

<http://ptushkina.com>

My Goldfish

A Comedy in Two Acts

by Nadezhda Ptushkina

Translated by Slava I. Yastremski and Michael M. Naydan

Translators' Notes

In our translations we try to find English equivalents for the colloquial Russian of Nadezhda Ptushkina's texts. For translations of theatrical pieces, the lines must sound natural for the actors performing them as well as for the audience. To that end, we asked the amateur and professional actors mentioned in the acknowledgements to do a staged reading of most of the plays in this volume and have incorporated much of what we heard in our translations.

Ptushkina's plays are closely connected with the *realia* of Russian culture during its transition from the Soviet regime to the new, quasi-capitalist environment of today's Russia. This period has seen a tremendous shift in cultural and spiritual values. Under the totalitarian Soviet regime when religion was banned, some Russian and foreign authors were prohibited from being published. Culture was the only means for preserving spiritual values. With most of the population being equally impoverished in the USSR, no one cared much about money. There was not much you could buy, even if you happened to have it. *Perestroika* and the first few years of the new Russia brought a complete reversal in people's attitude toward culture and money. This is prominently present in almost all of Ptushkina's plays. For example, in *I Pay Up Front*, the character Polina complains about the change that had taken place in Russian culture where spiritual and cultural values such as art, literature, reading books, despising money, etc. were replaced by the new corrupt capitalism such as businesswoman Olympiada's interest in nothing but

money and the attitude that it can buy anything – from a painting by Picasso (not because she admires its aesthetic values, but because of its monetary value) to buying a married husband for herself. We find a similar clash of the protagonist Alla's idealistic views on love and life and the mercantile values of Alexandrina in *Somebody Else's Candlelight*. In *Momma's Dying Again*, the lead character Sophia from the older generation has a difficult time understanding how a bookkeeper can acquire money to buy a car along with a summer house in Spain.

In *Momma's Dying Again* we encounter a problem in the cultural translation of things connected with the New Year's celebration. During Soviet times when religion was all but banned in the public sphere, the biggest and the most popular holiday was the secular New Year, which was celebrated exactly like Christmas (which according to the Russian Orthodox Julian calendar is on January 7) – with a decorated fir tree, Santa Claus (called Father Frost in Russian), the giving of presents, a big holiday dinner, etc. Even when religion made a return to favor after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the New Year's holiday has remained the people's favorite. Russian people now celebrate Orthodox Christmas on January 7 according to the Gregorian calendar, but the tree, the presents, the visit from Father Frost, all continue to occur on New Year's Eve. In our translation we have opted to use terms more familiar to a Western readership and call the Russian New Year's fir tree a Christmas tree and Father Frost St. Nick.

One other major issue in translation is that Russians have a penchant for using diminutive forms. Where possible we have retained them in the translation. For example Polina is also known as Polya, Polenka, Polyushka. They are all the same person, of course. Just as Olympiada is also Lipa, Lipusha, Lipochnka, and Lipuchka. In other instances we have opted for using an Anglicized version. For example, instead of Allka as the diminutive of Alla, we use Allie, and Tannie as the diminutive for Tatiana or Tanya.

Finally, in translating *Rachel's Flute*, written in the lofty biblical style of the Old Testament, the book of Genesis and the Song of Songs in particular, we have opted to translate the Russian original directly without any precise quotations from the Bible.

Slava Yastremski and Michael M. Naydan

Introduction: My Plays Are My Erotic Dreams

Since the mid-1990s Nadezhda Ptushkina has been the most popular and widely staged playwright in the Russian theater. When I first met her in 1996, she had eight plays produced in Moscow alone. To this day she has written more than seventy plays, forty of which were produced in many theaters in Russia and abroad, including the Baltic states, China, Japan, Germany, and Scotland. Ptushkina also has written screenplays for nine films, three of which she directed herself. As she said in a recent interview for the *Novye novosti* (The New News), she moved into the media of film in search of what Chekhov once called “new forms,” which the playwright hopes to find at the juncture of the most ancient and the most characteristic dramatic art form for the 20th century and beyond. In recent years Ptushkina also has turned to directing her own plays at several theaters.

Ptushkina has had an extraordinarily diverse and colorful biography before her success as a playwright. Earlier in her life, she experienced years of financial hardship and was forced to work to provide for her family. During Gorbachev’s *perestroika*, when the entire cultural infrastructure of the USSR collapsed, Ptushkina became a businesswoman. she had to navigate through and stand her ground against the mafia, corrupt officials, and competitors (mostly men).

Her first play was staged in Tashkent in 1982 at the Tashkent Theater for Youth, and in 1989-1990 she was invited to the Central Asian city of Dushanbe to write several film scripts. Despite the fact that she wrote a number of scripts, as a result of the hardships experienced by Russian theater at that time, it was difficult for her to stage her plays. She had to postpone her theater career while she continued to support herself through other means. However, Ptushkina continued to write plays that fed on her experience with people from all walks of life.

Ptushkina’s fame as a playwright began in 1994 when St. Petersburg’s “Experiment” state theater produced her play *A Monument to Victims*. The success led to the same theater releasing a production of another of Ptushkina’s plays – *A Mad Woman* the same year. Eventually, Vitaly V. Lanskoj’s production of her play *Somebody Else’s Candlelight* at the “small stage” of the Stanislavsky Theater in Moscow in 1995 after which she became the most staged playwright in the capital almost overnight. Later that same year true recognition as a playwright

came to her after Boris Milgram's production of *Rachel's Flute* (The *Little Lamb*, as it was literally called in Russian) at the independent Art-Club XXI theater company. Although initially the play caused a scandal and was attacked by conservative critics, the production enjoyed great artistic success and has remained extremely popular to this day. Her later play *Momma's Dying Again* (literally "While She Was Dying" in the original Russian) now has a large fan club.

It should be pointed out that Ptushkina's plays are not limited just to erotic themes. She wants to know how people's psychology changes in today's turbulent world. she asks questions such as: What is love? Why do the spiritual and the base, the constructive and the destructive, coexist in every person? What is the relationship between the ideal and reality, truth and deception? Ptushkina's characters are real people who have a wide appeal not only for the Russian theater, but for a western audience as well.

Rachel's Flute is based on the Biblical story of Jacob and Rachel, and Rachel's older sister Leah, who tricks Jacob into marrying her instead of Rachel. The scandalous success of the Moscow staging was the result of the unbridled eroticism of the play. The dramatic and poetic, biblically-based play can be seen somewhat as a literary precursor to *Fifty Shades of Grey* in its unabashed depiction of sexuality.

Somebody Else's Candlelight is a fast-moving play for just two female characters. The play speaks to the need for human contact and understanding, which women may find briefly in each other, but which is very often destroyed by the men in their lives.

Ptushkina's plays are unmistakably written for the theater. The playwright observes that she strives to create parts for actors, which will allow them to respect themselves. Ptushkina's characters are not supermodels from *Cosmopolitan* or a body-builder's magazine, which, in the playwright's opinion, do nothing but traumatize people and serve as a means for developing inferiority complexes among people. Her play *Momma's Dying Again* provides an excellent example of this particular theme. Ptushkina describes the play as a vaudeville; however, it might be more appropriately called a New Year's holiday fantasy.

I Pay Up Front is a typical Ptushkina comedy, which mixes comical, almost farcical scenes with tragic implications of the comic actions in the Russian tradition of “laughter through tears.” In any case, money is temptation and represents the battleground between God and the devil. Ptushkina says that for her God and the devil are Siamese twins: one cannot exist without the other.

This theme is continued in Ptushkina’s most recent play, included in this collection – *My Goldfish* (2012). It tells the story of SHE, who for thirty years has been in love with HER neighbor, a musician and composer, who lives one floor above HER. In this play Ptushkina continues to explore the theme of a great, ideal love set against the background of the Christian context of the fish as the symbol of Christ as well as of certain cultural traditions of Russian literature, such as Alexander Pushkin’s “Tale of the Goldfish”.

The universal themes of love, the need for human closeness, and multifaceted complex female characters make Nadezhda Ptushkina’s plays desirable material for any professional theater, and the translators hope that the availability of these translations will make their adaptation to the Anglophone stage easier.

Slava Yastremski

Characters:

SHE – it is impossible to imagine how she looked like when she was young but now at sixty-four nobody cares the way she looked then.

HE – a well-built, arrogant, and spoiled man who, despite being sixty-six years old, can still be very attractive to women.

ACT I

A vintage house, one of a few similar ones that have been preserved in this city.

A well-tended, romantic-looking entrance hall with stucco moldings on the ceiling and mahogany banisters.

A stair landing between the second and third floors (the uppermost floor in the building).

On the second floor is the door to HER apartment, on the third – to HIS. The door to HER apartment is wide open. A window is between the floors, with a large aquarium on the windowsill. The aquarium is nothing extraordinary and decorated in an ordinary way, but it creates a cozy atmosphere in the entrance hall. It's evening.

SHE, wearing a nice, but slightly worn out dress stands by the aquarium.

SHE. What is a puddle doing on the windowsill? Where did it come from? Where do we have a leak here? We'll fix it right away. (*applies some putty to the crack*)

HER cell phone rings.

SHE. Hello! I'm listening. You're giving birth? Already? Isn't it a bit too early? Yes? She's already giving birth to the twentieth baby? I can't remember right away, after all I have too many of you. Are you princesses of Burundi or of Dermogenys?¹ Ah! From Podolsk? That means halfbeak fighting fish. Well, I'll be at your place tomorrow at the usual time. Well, okay then, I'll stop by today. What are you worrying about? A fish doesn't die in childbirth.

Suddenly through the window SHE notices something or someone in the street. SHE quickly puts away the cell phone and tenses up all over. SHE watches intently

¹ Dermogenys is a freshwater or brackish fish species from Asia and India.

but stands in a way SHE can't be seen from the street. SHE takes a step away from the window and looks at the door to the entrance hall. SHE is so stunned that she forgets about her fish. At the same time SHE instantly looks younger by ten years. HER cell phone rings once again. SHE nervously takes it out and, without seeing who is calling, pushes the "decline and freezes in HER tracks. All HER movements look hurried and pitiful.

The door downstairs slams.

SHE overcomes her agitation and begins to slowly ascend the stairs once again.

HE, wearing an elegant but not a new coat, clattering along the steps with HIS wheeled suitcase, comes up the stairs. While doing this, HE completely ignores HER as if the stairway were totally empty. And HE does it rather naturally.

SHE. (to HIS back, almost calmly but in a suddenly slightly hoarse voice) Welcome back, Pavel Alexandrovich.

HE reacts as if stones suddenly had spoken to HIM.

SHE. (coughs, but still in a hoarse voice). Welcome back!

HE calmly goes up to HIS apartment, opens the door and disappears behind it.

SHE remains standing there covering HER face with HER hands, and again seemingly grows older to HER actual age.

SHE. That's it. Enough.

Then SHE picks up HER shopping bags, walks to the door of HER apartment, opens it with her key, and enters. HER appearance said – now I'll reach the bed, throw myself on it, and start sobbing. SHE enters the apartment and slams the door behind HER. Immediately after the door closes, we can hear sobbing coming from HER apartment. But it is deafened by the piano music splashing out of HIS apartment. The execution is energetic, as if HE wanted to declare to the world – here, I came back, I am the victor, everything is perfect and will always be perfect with me!

FADE OUT

Next morning.

SHE is nicely and coquettishly dressed with the attitude – I am an independent, beautiful, and self-assured woman. Apparently "big work on improving herself" had been done. SHE feeds the fish, counting them at the same time.

SHE. Five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven... a dozen... My dear catfish... All here.

On the landings there are two small pails of water and a bag of tools. SHE takes out a small rake from it and works on the lower level of plants in the aquarium.

HE comes out of HIS apartment wearing a stylish warm-up suit that looks really good on HIM and descends the staircase, ignoring HER as usual.

SHE demonstratively pays no attention to HIM, picks up a scraper and begins cleaning the walls of the aquarium. HER movements are artistic.

Only at the bottom of the stairway HE realizes that something is wrong. HE stops and looks back at HER, but SHE is still busy with HER work and seemingly does not notice HIM. HE whistles as if trying to remember something. SHE ignores HIM.

HE slowly descends the stairs, showing with all HIS air that if one greets HIM, HE will answer. But SHE doesn't greet HIM.

SHE takes stones, driftwood, and a skeleton out of the aquarium and puts them into a pail filled with water.

HE. (passing by HER, not being able to stand it any longer, casually says) Howdy. SHE looks around as though SHE doesn't understand who could have greeted HER and whether SHE misheard it all together. SHE seemingly doesn't notice HIM.

HE shrugs but still stops and turns toward HER.

HE. (with a peace offer and conviction that HIS offer would be accepted) How do you do?

There is no reaction. SHE begins to wash the stones with a sponge.

After thinking, HE returns to HER.

HE. (practically at point-blank range as a "test shot.") How do you do?

There is no response.

HE. Eh... Perhaps you're not feeling well? (touches HER hand)

SHE. (suddenly turning to HIM, holding a large stone and a sponge in HER hands, triumphantly smiles) At this moment I feel absolutely perfect.

HE. (is confused) It's about me saying "hello" to you.

SHE. (interrupts) Three times.

HE. Well, not quite three....

SHE. Exactly three times!

HE. I didn't count. But why didn't you answer?

SHE. Why? (with the intonation of "do-you-have-to-ask-why?") Hm-m.

HE. Eh..., yes!

SHE. (*victoriously*) I didn't answer! (*continues to rub the stone with the sponge*)

HE. Eh-eh-eh... I noticed.

SHE. (*triumphantly*) I hope so!

HE. Eh-eh-eh... but anyway?

SHE. (*not wanting to say it but unable to hold back*) I have been saying "hello" to you for thirty years, and for thirty years you never answered me.

HE. Eh-eh-eh... The more so I don't understand why you did not say "hello" to me today. Eh-eh-eh... didn't say "hello."

SHE. I've been saying "hello" for thirty years.

HE. Eh-eh-eh... and why did you stop today?

SHE. Because you didn't answer me for thirty years! (*gets steamed up*) For thirty years!!!

HE. Eh-eh-eh... Op-ah. Eh-eh-eh... and all of a sudden you've decided to become proud?

SHE. (*pulls herself together*) Precisely.

HE. Eh-eh-eh... Pride is the last refuge of unneeded women.

SHE. I don't know anything about unneeded women.

HE. Eh-eh-eh... those are women who are not answered, yet they keep saying "hello"... By the way, did you get married in the meantime?

SHE. Not yet.

HE. Eh-eh-eh... Not yet? Hm-m....

SHE. (*with the intonation—you are saying "hm-m"?*) Hm-m? Do you think that all mature age men have already died out?

HE. True, we don't have too many men living long. Eh-eh-eh... (*kindly and with concern*) But you can set off for Brasilia. There are plenty of them there.

There some hundred and five year old Don Pedro is ready to marry for the tenth time. He'd need someone to look after his fifty or so children.

SHE. To Brasilia? Why? The neighbor two floors higher isn't married.

SHE walks up to the window and looks up at the window "two stories higher."

HE. Eh-eh-eh, Two floors— that's closer than Brasilia, but he's about twenty years younger than you are.

SHE. I have no hang-ups about that.

HE. Hm-m....

SHE. By the way, the neighbor below is only ten years younger than I am.

HE. A-ah, I'll tell you a secret, at your age the difference is insurmountable.

SHE. You're just not... a gentleman!

HE. To the contrary. It's better if I say that to you than him.

SHE. I never give grounds to say something like that to me.

HE. Eh-eh-eh... Let it be another bit of news for you. The demand for the unapproachable and not-so-young women has fallen considerably in our times. Haven't you noticed?

SHE. I've noticed even more. The demand for acceptable but not-very-young men has grown significantly. But just for rich ones, it goes without saying.

HE. (*with sincere interest*) Do you want to say that the demand for poor men has risen at any time? (*moves really close to HER and asks softly and kind-heartedly*) Aren't you over sixty now?

SHE. You... you are not a gentleman! And are you drunk?

HE. Said forcefully! A morning hundred grams of a good cognac... I'll be sober in an hour, but you'll still be over sixty.

SHE. What about you? Are you going to sober up before you turn thirty?

She continues to wash a decorative object taken from the aquarium. HE doesn't leave and keeps watching what SHE is doing.

SHE. (*ironically*) I hope I'm not bothering you.

HE. Why don't you keep the aquarium in your apartment?

SHE. I have plenty of aquariums at home.

HE. And you didn't have room for this one?

SHE. I just want our entrance hallway to be beautiful.

HE. It seems you have problems with this aquarium all the time. It's either someone smoking and throwing ashes into it, or a cat falling into it.

SHE. That happened only once and a long time ago. It's had no problems for a year.

HE. It's really beautiful. What do you call this bushy plant?

SHE. Amazonian.

HE. Amazonian... It's beautiful. Eh-eh-eh... You and I argued some time ago, didn't we?

SHE. Argued?

HE. Eh-eh-eh... Something like that. What's the name of these ribbon-like things?

SHE. Elodea.

HE. It's beautiful. Yes, it seems that an argument took place. Eh-eh-eh... I don't remember the reason.

SHE. I don't remember either.

HE. Well, I hope that woman's memory... What about these plants on the top?

SHE. Hornwort.

HE. What are you saying? It's very beautiful. Eh-eh-eh... Is it so important what the reason was for our argument over thirty years ago? (*tries to produce a natural laugh, but SHE doesn't encourage it and HE awkwardly stops*) Yes, eh-eh-eh... Yes.

HE waits for any kind of reaction but SHE is impassively silent.

HE. And these fish? What are they called?

SHE. Guppies.

HE. Did you memorize the entire aquarium? What's the name of these fish?

SHE. Gourami.

HE. Gourami. I'll try to remember. God only knows what neighbors can argue over.

SHE is silent.

HE. And what are you doing now?

SHE. I'm adding fertilizers.

HE. Fertilizers to the aquarium? Unbelievable! You're a true professional! Maybe I flooded your apartment at some point?

SHE. You flooded my apartment many times, but that wasn't the reason for our argument. We already had had our blow up.

HE. Well... maybe I played the music too loud one night?

SHE. One night? I spent many nights listening your music, but that wasn't the reason for our argument either.

HE. Eh-eh-eh... maybe your cat pooped on my doormat sometime?

SHE. Cat?

HE. Your cat!

SHE. On your doormat?

HE. On my doormat.

SHE. Of course not.

HE. Definitely? Why are you so sure?

SHE. Because you never had a doormat, and I never had a cat.

HE. (*scrutinizes the aquarium*) Eh-eh-eh... Debris from a shipwreck. Was there a shipwreck in the aquarium a while back? With victims. (*touches the skeleton that SHE is washing*) Here's a skeleton. Eh-eh-eh... You're a creative person.

SHE. Well, generally speaking... Everything is quite commonplace, as I just understood. I'm going to replace all of these, but don't know with what. The choice is rather small, and there aren't any original ideas. Or unoriginal ones either.

HE. Hm-m... Maybe I made a pass at you while I was, well, drunk?

SHE. You made a pass at me when you were sober, too.

HE. I don't remember.

SHE. But it didn't offend me.

HE. (*with cautious hesitation*) Are you sure?

SHE. Sorry.

HE. Generally speaking, I used to have a lot of success with women.

SHE. Oh-o!

HE. I was good-looking and charismatic.

SHE. We all idealize our youth.

HE. I have no hang-up with regard to my age.

SHE. We tend to idealize our old age, too.

HE. Old age? Are you talking about me?

SHE. What are you saying? I'm too well brought up to call... no, to label someone an old man. It's just... generally speaking... I'm talking in general...

HE. I don't want to brag, but tonight, while travelling in the first class sleeping train car... I don't want to brag....

SHE. Don't brag then, if you don't want to.

HE. She was no older than thirty.

SHE. Did you see her passport?

HE. I saw a lot.

SHE. Oh-o-o....

HE. Though I don't want to brag....

SHE. What do you have to brag about here?

HE. What do you mean? By the way, I seduced a young, I stress that word, woman in half an hour.

SHE. In half an hour?

HE. I don't want to brag, but, yes, in half an hour.

SHE. In half an hour! That's not to your credit!

HE. Not to my?

SHE. It's to the credit of the multitude of men with whom she had travelled in the first class train car before you. (*SHE always answers HIM without looking at HIM or stopping what SHE was doing*)

HE wistfully looks at HER and suddenly pushes against the aquarium.

The aquarium falls and breaks.

SHE. (*drops the skeleton*) Oh-o! Why did you do it?

HE. Me?

SHE. Who else?

HE. Eh-eh-eh. An act of God....

SHE. You always bring nothing but trouble.

HE. Do you think I did that on purpose?

SHE. Of course.

HE. Watch out, don't slip on the fish.

SHE. The fish? (*suddenly realizes what has happened to the fish, shakes everything out of one of the bags, and begins to crawl over the stairs collecting the fish and putting them into the bag*) One, two, three, four....

HE. Here's the fifth one. It's not moving. Perhaps, it has a concussion.

SHE. You're sneering? Five, six, seven, eight....

HE. Nine. May be you should give it CPR?

SHE. Give it to me! Be more careful! Nine, ten... Eleven... And where's the thirteenth? I'm missing the catfish! My favorite little catfish....

HE. Little catfish? Little catfish? We're missing you, where are gadding about? Come hither!

SHE. Be careful! Look where you're stepping! Here it is! Don't touch it!

HE. (*hands HER a plant*) Your lesbian is alive and kicking.

SHE. Not lesbian, an Amazon!

HE. We shouldn't worry about political correctness now. And here are your snails, and shrimp....

SHE. I can't worry about them now.

HE. Do you mean it's all right if they die? May be we should use these gifts of the sea for our dinner?

SHE. Put them here in the palm of my hand. My poor little ones!

HE. Should I call a private ambulance for them?

SHE. Stick your hand into my pocket.

HE. No need, I'll pay for it.

SHE. Quick, stick your hand in my pocket.

HE. OK, if you insist on splitting the cost, we'll split it.

SHE. Did you find the key?

HE. This one?

SHE. Open my door.

HE. I'm opening it.

HE opens the door to HER apartment and freezes at the threshold, looking around it and nostalgically sighing, blocking HER way.

SHE. Why are you standing?

HE. *(enters the apartment)* It's been so long since I've visited you. Almost nothing has changed.

SHE. Drop the key on the floor and go out and close the door behind you.

HE. You're chasing me away?

SHE. Someone has to clean the broken glass on the landing.

HE. It seems to me that I'm needed here more.

SHE. To the stairs! Without delay! Clean the glass before someone might get hurt.

HE. Eh-eh-eh....

SHE. Quicker, quicker, as fast as you can, like in the first class sleeping car.

HE. Okay, agreed! I'll clean up and then drop in on you. Otherwise I'll worry about the fish's health.

SHE. It's too late to worry. I'll take care of them.

HE. You see, I'll, of course, clean up on the stairway but after that... I'm really busy today. Are you sure you'll get by without me till tomorrow?

SHE. Till tomorrow then? I'm sure.

HE. Don't worry, tomorrow I'll definitely stop by. *(goes out)*

SHE. *(after HIM)* Eh-eh-eh! Oh-oh-oh!

HE. The fish! You forgot about them. I, of course, don't understand anything about fish, but in my opinion we're counting the minutes. Do you want to discuss something with me?

SHE. No, no.

HE. Then, till tomorrow.

HE closes the door behind HIM. Approaches the broken glass, picks up the skeleton and looks it over.

HE Eh-eh-eh... *(laughs softly)*

FADE OUT

The entrance hall in HER apartment: a mirror, a coat rack, a small banquette, a chair. We can also see a part of HER living room. Across the room we see a row of aquariums with large goldfish. The room is lit by the lights of the aquariums, and this creates a special soft and mysterious atmosphere.

SHE, wearing a grandiose royal blue dress, lacy stockings, and high-heel shoes, stands in front of the mirror, looking herself over. It's clear that SHE has been doing that for a long time.

SHE. (as if shaking off some apparition) That's it! I've had enough!

SHE starts pulling the dress off but forgets about the zipper. SHE can't pull the dress off. It doesn't go anywhere. SHE arches HER back and tries to unzip the zipper. It's inconvenient to do for HE, because SHE's wearing high-heeled shoes. SHE kicks one shoe off and in annoyance sends it flying into the living room. SHE takes off one stocking and tosses it aside. At the same time SHE manages to catch the zipper and finally pull the dress off. First, SHE wants to toss it aside, but changes HER mind and carefully folds it and places it on the banquette. At that moment the doorbell rings. SHE freezes, bending over HER dress, wearing one stocking and one shoe and chic undergarments of 1970s-1980s style.

The doorbell rings for the second time.

SHE grabs the dress and, in order to put it on, unzips the zipper. Then SHE changes HER mind and, limping, rushes into the living room, grabs a robe and the second shoe there, wraps the robe around her and carrying the shoe in HER hand, opens the door, immediately assuming a calm and haughty demeanor.

HE is standing in the doorway slightly dressed up (label jersey and jeans calculated to look more youngish and smarter), holding an aquarium in HIS hands.

SHE. (in a surprised and natural tone) Is it you?

HE. Yes! After all we made an agreement.

SHE. Agreement?

HE. After all that happened between us, I, as a well-mannered person, was obligated to bring you an aquarium.

SHE. An aquarium?

From the depth of HER apartment comes the chiming of a clock. It startles HER, and she shudders.

HE. You got scared by your own clock. Yeah, it chimes very loudly. Sometime I hear it when I pass by your apartment.

The clock chimes ten times.

HE. Were you going to bed?

SHE. More or less.

HE. The aquarium is rather heavy.

Only now SHE looks at the aquarium and notices that it is filled almost to the top with red liquid.

SHE. What's it in it?

HE. Wine.

SHE. Wine?

HE. Fish don't swim on dry land.

SHE. You're suggesting I put my fish into the wine?

HE. Well, what daring fantasies women can have sometimes! No, I just changed water into wine. You can consider it a magic trick or a miracle. It depends on your capacity to believe.

SHE. I'll consider it plagiarism.

HE. If you don't invite me in right this second, I'll drop it.

SHE. Drop it then! I'm beginning to get used to that.

HE. Then your apartment will reek of alcohol.

SHE. That sounds like blackmail.

HE. It does sound like blackmail.

SHE. You won't scare me.

HE. The aquarium is heavy. I might drop it.

SHE. You've decided to break one aquarium a day?

HE. (*convincingly*) I'm dropping it.

SHE. (*hurriedly*) Bring it in.

HE enters and carefully puts the aquarium on a chair.

SHE. Why did you fill the aquarium with wine?

HE. I thought it would be witty.

SHE. Witty? Wine in an aquarium?

HE. You see, if I had filled the aquarium with cheap, mediocre wine, it would be stupid... But this is a reliable old wine!

SHE. It will turn sour.

HE. This wine has been opened an hour before you drink it. By the way, it's been an hour already.

SHE. I don't drink wine.

HE. You don't drink wine? Okay, I'll run to my apartment for some vodka.

SHE. No, no, I don't drink vodka.

HE. What do you drink then?

SHE. Nothing.

HE. That can't be, you have to drink something.

SHE. No, I don't drink.

HE. For how long has that been?

SHE. Probably for a long time. I don't remember.

HE. Why did you stop drinking?

SHE. I didn't stop. It somehow happened on its own... Yes!

HE. That means you don't have a really practical reason not to drink?

SHE. Eh-eh-eh. No practical reasons but... there are no practical reasons to drink either.

HE. Only alcoholics look for a reason to drink. You're not an alcoholic, are you?

SHE. Me?

HE. Then bring two wine glasses.

SHE. I'm afraid I don't have any wine glasses.

HE. No wine glasses? I understand your hint. (*turns to go out*)

SHE. (*agitatedly*) I meant that we can drink wine from tea glasses.

HE. From tea glasses? Wine? How can you say such a thing? I'll be right back. Don't worry. (*goes out*)

SHE. Don't worry? Who's worrying? (*notices that SHE is still holding HER shoe in HER hands*)

SHE puts the shoe on. It turns out that she has a stocking on one of HER legs, and none on the other, but SHE still doesn't notice it.

SHE. What impudence! Who's worrying here? Not me.

She looks in the mirror and realizes that SHE has a good reason to get drunk.

SHE grabs HER dress and puts it on right over the robe. SHE tries to zip the dress and succeeds.

SHE. Hmm. Don't worry! Why should I worry?

SHE goes to the mirror and sees all that is wrong with HER outfit. SHE starts pulling off the dress, forgetting once again to unzip it.

HE enters with wine glasses and with interest watches HER struggling with the dress caught around HER head.

SHE doesn't see HIM and mumbles furiously.

SHE. Don't worry! What am I? Do I look like a person who worries?

HE. Not in the least. I can help you with the zipper.

SHE freezes.

HE. Of course, if that's in your immediate plans.

SHE. *(after a pause)* Unzip it.

HE unzips HER dress with obvious difficulty.

HE. Done.

SHE. *(takes off the dress)* How come you failed to acquire this skill after travelling so often in a first class sleeping car?

HE. I'll step out, and you can put your dress on in peace.

SHE. No! Eh-eh-eh... I'll stay in my robe?

HE. You're asking me?

SHE. Eh-eh-eh.... Yes!

HE. I like it. The robe and high-heel shoes. Very sexy.

SHE. Eh-eh-eh... *(looks at HER legs and notices she has only one stocking on)*

Oh-oh-oh! (kicks off the shoes) Turn away.

HE turns away and in the mirror watches HER hurriedly peeling off the stocking and shoving it in HER pocket.

SHE. I'm ready.

HE. And I'm not quite yet. *(hands HER both wine glasses)*

HE sits down on the banquette, takes of HIS sneakers, and after thinking a bit – HIS socks. After thinking some more, takes off HIS jersey and hands the items to HER one after another. HE remains in a tank top (commonly known as a wino-top).

SHE. Hey, what are you doing?

HE. We have to start on even terms.

SHE. Start?

HE. Do you happen to have a small ladle?

SHE. A ladle?

HE. How about I run over to my place and bring one?

SHE. You're going to run up the stairs undressed? Come in, sit down. (*throws the clothes back to HIM.*)

HE hangs HIS clothes on the hanger in the entrance hall, goes to the living room, and sits down in an armchair at the coffee table. SHE puts the wine glasses at the table, goes out and returns, carrying a small ladle.

SHE. (*shows the ladle*) Here it is!

HE. Just right!

HE takes the ladle and the wine glass and goes to the entrance hall to the aquarium. HE pours wine into the glass, returns to the living room and puts the glass on the coffee table. Does the same thing with the second glass.

The clock strikes eleven during the entire procedure.

HE hands one glass to HER and picks up another. Both stand silently with the glasses in their hands.

SHE. (*suddenly in an energetic manner*) A beautiful night! I love July nights. And how about you?

HE. What about me?

SHE. Do you like July nights?

HE. Eh-eh-eh... Any night is beautiful if there is a beautiful woman next to you and... eh-eh-eh... you have a lot of wine. Or at least one of the two... Let's drink to this really promising July night!

SHE. Eh-eh-eh... In what sense?

HE. It looks like we've made peace. Off we go? (*sways HIS glass and scrutinizes the wine*)

SHE. Hm-m-m. (*also sways HER glass, scrutinizes the wine, and sniffs it*)

HE. Hold your fingers higher.

SHE. What do you mean?

HE puts HER finger in the proper position.

HE. You have to warm up the glass with your fingers.

SHE. Thank you. I got it.

HE. Will you be able to handle it after so much sobriety?

SHE. I'll really try.

HE. Well....

SHE. Yes!

Both drink rather quickly.

HE. We drank it up too quickly. That's no good.

SHE. (*quickly becoming intoxicated*) No big deal! You've brought a lot of wine!

HE. (*philosophically*) Is it really a lot? (*pours more wine*)

SHE. I couldn't drink that much water.

HE. No one can drink that much water. (*whispers*) Let's drink slowly this time, carefully, let's savor the wine....

SHE. (*also whispers*) Let's do that.

This time they drink slowly.

HE. Do you like it?

SHE. I don't know. (*suddenly bursts into a genuine laughter*) It's a bit tart.

HE. May I compliment you?

SHE. (*tries to sound ironic*) Already?

HE. (*enjoys the wine*) M-m-m.

SHE. Compliment?

HE. Excuse me?

SHE. You wanted to compliment me.

HE. A-a-a, the compliment. Yes, I will do it. You look wonderful.

SHE. Me? Wearing a robe barefoot. (*tries to laugh it off*)

HE. You look wonderful.

SHE. Eh-eh-eh... A woman at my age....

HE. It's a beautiful age. I didn't see you for a year and you... didn't age at all.

SHE. No, I aged during this year. Very much... (*hopefully*) Or maybe I didn't age very much?

HE. Just on the outside. You... surrounded by your aquariums, you're like a mermaid... Exactly like a mermaid.

SHE. A mermaid? (*empties HER glass in one gulp*)

HE. You downed it already? I have to catch up. (*also empties HIS glass in one gulp*)

SHE. It was inadvertent.

HE. Let's pour some more. (*pours*)

SHE. It's the last wineglass! So you think I don't look bad?

HE. And look better and better after each glass.

They drink.

SHE. Look better?

HE. Women in general look better because of wine.

SHE. As a matter of fact, we can have another glass.

HE pours.

SHE. Just not in one gulp. I'm out of breath. Why are we standing? Let's sit down. We're just drinking and singing the national anthem after all.

Both sit down.

HE. We're sitting well. One more glass?

SHE. Let's have just short breaks between glasses.

HE. Let's. But what will we do during the breaks?

SHE. During the breaks? We can chat, for example.

HE. A wonderful suggestion. I haven't chatted with anyone in a long time.

SHE. How did you spend last year? Where did you go? There was a rumor going around our building that you set out for trip around the world.

HE. Yes.

SHE. Fantastic!

HE. Yes. Let's drink. To a trip around the world.

SHE. Wait! Tell me your impressions.

HE. Impressions of what?

SHE. Of a trip around the world.

HE. Various impressions. Let's have a drink. We started in the right rhythm and I don't want to lose it.

SHE. You're an alcoholic?

HE. *(after a moment of thought)* Just partly.

SHE. You're not afraid of that?

HE. I'm a narrow profile alcoholic. I just drink dry red wine. I'm an elite alcoholic.. Let's drink.

SHE. We drink well.

HE. With a capital W!

SHE. Won't we have a headache?

HE. We'll plan to have a headache tomorrow.

SHE. But you're straying from the topic of our conversation.

HE. Really?

SHE. What countries did you visit?

HE. Well, I was in Rio de Janeiro.

SHE. Oh! Rio de Janeiro! *(jumps up sharply and throws her hands to each side of her so that HER wine splashes out of HER glass)*

HE. (*also jumps up and props HER up*) Don't be so flustered. Rio de Janeiro was just like Rio de Janeiro should be.

SHE. The statue of Our Redeemer at the top of Mt. Corcovado!

HE. Everything is okay with the mount and the statue, too.

SHE. It looms above Rio, opening up palms to the heavens.

HE. (*maintaining HER tone*) It hovers over the city of dark-complexioned and white-skinned, black and chocolate-skinned, white-teethed and wide-mouthed girls, wearing just a few precious stones for their clothing.

SHE. Eh-eh-eh... And where else were you?

HE. Montevideo.

SHE. O-o-o! Uruguay! El Cerro Mountain. Does it really have a cone shape?

HE. Cone shape? Absolutely. And what girls! Big breasts, small bottoms, beautiful bellybuttons!

SHE. Eh-eh-eh. You did see a lot of things indeed!

HE. Yes, It was the happiest year in my life. Each morning I woke up feeling happy. The entire world belonged to me! My childhood dream came true! I didn't have a single moment of a bad mood the whole year! Not the slightest worries or aggravations! I sailed a ship and looked at the ocean and dolphins playing. I wanted to turn into a dolphin! (*without changing his tone*) Let's finally drink! We've completely lost our rhythm!

SHE. Eh-eh-eh...

HE. Is something wrong?

SHE. No-o-o.... eh-eh-eh... I didn't have the chance earlier... I... eh-eh-eh... I wanted to congratulate....

HE. Thank you, but....

SHE. No, rather to the contrary... not congratulate, but to express my condolences... Tomorrow is exactly one year since eh-eh-eh... your... eh-eh-eh... wife passed away. Tomorrow is exactly one year. Sorry.

HE. Ye-es... Eh-eh-eh... Yes. We were four years short of our golden anniversary. Yes, yes. A huge loss, and so sudden... (*in a different tone*) Do you remember the exact day my wife passed away?

SHE. Eh-eh-eh... Of course not. I remembered accidentally because... eh-eh-eh... she died on the eve of your birthday. Yes!

HE. (*after a pause with amazement*) You remember my birthday?

SHE. No, no, no. That is, sometimes I remember it, sometimes I don't remember it at all.

HE. That's unexpected but very pleasant.

SHE. It's accidentally. It's just because a lot of famous people were born on the same day as you were. I was struck by that and remembered your birthday, too. Together with their ones.

HE. You've intrigued me. Who was born on the same day with me?

SHE. Eh-eh-eh... Giordano Bruno, Socrates, Joan of Arc, Marie Antoinette, Emelian Pugachev, Nicholas II... Eh-eh-eh... and Che Guevara!

HE. Che Guevara? I didn't know.

SHE. Yes. That's why your birthday is easy to remember.

HE. Very convincing. And how is your little catfish doing?

SHE. He passed away.

HE. Passed away? Because of me... Now I have to live with this. May the peace of God be with him. Let's drink to him.

They drink in a single gulp and HE immediately pours another.

HE. We've gotten knocked off our rhythm somehow. I've told you we shouldn't get distracted. Let's drink, two in a row!

SHE. Wait! My head is spinning! Let it stop!

HE. Impossible! It's impossible to slam the brakes on it! It's like a merry-go-round! What kind of pleasure is that to spin then stop all the time. It's bad for your system of balance.

SHE. Bad? Are you sure?

HE. Of course. You have to take care of your system of balance. It can't be restored! A toast to you!

They drink.

HE. (*considerately*) Is your head spinning?

SHE. No, my head stopped spinning.

HE. Are you sure?

SHE. Absolutely. My head is holding fast. Is that bad?

HE. I don't know yet. You're a special woman.

SHE. The room is spinning.

HE. Yes, the room is spinning. Definitely. I noticed it, too.

SHE. You too? It means I didn't imagine it.

HE. No, no. Everything is OK. It's spinning like crazy.

SHE. Yes, it's really spinning. The mirror's just rushing past me. What does that mean?

HE. It means we're practically sober.

SHE. Are you sure?

HE. You can rely on my vast experience.

The clock strikes twelve.

SHE. (*counts the chimes*) One, two, three, four, five... Are we both sober?

HE. Absolutely.

SHE. Seven, nine, ten... twelve. Twelve in the afternoon or twelve at night?

HE. Good question. To the point.

SHE. And what difference does it make for us?

HE. No difference.

SHE. I'm going to fall right now.

HE. While I'm next you, that's impossible. I won't allow it.

SHE falls. HE tries to catch HER and also falls. They lie for some time on the floor practically in an embrace.

HE. We're lying well!

SHE. We're lying? Already?

HE. Yes.

SHE. Weren't we standing just a minute ago?

HE. Fate sometimes arranges such reverses of fortune.

SHE. I don't believe it!

HE. Look around and figure it out.

SHE. It's true. The room somehow became vertical.

HE. You're observant.

SHE. Aren't you holding me?

HE. Certainly, since we're already lying together.

SHE. But I didn't give you a pretext.

HE. No, you did! You did it for sure!

SHE. What did I give you?

HE. The pretext, and now we're lying on the floor at your initiative, by the way.

SHE. Lying? But you said you'd never allow it.

HE. I failed.

SHE. Nobody can rely on you for anything.

HE. Give me another chance.

HE gets up and gives HER HIS hand.

HE. Get up!

SHE. I don't want to!

HE. I insist.

SHE. Even so? On which side should I get up?

HE pulls HER by HER hand, and SHE gets up with difficulty.

SHE. It looks like I'm standing.

HE. Is everything okay with your balance?

SHE. What do you mean?

HE. I mean, can you stand by yourself?

SHE. What are you saying? Is anyone standing next to me?

HE lets HER go and takes a step back ready to catch HER at any moment.

SHE. And for how long am I supposed to stand like this?

HE. Focus just on that and hold it till I bring the wine glasses.

HE leaves and pours wine into the glasses.

SHE. I'm still standing. It was better to be lying down. Where are you? (*closes HER eyes*) Where did you disappear to? I don't see you. Did you run away?

HE. (*comes back with glasses of wine and hands one to HER*) I propose to drink to *Bruderschaft!*

SHE. Who are you proposing to?

HE. To everyone.

SHE. To me, too?

HE. (*thinks*) To you, too. Hold the glass.

SHE. I'll take it, but I won't drink it.

HE. (*hooks HIS arm with HERS for the ritual of intimate friendship*) Well, keep steady!

SHE. I don't want to be steady. To be lying down is the best lot for women. What can be better for a woman than to lounge in bed... with a book... What else she can do in bed? Give birth. Not bad! Die? You can't do anything about that. After all, it's very comfortable to die in your own bed... And what about breakfast in bed? O-o-o-o! Isn't that something! Or just sleep... No, women are created for being in bed.

HE. I agree.

SHE. He agrees with me?! The greatest artists agree with me!

HE. Manet – with his Olympia.¹

SHE. Goya – with his Maja.²

HE. The naked Maja!

SHE. Cabanel with his Venus.³

HE. The naked Venus!

SHE. de Chirico's Ariadne.⁴

HE. The naked Ariadne!

SHE carefully lies down, holding a wine glass in HER hand. HE lies down next to HER.

HE. You and I once already tried to drink to intimate friendship. And you tried to do it lying down. That's why nothing came of it. Don't you remember?

SHE. No!

HE. It was about thirty years ago.

SHE. And...?

HE. We began standing up, but you couldn't open your eyes and the quickly fell down. Déjà vu. (*puts the wine glasses aside, lies down next to HER, and hugs HER*) And then we, beautifully drunk, were lying holding each other. Déjà vu. Do you remember?

SHE. No!

HE. You had a red dress!

SHE. I never had a red dress!

HE. Why do you say "no" to everything. I remember the red dress. It looked very good on you. You were lying here, at this very spot, and your red dress was lying over there.

SHE. Red dress... You don't remember anything... It was a fuchsia-colored dress. And what else?

HE. Oh, how passionately we kissed! Déjà vu.

SHE. I don't remember. And what else?

HE. Romantically.

SHE. Romantically... Oh, God.

HE. You were the embodiment of temptation.

SHE. (*in an ironic tone*) Of temptation... Oh, God.

HE. Oh, God. Oh, how we kissed...

SHE. Who?

HE. You and I, in a fuchsia-colored dress ... that is, you, of course, in a fuchsia-colored dress, and I, naturally, not in a dress... though, you weren't wearing the dress, either....

SHE. And what? (*mumbles petulantly*) Red dress, red dress... Not red, not red... Fuchsia-colored....

HE. Nuances always were more important for you than the main thing.

SHE. I have a headache from your wine.

HE. It's not from the wine.

SHE. Not from the wine? Then from what?

HE. Eh-eh-eh... From not enough sex. (*hugs HER*)

SHE. You're hugging me?

HE. Don't pay any attention to me!

SHE. There can't be anything between us.

HE. We're drunk and half-naked, we're lying down next to each other. It's getting me really hot! How about you?

SHE. No! Wine doesn't make life simpler. No, it doesn't.

HE. Eh-eh-eh... I don't understand. Didn't we make peace? What's your opinion on that? Will we be friends?

SHE. Friends?

HE. So, are we friends now?

SHE. I agree! We'll be friends.

HE raises HER robe and strokes HER knees.

SHE. Hey, what are you doing?

HE. You need to trust friends!

SHE. (*pushes HIM away*) If you take your hand off my knee, I'll believe in our friendship!

HE. You can't ruin friendship with sex.

SHE. I don't sleep with just anyone!

HE. Why not? It's your mistake! You need to sleep with everyone. It's a lottery! You buy random tickets, and some day one of them is a winner for you.

SHE. Or none of them is a winner and you go bankrupt. Don't touch me!

HE. I'll bother you just a little bit.

SHE. I'm cold, like a marble altar.

HE. We'll fix that in a second.

SHE. This isn't a first-class sleeping car here! (*rolls away from HIM on the floor*)

HE. Men are the same, thinking about sex all the time. That's their main shortcoming.

SHE. And their second main shortcoming is that their thoughts don't match their deeds.

HE. HE. Eh-eh-eh... Is that a shot at me?

SHE crawls over to the banquette.

HE. You're crawling away from me? Déjà vu.

SHE reaches the banquette, climbs onto it with difficulty, and curls up.

HE. How did I offend you? How? What did I do to offend you? At least tell me while you're still drunk.

SHE. Under no circumstances.

HE. Thirty years have passed since then.

SHE. So what? (*shrugs, meaning that thirty years is nothing*) Thirty years! So what?

HE. What do you mean so what? Are you going to stand me up every thirty years?

The clock strikes one.

HE. (*about the clock*) Is that's it? (*crawls to HER and shakes HER*) Hey, wake up! Your clock is broken! Your clock is kaput! Hey, you, mermaid! Mermaids don't sleep at night! No, you're not a mermaid, you're nothing but a codfish! A frozen codfish! (*sits for a while and thinks*) Well, I must be disappointing to you. You're not the only woman in the world. Yes, I like diversity. I like women when they're awake.

Takes a cell phone out of his pocket.

HE. Contacts... contacts... (*to HER*) By the way, I have plenty of contacts here. (*studies the address book, humming*) Girls who are terrorists, the terrorist girls... Aha, Natalia... Who is this? Nata, dear... Something familiar, very familiar... There's a letter "b" in parentheses after the name. Hmm... looks like no problem. (*dials*) The terrorist girl... Hello! (*jocularly*) Did I wake you? Bad girls don't sleep this time of night... Why are you saying it's a wrong number? I recognized Nata's sweet voice. Who am I? Guess. Well, my sweetie, guess. That's not good. And I remembered you a whole year. How sweet you are. No, I'm not mistaken. I dialed the number I wanted to dial. I'm a sharpshooter. Who am I? Who? It's Pasha Borodin. Ah-ha! You recognized me, you little hooligan. What do I want? What

can a man want from a bad girl? Maybe, I'll tear over to your place right now? Ah? Who might not like it? What old man? Did you get married? It means I missed something while I was taking a cruise around the world. Who did I wake up? Great grandson? What do we need a great grandson for? He's YOUR great grandson? Who did I reach after all? Is this Natalia? You... You're pulling my leg. Your voice is very familiar. Who? Who? B-b-b... bookkeeper? We did what together? Drank? Sang? Sang and drank? At your eightieth birthday? Your eightieth birthday celebration? Aha-ah-ah... Eh-eh-eh... O-o-o... Natalia Porfirievna? Eh-eh-eh... What? Yes, I came back... What? Was it witty? Eh-eh-eh... sorry... What? You want me to sing? Eh-eh-eh... Well, let's... (*sings*) trata-trata-ta-ta-ta... tra-ta-tra-ta-ta-ta-ta. Let my head tra-ta... my age isn't misfortune but my treasure. (*applauds*) Natasha! A! How well we've gotten along! I remember now, I remember. You had a wonderful celebration! You're still working? Here, our old guard never ages. Well, how young I am? Well, thank you, Nata dear. You don't say... I remembered how I came to you to get my first honorarium. When was that? We won't get specific.

SHE raises HER head and looks at HIM. HE fails to notice it.

HE. Nata dear! I love you so much. I imagine you right before my eyes. A shock of red hair. A green dress. Green eyes. I immediately fell for you. Forever. And what a sexy voice you have! And the way you sing! You're a mermaid!

SHE. (*loudly and clearly*) Get out of here! You dolphin!

HE. Eh-eh-eh... Nata, dear. Till tomorrow. (*the line disconnects*) Eh-eh-eh....

SHE. Play in the waves all the way out of here!

HE. Eh-eh-eh... You shouldn't talk to me like that.

SHE. Why?

HE. Eh-eh-eh... I'm having a mid-life crisis.

SHE. Men like you have a mid-life crisis from age of twenty till the grave.

HE. You shouldn't, you shouldn't repeat our former mistakes. Now I'm your last chance.

SHE gets up.

SHE. Get out of here, chance!

HE. I... eh-eh-eh... can explain... After all I'm a man.

SHE throws HIS sneakers, jersey, and socks onto the stairs.

SHE. Man isn't a gender. It's a medical diagnosis.

HE. Till tomorrow. (*goes to the door*)

SHE picks up the aquarium.

HE. I brought it for you.

SHE takes a swing with the aquarium.

HE. Don't... don't deprive your fish of a home.

SHE throws the aquarium into the door. The sound of glass breaking.

HE. Eh-eh-eh... Good night. (*carefully steps out*)

SHE slams the door behind HIM.

HE tip-toes, trying not to step on the glass, picks up HIS sneakers, socks, and jersey. No matter how much he tries, he nevertheless keeps stepping on the glass and yelps.

SHE opens the door and throws a broom and the ladle on the landing.

SHE. Fish terrorist!

SHE slams the door once again.

HE takes a few steps to pick his socks and sneakers, steps on glass once again, and gasps. Somehow puts a sock and sneaker on one foot and scrutinizes the other injured one, wiping blood with the sock. Hopping on one foot and stepping from time to time on toes of the injured foot, HE sweeps the glass and collects it into the scoop. HE finishes and rings HER doorbell, holding the scoop full of glass.

SHE opens the door, still barefoot, and looks at HIM.

HE. (*shows the contents of the scoop.*) The fish's house is all here.

SHE. You managed to do it very quickly. Almost like in the first class sleeping car.

HE. And now it's your turn to keep the rhythm. (*in a sharp movement tosses the scoop with the glass into HER apartment, tosses the broom after it*)

Then HE turns around and hops on one leg up the stairs to HIS apartment.

SHE also turns around and runs into HER apartment, stepping on the glass on the way there. SHE cries out and jumps up. SHE grabs the wine glasses and runs out of the apartment, stepping once again on the glass and again crying out and jumping up.

HE is already opening the door to HIS apartment.

SHE, also on practically one foot, catches up with HIM.

HE turns to HER, standing in the doorway.

HE. You propose to drink another glass of wine?

SHE. Yes, I even have a toast. To the mermaid! (*with all HER might SHE throws one glass into HIS apartment. We hear the sound of the broken glass.*) And to the dolphin! (*throws another glass.*) I don't like drunken men.

HE. But the sober men do not like you.

Suddenly a nightingale's singing descends on them like an avalanche. Both freeze in surprise and listen.

HE. A nightingale.

SHE. Yes, a nightingale. So what?

SHE moves away from HIM, hopping on one foot.; enters HER apartment and immediately steps on glass and screams loudly.

At the same time HE enters HIS apartment, puts HIS foot down and immediately steps on glass, and screams at the same time as SHE does.

HE. (*after HER*) Déjà vu.

FADE OUT

The stair landing. The beginning of a summer evening.

HE comes out of HIS apartment, wearing a light shirt and light pants. HE looks a bit official. HE holds an aquarium filled with fuchsia flowers in HIS hands. HE goes downstairs, slightly limping, and stops by the door to HER apartment. Listens to the clock striking six and rings the doorbell.

SHE opens the door and stands in the doorway, looking at HIM, but does not invite HIM in.

HE. (*as if nothing had happened and very upbeat*) Good evening!

SHE. I'm listening...

HE. Here, I've come to see you... with an aquarium!

SHE remains silent.

HE. Eh-eh-eh,, it's become a good tradition. (*laughs hesitatingly, but SHE doesn't join in, and HE stops*)

SHE. I see you haven't come to me empty-handed.

HE. This? It's nothing... just flowers.

SHE. I see. Flowers. So you say it's nothing?

HE. They're trifles. A few flowers. As a sign to ask forgiveness.

SHE. Trifles? In my opinion, they're very beautiful.

HE. Yes? I'm glad you like... these flowers. Yes.

SHE. I like them. Where are they from?

HE. Eh-eh-eh... They grew....

SHE. Well, where did you get them?

HE. In what sense do you mean where did I get them?

SHE. Well... did you pluck them in a flowerbed?

HE. Plucked? In a flowerbed? You flatter me.

SHE. Did you grow them on your windowsill?

HE. Me? Grew them? On my windowsill?

SHE. Did you buy them in a store?

HE. This is a strange conversation....

SHE. All the same?

HE. Naturally I.... (*grows silent*)

SHE. Continue!

HE. Eh-eh-eh... it's not important. As you remember, my birthday is today....

SHE. I have to remember it?

HE. You don't have to, but I decided on this occasion....

SHE. You decided on the occasion of your birthday to give me flowers? To me?

HE. Why not?

SHE. Bring them in! (*steps aside and lets HIM into HER apartment*)

HE enters and places the aquarium filled with fuchsia flowers on the banquette.

HE. The flowers are already in water. I hope they'll stay fresh for a long time. If you put your homeless fish in there, it will be beautiful.

SHE. What unique fantasies men have sometimes. But the flowers are beautiful and out of the ordinary. They show a ton of taste and attention to me.

HE. Does it mean you accept my apologies?

SHE. Do I have to accept the flowers only together with the apologies?

HE. No, no, not at all.

SHE. No? Then I can accept the aquarium with flowers, and will you finally leave me in peace?

HE. Eh-eh-eh... if you want exactly that....

SHE. I'm afraid I do.

HE. Do you want me to leave? Are you sure?

SHE. Well, it would look like I'm kicking you out.

HE. It does look like you're kicking me out.

SHE. You're not a gentleman. You should have presented me with your aquarium with flowers and quickly mumble something like this: I wish you my happy birthday, sorry I have to run.

HE. I wish you my happy birthday, sorry I have to run. (*wants to leave*)

SHE. Well, I'll feel guilty now.

HE. Listen. (*clears HIS throat*) Thirty years ago we had a hasty short love affair.

SHE wants to object.

HE. Just don't say you don't remember. Probably I was at fault before you somehow. How? Please answer me at least now!

SHE. I don't remember. It was probably some trifle.

HE. But because of that trifle you then threw all my clothes through the window, in which I... which was... which I... and kicked me out of your apartment in the middle of the night.

SHE. But under those circumstances it was better than in the middle of the day. And there are only thirteen steps up from my apartment to yours.

HE. In your opinion I could just go home?

SHE. Of course.

HE. To my wife?

SHE. Yes.

HE. Naked?

SHE. You want to say she never saw you naked before?

HE. You might be surprised, but I never came home naked from a symphony concert. It could lead to questions that I wouldn't want to answer.

SHE. She was asleep most likely.

HE. I couldn't risk it. I'll never forget how I went downstairs absolutely naked, came out from the building into the street, naked, and collected my clothes in the dark, crawling and groping for them with my hands on the asphalt, naked!

SHE. It was a warm July.

HE. I could have had a heart attack... And I would have lain on the asphalt, naked and celebrated, until the janitors would come to sweep the street.

SHE. I'd have called for an ambulance. You crawled right under a street lamp.

HE. You watched me from your window?

SHE. No, I didn't watch you, no.

HE. No?

SHE. I kept an eye on you.

HE. And were having a good time?

SHE. No.

HE. No?

SHE. I felt vindicated. By the way, was your wife asleep?

HE. Yes.

SHE. Too bad. So many unnecessary worries.

HE. But I had to pick up my clothes anyway. It was a tuxedo after all. I came to you straight from a concert.

SHE. A tuxedo, of course, was important back then. And except for the tuxedo you don't remember anything?

HE. It was thirty years ago!

SHE. The tuxedo, though, you've kept in your memory over three decades.

HE. Then tell me how I offended you. Thirty years ago! Even with murderers the statute of limitations is shorter.

SHE. Statute of limitations? (*suddenly starts laughing*) You know what? You'll get amnesty. (*continues laughing*) You're right – a statute of limitations.

HE. Eh-eh-eh... I feel better, but, properly speaking, I came to apologize for what happened yesterday.

SHE. You know, I was just about to have some tea....

HE. I understand. I won't bother you.

SHE. No, no, no. To the contrary, I wanted to offer you a cup of tea. I brew tea in a very interesting way and have no one to brag about it to.

HE. Brag away! I'd be glad to have some tea. I just use tea bags.

SHE. Sit down, please. The tea's almost ready.

HE goes to the table and she notices he is limping.

SHE. What's wrong with your foot?

HE. The foot? Eh-eh-eh...it may be rheumatism, or osteoporosis, or just old age. (*sits down*) Nice thermal carafe.

SHE put two cups on the table.

HE. Nice cups. And your dress is also nice. (*notices that SHE is also limping*) But you....

SHE. Twisted my ankle. Don't pay any attention to it. (*pours the tea into cups*)

HE. Thanks. (*sips the tea*) Oh, that IS tea!

SHE. Do you want a recipe?

HE. No, thanks. I won't be able to do it any way.

SHE. It lowers your blood pressure.

HE. Instead of medication?

SHE. Not at all, but I take only one fourth of a pill a day.

HE. What are you taking?

SHE. Nifedipine.

HE. Hmm... me too. But I take a whole pill in the morning.

SHE. I drink tea at six. Come by at six every evening, if you'd like, and in time you'll be able to gradually start taking just a quarter of a pill.

HE. It's a generous and enticing proposition. I accept. Thank you.

SHE. I'll brew tea for two.

HE. High blood pressure is just the curse of our times. In the past only older people had it, now even teenagers can have hypertension. What do you think of that?

SHE. Of what?

HE. Of high blood pressure.

SHE. I came to terms with that. You can't stop old age.

HE. But old... er mature age has its pluses.

SHE. Pluses?

HE. Of course.

SHE. Which ones?

HE. Many.

SHE. Many?

HE. Eh-eh-eh... Yes.

A pause.

SHE. What are you working on now?

HE. On an opera.

SHE. Oh-ho... Are you finishing it or just starting?

HE. I'm in the middle.

SHE. How is it turning out, nice?

HE. Well, somewhat, somehow... (*makes a vague gesture*) Yes.

SHE. What is the opera about?

HE. About love. It's based on Stefan Zweig's novella "Letter from an Unknown Woman."

SHE. I read it a long time ago.

HE. Everyone read it and everyone did it a long time ago.

SHE. It's a story about a great love. She loved him, and he couldn't even remember her.

HE. Yes. Men prefer several smaller loves to a single great one.

SHE. She sent him white roses for every birthday, and he didn't even notice. By the way, how is it possible not to notice that someone sends you a bouquet of white roses every birthday?

HE. I don't understand that either. I'd notice... and find out for sure who they are from.

SHE. She committed suicide, sending him a letter before that. In the letter she told him about her love. It began with these words: "You never knew me..." But he still didn't remember her.

HE. Yes, it's a beautiful story for an opera, but it's not coming easily for some reason.

Pause.

HE. Yes, very, very tasty tea.

Pause.

SHE. I wonder... (*starts speaking and stops as if SHE had changed HER mind*)

HE. What?

SHE. Well, nothing....

HE. Anyway, what?

SHE. Just... eh-eh-eh... if she didn't commit suicide... and they'd grown old... I wonder what their relationships would be like? Can it be such love would end up in nothing? In emptiness? Interesting, isn't it?

HE. (*thinking*) Reaching the old age? (*categorically*) Not interesting!

A pause.

SHE. Your opera will fail.

HE. (*gags*) Fail?

SHE. Yes.

HE. Why?

SHE. Because... because... you're not capable of love. You've never loved anyone.

HE. Op-pah! I've never loved? You are very much mistaken there.

SHE. Who did you love?

HE. Everyone all together, I can't remember.

SHE. O-o-oh!

HE. I had crazy love affairs! Maybe, with about twenty women.

SHE. Twenty?

HE. Well, plus-minus one or two.

SHE. You lived with your wife and had twenty love affairs? That is, you constantly had to lie and weasel your way out of sticky situations.

HE. It wasn't necessary. My wife was a smart woman, I'd even say a wise woman.

SHE. Really? And what's the difference between a smart and wise woman?

HE. A smart woman forgives her husband for his affair, but a wise woman ignores all of her husband's affairs.

SHE. (*pensively*) And a smart man will pretend that he believes in his wise woman's wisdom. I imagine how your wife must have hated you.

HE. (*somewhat shocked*) You're mistaken. It's just she knew how not to notice some things.

SHE. "Some things" are the twenty love affairs? I'll reveal a terrible secret to you — there aren't any wise women in the world who wouldn't notice her husband cheating on her, denigrating her, and lying to her. Your wife hated you!

HE. She loved me.

SHE. Loving women don't forgive betrayals.

HE. My wife was satisfied with her life.

SHE. She was satisfied that she had a housekeeper and a chauffeur, that she lived in a wonderful apartment, that she could buy expensive things and travel abroad, that she had celebrities coming to your house, that she had a social life, and that she never had to work or know poverty!

HE. It looks like you paid a lot of attention to my wife. I was happy to give her all those things.

SHE. Instead of your love.

HE. You were never married and you don't understand anything about family life. My wife lived like she was behind a stone wall. She was sure that I'd never leave her. She felt contented.

SHE. Contented? Then why did she smoke on the staircase so often, one cigarette after another?

HE. Well... she's not the only woman who smokes in the world.

SHE. She dropped ashes into my aquarium. Then why did she constantly forget to shut off the water in your bathtub and flood my apartment?

HE. She was absent-minded.

SHE. Then it was she who absent-mindedly grabbed a cat and threw it into my aquarium?

HE. How do we know that my wife did that?

SHE. The neighbor told me. It happened right at the moment when the neighbor asked about your health. Your wife was surprised. And the neighbor said that the entire house was surprised. While your wife was vacationing, two of her best friends were taking care of you in turn at night. By the way, how did you steer out of the situation with your wife's friends? For some reason I didn't see them here anymore.

HE. They challenged each other with pistols.

SHE. You mean they killed each other?

HE. Maybe we can stop discussing my wife? I assure you your pity for her is exaggerated. Even more so because she can't answer you.

SHE. I pity you, not her, you can still answer.

HE. There's even less reason to pity me. (*in a sentimental tone*) The year before the end... I don't know... as if I sensed something... I insisted on a celebration of the forty-fifth anniversary of our life together. About two hundred people came, and I told her (*with tears in HIS voice*) "Thank you for your gift to of tolerance, understanding, and forgiveness!"

SHE. To be tolerant, understand, and forgive twenty affairs – now that's a reason to ask for forgiveness.

HE. I told her, "All my life I've loved only you."

SHE. Very touching! I should cry... or laugh. I haven't decided yet.

HE. (*with reproach*) My wife cried.

SHE. Well, she had a lot of reasons to cry — twenty affairs.

HE. Twenty affairs but no betrayal. Not a single one!

SHE. That's a man's logic for you.

HE. It was nothing but sex with other women. (*in a careless manner as though HE were talking about trifles*) Sex and nothing else! (*very importantly*) I didn't say: "I love you" to any of them.

SHE. (*after a pause*) Are you sure?

HE. Eh-eh-eh....

SHE. You said it at least to one of them....

HE. Eh-eh-eh... I said that I like you.

SHE. No!

HE. Eh-eh-eh... that I'm enthralled with you....

SHE. No!

HE. That I wildly desire you!

SHE. No!!!

HE. I surrender. I said I love you.

SHE. Yes.

HE. And I regretted it very quickly.

SHE. Wasn't it true?

HE. I just don't believe that it could happen to me! I was dumbstruck, blinded by love. For the first time I couldn't feel the ground under my feet. Then I wrote a song in an hour. My best song ever. And the entire country sang it.

SHE. Only people in love have the right to write songs.

HE. I remember our short romance minute by minute. There were three meetings. You wore the red dress at the first... I mean the fuchsia colored dress. We drank wine and kissed. Then you suddenly fell asleep, and I couldn't wake you up.

SHE. I can't drink — I fall asleep right away.

HE. The second night was beautiful. I hugged you at dawn, and we looked at the goldfish in your aquarium and asked them to fulfill our wishes. A nightingale sang. I felt like I was in a Chinese fairytale.

SHE. I remember.

HE. And then you spoiled everything.

SHE. Was it after you said you love me?

HE. And what did you answer me?

SHE. I don't remember.

HE. Do you want me to remind you?

SHE. *(after a slight hesitation)* That I love you. *(laughs quietly)*

HE. *(wishing to catch HER red-handed)* And what else?

SHE. What?

HE. You asked when I'm going to tell my wife about us?

SHE. I didn't want to meet the person I loved on the sly.

HE. But you knew I was married. It means you were ready to meet on the sly.

SHE. No. There are things called divorces in this world.

HE. Not for me. Real men don't change mothers and wives.

SHE. But you fell in love with another woman.

HE. But it was no fault of my wife.

SHE. There are dramas in life that are no one's fault.

HE. Well, that drama was made clearly for my wife alone.

SHE. It means you think you acted right then?

HE. You can't change the past. Let's stop discussing it. Those three nights with you left me with the strongest impression in my life... Maybe I was wrong. I admit it. I suffered for some time ... You... it seems to me, even if you got upset, then it wasn't for very long ... At the same time I had a sense of guilt before you... and I somehow managed to smooth it over.

SHE. And brought flowers.

HE. Yes, and I sincerely wanted....

SHE. (*bitterly*) Sincerely? Someone else's flowers.

HE. Someone else's? What do you mean – someone else's?

SHE gets up, picks up the aquarium with the fuchsia flowers, and carries it to the window.

HE. Eh-eh-eh... What are you going to do?

SHE throws the aquarium into the window. The sound of the breaking glass can be heard.

Both are silent and stare at each other.

HE. Somebody could be under the window.

SHE. I looked carefully before I....

HE. Why? Why are you so aggressive? It's not my fault your life didn't work out.

SHE. (*looks in the window*) How tragic these fuchsia flowers look among the glass fragments

HE. Fuchsia flowers! Eh-eh-eh... you? That was you! I got it! And don't try to deny it!!!

SHE. What?

HE. You lied about Che Guevara... and lied about everything... All those people weren't born on the same day as me. Those... No, it can't be... That huge basket of fuchsia flowers... No, it can't be... my every birthday... No, it can't be! All these thirty years... you sent me? No, it's impossible. And today, too. I thought it was from the Union of Composers. Eh-eh-eh... I'll go and clean up the broken glass... otherwise the neighbor will take his dog for a walk and it might hurt its foot.

SHE. The broom and the scoop are by the door.

HE. I've remembered it. Eh-eh-eh... thank you... eh-eh-eh... for the fuchsia flowers. I... I... didn't even know they were fuchsias. I... I thought they were just flowers... without a name... (*begins to walk out but stops*) But why? Why did you send me fuchsias? How could I guess... I thought the Composers' Union was sending me a basket of flowers for my birthday because I'm... (*laughs*) a genius. It

was a great support for me; it inspired me... Even during my creative crises it seemed to me that... eh-eh-eh, people believed in me... eh-eh-eh... and that helped me come out of them... It supported my belief in myself... It's funny but... eh-eh-eh... without your fuchsias my work wouldn't be the same... It wouldn't be as successful.... Sorry... I brought them to you because... well, they would have just shriveled up in my place.... Eh-eh-eh... if I had only known that these flowers... I would have never bring them.... Yes, I'm sorry.

The clock begins to strike. HE shudders and grabs at HIS heart. The clock strikes seven.

HE. Thirty years! (*picks up the broom and the scoop and goes outside*)

FADE OUT

ACT II

Evening time. On the stairs.

HE stands before the door to HER apartment, holding a cake. HE's wearing the same jeans and classy jersey, but HE somehow looks more victorious.

HE rings the doorbell.

SHE opens the door and looks at HIM.

At that very moment the clock begins to strike six.

HE. It's exactly six. I'm punctual. I came for some healthy tea.

HE shows obvious changes. HE seemingly has become younger; we feel energy in HIM, vigor, and self-confidence.

SHE looks at a loss.

SHE. Eh-eh-eh... I see you don't have an aquarium with you.

HE. I've brought a cake today — it's much safer. Will you let me in?

SHE. Eh-eh-eh... sure, bring it in!

HE enters. SHE takes the cake and puts it on the table.

SHE. Eh-eh-eh... thank you... eh-eh-eh... sit down please.

HE sits at the table.

SHE. Eh-eh-eh... Can you cut the cake? (*puts cups, saucers, and utensils on the table*)

HE. Of course, I can.

HE cuts the cake.

SHE pours tea.

HE. (*referring to the cake*) Done!

SHE. Eh-eh-eh-eh... Allow me to give you a piece of cake.

HE. Thank you.

SHE puts a piece of cake on HIS plate.

HE. Thank you. Allow me to give you a piece of cake.

SHE. Eh-eh-eh...thank you. (*sits down*)

HE puts a piece of cake on HER plate.

SHE. Eh-eh-eh, bon appetite.

They say the following two phrases at the same time.

HE. (*sipping tea*) Very tasty tea!

SHE. (*trying the cake*) Very tasty cake!

HE. (*with a sigh of relief*) I personally bought it at a store. I swear.

SHE looks at HIM somewhat in surprise.

HE. I just want to believe that the cake... eh-eh-eh.. that we just eat it without...

SHE. Eh-eh-eh... Of course. I... I... I'm, generally speaking, not aggressive in the least... The fish... they can't stand aggressive people at all. They get sick from the aggression and can even die.

HE. Are fish your only friends, or do I have a chance to become your friend, too?

A pause.

SHE. Eh-eh-eh... I'd like to apologize...

HE. Apologize? You? For what?

SHE. For throwing your clothes through the window back then and for kicking you out... Generally speaking, I was wrong.

HE. Well, the statute of limitations is the same for everyone. Thirty years!

SHE. (*speaking as if no one had spoken like that before HER*) How quickly time has flown....

They drink the tea and eat the cake.

HE. (*speaking as if no one had spoken like that before HIM and this thought had just come to HIM*) How quickly the years have passed. It seems like only recently... and here's...

A pause.

SHE. What's recently?

HE. Everything is recently.

SHE. (*profoundly understanding*) Oh, how right you are! Time flies.

A pause.

HE. (*after thinking and sincerely agreeing with HER*) Yes, time flies! And life is different, and we are different.

SHE. Yes, time flies. You pointed it out quite rightly — life is different... That life now seems fresh, pure, as though washed clean by rain with cozy, seemingly tamed storms. Was it really like that or were we just young then?

HE. (*as if continuing the conversation*) Thirty years! I can't get over it. I didn't sleep the whole night, trying to understand... For thirty years you were giving me baskets of fuchsias... Me? Isn't that something! For thirty years!

SHE. I'd say it differently — not for thirty years but thirty times.

HE. Thirty times! To me! You presented a basket of fuchsias! Why didn't you stop after the third time? Answer me! It's important!

SHE. After the third time? Why exactly is that important?

HE. It doesn't matter after which time! Well, after the seventh, or twentieth? Just why didn't you stop?

SHE. It became a habit.

HE. Eh-eh-eh... maybe, just maybe, you're a one love woman?

SHE. One love? It's a good name for an insect. The onelove beetle, for example. It seems in the 21st century the word "onelove" isn't good for anything else.

HE. Thirty years! Then, thirty years ago... I remember that very first basket of fuchsias. Then I didn't know they were fuchsias... Thirty years! Then I thought they were from the Composers' Union... I've already said that....

SHE. Yes, you did. Why didn't you call the Composers' Union and check?

HE. It didn't come to mind. Every year — a huge basket of fuchsias... A huge basket!!! Thirty years in a row! Who would think they're from a woman? Only some organization is capable of something like that. I'm an idiot!!! I felt... eh-eh-eh... I felt something meeting you... I felt electrical charge flying by and sometimes simply striking in every direction, and the air was sparkling... eh-eh-eh... as though I were wearing synthetic clothes filled with static electricity. But I didn't add one plus one, the fuchsias and the electricity... Yes, it didn't come to mind. But... thirty years! After all, it's not just one year, not even ten. This is six local wars, it's half of the socialist epoch, it's... it's longer than Lermontov's life... it's a mighty oak tree growing from an acorn. What does an oak tree have to do with it? An entire cherry orchard could grow, become old, and die during that time. Do you understand what I'm talking about? I wrote a hundred songs, five operas, ten musicals... and so much music for the soap operas. I got some awards,

had affairs, fought for something, participated in festivals, all in all lived a banal and uninspiring life... But you... Oh, every year you sent me a basket of fuchsias....

SHE. (*with an awkward guilty smile*) It turned out somewhat stupid in the end.

HE. Stupid? No, I disagree. Without such naïve and idealistic women as you, men would simply die out as species. Precisely because of women like you they write poems! I mean used to write... The epoch of the true, great, selfless love is over. But maybe... It's quite possible that you're the last great heroine of that epoch! What do the ones who are young have before them? Safe feelings, politically correct passions, sex without hang ups? No mysteries, no prohibitions, no sins, no prayers... Everything is exchangeable, everything is correctable... Tragedy, triumph, catharsis — all this becomes depreciated. No, I don't envy them... I... I'm proud of your feelings, the way Egypt is proud of its pyramids, England — of its fog, Japan — of its earthquakes, China — of its wall... And in general... How did you manage to live?

SHE. I bred goldfish.

HE. Goldfish?

SHE. Many thousands of years ago in China a man left a woman. She cried on the seashore, and her every tear turned into a goldfish.

HE. Ah! You cried sitting over your aquarium?

SHE. It's close to the truth. I also learned Chinese and read many Chinese books about goldfish. I wanted to breed my fish and ask it make my wish come true.

HE. And?

SHE. Yes.

HE. Yes?

SHE. (*modestly*) Yes.

HE. Can I see that fish?

SHE. Of course.

HE. (*moves to the aquarium*) This one?

SHE. No, this is a well-known breed, veil-tail Betas.

HE. Very beautiful, but do they swim in such ascetic surroundings? There are just pebbles on the bottom, and that's it.

SHE. So they don't damage their wonderful, but fragile tails.

HE. How elegant they are. These fish resemble delicate magnificent feelings. Why have they stopped moving? Are they afraid?

SHE. They're examining us.

HE. Hi! (lightly taps on the glass of aquarium)

SHE. (*stops HIS hand*) Don't do that! Water transmits sound very well. For the fish you tapping is like thunder. Don't make sharp movements either. (*leads HIM to the next aquarium*) And those are mine!

HE. So that's what comes out of your tears?

SHE. More than twenty years of work.

HE. But they aren't gold, they're silver.

SHE. Stand right here. (*takes HIM to the spot*)

HE. And now they're gold.

SHE. And now stand right here.

HE. Now they're purple. They are just tiny living palaces, and the light inside them seemingly changes all the time. And you are the one who created these fish?

SHE. Yes, and now stand in my place and position your head so it'd at the same level as me. Do you see?

HE. What?

SHE. Do you see?!!!

HE. Yes!!! O-o-oh! A rainbow! The rainbow winds around the fish like a ribbon!
This is a rainbow!

SHE. Yes!

HE. Now I understand why some women are called goddesses. You are a creator, and that means Goddess. You've multiplied the beauty in life. Can I ask them to fulfill my wishes?

SHE. Yes. But only one wish.

HE. Why?

SHE. They're in an aquarium. There's no space, no depth, no currents there. Where would they get energy here? Right now they've stored enough energy to fulfill one wish.

HE. Did you ask them for your wish to come true?

SHE. No.

HE. But do you know what you want?

SHE. Yes.

HE. Why didn't you ask for it? I wouldn't be able to wait.

SHE. (*laughs*) Know what? You ask them.

HE. But... I can't deprive you... You said – just one wish...

SHE. I'm giving you the present of making your wish come true.

HE. Well... It's so unexpected... and awkward... and generous... but, I can't refuse. Can I do it right now?

SHE. Right now? Yes, of course. Why not?

HE. How? E-eh-eh... In what way... eh-eh-eh... Should I address them?

SHE. Eh-eh-eh... do it in a free, informal way... Eh-eh-eh... I'll step out... and leave you alone with them.

HE. No, my wish is no mystery. We've been so open with each other... I'm sure you guessed what I might ask for....

SHE. I'll step out!

HE. No-no, it's important for me that you be next to me.

SHE. Fine!

HE. Give me your hand.

SHE. (*gives HIM HER hand*) I'm flustered.

HE. Me, too.

SHE. Speak.

HE. Can I?

SHE. Of course.

HE. I ask....

A pause.

SHE. Be bolder!

HE. I'm asking... (*to HER*) I'll ask about the most important thing for me.

SHE. Of course.

HE. (*focuses on the fish and, staring at them, says clearly*) I want to create a genius opera.

SHE. (*laughs nervously and carefully frees HER hand*) I see you invited my fish to be your coauthor.

HE. (*laughs merrily*) You and I are like children. It was some delusion! For a few moments I believed that I really can make a wish and it will come true. (*in surprise*) I absolutely believed it!

SHE. I believe it will come true.

HE. I believe it, too. So, I invite you to the premiere as my priceless guest. And there will be no one more important for me that day. I swear on that.

SHE. It's wonderful when you have something to wait for. When you believe that your dream will come true.

A pause.

HE. But your wish will also come true. For some reason it seems to me that I'll handle it even better than all the goldfish in the world.

SHE. Really?

HE. It wasn't difficult for me to guess your wish. After everything I discovered, understood and felt these last few days, I know what I should do.

A pause.

HE. Hmm. I know what I have to do... but how to say it out loud? In short... we can get married... Eh-eh-eh... it would sound a bit brief but that's it. I don't know what else to add. Now, properly speaking... eh-eh-eh...you might burst out crying... or faint... or wrap yourself around my neck... The latter is preferable... In general you decide yourself when and where... on a grand scale or modestly... with a wedding dress and a crowd of guests or wearing snorkels surrounded by fish... or... I believe in the power of your imagination. Tomorrow we'll go to a store and you can chose a ring, and I'll solemnly present it to you. Everything will be as it's supposed to be and with a happy ending. Why are you silent? Did I miss something at this important moment?

SHE. I think you did.

HE. What? I told you about the rings, you'll choose the date, the ceremony is also up to you... What did I miss? The last time I proposed nearly a half century ago and apparently am out of shape. Some nuance missing? It's difficult for a man sometimes to understand how important some details are for a woman. So what did I miss?

SHE. You didn't propose.

HE. I didn't? (*laughs*) Yes, really... (*solemnly stands on one knee in front of HER*) Do you like it better this way?

SHE. Of course.

A pause.

HE. (*faltering*) My dear, I ask you to become my wife. I'm sure you will be happy with me. And you deserve this happiness, you suffered for it. I'm waiting for your answer in trepidation.

SHE remains silent.

HE. Eh-eh-eh... I'm waiting for your answer... Let everything be in the best traditions.

SHE. But you didn't ask me the question.

HE. Eh-eh-eh... you're right, I didn't ask... Eh-eh-eh... do you agree to become my wife?

A pause.

SHE. No.

HE. No?

SHE. No.

HE. What is "no?"

SHE. I don't want to marry you.

HE. You don't?

SHE. No.

HE. *(gets up)* No?!

SHE. No.

HE. *(peers into HER face and carefully stokes HER cheek)* No? Are you sure this is what you feel right now?

SHE. *(unwaveringly)* I'm sure.

HE. Haven't you dreamt precisely of this?

SHE. Yes, I dreamt that you'd kneel and ask me to become your wife... and I would say "no" to you.

HE. So, this means "no"?

SHE. Yes.

HE. Well, it means your dream's come true. Each story has to have an end. It looks like our story has reached its end. Good-bye! *(turns sharply and leaves)*

SHE. Ah-a-a... eh-eh-eh... *(takes a few steps after HIM but doesn't dare catch up. SHE looks around seemingly being at a loss at what to do, and sits down at the table)* No. *(absent-mindedly picks up a spoon and takes a piece of cake into HER mouth)* No! I don't agree! Here you go! *(sends another piece of cake into HER mouth)* No! *(another piece of cake into HER mouth)* No! *(another piece of cake)* No! *(the rest of the cake disappears in HER mouth)* No! *(notices that the cake is gone)* By the way the cake wasn't very tasty, though it looked promising. *(slowly drinks a cup of tea)* As a matter of fact, the tea is vile as well.

SHE slowly and deliberately collects what's left of the cake onto a spoon and licks the spoon clean. Then SHE finishes the tea in HIS cup.

From upstairs, like from the heavens, music resounds, music — the search for the single right musical phrase. It comes in endless variations, which seemingly are nothing but repetitions of the same thing, but every time more precise and closer to perfection.

FADE OUT

Night. On the stairway.

It's dark. The light is turned off in the entrance hall.

HIS door is slowly opening. HE quietly comes out of HIS apartment, wearing a long comfortable robe. HE hesitatingly, as though HE is hiding, descends the stairs, holding on to the banister. When HE reaches HER apartment, HE gropes in search of the doorbell and presses it, shuddering from the shrill sound in the quietness of the stairway. HE listens — no reaction from HER apartment. HE waits, then presses HIS ear to the door and listens. Nothing. Then HE lies down on the floor and listens for sound from under the door. Nothing. HE gets up, gropes for the doorbell again, but doesn't have time to ring it — the sound of the clock striking twelve is heard from the apartment. The clock goes silent. HE presses the doorbell and keeps ringing. Because of that, HE doesn't hear that in the apartment SHE is walking to the door, wearing a wide, long cozy robe. HE stops ringing and takes a rather big ax from under HIS robe. HE measures the lock.

On the other side of the door SHE sighs and opens the door at the very moment that HE raises the ax high, ready to strike the door.

HE. *(in surprise HE freezes still with the ax raised)* Eh-eh-eh... Good evening.

SHE. Eh-eh-eh... I see that like an year ago you've come to me not empty-handed.

HE. *(embarrassed and lowers the ax)* Why do you open the door in the middle of the night without asking who it is?

SHE. Well, what would happen if I asked? Would you answer: it's me with an ax?

HE. By the way, it's my birthday today.

SHE. And someone gave you the ax as a present! How I couldn't guess that before!

HE. Properly speaking, my birthday is practically over.

SHE. Now it's just five after twelve. My congratulations still count.

HE. *(with a feeling of child-like hurt)* How come you've forgot about my birthday?

SHE remains silent.

HE. You've remembered it for thirty years and then — poof, forgot it?

SHE remains silent.

HE. Well, I understand you could forget about me... Who am I to remember? But what about Joan of Arc? Socrates? Some tsars? Finally, how can you forget about Che Guevara?

SHE. But what does the ax have to do with this?

HE. Why are you pestering me about the ax? Well, I took the ax....

SHE. And you went to see me? With the ax?

HE. How female fantasy goes off the charts sometime!

SHE. What fantasy? Here's the ax! A year ago you came to see me with a cake, and now — with an ax?

HE. I don't know what you imagined, but I just wanted to break your door down, that's all.

SHE. I see. The door. Then everything's clear. But why do you have to break it?

HE. Well, in case you didn't open it.

SHE. Even so?

HE. No, I just thought for some reason that if you didn't send me... well, if you didn't send me the fuchsias, then maybe, God forbid, something has happened to you.

SHE. You don't say!

HE. It somehow didn't come to mind that you simply could have forgotten ... In the course of the thirty years I got somewhat used to....

SHE. *(with a sigh)* A year ago you yourself said that our story is over....

HE. Eh-he-eh... No-no-no... I said something different. I couldn't say that.

SHE. You said that all stories end at some point.

HE. Maybe... I was philosophizing. *(with an abstract intonation of generalizing)* All stories end at some point... *(in a completely different tone)* But I didn't say our story is included in that. Did I say that?

SHE. You said all stories.

HE. Exactly, all stories, but I didn't say anything about ours.

SHE. Are you steadfastly intended to stand by my door and talk to me all night, wearing a robe and holding an ax in your hands?

HE. Yes.

SHE. *(with a sigh)* Come in — then.

HE. Thanks for the invitation. I'm simply falling asleep standing here. By the way, I didn't wake you, did I?

SHE. You did! I took a sleeping pill and was sound asleep.

HE. God, how awkward. You probably want to sleep right now?

SHE. Very much.

HE. I'll come in. (*enters*)

SHE closes the door.

SHE. Give me the ax.

HE. What for?

SHE. You look stupid with the ax.

HE. (*gives HER the ax*) Now it's you who looks stupid.

SHE. Yeah, the ax becomes an unresolvable problem.

HE. Just don't throw it through the window.

SHE. I don't know what to do with the ax. It's stupid to put it away. It's stupid to hold it in my hands. To give it back to you is even stupider.

HE. Give me the ax. Better I look stupid. I deserve it. Sorry... I'm really upset... I've been upset for a whole month in anticipation and trepidation over my upcoming birthday. Don't laugh!

SHE. I'm not laughing. It's a cough. A nervous one.

HE. I didn't sleep at all last night. I kept thinking — they'll bring the basket with flowers in the morning. Then I'll take some champagne and go to your place to make peace. I bought the champagne long time ago. At six in morning I look out at the stairway — no basket with fuchsias. Well, I think — it's still really early. But the main thing is that I can't remember what time they used to deliver it. For thirty years I never paid any attention to what time the flowers were delivered. Well, I took shower and got dressed. At seven I looked out again — no fuchsias. Then I started to look out every hour, and again when I heard any noise on the stairs. Then I started to do it every half hour. Then every fifteen minutes... (*waves HIS hand*) Then even more often! Suddenly I realized there will be no fuchsias, and even worse, will never be forever. I wasn't ready for such cruelty from you. (*fights back a sudden tear*) Then suddenly I realized that I didn't see you the whole day, and I... I got scared. I started to panic. I thought that if you didn't send me fuchsias, then, maybe, you're no longer alive. I went to your place to save you if there was a chance.

SHE. You took the ax and went to save me.

HE. If you hadn't have opened it, I'd have broken the door down and rushed to you.

SHE. So, I'm soundly asleep and then wake up because you rushed to me with an ax in your hands. Can you imagine?

HE. Sorry.

SHE. I wake up and here you are with an ax in your hands!

HE. I didn't think you'd get frightened.

SHE. Yes, what's there to be frightened of?

HE. I have a premiere today.

SHE. I know. The posters are everywhere.

HE. I invited you a year ago.

SHE. I remember.

HE. (*in great agitation and because of that involuntarily swinging the ax*) So will you come?

SHE. (*carefully moving away from HIM*) Of course I'll come.

HE. Then I'll stop by tomorrow to pick you up? We'll go to the theater together.

SHE. Of course, of course. Stop by. Just without the ax.

FADE OUT

Then the light goes up to the point of summer twilight.

HER apartment.

SHE is standing nicely coiffed in a fuchsia-colored dress. The dress is open, slightly playful, and sexy. The dress is clearly inappropriate for HER at HER age. SHE holds a jacket in each of HER hands — one is violet and the other the color of a wave in the sea. It is apparent SHE is perplexed — she looks at one jacket, then at another, apparently deciding which one to wear.

The clock strikes six. The doorbell rings.

SHE opens the door.

HE enters wearing a tuxedo.

HE. (*looks at HER*) Can it be? Can it be the same dress?

SHE. (*modestly*) Yes.

HE. Unbelievable!

HE walks around HER, examining HER. SHE gracefully turns in such a way as to always face HIM, just like a sunflower to the Sun. At one of those moments SHE turns HER back to the audience, and we can see that the zipper on the dress isn't

closed, and there is no chance it will close. But SHE doesn't allow HIM to notice it.

SHE. Ah, you're wearing the tuxedo?

HE. Yes. (*discouraged*) My tailor let out the seams three times, but it's still too tight. Is it very noticeable?

SHE. I don't think you've gained even a tiny bit of weight.

HE. To tell the truth, I've gained weight over these thirty years, but just a little. I put on this tuxedo three-four times a year, and that forces me to watch my weight. Nevertheless, I had to go on a diet and lose a kilogram or two... Did you go on a diet, too?

SHE. No.

HE. No?

SHE. I didn't go on a diet. I've just been starving myself for a week and now I feel like I'm practically a saint. Am I really soaring in the air or just thinking too highly of myself?

HE. You're soaring a little and thinking a little too highly of yourself.

SHE. I can't pick a jacket. Which one would you suggest?

HE. Don't wear a jacket. It's too hot. The main thing is that you look magnificent in this dress! The jacket will just spoil everything.

SHE. Ehe-eh-eh... The dress is too revealing.

HE. It's beautiful.

SHE. Well, it is a bit too daring.

HE. Then this one. (*points to the one the color of a wave in the sea*)

SHE. It's decided.

HE. (*tries to take the jacket from HER*) Allow me.

SHE. No. Just hold this one. (*gives HIM another jacket*)

SHE manages to put the jacket on, constantly smiling all the time.

HE. Is everything all right?

SHE. Everything is perfect.

HE. Let's go.

SHE suddenly takes off, rushes to the living room, unbelievably quickly grabs a piece of bread, spreads butter on it, plops cheese on it, and eagerly but daintily devours it.

SHE. Now everything is in order.

HE opens the door and they find themselves in an opera theater. Velvet-upholstered armchairs stand now on the landing. Behind them is the backdrop with a theater in perspective: the pit, the amphitheater, boxes, the balcony. We can hear the noise the audience makes getting to their seats and the orchestra tuning its instruments.

They sit down.

SHE looks around with pleasure.

SHE. A full theater! A sell-out!

The lights go out. The overture begins.

HE embraces HER and presses her to HIS chest.

SHE. I won't miss a sound! (places HER head on HIS chest and falls asleep)

HE. (looks at HER) Eh-eh-eh... (tenderly) My dear, my priceless... (bends HIS head toward HER and also falls asleep)

In this manner they peacefully sleep through the overture. The overture ends, and the audience bursts in applause. HE shudders and jumps up. SHE does the same.

They realize where they are and begin to laugh and applaud.

THE END

¹ A reference to the French Impressionist artist Eduard Manet's scandalous painting *Olympia*, 1863 (exhibited in 1865).

² A reference to the Spanish artist Francisco Goya's painting. In fact Goya had two versions of it — *The Clothed Maja* and *The Nude Maja*, both painted in 1813.

³ A reference to an 1863 painting by the French artist Alexandre Cabanel, *The Birth of Venus*.

⁴ A reference to the painting of the Italian surrealist artist Giogrio de Chirico *The Awakening of Ariadne*, 1913.