

" Strange woman "

A tragifarce in two acts by Nadezhda Ptushkina

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CHARACTERS

HER: Tired, ordinary, fortyish, educated.

HIM: Young, handsome, thirtyish, well dressed.

ACT ONE

An entrance yard or, rather, a small square.

On the right is the back facade of an outhouse. On it is an advertising hoarding:

ONLY IN 'CAPRICORN'!

THE HIGHEST QUALITY COFFEE!

AT THE LOWEST PRICES! ONLY IN 'CAPRICORN'!

On the left is a patch of grass fenced off by a barrier of iron spikes.

On the patch of grass is an advertising hoarding with the same contents.

Between the back facade and the patch of grass is a tarmac road.

At the end of the road, at a wooden-paved corner, is a small commercial kiosk.

Beyond this shines an underground metro sign 'M'.

She is standing on the patch of grass, either hiding behind the hoarding or trying to be unseen.

He is leaving the building and heading for the shop.

She watches him tensely, in a state of extreme nervousness.

HE (at the window of the kiosk)

Marlboro! Lights! (Puts a packet of cigarettes in his pocket and heads back.)

She makes a decision. Suddenly and somehow desperately she bursts from her hiding place and throws herself into his path.

SHE

Excuse me! Can I speak to you a minute?

HE (from unexpectedness he turns too sharply towards her, aggressively)

What is it?

SHE (breathing heavily)

I just wanted to ask you something.

HE (no longer aggressive, but energetically, with the tone of a very busy person)

I'm listening!

SHE (the first thing that comes into her head)

How do I get to the Youth Fashion House?

HE (now disinterestedly courteous)

Let's see... The Youth Fashion House? Let's see... It's in a detached house? Sort of yellow, with decorations?

SHE

Yes, sort of.

HE

The Youth Fashion House... Up to the third set of traffic lights and turn left. Then take a right at the second set of traffic lights. Go to the end of the street. At the crossroads take a left, and it's the second or third building, I think on the right, a bit set back... Have you got that?

SHE

Thank you.

HE

So it's the third on the left, second on the right, to the end, left and right. I think it's the third... Or the fourth. You'll work it out when you're there. Can you remember?

SHE

Thank you.

HE (very considerately)

OK!

SHE

What about public transport?

HE (waves his arms)

I don't know. (Smiles in great sympathy.) I'm sorry, I don't know. I never use it.

SHE

And on foot?

HE

On foot I suggest you go the same way, but stick to the pavement. OK? (Wants to go.)

SHE (decisively)

Excuse me!

HE (dryly)

Is there something else?

SHE

I'm not going there now. Another time!

HE (waves his arms, already leaving)

That's your problem! Excuse me!

SHE (quickly)

One minute! Just one minute! I wanted to say something to you, or rather - propose.

No, rather - ask... Although, maybe - we can come to an agreement... I mean - we could... You might be interested...

HE (very dryly and making a show of being busy)

Quickly, please! And be more specific!

SHE

Could we not go to the side? People walk by this way...

HE (not moving)

I have no secrets from my fellow citizens.

SHE

Well, you see, I do.

HE

That's your problem! Excuse me, I'm in a hurry. I just came out for cigarettes. I'm expected.

SHE

Please, one minute! You don't know what I mean... But you're already biased!

You might find what I want of interest...

HE (interrupting)

No, I'm not interested in what you want! (He makes off.)

SHE (catching him by the sleeve, desperately)

But I want to offer you to make money!

HE

I don't buy goods from private individuals!(Frees his sleeve.) Excuse me!

SHE

You've misunderstood me! I mean help me in a piece of business and make money out of it yourself!

HE

How much?

SHE

One hundred dollars.

HE (disparagingly)

I see.

She grabs his sleeve.

HE

Let go of my hand, please!

SHE

I'm sorry, I did it automatically!

HE

Goodbye!

SHE

No! (Again she grabs his sleeve.)

HE (annoyed)

What's the matter with you, are you a bit strange?

SHE

You don't even know what I'm offering you to make money! For you it's such nonsense! Five minutes of absolutely easy, ordinary work!

HE

Five minutes? One hundred bucks? Ordinary work? Tell me! But quickly! Let go of my sleeve, for the last time!

SHE

Sorry!

HE

I'm listening! What kind of service do you require?

SHE

It's at my place... Five minutes from here by foot... And five minutes there...

(Pause.) Well, maybe... seven... No more than ten... Yes! You'll manage in ten minutes... And five minutes to come back.

HE

Altogether - twenty minutes. So, what's the job?

SHE

It's nonsense! It's... the tap... I'll explain there! Let's not waste time!

HE

A tap? Why have you decided that I'm used to that kind of work? What, do I look like a plumber?

SHE

No, not at all!

HE

Then talk to a plumber! And it would work out cheaper. In fact, I called one out not so long ago. Ten bucks!

SHE

No, no! A plumber is out of the question! They're all old or alcoholics... I beg you!

HE

Alright! Here's my office. Stand here and wait! I'll send for my plumber.

SHE

I would like it if you would do it personally.

HE

You know, you really perplex me! Nobody has ever grabbed me on the street by the sleeve and demanded that I mend a tap as quickly as possible. I assure you there's some kind of misunderstanding here.

SHE

You inspire confidence in me.

HE

Thank you very much! I've not been able to do that for ages. I pay for all that sort of thing myself. I've never occupied myself with this. And I've never felt the inclination to do it, either.

SHE

I assure you - any normal man can do this!

HE

I could do it before. But I've stopped doing it now. I'm obviously a bit strange. OK? So are you going to wait? Will I send for the plumber?

SHE

No, I can't. I can't trust someone I don't know.

HE

What is there not to trust? A tap?! Then I won't be able to help you with anything. Excuse me, I have negotiations. You're keeping me back, and wasting your own time.

SHE

You see, there isn't just a tap... It's not something you need a plumber for... You're running away all the time! Is it really so hard to hear me out? In actual fact, to be absolutely blunt, the tap has nothing to do with it. And I don't need a plumber. The problem is different. I only need you! And nobody else! I know what I'm talking about!

HE

Whereas I don't. What problem?

SHE

You see, in the rich Russian language there is no appropriate word. Do you speak English?

HE

Me? English? Are you really a bit strange?

SHE

No. Quite the opposite. I'm a doctor.

HE

What can't you tell me in Russian? What do you want from me?

Pause

HE

Well?

SHE

To be honest... I would like... you to... go to bed with me.

HE

Is that all?

SHE

Yes. Once.

HE

For one hundred bucks?

SHE

Yes.

HE

Once?

SHE

Yes. I don't think a second time would be necessary.

HE

What if it were?

SHE

Well, if that were the case... If it didn't work out the first time... I'll call you a second time!

HE

And that will be another hundred bucks?

SHE

Of course! I understand that this is an unusual proposal for you...

HE

Unusual? For me? You insult me! One hundred bucks for five minutes! It's damned tempting! Maybe I should retire and just occupy myself with that?!

A hundred bucks!

SHE

Why should you do it for free? You don't know me at all... Why the hell should you do it for free? It's me who needs it, not you. And I have a certificate stating that I'm healthy.

HE

And why the hell should I do it for a hundred bucks?! Is that the first impression I give?

SHE

Not at all!!! You give the impression of a decent person!

HE

And that's why you picked me?

SHE

I just really need it.

HE

Go to the Cosmos Hotel!

SHE

Who do you take me for? Is that the kind of impression I've given you?

Pause.

Whistling, he examines her.

SHE (Suddenly going on her knees before him)

I beg you, think whatever you like about me, but do what I ask you!

HE

Get up now!

She stands.

HE

Do what you ask me? Interesting, how do you imagine it? Alright. I understand.

These things happen. The menopause as well. Wait here. I'll suggest it to my mates. Don't give more than fifty bucks!

SHE

You don't understand me! I only need you! Only you in the whole world! I'll pay you two hundred dollars!

HE

You're haggling? I'll give you a hundred bucks myself, just go away from me!

You'd be better paying a good doctor. You need a doctor!

SHE

What are you humiliating me for? You haven't understood me! This is really vitally important for me! Right now! And it's you I need! What's so particularly special about what I'm proposing?(In tears.) What's so special? Oh God!

HE

I don't sleep with just anyone! I'm married! I have a child.

SHE

I know! I've seen them! You have a daughter. I like your daughter very much! She's a splendid child! Her face is a lovely colour. Luxuriant hair, beautiful features. All of her is in you!

HE

Thank you.

SHE

But wilful! Although that's upbringing. That doesn't concern me. I will bring my child up properly. If it's genes, then they're from your wife, not from you.

You are balanced. Very balanced! But your wife has a nervous look about her.

Yes, everything good in your daughter is from you alone. All the failings are from your wife.

HE

Thank you, thank you very much. And what else do you know about me?

SHE

Only what concerns me. You're in good health, you're clean-living... You don't drink. You're a sportsman. And most importantly - you're very handsome! It's bad that you smoke. But you don't smoke a lot! But then again, you are truly handsome! And charming. And you're a suitable height.

HE

You're very demanding, considering the situation you're in.

SHE

I can't be otherwise. I'm very serious about this. And I've prepared myself very thoroughly.

HE

But you've asked the wrong person. I'm not looking for adventures.

SHE

That's not true! Just in the last two weeks you've had five adventures! One foreigner - you spoke to her in English, three absolutely young compatriots, and the fifth was my age!

HE

It's very interesting to talk with you! It looks like my time has come! Are you a blackmailer?

SHE

I just want to sleep with you! I don't want anything else from you!

I'm offering you two hundred dollars!

HE

I take two hundred dollars for putting my bulldog out to stud!

SHE

But he probably has a good pedigree! Two hundred and fifty! That's all I have!

HE

You shouldn't be stingy with these things. Here - take a hundred bucks from me and offer three hundred and fifty. You'll have more of a chance! I'm not an expert, but for some reason that's what I think.

SHE

Thank you! I'll take it! Give me it! Give me your one hundred dollars!

HE (giving her one hundred dollars)

Don't thank me!

SHE

I'm offering you three hundred and fifty dollars! I don't know the price either!

HE

But you assured me that you'd prepared yourself thoroughly!

SHE

I would agree, if I were in your place!

HE

But I'm going to haggle! Fifteen minutes of my time, working time, costs a thousand bucks!

SHE

I don't have that kind of money!

HE

I won't make concessions!

SHE

But it's too much!

HE

Meaning that you're in the know as to what the present prices are for this?

SHE

Alright! I give up. You win! I agree! I'll find a thousand dollars!

At the end of the working day I'll come to your office! Wait for me!(SHE makes to go.)

HE

Stop!!! (He grabs her by the arm.) Can you understand one simple thing?

It's high time you knew it at your age! I can't do what you ask!

SHE

Why?!

HE

I don't want you! I don't like you as a woman. You don't attract me. You don't appeal to me sexually. And your little escapade won't work with me.

SHE

I don't like you either! I don't want you at all! I haven't wanted anyone for a long time! But I can't get by without you! If only I could! What will happen to you if you sleep with me? You sleep with anyone! Is there anyone you refuse? I've followed you for a month! Three weeks ago, on this very spot, you were joking with a young blonde... A sweet little girl with a ponytail... You chatted with her for five minutes... That same day she came to see you after work. She waited here. You came out and invited her into the office. You spent on chat and the seduction - on everything together - thirty-five minutes. And you didn't even offer to escort her! I heard - you were standing by your car discussing with her where to drop her off on your way home. The next day she came again towards the end of the working day. With an enormous bouquet of roses. You greeted her warmly and cordially. You have understanding and loyal employees, they didn't leave till late, they stayed playing cards. But she was waiting for everything. And everyone was kind to her. And everyone left the office at the same time... The same time as you... And you didn't offer her a lift at all.

And she came again and again. She became thin. She suffered for real. It was painful for me to see her. And you started to get irritated. In the end, you had to explain to her.

And she didn't come again! And a day later on this very spot you picked up a terribly vulgar-looking specimen! I felt sorry for you. She was waiting on the street until everyone had left. You let your employees off a little earlier than usual. And you whistled at her! You left the office with her in an excellent mood within seven minutes!

You parted very amicably, and she didn't appear again. And you spent more than three hours with the foreigner! In my opinion, that's cringing servility!

HE

Why are you following me?

SHE

You have a beautiful young wife! And you sleep with anyone! For free! Why can't you sleep with me as well?! Especially for three hundred and fifty dollars?!

HE

I don't take money from women!

SHE

Why are you abusing me?

HE

Me? I'm abusing you? It's you who's forcing yourself on me!

SHE

But that redhead, the day before yesterday, she also forced herself on you! She simply threw herself at you! You didn't even manage to close the window!

And you didn't resist at all! I saw it.

HE

You're a sex maniac! Here, behind the sign, you select your victim and throw yourself at them!

SHE

I needed to study you!

HE

What for?!

SHE (tired)

I need to sleep with you!

HE

What for? I'm not a sexual giant! I'm an ordinary partner. I can be replaced. It's even necessary to replace me!

SHE

Only you!

HE

Why? Have you made a bet with someone?

SHE

Who do you take me for all the time?

HE

OK! I won't say out loud who I take you for! Are you so seriously sexually stressed? Then I'm not for you. I know my capabilities.

SHE

You're always insulting me and being rude. Why?

HE

Get lost! (Quickly walks away.)

SHE (following)

Your home telephone is 200 2113! Your wife's name is Lena! I'll phone her now! I know she's at home! She doesn't work! My observations over a whole month won't be lost on her!

HE

You are a disgusting blackmailer! You make me sick!

SHE

Say what you like!

HE

How much do you need?

SHE

One time! At the most, two! But the second time only a month from now!

But that's undesirable.

HE

Perhaps with money?

SHE

No.

HE

Five hundred bucks! Including the hundred I already gave you.

SHE

No.

HE

Not including the hundred!

SHE

No.

HE

Five hundred and fifty!

SHE

No.

HE

Seven hundred!

SHE

No.

HE

A thousand bucks!

SHE

No.

HE

How old are you?

SHE

Forty... one...

HE

Take the money!

SHE

No!!!

HE

I don't want you!

SHE

One time! And I'll forget you!

HE

Forget me? I can't take that risk!

SHE

But why? Why are you ready to pay a thousand dollars not to sleep with me?!

Why? What's so horrific about me? Am I to totally lose faith in myself because of you?

HE

Have you fallen from the moon? Is this really how it's done?

SHE

I've been observing you for a whole month precisely in order to understand how it's done! I've even been rehearsing: "Excuse me, have you got a light?"

HE

Of course! Ah, damn! The lighter's in the office! Come along, it's just a step from here. Perhaps you'd like some coffee? As it happens, I'm on a break just now.

SHE

But it was risky! Anyway, your lighter is always in your pocket! I decided it would be better to ask directions. Then it's possible to have a conversation somehow.

HE

That was your mistake. You should have asked for a light!

SHE

But I don't smoke!

HE

It doesn't matter! I would have understood you! You should never break the rules of the game! And now it's too late! I'm just afraid of you!

SHE

What are you afraid of me for? I'm a doctor! An infectionist! I even work with cholera! I'm sorry about all the things I've been saying here! I don't want to do you any harm. I don't need anything from you! Only that you sleep with me one time! Or maybe two times!

HE

Back to square one! Excuse me, but I don't know anything about you!

SHE

What do you want to know about me?

HE

I don't want to know anything!

SHE

But we're in a dead end again like that! I'll tell you a little about myself anyway. True, you won't hear anything particularly interesting. I have an amazingly monotonous life. I was born in nineteen fifty...

HE

Don't!

SHE

What should I do?

HE

You have to interest me sexually.

SHE

Sexually? You? That's not a problem! I'm no worse than your casual partners! I'm the same height as that foreigner. My hips are just like that vulgar bimbo's! And my waist's just ever-so-slightly bigger than the blonde's! My hair, if you care to pay attention, is almost the same as your wife's! I correspond to your taste. I think I've left something out... I can't figure out what exactly... You can't remember everything! Aha!!! My breasts!!! By the way, I'm not wearing a bra! There! Why am I telling you? Have a look!

(SHE quickly unbuttons and opens her blouse.) Will that suit you one time?

HE

You're mad! Button up your blouse!(HE tries to button it up himself.)

SHE

You undress other women, but you forcibly dress me! Stop pawing me! What are you grabbing me in the middle of the street for?

Don't force yourself on me! I'll go about the way I like!

HE

Don't shout all over the street! Let's go to the side!(He guides her to the patch of grass.)

SHE

Are you hiding secrets from your fellow-countrymen?

HE

What do I have to do to get rid of you?

SHE

What an extremely strange fellow! He panics when he sees a woman's bare breasts! He's afraid! Ready to run away! How is it possible to tempt you?! It's simply impossible!

(She suddenly throws herself around his neck and kisses him on the lips.)

He flings her away from him.

SHE falls to the ground and stays lying.

He hesitates, and then, not coming closer to her,

He peers at her from a distance.

HE (whistling)

Pretend as much as you like! I'm sorry, of course, but it was self-defence! I'm going! And you'd better not come here again! I'm only going out with a guard from now on! And bodyguards don't mince words.(HE leaves, but then returns unsurely.) I'm sorry... I didn't want to. Let's forget about it?! I'm going. Goodbye! It was a pleasure meeting you.(Very carefully, HE bends over her.) Listen! Are you alright? I've never hit a woman in my life. Honestly! But you can't throw yourself like that at people! It's an unfortunate way of interesting a man! And generally - if he doesn't want to right away, then it's practically useless to insist. It's an empty waste of time. The more you try to catch him, the less he wants you. It's our nature.(HE comes right up to her.) And then - there are so many men in the world, you can't speak about some definitive choice. Better to send a man to hell. Then you have a chance that you might have dented his vanity... Well say something!(HE shakes her.) I can't go, because I don't understand - are you alive or not?

SHE

Don't move me! I've banged my head. I'm concussed.

HE

Shall I call an ambulance?

SHE

You could do.

HE

OK! I'll go call them!

SHE

You'll leave me lying here? In this state?

HE

What, should I carry you in my arms?

SHE

You could at least carry me to the office and lay me on the sofa!

HE

I won't even allow your corpse to be carried in to my office!

SHE

I was wrong about you.

HE

All because you didn't listen to me right away!

SHE

I thought you were - a sensitive person.

HE

So you assumed that a sensitive person is someone who is always ready to get in to bed with someone they've just met, for a hundred bucks? The weather is fine! Lie here, cool off, and I'll call an ambulance.

SHE

It'll be here in five hours.

HE

You're the doctor, you know best. By the way, you could give yourself first aid!

SHE

Go to hell!

HE

I wish I could! I wish you a successful recovery! I'll call an ambulance, and until it comes one of my workers will look after you.

SHE

According to your theory, you don't have any vanity!

HE

You didn't send me to hell sincerely. You don't have enough practice!

And you'll never get anything out of a man, because you've got very bad manners!

SHE (suddenly leaping up)

Go to hell! To hell's mother! To hell's grandmother! To all the hells! To the devil!

HE

Better already!

SHE

I don't need men at all! I don't need them as a species!

I would sleep one time with you and never again in my life approach another man!

HE

So you chose me to say farewell to your sex life? I'm flattered! But I'm afraid I don't suit your aim. There's a risk that after being with me you'll revise your views of men entirely, and on sex in part.

SHE

What are you trying to make yourself out to be?! I don't like you at all! You're a common poser!

HE

What are we wasting time for? You don't like me! I don't like you! Let's run away from each other!!!

SHE

Stop!!! I don't like you, but you suit me! I can't put it off.

HE

If we start from the beginning again, I won't be able to handle it. What is it about me that suits you so much?

SHE

You have a lot of virtues. Your intellect is higher than average.

HE

Thank you. I'd noticed myself.

SHE

You have - good manners, a feeling of self-worth, you respect other people, you're very gentlemanly towards women, you're courteous, sensitive, tolerable and tolerant, you're hardworking, you're - a true leader, you're cheerful and not aggressive.

HE

You're very demanding. So many virtues you need in a man with whom you intend to spend five minutes. And no compromises! You're probably not married?

SHE

Yes, I'm not married.

HE

I won't be surprised if you've never been married.

SHE

Yes, I have never been married.

HE

There's just no one you could get married to in this world! Even to go to bed once you'll only agree if it's with perfection!

SHE

I don't want to get married. I did once, but I don't now.

HE

Anyway, can I go? I have negotiations. I don't like being late. Add punctuality onto my list of virtues and let me go. Hm?

SHE

Perhaps you'll change your mind? Please! I really really beg you! You're not still scared of me? I was stressed! Do you imagine it's easy to go up to a strange man and ask him to sleep with you? It's not easy at all! I've tormented myself over you! (SHE cries.) Do you have a handkerchief?

HE

Take this! (HE wipes her face himself.) Come on... It's not such a problem.

If you knew my problems! Come on, don't cry!

SHE

Tears are my last weapon.

HE

Disarm! We'll think of something!

SHE

Please, think quickly!

HE

Quickly? Do you want me to introduce you to someone? But you have to behave differently. I'll advise you. For free! I even know who to introduce you to. I can guarantee it'll work. OK?

SHE

Oh, God, I just need you!!!

HE

Oh, God, again! No!.. Have you been secretly in love with me for a long time?

SHE

What are you on about?

HE

A pity!

SHE

So many women love you!

HE

I hadn't noticed.

SHE

Simply, if it will be you, I will love him. I will love him so tenderly... You understand?

HE

Sort of. Is your head alright?

SHE

Yes. Why?

HE

You got quite a nasty knock. Maybe I should call an ambulance anyway?

SHE

It must only be you and only today until midnight!

HE

The main thing is - calm down.

SHE

Is it really so difficult for you?

HE

It varies...

SHE

Am I really so unattractive?

HE

No, you're not that unattractive...

SHE (sincerely)

Thank you!

HE

When you cry you really are very charming! I even like you. I'll remember you.

SHE

But I can't always be crying? I suppose I could try! When I was thirteen I cried a whole month! No one could do anything with me! Even I couldn't stop myself. I almost died then.(SHE weeps.)

HE

Calm down! It was a long time ago! And why have you got so hung up on me? I'm not superman. I won't provide you with some kind of superpleasure. I can't guarantee you that.

SHE

Basically, I think about that with revulsion.

HE

That's amazing! You know, no one has snubbed me so hard for a long time!

What do you want from me personally?

SHE

What every woman wants!

HE

Don't refer to everyone! Personally, this is the first time I've come across your type! What do you specifically want from me? Give me one honest, straight answer and...

SHE

And what?

HE

I'm a soft person, it's hard for me to keep on refusing such an attractive woman. No one ever in my life has asked me this so movingly. What do you want?

SHE

A baby.

HE

What?

SHE

I want to have a baby by you.

HE

With me? To have what? Oh, God! What for?

SHE

A son!

HE

Thanks!

SHE

In order for it to be a son, he has to be conceived today! I know how to calculate it. If it's not today, then in the coming two years I can only conceive a daughter. And I dream of a son! For girls and women, you see, it's very hard to succeed.

HE

OK! You've just been inviting me to earn some money as a donor! What an idiot!!! I almost got caught out!

SHE

Naturally, it will only be my child! There will be no claims made on you!

HE

Thanks! That's reassuring.

SHE

You'll never even see him!

HE

Listen, what do you take me for, eh? Why do you assume that I'm a complete animal? Why shouldn't I give a damn about my own son?

SHE

Alright, I'm prepared to compromise.

HE

You're prepared to? Lucky me!

SHE

We'll discuss it after.

HE

I'd prefer to discuss it before. What is there to discuss anyway?

SHE

Your participation in his upbringing. You can visit him. Once a year.

HE

You yourself decided that it was necessary to sleep with me. You yourself decided to conceive a child with me. You yourself decided that it must be a son. Now you've decided how many times a year I'll see him. Next to you, I don't feel very much like a man!

SHE

Alright. I'll allow you to participate in his upbringing.

HE

Thanks.

SHE

I think you'll have a good influence on him. It's even better if a boy knows that he has a father. The boy won't have any complexes.

HE

I'll be the one with the complexes! Excuse me, but your openness changes the matter. I could have even... But I'm categorically against having a child with you! Thank you for warning me! That's all there is to say! The question is decisively closed! Don't waste time! You still have until midnight. (HE looks at his watch.)

That's all! I'm running late! Or rather, I'm already late!

SHE

I'll go with you! I won't give up! You have no right!

HE

turns sharply to her, takes a gun from under his jacket and aims it at her. SHE screams.

HE

I'm not joking and I'm not afraid. I'll shoot! Don't come near me!

SHE (not moving)

That's so stupid! You're behaving stupidly! A son is such a joy! Every normal man wants a son!

HE

I'm married! And if I want a son... One, two, three, ten... My own wife will give birth to them!

SHE

I've seen your wife! She'll never give you ten children! Thank God if she can have one more! And if it's a girl?

HE

As opposed to you, I don't have anything against girls! Thank you, thank you, but if you don't mind, my wife and I will decide this ourselves, without consulting you! At the moment, I don't need a son.

SHE

But you can't live only for today! You don't know what else will happen to you in this life! Nobody can know that. What if you separate from your wife?

HE

I'm not as opposed to marriage as you are! I'll marry again!

SHE

And what if you don't have any more children? And your daughter takes after her mother? And grows up to be a stranger to you? And all she needs from you is money? God forbid, of course! Will you be in pain and lonely?

HE

Don't worry, I'll cope.

SHE

I will bring up my son so that he will always love you.

HE

Thanks.

SHE

And who knows - when we get old, you might one day go down on your knees before me and kiss my hands and thank me for your son.

(SHE covers her face in her hands and weeps.)

He puts the gun away, approaches her, takes her hand and kisses it.

HE

Forgive me! You're amazing. You have no cynicism. Some Dutch businessmen have been waiting in the office for twenty minutes now. A very important meeting. It's not enough that I'm not ready for it, I'm even late. My chances weren't very good in the first place, but now they're completely zero. I'm touched. I'm sincerely sorry for you. I'm starting to like you.

But I can't help you. Let me go, please. I'm tired. (Pause.) You see, I've also got problems. Not as extensive as yours, but all the same. Let me go, please! I'm tired. And right now I desperately need to convince the Dutch to give me a shipment of coffee to sell.

At the moment I don't have any money to pay up front. They don't take risks with anything, and they know my reputation, and I have impeccable and reputable recommendations... But it's practically impossible to reach a deal! Yet I can't let such a profitable contract go. But I don't have any money at the moment. Yet if I let the contract fall through, then other suppliers might start to doubt my solvency altogether.

Doubts about the reliability of my company. There's a lot riding on this.

I have to take an entirely new tack with these Dutchmen. (Pause.) If only I had your ability!

I think you could convince a dead person to do anything you wanted!

SHE

A dead person. But not you!

HE

You just didn't have enough time.

SHE

Have you already begun to give in?

HE

Well, somehow - yes... But you made a blunder - letting it slip about the child...

SHE

You've started to like me?

HE

That's not the point! It's easier to give in to you than to refuse.

You're a born manager! Maybe I could entice you to work for me?

SHE

Won't your wife be jealous?

HE

Of you? Never! I'm sorry! You know, I'm going to risk it. I've decided on a desperate measure. Have it your way! Come to my office!

SHE

Hurrah!

HE

I'll take you to the bathroom...

SHE

Yes!

HE

You can get yourself ready!

SHE

Yes!

HE

I'll be nearby all the time...

SHE

Yes!

HE

All this time I'll explain to you about coffee, about the difference between up front payment and sales...

SHE

That's really not necessary!

HE

And I'll let you loose on the Dutch!

Pause.

SHE

Are you serious?

HE

What can they do against you! They'll cave in! OK?

SHE

No!

HE

Don't worry! I'll be nearby. I'll make sure everything's alright.

SHE

No.

HE

The fact is, I'm late because of you! This is very important for me. Just one time!

SHE

I can't! I've never taken part in negotiations like this! I'll just make it worse for you!

HE

I'm ready to take the risk, because I'm afraid it can't get much worse.

SHE

I won't be able to understand it.

HE

It's easy!

SHE

I haven't the faintest idea what to say!

HE

These Dutch don't understand a word in Russian! I can feed you a script. If it doesn't work out the first time, we can arrange a second meeting. It wouldn't be ideal, but what can we do? For a separate fee! For half an hour's work I'll pay you two hundred dollars.

SHE

Not counting the hundred bucks you already gave me?

HE

Not counting them! That was for moral damage! And if you get a deal first time round, I'll pay you four hundred dollars.

SHE

You seriously think I can manage? I've never done this in my life!

HE

I've already observed your debut on my own. It was splendid!

SHE

But the result?..

HE

You did everything you could!

SHE

Alright, I agree. But I can count.

HE

On four hundred dollars? You can! And I hope very much that we can be friends! I beg you! Do you agree?

SHE

You really beg me?

HE

Really!

SHE

Then - onward.

HE

Onward!

END OF PART ONE

PART TWO

Blackout. Her voice. His voice. Two new male voices. Conversation in English. The intonation indicates that they are saying goodbye. They are speaking over each other, the voices are lively, good-humoured, mixed with laughter.

Lights. An office. Ascetic office furniture. A desk and revolving chair. A corner sofa, and in front of it a coffee table. On the coffee table there are cups, glasses, a half-full bottle of brandy. Cardboard boxes lie in various places.

In the corner there is a safe.

HE and SHE are laughing, pulling each other, pushing, horsing around, behaving like accomplices after a great stroke of luck. It is unclear which of them is happier. SHE has greatly transformed. She suits his jacket, which immediately makes her look stylish. But what suits her more is joy. She grabs his hand and shouts.

SHE

Hurrah! Viva! Victory!

HE

Thank you, thank you! Thank you!!! You're brilliant! I was falling in love with you all the time! You're so persistent! Poor Dutchmen! That's the first time they've met a woman like you! So alive! Brilliantly clever! And you're so tactful, subtle, flirtatious! I've never met another woman who could even remotely compare with you! And how good your English is!

SHE

And your English isn't so bad!

HE

You've hooked me. Ten bucks an hour!

SHE

For a thicky like you - twenty!

HE

I won't argue! I'm crazy about you! And the Dutch have gone crazy about you! They invited you to Holland!

SHE

They invited you as well!

HE

Exactly! They invited you! And me - as well!

SHE

The Dutch are a polite nation. They give women priority.

HE

Especially if she is the most charming woman in the world! And a fine psychologist! And a great actress! And an inventor! You thought everything up brilliantly! For us to appear before the Dutch like a totally in love couple! Only lovers can be forgiven for being late.

And how we don't care about the shipment of coffee! And how we don't care about money! We only want to be together! Lovers arouse trust. People who are capable of the highest feelings cannot be swindlers. You want to take care of lovers. There's so little real love in the world that other people instinctively protect it.

SHE

Oh, you're a poet!

HE

When you suggested this to me, I admit I didn't immediately appreciate it.

And how to pretend to be in love? I've already forgotten when it happened to me!

But you suggested such a brilliant approach. Just don't drop my gaze from you for an instant. You made me pay attention to my face and not to let an injured expression cross it.

I figured out that I either had to smile, or look serious and profound.

SHE

Oh, how you smiled! You were positively shining.

HE

From nervous tension! I was afraid we would be public ally unmasked.

SHE

When you looked at me fixedly and sadly, what were you thinking about?

HE

I was multiplying three figure sums in my head. I've totally forgotten how to count in my head what with these calculators! Give me credit! I was looking at you so diligently, I don't think I'll ever forget you in my life.

SHE

You can relax. We're alone now. There's no need to continue looking at me so intensely any more.

HE

You're lovely! I want to look at you. Can I?

SHE

Do what you like.

HE

Capitalists are a naive lot, really. Did you notice how touched, concerned, charmed they were by our love for each other? You're a brilliant director!

SHE

It's not hard to be a brilliant director with such a wonderful actor as you.

HE

Have you noticed, I got into the role so much that I still can't get out of it?

Pay attention to how I'm looking at you!

SHE

And what are you multiplying in your head at the moment?

HE

Oh, very big numbers! It's a pleasure doing business with you, and a pleasure to chat.

SHE

Do you really think I was fishing for compliments?

HE

It's not a compliment. It's the truth.

SHE

Thank you twice.

HE

Thank you! You came to my rescue! You saved me! Don't be angry with me! I was behaving like a complete idiot.(HE draws her towards him and kisses her.)

SHE freezes at first, then unexpectedly pulls away.

SHE (going away from him)

I'm sorry! I probably gave you the motivation myself. But it's a little unexpected at the moment. I'm sorry.

HE (approaches and confidently embraces her)

I can't help myself. My God, the smell of your hair! You looked at me so tenderly and winningly in front of the Dutch! And like an idiot, I dreamt that there was a drop of truth in your tenderness. And I remembered how you pleaded with me. I look at that differently now.

SHE

Let's forget it! You didn't agree, and I'm resigned to that. The boat's sailed away.

HE

I don't want to forget! I was an idiot! You have lovely breasts, you were completely right.(HE unbuttons her blouse.)

SHE

What's got into you?

HE

Is something wrong?

SHE

Everything's wrong.

HE

My head's in a spin over you.

SHE

My head's in a spin as well. But I'd say it was from the brandy. In general, I'd say we've spun around too far.

HE (quietly)

Shall I undress you?.. That will be the best memory.

SHE

You know, I've lost the mood.

HE

Don't pay any attention to that! This is no time for sulks! We only have three hours to conceive a son. You helped me, I'll help you. One thing for another. I'll try very hard.

SHE

Thanks. No. We've been drinking - there could be consequences for the child.

HE

The alcohol hasn't entered our bloodstreams yet. And we only drank about twenty-five milligrammes! You can't imagine how much I drank before... And my daughter - you've seen yourself - she's healthy. If I hadn't drunk then, she wouldn't be in the world! If that's the only problem. You're not disgusted by me any more?

SHE

I'm tired. It's been an unusual day! You handed all the negotiations over entirely to me! You only made the coffee! And made eyes at me!

HE

All the more reason for you to change your impressions! What are we doing, arguing, arguing all the time? Let's make up at last!

SHE

Don't you respect me?

HE

Strange woman! I want you! And I won't let you go! My God, the smell of your hair! By the way - what's your name?

SHE

Marina Andreyevna.

HE

Marinotchka, Marisha... The name suits you. Marina... The sea. Mirage... I'll call you Marina.

SHE

And what's your name?

HE

Alexei.

SHE

And your patronymic?

HE

Nikolayevitch. (he embraces her and tries to kiss her.)

SHE

Alexei Nikolayevitch, why are you doing this? Don't. I'm asking you. I don't love you.

HE

Marina. I wouldn't give any love for the tenderness of your unlovingness! Your eyes sent the Dutch crazy. Were you really pretending all the time?

SHE

Of course!

HE

It's been a long time since I believed women. But I'm still a little disenchanted now. I'm hurt and sad. God knows why. All the same, you are the most attractive woman on earth!

SHE

You're repeating yourself. Don't touch me, Alexei Nikolayevitch.

HE

Who started forcing themselves on who first?! I'm confused already. Was it me who took the initiative?

SHE

Don't worry, I'll find somebody else.

HE

Why are you talking nonsense?! Who will you find? In the courtyard at night!

SHE

But aren't there young, healthy and handsome men in the world, apart from you?

HE

It seems I'm jealous. You've awakened so many forgotten feelings in me!

Don't spoil it all, please! It will be so good for us now! Okay?

SHE

I'm older than you.

HE

I'm not as demanding as you are. And what does that mean for a fling late into the night?

SHE

Let me go!

HE

What's the matter? What's happened to you? What am I doing wrong?

Am I not saying something wrong? Have I hurt you somehow?

SHE

It's just time I was home. I have - things to do.

HE

Do you take the sick into your house at night?

SHE

It happens - can you imagine it! There are sixteen entrances to our building.

And everyone comes to see me! Even with toothache! Enough! I said let me go!

What do I have to do - call for help or something?

HE

Go.

SHE

But... You're holding me.

HE

I'm not holding you. I'm embracing you. Anyway, you're not capable of grasping the difference. (HE releases her.) You're free. Run!

The telephone rings. SHE picks up the receiver.

SHE

Allo! You've got the wrong number. This is the cemetery.

There's no one here of that name. (SHE replaces the receiver.)

HE

What a sense of humour you have. Congratulations!

SHE

Of course someone had to call you. All the more so as it was your wife who called.

HE

Why did you take the phone?

SHE

Reflex. Don't worry, she'll probably call back.

The telephone rings.

HE (picks up the phone)

Hello! I'm alone. I was delayed with the Dutch. Everything's alright. Yes, they agreed. Thanks. Yes, I'm coming. I'm on my way out. And you as well. (HE replaces the receiver.)

SHE

I'm so tired.

HE

I'll get you home.

SHE

Thanks. I'll go on foot.

HE

Will you let me get you home anyway? Are you ready? Let's go!

SHE

Give me a cigarette!

HE

I won't. You don't smoke.

SHE

I'll start.

HE

I wouldn't advise it. You'll become addicted.

SHE

What difference is it to you whether I become addicted or not? You're never going to see me again anyway!

HE

I'm just not used to the thought yet. You're welcome. (HE gives her a cigarette.)

You're welcome. (HE lights her cigarette.)

She smokes. He waits.

HE

Maybe you'll have some coffee?

SHE

Thanks. Don't worry. Am I keeping you back?

HE

A little.

Pause.

HE

Can I tell you something?

SHE

I'm listening.

HE

I really do like you. I'm sorry to part with you just like that and lose you.

And don't forget - they invited us both to Holland! What will I tell the Dutch?

They were interested in you particularly, Marina Andreyevna. What will I tell them? A story about our separation, your unfaithfulness or your death?

SHE

Whatever you like.

HE

I would like to invite you to work with me. How much do you earn as a doctor?

SHE

Not a lot.

HE

For a start I'll offer you twice as much. And that's just the beginning.

SHE

Poor Russia! If everyone starts trading, who will teach, heal, educate?

HE

You can practice as a doctor with us! It will be good for you. And convenient for me.

SHE

How many people work here?

HE

Full-time - a little less than twenty. But there are about fifty part-time workers.

SHE

One doctor for fifty people in any given company. And for the rest of Russia - one doctor for every ten thousand.

HE

It's not my ambition to take all the cares of Russia on myself.

As long as I've lived, I've never seen one person who could cope with that.

As far as I'm personally concerned, I give enough to charity.

SHE

Enough for you, or for charity?

HE

We'll speak about that another time. But just now, I'd like to return to my offer.

SHE

Go ahead.

HE

I would really like to work with you. You're a beautiful, intelligent, educated woman!

You have character. You're a good companion and understand everything at a glance. You're businesslike, although a little naive. You're entering your summer. You have your own opinion about everything. You're energetic and enterprising. You're daring and decisive. In essence, you are a natural leader.

SHE

So many virtues! I don't recognise myself in this portrait! Aren't you afraid of competition?

HE

No... You and I complement each other perfectly. You're an adventurer, and I'm circumspect. You sense the big picture, and I pay attention to detail. You're educated, you have ideas, and I have experience. You're a temperamental person, and I'm consistent. And in general, I like you more and more.

SHE

Alright. I'll think about it.

HE

Think about it. Here's my card. I will wait for your answer. Where shall I take you now?

SHE

You asked me to think. Sit and wait. I'm thinking.

Pause.

HE

Shall I make coffee?

SHE

You're always the same. Don't stay quiet!! Speak! I don't care what about. For background effect.

HE

I can't speak, knowing that I'm not being listened to.

SHE

I'll keep up the conversation. Like you, I'm perfectly capable of saying one thing and thinking about something quite different.

HE

Yet another virtue! Why were you never married?

I'm not offending you? I wouldn't ask if you were some sort of monster.

SHE

I wanted to marry for love.

HE

You were hopelessly in love? It happens to women.

They get caught up in it. And waste time.

SHE

I had an unhappy love.

Pause.

SHE

I'll tell you. Women do adore talking about love!

HE

Maybe another time?

SHE

Hear me out, please.

HE

Of course, of course.

SHE

I was thirteen. My parents rented a dacha for me and my grandmother in Lacht on the Gulf of Finland. And I met him there. He was eighteen. And it was his last summer before his military service. God, how handsome he was! Not just handsome - beautiful! Black hair, tanned, in a blue shirt the colour of his blue eyes! His face constantly had an expression of some kind of gentle attentiveness, concentration. And attention to something unseen by others. Maybe it was to what was in himself. I've never met anyone remotely like him since. He was a real man. For many years, only the knowledge that he was alive protected me from all the evil in the world. He had no aggression. He was somehow professorially courteous, respectful, he had amazingly good manners. And such an open, naive laugh. And white, even teeth. I loved him at first sight. I loved him deeply, strongly, passionately and shyly. As only a well-read girl who is prone to fantasies can love. It lasted a week, no more. We didn't manage to say anything in particular to each other. Love overtook us suddenly. We managed to fall in love, but we didn't manage to get used to each other.

Pause.

HE

Thank you, thank you for telling me this. Then what?

SHE

At the dacha, before I met him, I hung out with a gang, a group of guys from the neighbourhood and their girlfriends, several couples. I used to go round with them, although I never got off with anyone, and never went out with any of them. We swam, rode around on mopeds, played cards and table tennis. I didn't really spend that much time with them. I read a lot, thought about things, got sad about things. I valued my solitude.

All the same, these guys didn't like the fact that an outsider had become important to me. They tore into him, picked fights. And it wasn't just that he wasn't scared of them, he didn't even notice them. That probably infuriated them more than anything.

Pause.

HE

Then what? Thank you, thank you, I'm listening.

SHE

One morning I woke up knowing that some misfortune had happened. I got up and began pacing around the house, as if I was looking for this misfortune. The sun was scorching. The insects were buzzing. The dahlias were blooming. Everything smelt of peace and unity. I gradually calmed down and went to the well for water. And I heard the neighbours talking there. All night they'd been searching for a young lad, a good-looking boy, who lived with his sister and mother in a dacha right by the sea. My misfortune had found me! I dropped the bucket and went into the yard opposite. Ach, how the sun burnt, as if it were ancient Judea! In the middle of the yard, my gang had set bottles up, and was shooting at them with a double-barrelled shotgun. And another double-barrelled shotgun lay on the table. I picked it up and aimed it at one of them, nicknamed Pinetree, I don't remember his name. Pine-trees grew next to his house, that's why he had such a nickname. I aimed for a long time, very carefully. I was afraid to miss. And a silence fell! I could hear milk hitting the side of a bucket in the barn. His mother was milking a cow. I fired. It hit me full force in the shoulder. Pinetree fell like he'd been cut by a scythe. And I aimed at Vaska the Turner. I was a bit surprised - why's he so white? A moment ago he was as tanned as an African! And then his girlfriend, I don't remember her name, began screaming, as if it could pierce you, and threw herself at him to cover him. And he didn't push her away, he even squatted somehow behind her back. She was in my way. I didn't want to shoot at her. And suddenly, you couldn't make out from where, Pinetree's mother! She was shouting: "Dead! My son is dead!" I threw the gun away and left. I don't remember how I ended up at his dacha by the Gulf. Two weeping women, his mother and sister, were collecting his things. Ach, with what hatred they looked at me! I don't remember how or when I returned home. A policeman was already waiting for me. But I hadn't killed Pinetree, just wounded his shoulder, a flesh wound. Otherwise I'd have been in prison! But then the gang would be sent down as well! My parents would have attempted to do that! Pinetree's mother had thought it all out, and withdrew the accusation. I was taken to Leningrad. I caught some kind of fever. And I was let out when the leaves had already turned yellow. It was terrible!

Pause.

HE

Thank you, thank you.

SHE

And now hold on to yourself!

HE

What, what?..

SHE

You look amazingly like that boy, who I still loved for such a long time and never saw again.

HE

Thank you, thank you. I envy you.

I have never had such a love. I don't really believe in love.

SHE

I chose you because I wanted my son to look like him.

HE

Thank you. But it doesn't work like that.(HE looks at his watch.) Ten o'clock.

The telephone rings. It rings for a long time, but neither of them picks it up.

SHE

Thank you.

HE

What for?

SHE

Today I understood - it's impossible to live in the past all one's life.(Laughs.) When I was trying to persuade you today, I was hysterically afraid that I wouldn't succeed. Then I would have gone off my head with shame. But victory can be more shameful than defeat.

HE (laughs)

We already have memories in common. And defeats, and victories.

SHE

I've grown up today. I don't understand the person I was this morning.

How could I hope to have a son I love from a man I don't love?

HE

You don't like me at all?

SHE

No, not at all.

HE

That's a pity.

SHE

What can I do?

HE

Is it possible to know why? Before, you found so many virtues in me.

SHE

I was mistaken.

HE

A pity! I'd already got used to seeing something of myself in your eyes.

SHE

Just now, when you need me, you smile so gently, you look at me in such a friendly way. It's possible to believe that you really like me.

HE

I really do like you. You don't have enough confidence in yourself.

You don't have any foundation to doubt your own attractiveness.

SHE

That sounds straightforward, open and sincere.

HE

I'm saying what I think.

SHE

But you're not trying as hard as you did in front of the Dutch.

HE

It depends on the circumstances.

SHE

Why didn't I seem so attractive to you in the street?

HE

I didn't know you then.

SHE

You

didn't know that I could be of some benefit to you? And you simply turn on the charm and sincerity when you need to use something.

HE

Eleven o'clock. My wife will be worrying.

We have to consider other peoples feelings. Where shall I take you?

SHE

Did I work well for you?

HE

Yes, very well. Thank you.

SHE

And where are the four hundred bucks? You promised me, if...

HE (interrupting)

Sorry, I forgot. Here. (HE takes money from his pocket, takes an envelope, puts the money inside it and offers it to her.)

SHE (not taking it)

You've put me in an uncomfortable position. You made it necessary for me to remind you about the money. That's not gentlemanly.

HE

I'm sorry. You're right.

SHE

Take a hundred bucks out. I return them to you.

HE

Let it be my personal gift to you.

SHE

I don't take anything from strangers.

HE

Alright. (With a sigh, HE takes a note from the envelope.)

SHE

Do you always carry a thousand, two thousand dollars?

HE

You want to mug me?

SHE

You carry as much money with you for incidental expenses as a normal person can live on for a year.

HE

I have as much money as I earn.

SHE

You don't work, you trade.

HE

You're absolutely right. You probably don't work either, but pretend that you heal people, the way it happens in neighbourhood health centres.

SHE

I've thought. I won't work for you.

HE (suddenly embracing her and lightly touching his lips to hers)

I didn't mean to insult you. I don't understand, what's going on? Why are we heading for such an end? How can we change it? Give me a call! Call me! Don't lose touch! And take the money! You earned them honestly.(HE puts the envelope on the table.)

SHE

I won't take the money. Put the envelope away, or it'll disappear.

HE

No one steals here. I pay well, and everyone values their job.

(HE switches off the light.) We can go.

SHE

But you offered coffee!

HE

Another time!

SHE

There won't be another time! We'll say goodbye, and I'll go forever.

HE

Do you live nearby?

SHE

Relatively near. What about it?

HE

Drink coffee at home.

SHE

I don't keep coffee at home. My salary doesn't allow it.

HE (switches on the desk lamp, takes a jar of coffee from a box)

Is 'Classic' alright? I'll give it to you as a souvenir.

SHE

I told you, I don't take presents on a first date!

The telephone rings. It rings a long time. Neither of them picks it up.

HE

Excuse me, but there's no time to make coffee. I'm in a hurry. My wife is waiting for me. She's worrying, she can't sleep. This is hard for you to understand. You're a free person. (HE waits demonstratively.)

Long pause.

SHE (quietly)

Kiss me goodbye. Please.

HE (kisses)

Don't lose touch! I'm going to miss you. Come round.

SHE

At the end of the working day? Stand over there and wait for you to whistle? And wonder whether you need me now or not?

HE (very seriously and carefully)

What do you want from me? I can't understand. I can't guess, though I'm trying very hard. You have to tell me yourself. Gather your courage and tell me. You can be brave. Is it really easier to be brave than truthful?

SHE

If I understood it myself.

HE

How can I understand you if you don't understand yourself?

Pause.

HE (seriously and gently)

You're deluded.

SHE (starting)

Deluded?! Yes! You're right.

HE

You'll see everything differently in the morning. And in a week, you'll have forgotten the mood you're in now. You'll have forgotten me, I'm afraid.

SHE

I'm scared. I'm thirteen years old again. I feel I'm at the epicentre of a catastrophe again. And there's no escape. I always knew that loneliness isn't when there's no one else. It's when all you need is solitude. I was so careful. I looked after myself so well. I couldn't allow my heart to be broken again. I wasn't able to approach you. I followed you for a month. I dreamed, fantasised, was enraptured by you, was indignant, jealous, hated you, suffered. I was alive!!! There wasn't one ordinary day! Every day became full of you!

Why deceive myself and you? I love you madly, passionately, deeply. I love you!

What am I to do with my love for you? (SHE goes down on her knees before him.)

Tell me, what should I do?

HE also goes down on his knees, embraces her and rocks her like a small child.

HE

My defenceless little thirteen-year-old girl! My dear, sweet girl! Where did you appear from? From where did you burst into my colourless existence? You are my unexpected festival. You smell of lilacs. Why? Because I love you. I want you to be happy. I will take you to a place I know, and we will buy you a dress, like a princess, and crystal slippers.

You yourself don't know how magnetic you are! I love you very much.

SHE (weeping)

Alyoshenka.

HE

I thank fate for you. I'm not worthy of you. You are the best thing that has ever happened to me. I'm thirty years old. I haven't lived yet. I made myself. From nothing. From a provincial boy, not blessed with any abilities, only conscientiousness.

From a boy, whose father drank and beat his mother, whose mother cried and worked to bring up three children. I came to Moscow. Studied and worked, earned money and sent almost everything to mama for my little sister. Married somehow suddenly, according to my mood, and it seems to me now - without love. Yes, I earn a lot, but I don't have time, or wish to spend the money. Never in my life have I had a holiday.

I don't believe what is happening to us, you and I. I don't believe it.

SHE

Alyoshenka.

HE

You're crying. Such delicious tears... So sweet. My little girl, we'll go together to Holland. By the way, is your foreign travel passport in order?

SHE (laughs)

I don't have and never have had a foreign travel passport. I've been in Riga, in Sochi and in the Pushkin Mountains. I know Moscow and Leningrad.

My mama was ill for many years, it was impossible to leave her alone.

I want to see the world with you. What do I need the world for without you?

HE

I'll show you the whole world. We'll travel together everywhere. And then you will have a daughter. Maybe you could agree to a girl, since we already won't manage a boy?

SHE

Let it be a girl! And sometimes girls don't live so badly.

HE

Thank you! And I will always, always help you! And later, when our daughter is older, you will introduce us. I want you to have our daughter, and call her Marina.

It won't be so painful for you to part from me if our girl will be with you?

SHE

Yes.

HE

It won't be too painful for you? I'm afraid for you.

You're so gentle. It won't be too painful for you?

SHE

No.

HE

It will be painful for you, of course, as it will be for me.

But it won't be painful for you too long?

SHE

No.

HE

I love you.

SHE

Yes.

HE

Do you love me?

SHE

Yes. It's time you went home. They're waiting for you and worrying.

HE

My wife's asleep. She goes to bed early. She gets tired with our daughter.

Our daughter really is very capricious, and my wife, it's true, is nervy.

She's difficult to please. She doesn't like anything that I do. Everything I say irritates her. She's constantly nagging me about staying late at work. She has hysterics because she thinks I don't pay her enough attention. If my wife was a woman like you, I'd be happy. There's nothing shallow or ordinary in you. You are a feast. You have a soul.

SHE

Thank you.

HE

No, she's wonderful around the house, a wonderful wife, a wonderful mother. I'm satisfied with everything. The house is clean. My daughter has things to do. Of course, it's hard for my wife to stay at home. She gets tired. I could take my family somewhere on the weekends to relax. I miss my daughter in the course of the week - and my daughter misses me. But it's precisely at the weekends that my wife has to go shopping. To look for some blouse or umpteenth swimming costume. And we go halfway round Moscow, and spend money uselessly. And my wife gets irritable, and my daughter starts whining. And I can't tell one blouse from another anyway, because my wife's the same wife in them all.

I'm afraid it really is time for me to go. Will we go to Holland together?

SHE

Yes.

HE

I don't believe it. Is there sea there? I've never been in Holland.

SHE

There's sea.

HE

What's it called?

SHE

The Dutch Sea. Everything's Dutch there.

Dutch tulips, Dutch cheese. Non-Dutch don't have anything to do there!

HE

We'll behave ourselves like Dutch people. We'll eat cheese every day. And I'll give you tulips. And look after you like my most precious possession. Are you happy with me?

SHE

Yes.

HE

Why are you so quiet? And not being angry with me at all?

Pause.

HE

Everything will be alright. Do you trust me?

SHE

I trust you, Alyoshenka.

HE

It's time we went.

SHE

Yes.

They get up off the floor. HE walks round the office, adjusts something, checks something, as all thorough people do before leaving.

HE

Take the dollars!

SHE (shakes her head)

No.

HE (throws the money into the desk and locks it)

Call me! You know when? In a week. Or even in ten days.

I have a lot of work just now. And the time for the trip is already coming up.

I'll arrange your passport myself. I've got good contacts with the girls in the Foreign Ministry.

SHE

Thank you.

HE (gently and slightly ironically)

You're welcome!

SHE

We should go.

HE

There's something about you that I'm starting not to like. Your eyes are wet with tears. You must look after yourself. Don't take too much work on.

SHE

I'm on holiday at the moment.

HE

Holiday?! I envy you! Read, rest, go away somewhere, and don't forget me. And call! Okay?

SHE

Okay!

HE

Ri-gh-t. (HE looks around.) Looks like that's everything. Take the coffee!

SHE

Thank you.

HE

It's good coffee! I only drink this one.

SHE

And now I will always drink only this coffee!

HE

So, it's goodbye?

SHE

It's goodbye!

HE

Say that you love me as a goodbye. It sounds genuine when you say it.

SHE (speaking as if it were poetry)

I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you.

HE

What's the matter? Are you unwell?

SHE

I love you. I love you. I love you.

HE

Say something else! Say something different!

SHE

I don't know anything else. Only - I love you. I love you.

HE

Say something else!

SHE

What? What?

HE

I don't know.

SHE

I don't have any more to say.

HE

Listen. (Looks at his watch.) Alright, damn it! Stay here. I'll put some music on for you. Patricia Kass.(HE puts on a cassette of Patricia Kass, the song 'Stay With Me'.)

I'll be right back. In half an hour. Stay here!(HE kisses her and runs off.)

SHE

(switches the song off and begins recording herself on the tape recorder)

I love you. I will never see you again. I will not bear you a son, or a daughter. I won't go with you to Holland, because there is no such country as Holland. And you will not give me tulips every day, because there are no tulips in the world. And I will not work with you.

And you will not show me the world. Not even one little piece of the world, the tiniest bit of the world. And you will never say to me again: "Marina, I love you!" And you will not buy me a dress and crystal slippers. And you won't arrange my foreign travel passport. And I won't introduce you to our grown-up daughter. I will never have a daughter now. I will have nothing, nothing, nothing more! I don't know what you tell other women. But if it's the same as you tell me, I thank you all the same! The person who loves and suffers is not always right. And the person who doesn't love isn't always wrong. I love you, and I'm afraid that I won't have enough time to stop loving you before I die. I'm scared. And what if we don't die at all? And there, on the far unseen shore, I will love you just as hopelessly. It's not your fault that nothing happened to you. And love isn't there for the asking! It is a gift of God.

In a week from now you will look at everything with different eyes. And in a week I won't love you as I do now. So, while I still have the strength, I will leave you forever.

(SHE switches the tape recorder over to 'Play' again, and Patricia Kass continues to sing midway through the song.)

SHE takes off his jacket, carefully hangs it on the back of the chair, and leaves. Patricia Kass plays. HE returns with a bouquet of roses.

HE

You've not fallen asleep? See how quick I was! I was choosing roses, and none of the roses seemed good enough for you.(HE switches on the main light.) Marina! (Louder.) Marina!(HE looks around the room, understands that she has gone, puts down the roses, thinks, then runs to look in the desk drawer, unlocks the safe, looks in, switches off the tape recorder, throws the cassette carelessly on the table and shrugs his shoulders.)

Strange woman! (HE sees his jacket, picks it up, and brings it to his face.) Strange woman.

The telephone rings.

HE

(immediately grabbing the receiver, shouts)

Is that you?!(Wearily.) I was waiting for a call, that's why I picked the phone up right away. Why aren't you asleep? No, nothing's happened to me. What do you think could happen to me? An ordinary work situation. I had to stay behind. No, you don't know why I was held back! Think whatever you like. Yes, I'm alone. Lena, I'm tired. Lena, I'm not in the mood to start justifying myself. Some problems cropped up, and I was held back. Yes, I remember that I have a family. Tomorrow I'm going to take my family to look at the dinosaurs. What fur coat, Lena? It's summer now! Why do you urgently need an Astrakhan fur coat in June?! Alright, alright, we'll buy it. And the kid will be dragged around the shops with us, as always. Lena, you have a sick imagination! What women could be in my office at night! By the way, I bought you Patricia Kass. I'll bring it. You can listen to it all day! Yes, kisses to you as well. My voice ? Is quite normal. I'm on my way home. Nothing's happened to me!

THE END

STRANGE WOMAN

A tragifarce in two acts by Nadezhda Ptushkina

translated by James Donohoe