna hang myself right now or stick my head in the oven. Right now!!! I’m calling to say good-bye. (a *new bout of sobbing*) Tannie, I’m calling from her apartment. He came! And he left, too. Tannie, it was all just like I imagined it would be. He brought me roses. You should see them! And then he took everything from the apartment. He took all of her things. Tannie, he took everything! He pulled paintings right out of the frames. Well, the paintings – okay. He took the TV, and the VCR, and a great big telephone – you won’t be able to pay for this. He thought it was my apartment. Yeah, he thought it’s all mine and my mother’s... Tannie, what can’t you understand? What? He shoved me in the bathroom, locked it and carried off everything from the apartment. He loaded it into his Mercedes and drove off. He thought it was my apartment. Ta-a-nnie, what don’t you understand? I’m telling you! Everything was the way I imagined it would be. He brought me roses. I bought some champagne, tomatoes, and all kinds of stuff from yesterday’s pay... And we dined in candlelight. In her candlelight... We dined in somebody else’s candlelight... Maybe it’s a bad sign – to be in somebody else’s candlelight? I love him, Tanya, I love him! Yes! Yes!!! I’m gonna hang myself, Tanya! What’s left for me if I love him? Yes! Yes!!! Find him! Explain! No!!! Don’t say the apartment’s not mine! Please don’t say it! I beg you – don’t say it! Tannie, they’re going to put me in prison, aren’t then? I won’t see him at all then! I’ll be thrown into prison!!! My brother’s in prison, and they’ll put me there. The judges will say – your brother’s in prison, let’s put you in, too. And it doesn’t matter that he’s not my brother by blood. My mother took him from the orphanage when she worked there, to get an apartment quicker. That’s it! That’s it! My mother won’t survive this with her liver problems and her sense of principle! She’ll begin to pay for me and kick the bucket. She’s paying for my brother, although the court didn’t require it! And why does she have ten jobs, and we live in poverty? She’s gone now to her brother in Kursk. She took two packets of buttermilk, a kilo of gingerbread and a lemon. A single lemon!!! Just imagine – a single lemon! Could you imagine that? I’ll hang myself! What else can I tell you? I’m already telling you! Everything happened the way I imagined it would. He brought me roses, we dined in candlelight, and in the morning he carried off the things. I love him so much. If you only knew how he looked at me so! Ta-annie, when I was with him it seemed like angels were raising us on somebody else’s bed sheets to the heavens... I love him so much! I didn’t tell him... no... I was afraid. He’d understand that I can’t live without him and right away he’d dump me out of boredom. I can’t breathe without him for very long. I, Tanya, it’s hard for me to breathe right now – there’s not enough air. I don’t know what I’m going to do later, how to breathe without him. I’m having spasms, he carried off everything... But what could I do? I said something... And he hit me... shoved me into the bathroom and locked it. And who could hear anything? They moved nearly everyone from the whole building. Only a deaf old lady is feeding cats on the porch. It’s right in the best part of the city. Kotelnicheskya Embankment, the Foreign Language Library, the house is standing here alone on a great big lot. Everything around has been demolished and everyone’s moved. There’s a church next door, but it’s still not clear when it’s going to be open for services, for the time being it’s just standing there. Tannie, find him, tell him I love him. I’ll give him my life. He didn’t understand. He thought that I spend all my nights that way. Ta-nnie, I dreamed of having a child with him. I love him so much, that just from that one night with him I began to believe in God. I’m going to be baptized. I’m going to go to church and learn how to pray. I know I can’t keep a man like him, but the child would have been with me! And he’d have a little boy, just as handsome as he is. Find him!!! Will you find him? Thank you! I won’t leave here. I’ll be waiting. The landlady will come tomorrow. Ta-annie, I feel like I’m pregnant! (*she sobs*) I’ll hang myself – pregnant... The child and I’ll die! I don’t want to go to prison!!! I’ll be depressed without Alex in prison. Ta-annie!!! I’m waiting for you! I’ll be waiting! Okay, I won’t hang myself for the time being, I’ll be waiting for your call. I’ll be waiting, Tanya! (*she hangs up the receiver*)

*She walks up to a large mirror, looks herself over. Not her external appearance, but it’s as though she were cautiously looking into her soul. She leans with her back against the mirror, recalls last night like music. For the first and last time we overhear his voice.*

ALLA. Lexi honey...

HE. Allochka... *alyi*-scarlet....[[1]](#endnote-1)

ALLA. Do you feel good with me?

HE. All right. Why are you so strange? Not enough boyfriends?

ALLA. I have a husband. He’s in the army now.

HE. That’s bad. I thought you’re free. I was in the service myself and don’t like to mess over other guys, I don’t like deceiving them.

ALLA. I’ll write him and I’ll be free.

HE. Don’t rush into that. Does he love you?

ALLA. I don’t know. I never thought about him that way – whether he loves me or not.

HE. He loves you. You’re beautiful.

ALLA. Me?!

HE. You caught my eye right away. You’re really beautiful. Even when you’re washing up. Your breasts are so beautiful! And your legs, your tummy... and your neck like a swan’s....

ALLA. I’m beautiful and happy.

HE. Of course, happy! You’re living all right!

ALLA. Lexi, honey, right now I’m happy for the first time in my life!

HE. You’re strange altogether! First you’re cheerful, then sad. Enigmatic! I like you! Do you like me?

ALLA. Ye-sss...

*The telephone rings. Alla grabs the receiver.*

ALLA. Tannie! (*she stands still, remains silent for a long time, then in a whisper*) Lexi, honey! (*again she listens*) The things are already gone? Yes? Yes? Yes, they’re not mine. And the apartment’s not mine. Sorry. You’re not angry? Mom and I are poor. Momma just gets paid for cleaning the apartment. And I lifted the keys from her. The landlady’s coming back tomorrow. From Germany I think. (*she shouts*) Kill you? What little account? You’re not hiding anything from me? You’re not trying to console me? What happiness! What happiness! And you were with me and kept quiet? You’re the best. Sorry that I nearly thought badly of you. On my own I’m bad, but with you I’ll become better. Can we meet? I’ll wait. What? What? (*she begins to stutter*) It’s hard to hear you here! What did you say? (*tempestuously*) Who’s getting married? Us? You and I?! We’re getting married?! (*instantly she turns into a astoundingly happy woman*) Alex, I love you! I loved you at first sight, there in the dance club. But it seems I’ve loved you without beginning and end. Me?! Angry? For what? Could anyone really get angry at his or her hands or legs? There’s no me without you. I don’t need myself without you! What, what of it if I’m crying? It’s from happiness! I’ll stop now. You know I’ve been unlucky in love before you. It’s the second time in my life that I’ve been in love. When I was 14, I loved a tiny kitten. How I loved him. Alex, how I loved him! And how he loved me! He wouldn’t eat or drink without me, he always waited for me at the door. And then our neighbor in the communal apartment and my mother got in a fight over some kind of idiotic stuff, as usual... And the neighbor woman began to object to the cat to spite my mother. We live by the Beltway. Mother took the cat beyond the Beltway. She’s principled, my mother. She felt that since the neighbor objected, we didn’t have a right to keep it. A hundred times a week my mother would fight and make up with our neighbor, curse her out, and wouldn’t give in to her much... I looked for the kitten for the whole day. Along the melting snowdrifts, the patches of forest. I got a sore throat from calling for it. The police found me. I fell asleep at the police station, and nobody could wake me up. They woke me up in the hospital. I slept for seven days – how I didn’t want to live! Alex, honey, may my kitty forgive me, but I love you more! I was afraid to say this to you earlier because of my feminine pride. I love you, Alex! (*she listens*) They won’t kill you? I love you! You remember, you said that they cover up the fact that one of our cosmonauts, as a result of an oversight, of carelessness, flew into space alone without a rocket? How lonely he was! When I’m baptized, I’ll be praying for him as well! Without you I’m like that cosmonaut. What? A revolver? Where? By the bed? Wait, I’ll look (*she walks away and returns with the revolver*) I found it! Why are you throwing revolvers around everywhere? Is it a real one? What, it can even shoot? I’ll be careful... What should I do? Throw it out? Such an expensive thing? But it’s completely new! Better I’ll hide it, and give it back to you later! Throw it out? Into the Moscow River? All right, all right, don’t be angry! I’ll throw it out, I’ll throw it out... But why do you need a revolver? What did you do with it? Can I shoot it once? OK, I won’t. OK, OK, I’ll throw it out today. From here it’s a stone throw to the Yauza River, I’ll throw it out right now. I’ve never seen a revolver up close like that. It’s so interesting! Don’t be nervous. I’ll throw it out right now. A kiss to you too... A kiss to you, kiss you, kiss you... Say something, I’ll kiss your voice. (*she listens, closing her eyes*) Your kisses haven’t grown cold on me... What will I do? Oh!!! My God!!! I’ve forgotten about everything! The landlady’s coming back tomorrow. She’ll file a complaint right away. And the second set of keys is at my mother’s. She’s coming back from Kursk this evening. And tomorrow she’s supposed to do the cleaning here. My mother will file a complaint right away. No, you can’t make a deal with my mother! She won’t bat an eyelash if they put me in jail. Why do you say she doesn’t love me? She loves me. It’s just that she puts justice, the law, a sense of duty, honesty, and truth higher... It’d be good, if I could take the hundredth place in her system of values! And there’s nothing standing behind me there. I don’t want to go to prison, Alex! Without you I’ll be in despair there. My heart will be torn apart without you. Will you visit me? (*she laughs happily, as though at a sweet nothing*) My love, who’ll let you come to see me every day? But won’t they kill you? For sure? Are you trying to console me? I forgive you. You did it accidentally. I’ll think up something... I’ll go to my husband; he’ll confirm I’ve been there since yesterday. The main thing – return the keys, so the neighbor woman doesn’t catch me when I show up at home. And my husband will corroborate it! Are you jealous? (*she laughs*) Better than you, worse – what’s the difference? I love you the way you are. But how will we find each other? And when will we see each other? No, it isn’t soon, Lexi, honey. I miss you. A day, an hour – what’s the difference? I miss you... Maybe I shouldn’t leave? No, my mother will figure it out right away and file a complaint on the spot. All right. I’ll return in about two days. And we’ll meet! I love you, I love you... (*she hangs up the phone and swirls around, brimming with happiness*)

*She suddenly remembers something, looks for her jeans, her top, her slippers, the package. She takes off her beautiful skirt, her blouse; she walks up to the mirror and looks herself over with growing pride and ecstasy. She gets the revolver, aims at her reflection, takes various poses.*

*Alexandrina Dmitrievna appears in the doorway.*

*She’s an unattractive woman between 50 and 60 years old wearing glasses. She’s dressed with the pretensions of chic style and youth: a loose, lacy, delicate black blouse, through which nothing particularly attractive shows, tightly-fitted chamois pants, shoes on very high, “sexy” heels. There is a poisonously red large spider hairpin in her hair, she elicits associations with someone between Carmen and Cleopatra.*

*Alexandrina is paralyzed from astonishment. From her own doorway she first examines the ravaged apartment, then Alla.*

*Alla notices Alexandrina in the mirror. She tenses up, grows still then slowly turns to the owner of the apartment. She forgets about the revolver in her hand, and it turns out to be pointed at Alexandrina.*

ALLA. (*super politely*) How do you do!

*Alexandrina puts down her suitcase and slowly raises her hand.*

ALLA. (*she suddenly remembers the revolver and quickly hides it behind her back*) What’s with you? Don’t pay attention to it! What’s with you? You’ve gotten scared by this? It’s a toy. For playing a joke. Well, to play a joke, first me on you, then you on me –for a laugh. To cheer you up. (*she points to the distance*) Take a look yourself, if, of course, you know anything about guns.

*Alexandrina lowers her hand and steps unsteadily toward Alla.*

*Alla, overstressed, presses the trigger. There’s a shot. Alla screams and drops the revolver. Alexandrina throws herself onto the floor. Silence. No one stirs.*

ALLA. Are you alive? Woman, are you alive? (*she stands there frightened*) Well, woman, I’m afraid to touch you. Please, answer, are you alive? Oh, Lord, are you alive or not?

ALEXANDRINA. (*displaying the exceptional experience of an orator*) Have they hired you to kill me? (*she rises up on her knees, not without pathos*) Who’s behind you? Who sent you? Whose will are you following in blind ignorance?

ALLA. You’re not wounded?

ALEXANDRINA. Did Derzhavin the writer set you on me?

ALLA. Something familiar there... Derzhavin? The actor!

ALEXANDRINA. Please, don’t! The writer! Robert Derzhavin.

ALLA. “And gave me his blessings, going to his grave....” I thought he had died.

ALEXANDRINA. The great 18th century poet Derzhavin has died! But mediocrity is everlasting! And it sows the seeds of the foolish, the bad, and the transitory. It’s he who sent you! He publicly threatened me! Through anonymous phone calls. He’s a Mafioso. By your hand he wants to eliminate me thus eliminating my criticism of him. Derzhavin sent you!

ALLA. Yes.... of course! Now I understand the kind of guy he is! And I liked you right away! Right away I’m going to go to him and tell him everything!

ALEXANDRINA. Are you a groupie of his?

ALLA. No, just a hairdresser. (*she puts away the revolver into a plastic bag, quickly pulls on her jeans and tee-shirt*) And I liked you right away and everything about you! I see you have a suitcase?

ALEXANDRINA. (*hurriedly*) There’s nothing there!

ALLA. Then I won’t distract you. It was nice to meet you. Sorry for troubling you. Good-bye!

*But before Alla could get close to the door, Alexandrina locks it with the key.*

ALEXANDRINA. Have you been here long?

ALLA. Literally just a minute! And I’m already leaving. I don’t want to distract you.

ALEXANDRINA. Was the door open?

ALLA. Wide open! I thought that all the apartments had been abandoned. I thought I’d go it, take a look.... Sometimes people leave such great things! I took a look and saw, no, they haven’t left anything. I noticed that someone was still living here! I’m out of here. It was really-really nice to meet you!

ALEXANDRINA. (*with a moan*) My God! My paintings!!! Did you see anyone here?

ALLA. No one!

ALEXANDRINA. Whom did you find when you entered?

ALLA. Not a soul! Excuse me, but I don’t want to hold you up even for another minute.

ALEXANDRINA. Stop! I’m calling the police! Stay here! You’ll be a witness!

ALLA. Sorry, but I’m in a hurry! I’d be happy to oblige, but there’s no way I can!

ALEXANDRINA. (*she no longer is listening to her and walks around the apartment*) My God! For what reason? They robbed me!!! They even took the phone! With the fax! And the gold! And diamonds! My diamonds! My dollars!!!

*Alla quietly tries to open the door with her keys. Alexandrina notices. She takes a chair, sneaks up and strikes Alla with the chair on the head. Alla falls. Alexandrina picks up Alla’s keys. She pulls the revolver out of the bag. She finds ropes in the house.*

ALEXANDRINA. (*she ties Alla’s arms and legs*) Thief! Stool pigeon! Bandit! Just you wait, Derzhavin! You’ll study my life in the Solovki prison camp! (*she drags the tied-up and moaning Alla to the bathroom*) You’ve created a paradise on earth for yourself! Built a living museum for yourself. Your own hired killers! (*she speaks as though she’s reading a public lecture*) A bad writer is always amoral! You can have an incompetent worker, a worthless dressmaker, a miserable actress... But despite that they can be remarkable people needed by society. But society doesn’t need a bad writer ever! His complexes, his thirst for self-affirmation destroy everything sacred in him! The desire to hold spiritual power over people possesses them, the desire for glory at any cost... and all this is combined with a vulgar attraction to the despicable riches of everyday life... (*she splashes water into Alla’s face*)

ALLA. (*without raising her head*) Why’d you do this? Gone mad? Why’d you nail me on the head? Did I touch you? Why’d you tie me up? Are you nuts?

ALEXANDRINA. How is it you have my keys?

ALLA. They were lying by the door!

ALEXANDRINA. They weren’t! My door’s been opened with just these keys! You opened it! That’s why you were taking to your heels!

ALLA. I protest! Untie me right now! You don’t have a right to tie me up and interrogate me!

ALEXANDRINA. It was self-defense! You tell me where you got the keys from, and I’ll immediately untie you.

*Alla remains silent.*

ALEXANDRINA. There are three sets of keys. One’s mine. The second’s at Benjamin’s... (*thinks.*)

ALLA. Untie me!

ALEXANDRINA. Answer me honestly just once, but honestly, and I’ll let you go right away. I’ve already understood everything. The whole picture is practically right in front of me. I just want you to confirm it one more time. If you confirm it, I’ll let you go.

ALLA. What do I have to confirm?

ALEXANDRINA. Do you know Benjamin... Sergeevich?

ALLA. (*immediately*) Yes.

ALEXANDRINA. (*abruptly*) Where does he live?

*Alla is evidently struggling with the answer.*

ALEXANDRINA. (*she steps away and disgustedly looks her over*) He brought you here. Apparently he got the urge for a young chick! Well, of course, he wouldn’t introduce you to his mother! Have you two been doing this for a long time? Answer – and I’ll let you go. I’ve already figured out everything. For a long time?

ALLA. (*indistinctly*) Not very...

ALEXANDRINA. (*she gets more and more interested in the investigation*) How did my keys end up in your hands?

*Alla struggles with the answer.*

ALEXANDRINA. (*proud of her own perspicacity*) He took off earlier and left you here?

ALLA. Yes.

ALEXANDRINA. Naked?

ALLA. No. First he left, and I undressed afterward.

ALEXANDRINA. That’s original! A respectable guy, and what did he lust after?

ALLA. Well, he didn’t lust after anything that much....

ALEXANDRINA. So all of it was your initiative?

ALLA. Yeah. Mine.

ALEXANDRINA. What did he say about me?

ALLA. About you personally? Nothing!

ALEXANDRINA. That means there’s something sacred still left?

ALLA. That’s left. (*a pause*) Well now, everything is apparently quite clear. Time to untie me.

ALEXANDRINA. (*she sits on the edge of the bathtub*) Who to believe? A ten-year long affair.

ALLA. So, that’s what it’s all about! Don’t you worry! You know, I remembered. I just brazenly thrust myself on him. I didn’t know anything about you! And he resisted. And there was nothing between us. Nothing happened. He told me right to my face that he’s loved another woman for ten years. Now I remember – he was hinting at you.

ALEXANDRINA. (*she laughs loudly*) Ten years of what?

ALLA. He’s in love!

ALEXANDRINA. With whom?

ALLA. A woman! You!

ALEXANDRINA. Did he use those words exactly? He’s in love?

ALLA. Yes, now I remember exactly. Those words.

ALEXANDRINA. Exactly? Quote it!

ALLA. What?

ALEXANDRINA. Quo-ote it! But repeat his words about love exactly!

ALLA. Well, he said that he misses, really misses... really misses... Really misses you!

ALEXANDRINA. I got that. Go on!

ALLA. And, when you’re together, it seems to him that the angels are raising you up to the heavens on a sheet!

ALEXANDRINA. It’d be better for the angels to raise a little something for him personally once in a while. Well thought out, kiddo! Very touching! That’s very touching that you’ve taken to comfort me in your situation! But that means my affairs are in really bad shape! And that’s very noticeable! He’s impotent. You never noticed that?

ALLA. No.

ALEXANDRINA. Have you ever run across impotents in your life?

ALLA. No.

ALEXANDRINA. I only run across impotents! In all respects! (*she walks away to the mirror and looks over herself*) You have to accept reality. I’m younger than Sophia Loren, but look a lot worse.

ALLA. Do you love him?

ALEXANDRINA. I was at a conference in that bastard city of Munich. The French, the Germans, and Poles paid me compliments, laughed and drank with me! I had the kind of blouse on me that looked as if I wasn’t wearing one at all! But not the slightest hint of desire flashed on a single vile mug of theirs to fuck me! But I was in ecstasy! It seemed to me I was having great success! All around me love affairs were going on, everyone was sleeping with somebody... But not with me! No, not with me!

ALLA. Do you love him?

ALEXANDRINA. What do you know about love? I always tried, but the sex somehow never worked out. At first I felt too pretty to condescend to having sex with someone. And then all the men I knew somehow became terribly virtuous. Don’t ask idiotic questions! You and I can’t understand each other! To each their own. Like in hell!

ALLA. True, I’m not as educated as you are. I don’t understand anything about love. But I love! Untie me, please! I’ve already been pushed into this bathroom today! I hate it! I’m sick to my stomach here!

ALEXANDRINA. Was Benjamin violent? I’m beginning to respect him. Well, Benjamin, who brought you here to poetically wax about angels! Tell me everything! And don’t think I’m a fool! I won’t untie you until you tell me the truth!

ALLA. Tell you what? What?! I don’t understand!

ALEXANDRINA. Really, what?! I come back from Germany – the door’s wide open! The apartment’s been emptied! You’re naked! You shoot a revolver at me! Then you try to run away! And you have nothing to say to me?

ALLA. (*jerks*) And where’s the revolver?

ALEXANDRINA. The revolver’s material evidence. Tell me! Where did you first meet?

ALLA. At a dance club.

ALEXANDRINA. Benjamin at a dance club? Bravo!

ALLA. No, he was just walking past... to a bar....

ALEXANDRINA. To have a drink?

ALLA. Rather to get cigarettes....

ALEXANDRINA. Let’s suppose. And what then?

ALLA. I approached him....

ALEXANDRINA. Why?

ALLA. To bum a cigarette.

ALEXANDRINA. That’s a pretext.

ALLA. Well, I started talking....

ALEXANDRINA. About what?

ALLA. Well it was like... this and that....

ALEXANDRINA. And he brought you to this apartment?

ALLA. Yes, everything was something like that....

ALEXANDRINA. And why did he bring you here?

ALLA. Well, he brought me... like a man....

ALEXANDRINA. Was he wearing glasses?

ALLA. Now, now, let me remember.

ALEXANDRINA. Or wasn’t he?

ALLA. Glasses... sometimes... And sometimes... completely without his glasses!

ALEXANDRINA. Well, he brought you here... And what happened?

ALLA. Nothing happened!

ALEXANDRINA. That I can believe!

ALLA. Untie me! It hurts!

ALEXANDRINA. And where’d Benjamin go? Did you shoot him?

ALLA. What are you saying? I don’t even kill mosquitoes! I shush them away! He left on business.

ALEXANDRINA. He left you in my apartment with the keys?

ALLA. And didn’t lock up behind himself! In the next moment robbers broke in, shoved me into the bathroom and....

ALEXANDRINA. Did they rape you?

ALLA. What are you saying? No, of course not!

ALEXANDRINA. And, when they were leaving, let you out of the bathroom! You don’t say, how delicately men treat you! But your legend hasn’t passed the test! Benjamin doesn’t smoke, doesn’t ever wear glasses. He doesn’t have a business, and he’s not interested in women. In men either, by the way! We’ve hit a dead end. Aren’t you sick and tired of lying? Let’s go back to the first version! Do you know Derzhavin?

ALLA. And gave me his blessings, going to his grave! That’s it!!! I don’t know anything else about him!

ALEXANDRINA. The other Derzhavin!

ALLA. I don’t know anyone at all. Not your Benjamin, or Derzhavin! Untie me! It hurts! I’m tired! I’m in a rush! I’m here by mistake!

ALEXANDRINA. No, Derzhavin never would have sent a murderer! That, they say, costs a lot! And he’s greedy! And you’re apparently altogether not from his circle! As an investigator I’ve failed! An excess of intellect and fantasy have gotten in the way. (*she steps out of the bathroom*) The police will untie you! Be patient! In about ten minutes the police will be here! (*she moves toward the telephone, on the way her foot slips on the roses*) The roses are, by the way, evidence! Hardly would someone go to a robbery with roses!

ALLA. Hear me out woman to woman! I’ll tell the truth!

ALEXANDRINA. (*she returns, stands in the doorway*) I’m listening. But just the truth!

ALLA. Untie me! I won’t run away. Honest!

ALEXANDRINA. Why? Your mouth is free! Talk!

ALLA. It’s really hard to tell the truth when your hands and feet are tied!

ALEXANDRINA. Then let the police deal with you!

ALLA. Wait a minute! I understand – you’re out of sorts! You’ve had so much stolen! I never knew that anyone could have so many different things! But the police won’t help! We have to cut a deal somehow! Those things are already gone! I know that for sure. They no longer exist for you! And they’ll never be! And there’s no way the police will find them! Why are you counting on the police like a little girl? You don’t think they have any other business, huh?

ALEXANDRINA. My things are gone? Already are gone? You little shit! Slut! (*she kicks Alla with her foot*) My entire life! The life of my father! My father defended the Motherland! He made it all the way to Berlin! All these paintings were from there! From the best collections! They’re priceless! Gold! A unique collection of diamonds! You’ve deprived me of everything in this world! I have nothing left! You little shit!!! You snake!!!

ALLA. Stop! It hurts!!! You’re not a human being! I’m pregnant!!!

ALEXANDRINA. (*in a state of affectation*) You hurt! And I don’t hurt? Little shit!!!

ALLA. (*shouting*) We’ll return everything to you!!!

ALEXANDRINA. (*abruptly growing still*) You’ll return it? Let’s make a deal! You’ll return the things! I won’t file a complaint! And I’ll let you go!

ALLA. (*after a pause*) You have to understand – the things are gone! And never will come back! But count up how much they cost. And we’ll return the money to you. Gradually... bit by bit... And, if you report to the police, you won’t receive anything at all! Well, they’ll put me in prison! Will you feel better? Better?

ALEXANDRINA. Yes! Better! I heard the word “we” here. Who is this “we?”

ALLA. I’ll tell you everything.

ALEXANDRINA. Go ahead! (*she lights up a cigarette*)

ALLA. Have you ever loved anyone?

ALEXANDRINA. Stop pretending to be a schizophrenic!

ALLA. Didn’t you love your Benjamin?

ALEXANDRINA. Now I finally know that you never saw him! Don’t waste time!

ALLA. I love one man! He’s handsome, thoughtful, caring... He has such wonderful eyes. He can speak with his eyes. And on the back of his head he has a soft lock of hair... I love him so much that if he dies at a really old age at the other end of the earth, I’d die the very next minute after his death! I’d die without even trying! I wanted to hang myself here in your apartment....

ALEXANDRINA. All I need now is a corpse!

ALLA. Do you know what I was afraid of? Not death! I was afraid that I’d die and end up alone without him! Dead, I’d eternally long for him!

ALEXANDRINA. Wait a minute, wait a minute, this isn’t without a degree of interest. (*she brings in a tape recorder*) This can be useful to me. Can you repeat it?

ALLA. Repeat what?

ALEXANDRINA. All this about love and death*.* (*she turns on the tape recorder*) You understand, it sounds quite amusing. If I write about some worthless love novel, I’ll quote you. It’ll be a kind of option. Repeat, please! It’s recording! Repeat!

ALLA. Say what?

ALEXANDRINA. Well, how you love him! Try to reconstruct it word for word! Well, talk about love!

ALLA. About love? I don’t understand anything about love! I had a grandmother, she really loved me....

ALEXANDRINA. You don’t need to talk about your grandmother!

ALLA. Wait a minute! My thoughts are a mess. My mother forbade me from being baptized. And my grandmother got upset. I don’t have a guardian angel. And you know yourself how rough it is without a guardian angel! And when I saw him, I knew right away that here’s my guardian angel! He thinks he can hurt me. (*she laughs*) He doesn’t understand that he’s not only Alex, but also my Guardian Angel forever. I didn’t have time to tell him this. I was afraid he’d laugh at me. I chickened out. He never thinks about the fact that he has a soul. It would be awful if he understood this too late – when the soul is beyond salvation.

ALEXANDRINA. Pretty cool. Did you slap it together all on your own?

ALLA. This is the whole truth! Don’t you feel it?

ALEXANDRINA. Talk, keep talking....

ALLA. I chickened out. I got scared that he wouldn’t like me the way I was... And... I invented myself. I took him to your apartment, dressed up in your things, lit up your candles....

ALEXANDRINA. And fucked him in my bed! My Benjamin thinks that a bed is just for snoring with your mouth open. If only, for once in my life, it would turn out that I’d fallen in love and had good sex! Life has passed by, and nothing like that has happened. And what do you feel while doing this?

ALLA. What do I feel?

ALEXANDRINA. What do you feel if you end up in bed with him and it turns out you’re in love with him, too?

ALLA. I feel I’m with him and love him. And no one can ever take away that moment.

ALEXANDRINA. (*dreamily*) And then, when you get sick of him, all the same it’ll be nice to remember. Memories are left.

ALLA. I’ll never fall out of love with him, even after death.

ALEXANDRINA. It’s really amazing how soap operas have influenced our women! Do you watch all those TV series?

ALLA. What?

ALEXANDRINA. Well, all that junk about fated loves?

ALLA. I watch them.

ALEXANDRINA. And do you like them?

ALLA. A lot.

ALEXANDRINA. I should have expected that. So, you brought this freshly baked guardian angel to my apartment?

*Alla remains silent.*

ALEXANDRINA. Did he fuck you in my bed?

*Alla remains silent.*

ALEXANDRINA. Then he robbed my apartment?

ALLA. He thought it was my apartment!

ALEXANDRINA. That really gives him a sense of dignity. By the way, where did you get the keys?

ALLA. From my mother. Momma cleans house for you.

ALEXANDRINA. From your mother! How simple! Your Momma has been cleaning for me it seems for about two years? And she never even stole a piece of candy from a dish! It’s a pity you didn’t take after her! That means he robbed my apartment while you were gazing at him with loving eyes?!

ALLA. I begged him, really begged him!

ALEXANDRINA. And he didn’t give a damn about at your pleas? Well yes, he still doesn’t know that such a brilliant career is waiting for him – from a pimp to a guardian angel!

ALLA. I love him the way he is. All people make mistakes.

ALEXANDRINA. It’s easy to philosophize on someone else’s account! On someone else’s account you can go to the peaks of humanity beyond the clouds. Who is he? What’s his name? His address? I’m calling the police, we’ll go get him!

ALLA. I won’t tell you!

ALEXANDRINA. Then they’ll send you to prison you for a long time. About eight years!

ALLA. I won’t tell you! And he’ll pay you back! He just got himself into a tough situation! He has debts! They would have killed him! He’ll pay you back! We’ll pay you back together! Is his life really worth less than your things?!

ALEXANDRINA. Oh, I see that you’re an exceptional demagogue! Stop playing the heroine and look soberly into the face of reality! Right here, in this apartment, several hours ago you saw him for the last time in your life! He’s not going to wait for you to get out of prison! He won’t even visit you! You’re pregnant? Did I hear something like that?

ALLA. I have a feeling I am. I’m pregnant for the second day!

ALEXANDRINA. What tremendous intuition! And with that kind of intuition how is it that you don’t feel you’re almost up to your eyeballs in shit?!

ALLA. I’m not in shit! I’m happy!

ALEXANDRINA. Well yes, it’s me who’s in shit! And you’re in your wedding dress! Think a bit, several years of prison is an almost tangible reality for you. You’ve already lost your boyfriend! And you’ll lose your son, too! Not to see your child for x-number of years is to lose him! Think what it will be like for your baby, conceived in love, to grow up without his mother? You’ll be forced to choose – him or the child! And what will you choose?

ALLA. I won’t say anything!

ALEXANDRINA. What’s baby’s tears for people like you? (*she bends over Alla and screams*) Understand at last – your guardian angel is an ordinary pimp and an extraordinary bastard!

*Alla spits in her face.*

ALEXANDRINA. You’re a fanatic! You’ll rot in a prison! I’ll do everything to make it happen! Have you read about our labor camps? You’ll be fucked to death there by dirty stinking dykes and guards! Or you’ll kick the bucket or become an animal! Fool! Tell me about him! We’ll save our skins together! We’ll have time to save something at least!

ALLA. None of your things are left! I won’t tell you anything! I won’t talk to you at all!

ALEXANDRINA. Listen, I won’t do anything bad to him. Let him live! You two can marry, fuck, procreate, grow wings, die together at the same instant... Do what you want! But give me back my things!

ALLA. I won’t say anything! Not to you, not to the cops! Beat me! Put me in prison! I still won’t say anything!

ALEXANDRINA. Joan of Arc!!! By the way, Voltaire thought she was no virgin but a whore! She also thought angels appeared to her at first. Then she fucked the Angel in the flesh, too. He was the one who betrayed her. History repeats itself! First the fanatic was tortured by the Inquisition. Then she was burned at the stake! And she also was happy! Well, let’s follow the examples from history! I can’t put up a stake here. After all, the stake is so Middle Ages. We have democracy! We’ll manage with a hot iron. I hope your Angel didn’t pinch the hot iron. (*brings the hot iron* *and plugs it in an outlet*) Can you guess what I’m going to do?

ALLA. I’m afraid of you!

ALEXANDRINA. You should be! What did you hope for? That for the sake of your great love I’ll agree to live the rest of my life in poverty? To each her own. Why should I live in poverty?

ALLA. Don’t you earn a lot? Aren’t you a critic or something like that?

ALEXANDRINA. Baby, not even book writers get any money these days. I just review them. Nobody has been able to get any money for doing it. Of course, you should consider who has what needs. I’m used to living in a luxury apartment. To eating in expensive restaurants where waitresses address me by my full name Alexandrina Dmitrievna. I’m used to having expensive cognac at home, natural fruit juices, quality chocolates. I eat strawberries even in the winter! A masseuse and a hairdresser come to me almost every day. I only go to expensive doctors. I take a vacation abroad no less than twice a year. For example, I go to Switzerland... I throw parties for celebrities in my home. And the things I feed them play quite a significant role. Yes! As a rule, they’re all greedy. And they like to get things for free. So they come to me, there’s no reason for me to hide the truth between us, they come to fill their bellies. And to borrow money! I sell one painting a year. And that lets me live that life. It’s too late for me to lose that! Do you know how much it costs to be a client at a beauty salon?

ALLA. You’re an ugly, evil old broad!

ALEXANDRINA. (*moves the hot iron closer to Alla*). You are going to tell me where I can find your boyfriend! I imagine how handsome and young he is. I won’t put him in jail – just make him give back everything! I’ll pay his debts! I’ll be humane, but, take note, on my own terms. I’ll put YOU in jail. And your Guardian Angel will help me do that. You, with your pretty face, will weave endless soap operas about a great love, and here, in my apartment, on this bed, your boyfriend will fuck me, the ugly, evil old broad! I’ll become younger looking. Trust me, I’ll stop being evil. And I’ll become prettier! Why do you have to buy love for yourself on my account? I pay – I get fucked. That’s normal. Before I never even thought that love needs to be bought. I’m from the generation of hypocrites. But love is, maybe, the most valuable thing a woman has in her life. It’s only just that one has to pay for everything of value. If she is, of course, able to pay for it! I’m 56, and I haven’t been fucked even once the way I’d like to be fucked! I’ll get your boy! I want yours and nobody else! I’ll get my things back. And you’ll be in prison! (*touches Alla with the hot iron*)

ALLA. A-aaaa!!! Alex! (*loses consciousness*)

ALEXANDRINA. God damn it! What’s with me? Like a blackout! (*quickly turns off the hot iron and takes it away*). Miss! Damn, what’s her name? Miss! (*splashes Alla with water*) Miss! Nobody was going to torture you! It was just for show. Don’t die! (*bends over listening to Alla’s heart*). I don’t know. I’ve heard that you need to put a mirror to the mouth... (*snatches a compact out of her purse, opens it, and puts the mirror to Alla’s mouth*) I don’t know whether she’s alive or not. It’s murder! A criminal case! A corpse! I’ll be acquitted. It was self-defense. What the hell kind of self-defense is it, if she’s tied up? I tied her up too tightly! And the burn from the hot iron on top of that! (*unties Alla*) How will I explain it all? I have to rub her hands and feet! Or CPR! (*tries to do CPR*) I don’t know how! I have to call a doctor! Maybe they’ll get here on time and revive her! I should also call the police! How deep the marks from the rope are! (*quickly unties Alla*) I have to hide the ropes! I’ll do it later. (*runs to the phone and dials the number*)

*Alla carefully gets up, she staggers.*

ALEXANDRINA. Emergency Services? Yes, I’ll wait...

*Alla listens tensely.*

ALEXANDRINA. Emergency? Yes, I’m waiting, waiting... Emergency Services?! A girl is dying on me here! Heart trouble. I don’t know, don’t know... I don’t know anything about her at all. No, not in the street. In my home.

*Alla picks up a chair and silently steals toward Alexandrina.*

ALEXANDRINA. You see, I’ve just got back from Germany and found my apartment robbed. Yeah, I’ll call the police, but there’s a girl here, unconscious. She was apparently robbing the apartment and lost consciousness... Or her accomplices knocked her out! She’s bruised all over!

*Alla hits Alexandrina on the head with the chair. Alexandrina falls down.*

ALLA. (*on the phone, calmly*) The girl feels considerably better. Thanks for your concern. No need to worry. (*ties Alexandrina’s hands and feet with the ropes*) How did she tie me up? She did it really tightly. I need to do the same. Then she won’t get free for sure.

*Alexandrina comes to. Her hands are tied, but her feet are free.*

ALEXANDRINA. (*furiously kicking with her feet*) You, you thief! You housekeeper’s daughter! I’ll put you in jail for life! You’ll enjoy your time in jail! (*manages to give Alla a powerful kick*)

*Alla screams out and releases Alexandrina. Alexandrina manages to jump up, run to the wall and lean against it. She squirms, trying to free her hands. She uses her feet to repel any attempt on Alla’s part to come close to her.*

ALEXANDRINA. A mongrel with a pea brain! Street-walking shit! How dare you hit me? Just try to get close!

ALLA. (*Alla finds the revolver and points it at Alexandrina*) Down! I said, down! Count to three or I’ll shoot at your legs.

*Alexandrina quiets down and quickly lies down on the floor.*

*Alla puts the gun out of Alexandrina’s reach and comes closer to her.*

ALLA. Don’t even think about moving! And don’t interfere with me! (*ties Alexandrina’s feet and drags her into the bathroom*) You’ll lie here till tomorrow. Tomorrow my mother, the cleaner, will come and together you can call the police. By that time we’ll be far away from here. We have your money! We can do a lot of things with it! You’re right – money is very important! We’ll run away! We’ll skip the country altogether! And we’ll be happy because we love each other!

ALEXANDRINA. You won’t get far. You are really stupid, child! I already know a lot about your boyfriend. With my help, the police will find him and arrest him. You won’t run away! The birds will end up sitting in different cages.

*Alla calmly walks away, picks up the revolver, returns and points it at Alexandrina point blank.*

ALLA. (*very calmly and decisively*) Then I’ll have to kill you.

*End of Act 1.*

Act 2

*Alexandrina is tied up in the bathroom. Alla aims the revolver at her.*

ALLA. Then I’ll have to kill you.

ALEXANDRINA. (*after a pause, in an assured voice*) Yes! Kill me! Let at least something significant happen in my life! (*after a pause*) Well, shoot the damn revolver, you shit! I don’t want to live, do you hear? I’m fifty-six years old and I haven’t even begun to live yet. Childhood? Yes. A bit of adolescence, and that’s it. That’s it! The rest in one sweep can be thrown into an abyss. Plop! I haven’t lived yet! You won’t comprehend this horror. I’ve never loved anyone. I was never even really in love. Never loved anyone. What would I need a life like that for? Shoot, for God’s sake! Shoot quick before I change my mind! (*hits her head against the edge of the bath tub and sobs*) I’ve never loved anyone! I’ve never loved anyone! I have no memories of love! What a horror! What a chilling horror! Nobody ever will understand that! O God, give me back my youth! What did I waste it for? My life is wasted! Shoot then, shoot!

*Alla runs off to fetch a glass of water and tries to force Alexandrina to drink.*

ALEXANDRINA. (*shakes her head resisting the drink*) I was never married. Not once. Not even close to it! I don’t have any children and never will! I never even had a decent lover! I only know about sex from porno movies.

ALLA. Drink the water! You’re hysterical!

ALEXANDRINA. Shoot before I get scared!

ALLA. I don’t want to. Do you really think I can kill anyone? Not even you. But I love him. I’m afraid for him. I love him so much!

ALEXANDRINA. I never loved anyone! I have no memories!

ALLA. I love him, do you understand? I remember every moment I spent with him. I loved him even when he insulted me. I love....

ALEXANDRINA. I’ve never loved anyone!

ALLA. It’s entirely my fault. It happened because I love him so much.

ALEXANDRINA. Life is wasted! What for? Where? Where’s my youth? What did I write books for? I killed the ten best years of my life for two books!

ALLA. Books? But that’s great!

ALEXANDRINA. There are books and there are books. I killed ten years of my life for garbage. No glory, no money, no love! (*laughs*)

ALLA. (*sobs*) You’re hysterical. I ask you – please drink some water.

ALEXANDRINA. (*shouts*) Shut up! I wrote two books! (*whispers*) Who needs them?

ALLA. Drink some water. Calm down!

ALEXANDRINA. (*laughs*) I’m a writer! Monsieur I’ve published two books. (*sobs in despair*) I wish I were a whore! Better to be married to a drunk! A barren sycamore! Wrote two books! (*laughs*) Nobody’s read them! No, I’m lying. The typesetter read them. He’s paid to do it.

ALLA. (*through tears*) Drink some water! Please! (*she manages to “pour” some water into Alexandrina’s mouth*)

ALEXANDRINA. Tell me the truth! Just the truth, am I really so unattractive? No, don’t answer! Now I am, of course, an ugly, mean old woman.

ALLA. Forgive me.

ALEXANDRINA. You just imagine... How old are you now?

ALLA. Twenty-one.

ALEXANDRINA. So imagine me thirty-five years ago. I’m also twenty-one. Can you see me then?

ALLA. Forgive me, I didn’t want to offend you.

ALEXANDRINA. (*passionately*) Concentrate! There was none of this (*shakes her head*) on my head. There was no blonde! There was no perm! There was no gray hair that needs to be dyed! None! I had wavy chestnut-colored hair. Velvety. I was thin as a reed. I had peach-colored skin! And freckles. I got rid of them, now you can’t bring them back. I also had green eyes.

ALLA. You still have them

ALEXANDRINA. I had eyebrows. Not these ones, plucked, but wide, soft ones. Can you imagine all these things?

ALLA. I’ll try. (*in earnest closes her eyes and concentrates, then cries out happily*) I see it!

ALEXANDRINA. Well?

ALLA. You were gorgeous!

ALEXANDRINA. You’re right. I was a beauty.

ALLA. There can be no doubt.

ALEXANDRINA. Did you see me clearly?

ALLA. A beauty!

ALEXANDRINA. And I was afraid that no one could love me.

ALLA. Why?

ALEXANDRINA. I don’t know. If I felt at least a little attracted to a man, I immediately became aggressive toward him.

ALLA. But why?

ALEXANDRINA. I don’t know. Maybe I was afraid he wouldn’t pay any attention to me.

ALLA. That’s a mistake.

ALEXANDRINA. Some female mechanism wasn’t tuned on right in me. In my life I’ve only had three lovers.

ALLA. That’s not too bad. You’re just a decent woman. That’s the only way you should look at it. I’ve never cheated on my husband, and now that I’ve fallen in love, I’ll tell him right away.

ALEXANDRINA. And all three lovers were nothings. I slept with each one of them just because each time I was sure that this time this nothing would never dump me. That nobody would be tempted by that nothing! The first one dumped me very quickly. The second was seduced by our maid, a homespun country girl without a Moscow living permit. I’ve been living with Benjamin on Thursdays for ten years. He’s a nerd, impotent, and a bore. But not even he grew attached to me in those ten years. And no one, just nobody, wanted to marry me.

ALLA. I refuse to accept that.

ALEXANDRINA. I got pregnant just once when I was thirty-five. And I had an abortion. (*laughs*) I got scared for my reputation. Can you understand that?

ALLA. What’s reputation?

ALEXANDRINA. (*laughs*) You don’t even know the word! Re-pu-tation! There is reputation but there’s no child. I lost a child whom I could have breast-fed. I lost a child whom I could have led by the hand. I lose my child every day! I wake up thinking that I’ve lost my child. Because of this single thought, it takes me a long time to fall asleep. Yesterday, today, or tomorrow my son might have had a birthday. I lost a 20-year son! My life is nothing but grieving. And there will be no end to it. I close my eyes and he appears to me. I know his face by heart. It’s like a series of photographs... One year old... two... three... twenty... A whole family album. Do you at least know the word “career?”

ALLA. Artists, apparently, have one?

ALEXANDRINA. What about “dissertation,” “prestige” – do you know these words?

ALLA. I’m less familiar with these.

ALEXANDRINA. Everything has suddenly lost its value. My every step was calculated and sure. It led me to my goal. From the very beginning, from the time I applied to college, I made the right move. The class was selected by Derzhavin. My application essay was about him. I believed in it. Back then I wrote only about him. I published early. Derzhavin considered me his best student. I spent all my weekends at his house. I even had my own place at his dinner table, which no one else could take. I went to graduate school and defended a dissertation about Derzhavin. I wrote two books about Derzhavin. Suddenly everything became mixed-up. The right steps were taken, but everything just became mixed-up. Once at night the thought suddenly came to me that Derzhavin was no genius. And then I wrote an article with a devastating criticism of his latest novel. This was also the right move. It started a debate that lasted for three years. The debate destroyed Derzhavin. And I was carried by the wave of the debate all the way abroad. I gave lectures, published articles. I thrashed, re-evaluated, and railed against Derzhavin. Suddenly I realized that I couldn’t do anything else. I only knew how to do things connected with Derzhavin. I bored everyone everywhere with my Derzhavin. He recovered from a heart attack and wrote another book. As a result he got new admirers and even fans. And some despite it all once again consider him a genius!

ALLA. Let it be! What is it to you?

ALEXANDRINA. I have nobody to hang around with on weekends. I robbed him worse than you did me. After all, you aren’t going to see me on weekends?

ALLA. I will. I’ll ask you to forgive me. I’ll start to pay you back the money I stole. And I’ll come to see you. Don’t be concerned and don’t even doubt it. I’ll come to see you. Often.

ALEXANDRINA. Thank you.

ALLA. Because I like you.

ALEXANDRINA. Thank you.

ALLA. Please forgive me for calling you names.

ALEXANDRINA. I forgive you. And you also forgive me.

ALLA. Don’t say that. I understand you so well. My socks were once stolen on the subway.

ALEXANDRINA. Socks on the subway?

ALLA. I bought them as a present for my husband. For our wedding anniversary. They were foreign made, in beautiful wrapping. I wanted to send them right to where he was stationed in the service. Someone pinched them from my bag in the subway. O, you can’t even imagine how upset I was. I just hated that thief! I could just kill him! And you were robbed of everything! Everything! You have the temperament of an angel! Just an angel!

ALEXANDRINA. I have the temperament of an angel! (*laughs sincerely*) An angel? Me?

ALLA. You! You’re an angel!

ALEXANDRINA. Nobody ever said things like that to me.

ALLA. I’m saying it.

ALEXANDRINA. An angel... Untie me. Otherwise I’ll feel like a martyr. Enough is enough. It’s stupid to tie each other back and forth! Untie me! We’ve come to understand each other and now we’ll sit down to drink some tea. I don’t know about you, but I came back from my trip terribly hungry.

ALLA. Well, I don’t know... I’ll sit you more comfortably and serve tea here. My mother will free you tomorrow. I think it’ll be better that way.

ALEXANDRINA. What if I need to go the bathroom?

ALLA. You’ll have to hold it. Sorry.

ALEXANDRINA. It’s easy for you to say! Your kidneys are three times younger than mine.

ALLA. I can’t. Sorry.

ALEXANDRINA. That means I’ll be a cripple in the morning.

ALLA. Swear... that you won’t call the police... and prosecute Alex.

ALEXANDRINA. (*laughs*) I swear, I swear, I swear....

ALLA. What do you swear on?

ALEXANDRINA. What do I swear on?

ALLA. Yes, on what? It’s very important – on what!

ALEXANDRINA. What do I have left? Just the dear memory of my mother and father?

ALLA. Not good enough!

ALEXANDRINA. Okay, I swear on my kidneys. I value them very much. I swear on both of them.

ALLA. No.

ALEXANDRINA. Child, I really don’t have anything else.

ALLA. Swear on your immortal soul.

ALEXANDRINA. This is becoming more and more interesting with you. Well, I swear on my immortal soul that I won’t do harm to your boy. Is that all right?

ALLA. Yes.

ALEXANDRINA. Okay, we’ve reconciled with the soul. Let’s reconcile with the body and sit down to drink some tea.

ALLA. (*frees Alexandrina*) What do you think of my mother?

ALEXANDRINA. Maybe I’m a little bit cautious about her. Her moral principles are too lofty.

ALLA. But I’m her daughter. I also never take anything that belongs to other people. We’ll pay you back for everything.

ALEXANDRINA. At the moment, child, I’m concerned about something totally different.

ALLA. But it will bother you later. And for me it’s very important that you believe me. I can’t be happy if you’re suffering.

ALEXANDRINA. I’m not suffering anymore. In any case, not from that. (*rubs her hands*) O, how my hands are swollen. Terrible pain. By tomorrow I would have definitely become a cripple. You, child, do everything conscientiously.

ALLA. (*busy with Alexandrina’s legs*) You need to put them in cold water. Does it hurt a lot? Sorry! I didn’t mean to. It all happened as though it was someone else doing it and not me. Even now everything that happens with me seems strange. As if I’m looking at myself from outside of me, and nothing is real. I only love, love truly. Can you stand up? Try!

ALEXANDRINA. My hands and legs seem like they’re somebody else’s.

ALLA. It’ll pass. (*turns on the water*) Let’s put your hands under some cold water. Or your feet first? Know what, why don’t you take shower?

ALEXANDRINA. Maybe I wouldn’t say no to a shower. I’m just off the plane, and so many things happening right away.

ALLA. A shower, of course. You’ll see – you’ll feel better right away. Meanwhile I’ll make some tea.

ALEXANDRINA. You’ll find cups....

ALLA. I know where everything is here. Don’t worry!

ALEXANDRINA. (*after a pause*) Yeah, interesting...

*Alla leaves the bathroom. Alexandrina takes off her clothes, closes the shower curtain and turns on the water.*

*Alla turns on the electric teapot, tidies up a little bit. She picks up a vase, puts roses in it and buries her face in them.*

ALEXANDRINA. (*shouts*) I’m sorry, I was away. I have absolutely nothing to eat.

ALLA. (*not immediately remembering where she is*) Don’t worry! I have some food.

ALEXANDRINA. I thought you’d run away while I was soaking. And leave me.

ALLA. It didn’t even cross my mind.

ALEXANDRINA. Look in the dining room. There should be some biscuits in the cupboard.

ALLA. I saw them, but we didn’t touch them.

ALEXANDRINA. Too bad. They’re very tasty. Take a look, too, in the wet bar. I always have plenty of stuff there. We need to relieve our stress. (*turns off the shower, towels herself off, and gets dressed*)

ALLA. You sure have a lot of alcohol.

ALEXANDRINA. These are the main necessities for me. Will you be able to sort it out?

ALLA. I’m not sure. What will you have to drink?

ALEXANDRINA. Vodka.

ALLA. What do you suggest for me?

ALEXANDRINA. What you usually drink.

ALLA. Usually I don’t drink at all.

ALEXANDRINA. Then vodka too.

ALLA. Thanks, but I don’t think I like vodka.

ALEXANDRINA. Just vodka! (*comes out of the bathroom*) God, the place looks so empty! Vodka, quick!

ALLA. (*after a pause*) You really don’t hold any ill will against me?

ALEXANDRINA. Everything’s been stolen! The problem’s not you, child. It’s something like providence! All these things really, to tell you the truth, never were mine. To put it more precisely, I didn’t feel like they were mine. They didn’t belong to my ancestors, they weren’t given to me as a gift or inherited by me. Everything was either taken away from other people by force or stolen. When I was a child, I was afraid of these dark canvases that were like windows into a different dimension. I started to sell them gradually. I didn’t feel sorry parting with them. Money suited me much better. Money was already something of my own. It could be that the biofields of these paintings destroyed my youth. I was always depressed sitting among these things. Now here it’s empty and new. This is my universe! My emptiness! My beginning! I’ll start living in this emptiness! (*pours some vodka into the shot glasses*) Let’s drink to emptiness!

ALLA. (*barely touches the drink and puts her shot glass down*) You should get something to chase it down!

ALEXANDRINA. Excellent vodka! It was a mistake on the part of your boy not to take it. Let’s drink to our boys! To yours and to mine! To the boys who are not here and who won’t be! (*drinks*) Why not? I’ll start living! If not now, then when? I’ll kick out Benjamin and get myself a dog. I’ll go into the street and bring home the first stray dog I find. Even if it’s lame, lice ridden, and ugly. Any will be better than Benjamin. I’ll love it. It will become my dog. It will love me! I’ll take it for a walk in the park. Do you like dogs?

ALLA. No.

ALEXANDRINA. You don’t like dogs? Let’s drink to that! That’s it with the dogs. I won’t get one for myself. Well, there’s no replacement for Benjamin.

ALLA. Where I lived the only place between the buildings where children could play was a sandbox. From-time-to time they used to fill it with a light, fine sand. I was so happy when they would come to fill it with sand. I remember how I would settle down in it, set up molds, a bucket and a shovel around me, and I’d sit there sighing from happiness. At that moment you’d plop into something foul for sure. Someone had taken his dog for a walk. And that’s it. I would go home feeling as if there was no place for me in this world. Almost certainly not wanting to live or play. Since that time I’ve always had the feeling that when something is beautiful, you’d plop into something foul for sure.

ALEXANDRINA. Okay, so you don’t like dogs since childhood, but what do you do in general?

ALLA. In general, I’m a hairdresser. I work at a salon, give haircuts.

ALEXANDRINA. Do you at least like your work? Do you like to make women beautiful?

ALLA. No, I don’t. The pay’s too low.

ALEXANDRINA. Let’s drink to that as well! (*drinks*)

ALLA. You know I’m looking and looking at you....

ALEXANDRINA. On top of everything she’s looking at me!

ALLA. Do you know what I’ve come to know about you?

ALEXANDRINA. On top of everything she’s come to know me!

ALLA. Your hairdo makes you look old. Let me give you a haircut? Do you have scissors?

ALEXANDRINA. I’m afraid that would be too much for one day.

ALLA. Take a risk. It won’t be any worse.

ALEXANDRINA. (*holding the shot glass in her hand, scrutinizes her face in the mirror for a long time*) Yeah, Sophia Loren looks much better. Let’s! I’ve lost a lot more. Hold the scissors. Will those do?

ALLA. Do you have any others?

ALEXANDRINA. No.

ALLA. Then these will do. I have my own comb.

*Alla puts a chair in front of the mirror.*

*Alexandrina makes herself comfortable without forgetting to take the shot glass filled with vodka.*

*Alla covers Alexandrina’s shoulders with a towel, positions herself behind her back, thinking and sizing up what needs to be done.*

ALLA. You have beautiful eyes. We need to reveal them. I’ll take a bit off the sides, make the front shorter and thin it out a bit. Like that. You’ll see how they begin to sparkle.

ALEXANDRINA. I’ve been wearing this hairdo for twenty years.

ALLA. So it’s time to change it. You have a nice neck. You know most women have ugly necks.

ALEXANDRINA. The majority of women are ugly in general.

ALLA. I’ll do ridges on the top and on the back. It really increases the body of the hair. No short cut. I know a secret how to make hair always look fluffy. (*while cutting*) Do you like it?

ALEXANDRINA. (*looking at herself in the mirror*) Child, you should’ve taken part in the Paris competition! Why didn’t they accept you there?

ALLA. You need connections for that.

ALEXANDRINA. Too bad. Your homeland could have been proud of you. No, I’ll no longer say I look worse than Sophia Loren. Stressed out twice in one day: the robbery and the haircut. I’m going to change my clothes. (*leaves the room*)

*Alla cleans up.*

ALEXANDRINA. (*sings in the other room*) “A young girl in a blouse white as snow, where are you, my daisy?”[[2]](#endnote-2)

ALLA. (*shouts*) Do you really like it?

ALEXANDRINA. At fifty-six she suddenly understood that she’s kind and beautiful! And she’s thrown herself at food! (*runs in and with a jovial roar attacks the food*) Tremendous! You are a marvelous stylist! Did you dream of becoming a stylist?

ALLA. What are you saying? Of course not. Circumstances forced me into it.

ALEXANDRINA. You didn’t dream of becoming a stylist?

ALLA. Now I don’t care what kind of work I do. I’ll try to do my best anywhere I work. If only they’d pay more and have fewer scumbags for co-workers.

ALEXANDRINA. Did you ever dream of anything?

ALLA. Of love. I’ve dreamt of love since I can remember. I dreamt that my Mom would love me. Then I dreamt that my teacher would love me. And then only of him! I imagined that I was a princess or a maid, or a ballerina. And always lonely! Then he appears, always the one and only. I saw him in my dreams. I seemed to see him in the windows of passing cars. When I met him at a dance club, I recognized him immediately – there he was!

ALEXANDRINA. Did you know him for long?

ALLA. I’m saying I dreamt of him since childhood.

ALEXANDRINA. I’ll put my question differently: how long did he know you?

ALLA. Three days!

ALEXANDRINA. (*lights up a cigarette*) All in all, that’s normal. I’ve known Benjamin for ten years, but after the first three days I didn’t discover anything new about him. Let’s drink to the two of you! To you two, child. You’ll have to stop cheating and drink for real.

*They drink.*

ALEXANDRINA. Fine, so you don’t dream of anything else?

ALLA. Why? I always dream.

ALEXANDRINA. Of what now?

ALLA. Of him! I dream about going with him to the edge of the world.

ALEXANDRINA. Do you mean you want to leave your homeland?

ALLA. Yes.

ALEXANDRINA. You don’t like your homeland?

ALLA. No, I don’t. But it doesn’t like me either. It despises me and doesn’t even consider me to be a person.

ALEXANDRINA. You turned out to be an interesting person to talk to.

ALLA. When did I have time to start loving it? Since childhood when I wandered through the impassible mud around our neighborhood near the Beltway, not needed by anyone, breathing in the rotten air of the garbage dump? Or when I got into the dog poop in the sandbox? Or at a Young Pioneer summer camp? Never having any money, and people never had time for me! I don’t have a homeland yet, and I haven’t met a single person in my life who sincerely loves his homeland. What about you? Do you love it?

ALEXANDRINA. Me? I do love it! I’m a real patriot.

ALLA. What exactly do you love?

ALEXANDRINA. Birch trees. I love birch trees no matter how trivial that sounds.

ALLA. What?

ALEXANDRINA. I put birch trees in all my articles. (*laughs*) Can you tell a birch tree from an aspen?

ALLA. Of course. It’s simple. I’ll teach you.

ALEXANDRINA. (*laughs*) To hell with our homeland! (*drinks*) It’s not a homeland. It’s a cage. Nowadays at least people can fly away from it. But – some have gotten used to it and stay. Others fly in all kinds of different directions, but not to freedom, but in search of another cage, a better one, a more comfortable one. And people like me would fly away, fly around for a while, and scamper back again to their cage. (*laughs*) Nobody needs me with my Derzhavin in another cage. Let’s have a drink. You are really lagging behind me. I don’t like that.

ALLA. Maybe that’s enough liquor on an empty stomach?

ALEXANDRINA. You can’t imagine how much I can drink. I drink alone. I see that you’re not as simple as you want to seem: “I don’t like my homeland!” (*laughs*)

ALLA. I want to have a homeland. I was born to love a homeland. I’ll find it and will fall in love with it. Let there be palm trees instead of the birch trees, but I’ll feel like a person there. I’ll be able not only to work, but also earn some money there. I’ll be able to love everyone there, and everyone will love me. I’ll give birth to many children and buy them all new things instead of collecting second-hand things from my girlfriends. I’ll find my true homeland.

ALEXANDRINA. (*drinks*) I drink to you and your homeland finding each other! I, on the other hand, will continue to fly about. I’ll flap my wings a little and come back to my roost. To each her own.

ALLA. You have a roof above your head. And you’ve seen the world. You have a lot of beautiful dresses. You’ll always be able to earn your piece of bread. You have everything you need to feel free.

ALEXANDRINA. I see that you’re a philosopher, child. To a great extent you’re right. Freedom is inside us. You either have it, or don’t. I’ll write a book about myself. A truthful book. Thank God, I know how to put words into phrases and link them with each other. This book will be real. A lot of people will recognize the similarity between their fates and mine. Do you know, child, you’ve given me hope. In three... five years, who knows what will happen, you and your husband will come to visit me with your children. We’ll remember this long day then and will have dinner with candles. Ah, how we’ll laugh. I’ve reached the point of catharsis! Let’s drink to my catharsis!

ALLA. Catharsis? Isn’t that dangerous?

ALEXANDRINA. (*laughs*) What? What are you saying?

ALLA. Catharsis – it’s not a dangerous illness, is it?

ALEXANDRINA. Catharsis is a cleansing of everything vile, egotistical. It’s a soaring of the spiritual above the material. (*drinks*) I’m soaring! I love you, my child, from my height! But... wait... (*rises with difficulty*) Not everything is perfect even during catharsis. I feel sick....

ALLA. Don’t drink anymore.

ALEXANDRINA. It’s not because of the vodka. Nothing bad happens to me because of the vodka. (*goes to the bathroom and throws up*) Sorry! Are you throwing up?

ALLA. No, I drank only half a glass. Do you need any help?

ALEXANDRINA. No. You did everything you could for me. She’s not throwing up. She is perfectly all right. I am the only one who is throwing up. She is the one who loves and dreams, constantly dreams and loves! I have catharsis!.. It seems like it’s leaving me now. Where is your boy now? And mainly, I’m really, really curious about knowing where my things are now. No matter how absurd that may sound, but I’m beginning to miss my things. The cage has to be comfortable. You shouldn’t confuse a cage with a cesspool. Where’s your boyfriend? Was there any boy at all?

ALLA. (*becomes dispirited*) We’ll pay you back everything. Thank you.

ALEXANDRINA. When? Start paying! I need money as early as tomorrow morning! To go on living. Or give me back my things! Or the money! This is the only way it’s done among decent people.

ALLA. I’ll come to see you tomorrow. You meanwhile take a rest, sleep, and I’ll come tomorrow.

ALEXANDRINA. I still don’t understand where your boyfriend is with my things?

ALLA. I worry about him myself. I want to go to look for him. I miss him.

ALEXANDRINA. And I miss my things! I have the feeling that I’ve moved to a different place and have been replaced with someone else. It’s not very pleasant! Are you leaving?

ALLA. I’ll come back tomorrow.

ALEXANDRINA. Why do you need to go at all? Just to waste time going there and back. Sit here and don’t make sudden moves! (*pushes her onto a chair*)

ALLA. I really need to go. I’ll come tomorrow.

ALEXANDRINA. It looks like you’re leaving me.

ALLA. I’ll come tomorrow – I promise.

ALEXANDRINA. You’re leaving me in pitch darkness. Everything is empty!

ALLA. I’ll never leave you.

ALEXANDRINA. Then where are you going? Why are you leaving? Why should you go?

ALLA. I’m going to look for Alex. I’m worried... I... can’t... breathe.

ALEXANDRINA. (*prolonged laugh*) It seems she’s serious about all this. Do you believe you’ll find him?

ALLA. I’ll find him!

ALEXANDRINA. Long live Brazilian soap operas! (*laughs*) He doesn’t need you! He robbed you more than he did me! He robbed your soul... You know, right now he’s somewhere in the flesh. Right now he’s doing something. Talking to someone. Thinking about something. Remembering. (*laughs*) But you’ll never see him again!

ALLA. You’ve had too much to drink. You’d better lie down.

ALEXANDRINA. He’s a vulgar pimp! He needs to be found! He won’t be able to give you back your soul, let him at least give me back my things. They are all I have! My prestige! My reputation! My career! They’re my way of living! They’re me! It’s too late for me to change. You’re a brave girl. You need a lot of courage to dream and to allow yourself to live by dreams. People like you make life more beautiful century after century. Well, you dared! And lost! Find the courage to admit it! There won’t be another homeland for you, there won’t be another love. Use what you have. Let’s go and have a drink to what we have! Nothing more than that, nothing more.

ALLA. I’ll come back tomorrow. I’m leaving now. I’ll come back tomorrow and will always come back to you. I have to see him now. I can’t breathe without him! I can’t be without him for so long! Without him I’m like a fish pulled out onto the shore – I can live, but not for long. I’m sorry, but I’m leaving. I’ll come back to you tomorrow. We’ll have a breath of fresh air and come back. I can’t think straight. I constantly think about him. I love him every single minute!

ALEXANDRINA. And where should I go to have a breath of fresh air? There will be nothing for me! Nothing! I won’t write a book! I won’t get a dog! I won’t kick Benjamin out! You won’t see your boyfriend anymore.

ALLA. I won’t see him only if I die.

ALEXANDRINA. I never loved anyone. I have to tell you about it!

ALLA. I’m in love. I’m leaving. Thank you. Till tomorrow. (*picks up the roses and goes to the door*)

ALEXANDRINA. Stop!

*Alla stops and looks at her.*

ALEXANDRINA. Stop! (*looks for and finds the revolver*)

ALLA. (*takes a step toward her*) Thank you. I totally forgot about the revolver.

ALEXANDRINA. Stop! (*points the gun at her*) There’s no place for you to go. He stole all your dreams together with my things. Why should I be touched by your feelings? Is this the only thing you left me in my life? For you – love, sex, memories, and for me – a new haircut? You won’t go anywhere from here until we destroy your boy.

ALLA. But you’ve sworn on your soul!

ALEXANDRINA. Child, of the two of us, one is crazy, and it’s not me.

ALLA. I’m leaving, and I’ll run away with him, and I’ll be happy! I love him! And he loves me! No one, no one will stop me! (*opens the door wide*)

*Alexandrina fires. Alla slowly turns around and looks at her. Alexandrina backs away from Alla and fires one more time. Alla drops the roses and slowly slides down the doorway. Alexandrina fires for the third time. Alla falls and lies still forever.*

*Alexandrina tosses the gun. It strikes something. It’s a tape recorder that turns on from the blow.*

ALLA’S VOICE. But he doesn’t know himself that he’s my Guardian Angel. He thinks he can hurt me. He doesn’t understand that he’s not only Alex, but also my Guardian Angel forever. I didn’t have time to tell him this. I was afraid he’d laugh at me. I chickened out. He never thinks about the fact that he has a soul. It would be awful if he understood this too late – when the soul is beyond salvation.

*Alexandrina stands up.*

*Alla lies among the roses scattered on the floor.*

THE END

Notes

1. . Ptushkina is playing on the sound similarity between the name Alla and the Russian word *alyi*, which means scarlet. In Russian he also says *alen’kyi*, which is an allusion to “Alen’kyi tsvetochochek” (The Scarlet Flower), which is a folktale transcribed by Sergei Aksakov and a retelling of the Greek myth of Eros and Psyche. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. . A quote from a popular Soviet song “If Only My Accordion Knew How,” music by A. Lepin, lyrics by A. Fat’yanov from the film “The Soldier Ivan Brovkin” (dir. by Ivan Lukinsky, 1955). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)