

NIRVANA

a Play in Two Parts by

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THE MAN

CHARACTERS:

THE WOMAN

ACT ONE

A lamp with a big green lamp-shade lights part of a small study. In the left corner there is a sofa, by the sofa there is a small table on which the lamp is placed. Just next to the table, facing the audience, there is a door, by the door - a writing table. To the right there is another door. By the chair - a stool. A man, about thirty five, is lying on the sofa, half covered with a blanket, with a book in his hand. His head and shoulders rest against the wall behind the sofa. The wall is covered with a rug. The man is looking away from the book, holding in his other hand a cigarette. He extinguishes the cigarette, leans towards the lamp and darkness falls upon the room.

A tune of a wall clock heralds the hour, then a bright light fills the small study. A woman, about thirty, stands by the door to the right in a formal black dress. The man rises slightly and leans against the wall again. The woman pulls out a gun from the pocket of the trousers hung on the back of the chair, she levels it at the man. He is looking at her silently. The woman lowers her hand, puts the gun back in its place and leaves the room. The man rises from the sofa, leaning with one hand on the table, reaching out with his other hand for the switch by the door. It becomes dark in the room.

Bright light. Now the woman is holding a open newspaper. She leans against the frame of the door. The man's head and shoulders are resting against the wall.

WOMAN: I'll read you something from the paper. The headline is "Was it a revolution?". (*She reads.*) "Sultan Abdul Hamid is attempting to restore the old regime. The Sultan is arrested and taken into his villa "Alatini" together with four of his wives.

The man lights a cigarette.

The government grants an annual allowance of 13,000 liry to the remaining 746 wives from his old harem... (*Pause.*)... 746 wives from his old harem". What do you reckon?

The man says nothing. The woman folds the newspaper, flings it violently on the desk and exits. The man continues smoking his cigarette. The woman comes in and leans against the door to the right again.

I wrote a postcard to Sarah Bernhard. I didn't mention your play at all.

MAN: Don't you feel tired?

WOMAN: She'll say herself if she likes the part.

MAN: To whom will she say it?

WOMAN: To me.

MAN: And what do you think? That I'll throw myself at your feet and say: For God's sake, don't leave for Paris.

WOMAN: Whether you kneel or not I am going anyway.

MAN: Then go, no one's stopping you.

WOMAN: I wrote to my sister. To reserve two rooms in the house where she lives.

MAN: When is your train leaving?

WOMAN: On Sunday, Sunday afternoon.

MAN: There is no time left. I'll send a note to captain Popov to issue your passport as soon as possible.

WOMAN: Do you think Captain Popov will pay attention to your note?

MAN: Why not?

WOMAN: Because he is an officer. He is not some school-girl, to send him notes.

MAN: I'll ask Mr. Jordan to explain...

WOMAN: And what will he explain?

MAN: That you need to leave immediately.

WOMAN: Captain Popov will bring me the passport in person. He was in command of the ceremonial guard in front of my father's house in 1891.

MAN: I want to sleep.

WOMAN: Sleep. Who's stopping you? (*Pause.*) Are we going to discuss what to do with the maid before I leave?

MAN: No, we we're not.

WOMAN: Why not?

MAN: Because you aren't going to leave.

WOMAN: They are selling nice overshoes on Clementine street, opposite the National Museum. I'll send her to buy some.

MAN: (*looking at his watch*) Five hours left.

WOMAN: If you want we can send a pair or two to your sister?

MAN: In five hours I have to get up for that meeting. We're doing the casting tomorrow. I have to get up.

WOMAN: I'm asking you, should I send a pair of overshoes to your sister?

MAN: I have two sisters.

WOMAN: I'll send a pair to both of them.

MAN: Aren't you going to take that dress off at last?

WOMAN: Why should I take off my dress?

MAN: Because it's two o'clock in the morning.

WOMAN: Get the scissors and cut your nails.

MAN: What?

WOMAN: Cut your nails. Your toe-nails.

MAN: What's wrong with my toe-nails? I had a bath today.

WOMAN: What do you think you look like, with those nails of yours? A dragon?

MAN: There is nothing wrong with my toe-nails.

WOMAN: They're too long. Can't you see they're too long?

MAN: I can't cut them any shorter.

WOMAN: Because you weren't taught to cut them properly when you had to.

MAN: Take off your dress and go to bed.

WOMAN: Now I see, aunt Mariola was right.

MAN: What?

WOMAN: Aunt Mariola. She used to say you looked like a snake.

MAN: No, she didn't. She said I looked like a Gypsy.

WOMAN: Your skin is sort of yellow and green. Even the whites of your eyes are not really white but yellow.

MAN: That's because of the lamp.

WOMAN: No, it's not. In day light you are still yellow and green.

MAN: Your aunt Mariola looks like a pig.

WOMAN: You lie here all yellow and green with these long toe-nails of yours and you want me to take my dress off. I can't take it off.

MAN: Go to the bedroom then. Why did you come in here?

WOMAN: I can't in the bedroom either.

MAN: Do you hate me so much?

WOMAN: I can't sleep under the same roof as a snake.

MAN: Why don't you blindfold me. Tie my eyes up and guide me like a blind man when we go to parties.

WOMAN: The other men weren't blindfolded but they didn't stare like you.

MAN: How did I stare? (*Pause.*) She was sitting just in front of me - how could I miss her? (*Pause.*) I've already told you. When I think about something I do stare like that. I stare but I don't see anything. I might have been thinking about something.

WOMAN: About what?

MAN: With those college-girls in Kniajevo, it was the same. I told you I was thinking about something, I didn't stare at them.

WOMAN: And the handkerchief?

MAN: What about the handkerchief?

WOMAN: How many times did you throw the handkerchief in her lap?

MAN: Don't shout, you'll wake up the maid.

WOMAN: Four times. In a row.

MAN: I didn't make up that silly game. Grown up people - sitting there and throwing a knotted handkerchief.

WOMAN: You liked the game. Four times in a row!

MAN: She was sitting in front of me. Where could I throw it?

WOMAN: I was sitting in front of you too.

MAN: No, you weren't. You were by my side on the armchair.

WOMAN: You didn't even notice me. When the game started, I moved. I was sitting next to her on the sofa.

MAN: Then I didn't. I didn't notice.

WOMAN: How could you? Neither of you noticed anything, if only everybody had disappeared and left you two alone!

MAN: I can't stand her. Don't you understand what I am saying? I can't stand her. She is vacuous and silly and...

WOMAN: And what?

MAN: And I've told you a hundred times not to ask her to our house. Why do you keep on inviting her?

WOMAN: To keep you entertained. When she's here you are always in a good mood.

MAN: You know perfectly well that it's just the opposite.

WOMAN: And tonight at the party you were in a very good mood. Rather happy, excited.

MAN: I was like that all day. Not only tonight, but all day.

WOMAN: Why's that?

MAN: I don't know.

WOMAN: Because you knew she would be coming to the Tihov's party.

MAN: I had completely forgotten that we were going. Kiril Khristov and I left the theatre about six o'clock. We met Professor Mikhalchev and Asen Zlatarov. They were with their wives. We talked. Then Kiril Khristov and I walked down the streets.

WOMAN: And what?

MAN: Nothing. I enjoyed it.

WOMAN: Enjoyed what? Sofia's muddy streets?

MAN: They weren't muddy. It had snowed.

WOMAN: Or maybe Kiril Khristov's long nose? You can't bear him.

MAN: That's all in the past. We're going to publish a magazine now.

WOMAN: I see, the snow and Kiril Khristov. And the magazine. And you have a new play on at the theatre?

MAN: What about it?

WOMAN: Don't you enjoy that too?

MAN: I do.

WOMAN: And the college-girls fancying you and sending you anonymous postcards. And flowers. Don't you enjoy that too?

The man turns his back on her. He pulls the blanket over his head.

P a u s e

The woman sits on the stool. She pulls out the gun from the pocket of the trousers. She holds it in her hand.

MAN: Lora!

WOMAN: Yes.

MAN: How many times have you come into this room tonight?

WOMAN: Why shouldn't I?

MAN: Have you touched the gun?

WOMAN: No, I haven't.

MAN: I thought I saw you pulling out the gun and pointing it at me a while ago.

WOMAN: You thought you saw?

MAN: Then I started to sweat. I still feel very hot. (*He throws off the blanket and gets up.*)

WOMAN: (*She puts the gun on the seat of the chair.*) You shouldn't drink so much.

The jacket and the trousers on the back of the chair prevent the man from seeing the gun. He won't see it until the end of this part although the woman takes it in her hand over and over again.

MAN: I didn't drink. Not more than the others. I didn't drink.

WOMAN: So, I pulled out the gun and pointed it at you?

MAN: We were sitting with my sisters on the veranda one evening. And suddenly it seemed to me I saw maidens in white dresses dancing in the garden. They were dancing and shaking with laughter. I had cried out and fainted. I spent the next day laying feverish in the big room. My mother had dug over the spot in the garden and dusted it with sugar. She had also burned some incense there, to chase away the evil spirits. She came to me and put a wet cloth on my forehead. And she told me: 'We sent them to play far away in the woods'.

WOMAN: Poor, poor you.

MAN: Are you mocking me?

WOMAN: Why would I mock you?

MAN: I'm sorry about tonight.

WOMAN: What about?

MAN: That I snapped at you at the party.

WOMAN: I just went to see a book on the shelf.

MAN: You shouldn't turn your back on the company like that.

WOMAN: I had a reason.

MAN: And what was that?

WOMAN: Did your father beat your mother?

MAN: You are not suggesting that I might start beating you?

WOMAN: What you did was worse.

MAN: I only told you to leave the book and sit with us.

WOMAN: But HOW did you do it?

MAN: I am thirty six. I can't change.

WOMAN: You can't and you don't want to.

MAN: And I don't want to. Because you are the first one to tell me I am a rude man. No one's ever told me that before.

WOMAN: No man or no woman?

MAN: Fine. No woman.

WOMAN: Naturally!

MAN: What's so natural?

WOMAN: You've never been married. The breeding of a man shows in the way he treats his own wife. Even the boor is polite with somebody else's wife.

MAN: Is there anything else you'll make me out to be tonight? What else do you want to say?

The woman lifts the gun and it lays on her palm parallel to the back of the chair. She moves her hand up and down as if to feel its weight.

I am a simple man. I didn't study for five years in France and England.

WOMAN: Two. Two years.

MAN: I wasn't brought up by a governess...

WOMAN: I didn't have a governess.

MAN: I didn't spend my childhood surrounded by ministers and diplomats. The first time I set off for Paris some Germans in Munich made fun of me, in a pub by the station - because I didn't know where to hang up my coat. And a woman shouted at me as if I was an animal - I didn't even know why - I don't speak that barking language of theirs. Even now, every time I cross Germany I still feel like a hunted rabbit. Do you think I don't remember how the waiters bowed to you in that restaurant at "Saint Michel" and how they stared at me as if I was a performing monkey from the Orient. I know I am awkward...

WOMAN: But that didn't stop you showing up at the restaurant like Alexander The Great with that blond prostitute on your arm.

MAN: Yes, madam. I have confidence. And I shall always have confidence, even if Slaveikov and Krustev and everybody from their crowd calls me a Gypsy from Chirpan.

WOMAN: How dare you speak against Slaveikov?

MAN: I say what I like. And you'll listen because you are the same breed as them.

WOMAN: You're ungrateful!

MAN: Don't speak about what you don't understand.

WOMAN: Slaveikov gave you your name. He gave you the name Iavorov! Where would you be now without him and without Doctor Krustev?

MAN: Don't you tell me who Slaveikov is! If there is Heaven I'll follow him even there, I'll take my hat off and shout to the dead: "Look, what a marvel Bulgaria has given birth to!"

WOMAN: When did Slaveikov tell you such a thing?

MAN: He didn't.

WOMAN: He thought you greater than Vasov.

MAN: So what?

WOMAN: What do you mean?

MAN: Don't ask me to wag my tail and stand on my feet because somebody said: 'You are a puppy but you are bigger than the other puppies.'

WOMAN: He never thought you were a puppy.

MAN: He thought I wasn't good enough for polite society. He thought I was a lad from Chirpan, that God had given me some talent but didn't give me the right mother and father to teach me how to converse while sipping my coffee in the salons of Sofia's upstarts.

WOMAN: I am to blame then. And Slaveikov is to blame, and Doctor Kristev, who dragged you out from the sticks and made you what you are now.

MAN: What am I now? I am ready to give up everything and go back to Anhialo. I want nothing. Only that room.

WOMAN: What room?

MAN: A room. With a table and a bed. And one chair. And there was a fig tree there. When I worked at the table I used to close the window because of the wasps. They would come to the tree.

WOMAN: What would you do in a room like this?

MAN: What I did then. They called me "the Shadow". Because I didn't mix with people. From the telegraph-office - straight home. Only in the evenings, when the streets were empty, I'd go down by the sea. And back to the writing table. They called me "the Shadow".

WOMAN: Then send them a letter. May be they still have a vacancy in the telegraph. Or you can be a telegrapher here. (*Pause.*) I can't bring you the sea but a fig-tree I can order to be planted outside. (*Pause.*) You're an ungrateful wretch. I gave everything up. I don't write. I don't play. I've lost touch with all my dearest and nearest because of you. What more do you want?

MAN: A room. A room with four walls.

WOMAN: Does this one have five?

MAN: And with no door.

WOMAN: So I couldn't come in.

Pause.

(*She raises the pistol in her palm as though weighing it.*) You had quite a lot of bachelor pads. Did you feel better there? With a broken bed and a single nail on the wall to hang your hat on. Were you better there?

MAN: I felt miserable, at the beginning.

WOMAN: What beginning?

MAN: When I first came to Sofia.

WOMAN: But you had a pretty landlady in Maria-Luisa Street, didn't you?

MAN: I was living in Antim Street. And the landlady was old and deaf. And spiteful.

WOMAN: At least the area was perfect. With the filthiest brothels in town. What didn't you like there?

MAN: I didn't like Sofia.

WOMAN: Why don't you go back to Chirpan then? You can pick grapes and sell wine in your father's shop.

MAN: Don't go on about it! At least not about Chirpan. And my parents.

WOMAN: What?

MAN: I forbid you!

WOMAN: You're a hypocrite. In the ten or fifteen years you've been in Sofia, how many times did you go back there?

MAN: Shut up!

WOMAN: Once. For the funeral of your mother.

MAN: (*He lights a cigarette.*) That's not true.

WOMAN: What kept you in Sofia? (*Pause.*) If she was alive and was sitting here in my place would you have said 'I am ready to throw away everything and to go back to Chirpan'?

MAN: Who? Who do you mean?

WOMAN: Her.

MAN: Leave the dead in peace.

WOMAN: I am not talking about your mother.

MAN: When did I say I'd go back to Chirpan?

WOMAN: Fine. Not to Chirpan but to Anhialo. If she was alive and was sitting here would you have said: 'I am ready to throw away everything to become a telegrapher in Anhialo again'?

MAN: There are some sleeping pills in the drawer. Take one and go to sleep.

WOMAN: I just want you to tell me this.

MAN: What?

WOMAN: If she...

MAN: Who?

WOMAN: 'Miss'.

MAN: Don't call her 'Miss'.

WOMAN: What's wrong with that?

MAN: She had a name.

WOMAN: I don't want to mention it.

MAN: Have some respect for the dead at least.

WOMAN: I don't want to mention it. I loved her very much.

MAN: Then leave her, leave her alone. Talk about something else. About tonight for example. Ask! Ask more. Where did I sit. At whom did I stare. Ask even more.

WOMAN: You said: I am ready to give up everything I have and to go back to Anhialo. What do you have?

MAN: Nothing.

WOMAN: Really?

MAN: Two suits. Three rifles. A knapsack.

WOMAN: The rifles belong to the Macedonians.

MAN: That's it - I have nothing.

WOMAN: I thought you had a wife.

MAN: I should've never written those three books of poems. Nor the plays. And the theatre - even the theatre. But to be what I was, back in Anhialo. That's what I meant.

WOMAN: There is nothing wrong with the theatre. It's me. I'm in your way.

MAN: Did you touch the gun?

WOMAN: I've already told you.

MAN: No, you haven't.

WOMAN: Apart from those girls in white dancing in your garden have you ever seen any other apparitions?

MAN: Why?

WOMAN: Because we've been married for a year and I know nothing about you.

MAN: I've told you everything.

WOMAN: You've told me nothing. I am sitting in front of you as though I was in a waiting room and I wait. Mr. Iavorov will see no more visitors.

MAN: Christo Botev.

WOMAN: What?

MAN: Christo Botev. He appeared in front me.

WOMAN: Why?

MAN: I don't know. It always happens in the spring. In May. It might be some kind of illness.

WOMAN: And what?

MAN: And nothing. He stands by me and watches me. I'm sleeping in my bed and he comes, stands there and watches me.

WOMAN: But how? With a beard, rifle and sword?

MAN: I am telling you, Christo Botev, without a rifle or a sword. With boots. First I see his boots. When I open my eyes I see a pair of boots in front of me.

WOMAN: Does he say anything?

MAN: He says nothing. But twice he held out his hand to grasp me.

WOMAN: I should've bought a pair of spectacles and a pile of books and gone to the Sorbonne.

MAN: What?

WOMAN: Then I would've come back and put some order in this damned Bulgarian Literature.

MAN: Why is it damned?

WOMAN: Why hasn't anybody written something decent about you! So you could see at last who you are and what you are.

MAN: I know who I am and what I am.

WOMAN: Why do you pretend to be Christo Botev then?

MAN: I don't.

WOMAN: Why do you dream of him?

MAN: It's not a dream. It happens when I am awake. It must've been some kind of illness. And it was a long time ago.

WOMAN: Why exactly Christo Botev?

MAN: I don't know.

WOMAN: He wrote twenty poems and went to slaughter the Turks in the Balkan. You didn't write even that many and - off you go - with the butchers in Macedonia.

MAN: Lora!

WOMAN: If only you had slaughtered somebody...

MAN: He didn't either.

WOMAN: Well, that's one thing you have in common.

MAN: I forbid you to call them butchers.

WOMAN: You called them that.

MAN: I can. You can't.

WOMAN: Should I remind you how you came back from Salonika and asked me to lock up all the rifles and knapsacks with two sets of padlocks because you were sick to your soul with all that.

MAN: I came back from a war. How could I have not been sick to my soul.

WOMAN: That was funny. When I think about it now - that was very funny.

MAN: You think the war was funny?

WOMAN: You wrote me a farewell letter, as if you were on that boat 'Radetzki'. You mentioned Peter in it as Botev had mentioned the children in his letter to his wife. And I was pretending to be Veneta Boteva.

MAN: You might have been pretending. I wasn't.

WOMAN: And those rebels in Samokov...

MAN: What about the rebels?

WOMAN: Carters and barbers, in it for the drinking and pillaging.

MAN: Who told you that about them?

WOMAN: You did.

MAN: Why did you get up from your place?

WOMAN: Why shouldn't I?

MAN: When I close my eyes and think, even now, what is the dearest thing on earth which will make my heart bleed before I die, that's still Macedonia. And the first person I'll be looking for in Heaven, if there is any Heaven, is Gotse.

WOMAN: I am not talking about Gotse.

MAN: He would meet me holding three snowdrops in his hand. He had picked three snowdrops and handed them to me because he liked the first issue of 'Freedom or Death'. A man with two pistols in his belt. And a dagger. And three snowdrops.

WOMAN: I am not talking about Gotse.

MAN: Christo Chernopeev kept two hundred pounds of gold from the ransom of Miss Stone, but didn't take a penny for his wife. His wife and four children were starving in the North of Bulgaria. Krustyo Assenov walked to Sofia and then begged 10 leva for the train fare from his sister and didn't touch the gold either. Who are you calling thieves and murderers?

WOMAN: What about the slaughtered in Mehomia? And the looting of Kavala?

MAN: I am talking about 1903!

WOMAN: I am talking about now!

MAN: What - now? Now it is a war, it's not a revolution.

WOMAN: Even if it was a revolution, innocent people would still die. I know what a revolution is like.

MAN: From the French nuns in the boarding-school? Did they teach you what a revolution is like?

WOMAN: Apparently you've forgotten who my father was?

MAN: You aren't trying to tell me he was a revolutionary, are you?

WOMAN: And my uncle, wasn't he one either?

MAN: And your mother. And your cousin. And General Tzonchev. And Tsar Ferdinand with all his castles and carriages. All of them are revolutionaries.

WOMAN: I am talking about Lyuben Karavelov. Not about the Tsar.

MAN: You have nothing to do with Karavelov. Apart from the name.

WOMAN: None of my family were ever at the tsar's court, they were never courtiers.

MAN: Gotse died a disappointed man. When he met me with the three snowdrops smiling by that rock he was already a disappointed man.

WOMAN: Even my mother.

MAN: Every brute in Bulgaria, with or without an uniform, was shedding crocodile tears about the freedom of Macedonia.

WOMAN: She was invited a couple of times to the Palace but that doesn't mean anything.

MAN: From St. Petersburg to London everybody took to feathering their own nest from what was left of Macedonian. What could Gotse do alone?

WOMAN: Do you have any idea what kind of people gathered in General Lermontov's house?

MAN: What General? What Lermontov?

WOMAN: General Lermontov. The one who is a relative of the poet. I've told you a hundred times that my mother stayed in their house in Moscow. She met Sophia Perovska and Natalia Armfeld there.

MAN: So what?

WOMAN: They were revolutionaries.

MAN: In the General's house?

WOMAN: That's what I am saying.

MAN: What are you saying?

WOMAN: General Lermontov. They met in his house.

MAN: Who met there?

WOMAN: The revolutionaries.

MAN: Don't tell me, please, that a Russian general can be a revolutionary because I'll take this lamp and I'll smash it on the floor.

WOMAN: Now it's the lamp's fault.

MAN: That's the reason for the tragi-comedy down there in Macedonia, because the generals pretended to be revolutionaries.

WOMAN: Tragi-comedy ?

MAN: A general - a revolutionary!

WOMAN: Apart from you and me I can't see anything tragic about it.

MAN: Because you weren't there.

WOMAN: I was here. Do you think it was easy for me watching you moaning and groaning over the map for a whole year.

MAN: They were Bulgarian towns and villages. There were Bulgarian people left there.

WOMAN: Stop it!

MAN: Stop what?

WOMAN: One whole year of offensives, retreats, negotiations, reckoning and bargaining. We were brothers with the Serbs, we were brothers with the Greeks. Then the Serbs became villains and the Greeks became villains too. And the Rumanians are

the greatest villains of all. Now we are going to become brothers with the Turks. I am sick of it all.

MAN: I am sick of it too! Go to bed!

WOMAN: What about what I'm going through? You don't give a dam. You don't care about my tragedy.

MAN: It's a catastrophe for Bulgaria. What can I do if I can't sleep, I can't write. Nothing. Five states against poor Bulgaria.

WOMAN: During the negotiations and bargaining for Macedonia you said that something should be done.

MAN: I did. I said we should do something.

WOMAN: And there you are - something was done. A catastrophe, a massacre, that's what was done!

MAN: Am I to blame for the catastrophe? Ten years ago I went to Macedonia to campaign for a social revolution, I didn't campaign for a war.

WOMAN: But you went to enjoy the shelling near Kiustendil...

MAN: What?

WOMAN: Two months ago.

MAN: I didn't enjoy that. Those were the blackest days of my life.

WOMAN: Why did you go then?

MAN: Do you think I could stay here? Tied to your apron strings.

WOMAN: It was NOT a revolution.

MAN: I never wrote a single line in favour of the war. I never wrote a single patriotic poem.

WOMAN: It doesn't matter that you didn't.

MAN: Others did.

WOMAN: Sleep then. If your conscience is clear why can't you sleep?

MAN: There is a song that keeps running through my head.

WOMAN: Write it down. There's the ink-pot.

MAN: I heard it ten years ago. During the campaign, when I was touring Macedonia with the printing press on the back of my horse.

WOMAN: Am I in your way?

MAN: A boy was singing it, a boy in Kukush. 'Hey, girl, beautiful girl! Iris in the summer, pansy in the winter! Why did you burst into blossom early before Easter, early before Easter, before Easter Sunday.'

WOMAN: I hate Macedonia.

MAN: I'd come into somebody's house and a young girl used to hand me an apple. The host would pour a glass or two of rakia, they'd make some coffee and if there was a girl in the house she'd hand me a red apple as a welcome. Then she would rush out

blushing. I'd sit quietly by the fire and my friend would say enough for both of us. Then we would set out all our gear about the room and we'd start to print the newspaper. The press fitted in two saddle-bags. We carried dynamite on the back of the horse - so we could light it and run if anything happened. I spoke once in a church, just before Easter. About freedom and justice. Three thousand women and girls raped, two hundred villages burned, seven thousand slaughtered - that's what freedom and justice meant to them.

WOMAN: It wasn't you who slaughtered them. The Turks slaughtered them.

MAN: Why did you burst into blossom early before Easter... For the past ten years their graves are weed-grown, dogs piss on them and soldiers march over them measuring off the land: this bit for the Greek King, this bit for the Serbian and this - for the German - nobody left out.

WOMAN: Mourn for them, mourn. Mourn for everything. Macedonia, Macedonian women. And mourn Bulgaria, for our Tsar is a German. When you stop crying you might remember me.

MAN: Take off that black dress and go to bed.

WOMAN: Is it the colour that irritates you?

MAN: Why did you bring ten dressing gowns from Paris? Put one of them on.

WOMAN: Don't you like the black?

MAN: I am still alive.

WOMAN: Alive. You - alive.

MAN: Take off that black dress.

WOMAN: Perhaps you forgot what happened three months ago.

MAN: What happened?

WOMAN: Nothing. Nothing happened.

MAN: Lora!

WOMAN: Nothing happened.

MAN: You mustn't...it's a sin.

WOMAN: What's a sin?

MAN: It's a sin to grieve for an unborn child.

WOMAN: And you? What do you grieve for? Macedonia?

MAN: Me? I grieve for myself.

WOMAN: You're fine. You sit in your warm office, in that new theatre. The newspapers write about you every day, the actresses knock on your door.

MAN: How do you know they knock? (*Pause.*) I don't need a warm office. I don't care what the newspapers write. The only thing in front of my eyes are galoshes. Those of the Bulgarian peasants. They left their land, if they had any, they left their ploughs and went bare handed against the guns. Because they read in the school-books: 'He who falls in the fight for freedom will never die' and 'My dear Fatherland - I love you'. Now their flesh is rotting in foreign lands, their children are starving and we sit in our warm

offices sipping coffee and fretting over the map: 'We've made a mistake! We've made such a mess!'

WOMAN: You have nothing to do with this. Did you order the artillery to fire at the Serbs?

MAN: I didn't.

WOMAN: Then what?

MAN: I didn't plot to be crowned as emperor in Istanbul either. But it is very easy to say now: 'Tsar Ferdinand is to blame. General Savov is to blame. The Prime Minister is to blame.' But when we could have done something, nobody did. Nobody wrote anything either. Including me.

WOMAN: Write. Since you know what to write. Write now.

MAN: I can't. And I don't know. I don't know what should be written.

WOMAN: Call Alexandrov tomorrow and tell him to take the rifles in the larder.

MAN: What a delusion! We believed we were taking part in a revolution while others were scheming to conquer Istanbul.

WOMAN: Or I can lock them in the chest?

MAN: Do you know what we were? We were gravediggers at a wedding. Everybody around was making shady deals and speculations while we were shouting: 'Freedom for Macedonian slaves!'. Gravediggers at a wedding, that's what we were. Don't you touch the rifles.

WOMAN: Do you need them?

MAN: Don't touch them.

WOMAN: Now you look handsome.

MAN: What?

WOMAN: You look handsome. When you stare at me with those wide open eyes and tight lips you look like an offended child.

MAN: I won't be able to sleep now.

WOMAN: Take some pills.

MAN: What pills?

WOMAN: You said there were some sleeping pills over there.

MAN: I don't feel like taking any.

WOMAN: Do you want me to play something on the piano?

MAN: Right now?

WOMAN: I'd like to.

MAN: Come here.

WOMAN: Why?

MAN: Just come.

The woman does not move from her place.

Is there some wine left from last night?

WOMAN: I don't know.

MAN: All right. I'll take a pill.

WOMAN: Take what you want.

MAN: Why don't you come here?

WOMAN: I think there's some French cognac left. There is no wine.

MAN: Fetch it. Wait, I'll do it.

WOMAN: Why shouldn't I play?

MAN: Because you'll wake up the landlords. What are you doing?

WOMAN: I am putting it back. (*She puts the gun in the back pocket of the trousers.*) It had slipped out. I bought it from the new wine store.

MAN: What?

WOMAN: The cognac.

MAN: Was that button undone?

WOMAN: Which button?

MAN: On the pocket.

WOMAN: I don't know. Probably. Otherwise how could it have slipped out.

MAN: (*He stares at her for a few seconds, pulls the gun out of the pocket, moves towards the writing table, opens the drawer, puts the gun inside, locks up the drawer.*) Do you want us to go to bed now?

WOMAN: No. I don't want to.

MAN: (*He lays his hand on her head.*) Lora! (*She takes his hand between hers and puts it on her cheek.*) You don't have to do anything. I'll carry you there.

WOMAN: I don't want to.

MAN: I'll take off your dress.

WOMAN: No.

MAN: And I'll put you to bed.

WOMAN: I don't want to.

MAN: What a life! (*He abruptly pulls his hand away and exits.*)

The woman moves in front of the writing table, she tries to open the drawer, then suddenly moves aside. The man comes in.

The bulb's gone. Where are the candles?

WOMAN: They must be here. In the drawer.

MAN: They aren't in the drawer. (*He gets a box of matches from the table.*) I am going to get the bottle, I'll light a match.

WOMAN: Try not to set the house on fire.

The man exits. The woman goes into the other room. In a while we can hear her playing the piano.

ACT TWO

The man comes in, he puts the bottle on the table. The music stops. He pulls his watch out of his pocket, opens it, closes it nervously. A hand appears through the half open door to the right and switches off the light. Now the only light comes from the next room. A figure wrapped in a long black cloak is standing in the doorway with a white skull above the cloak.

MAN: What have you done with yourself? (*Pause.*) I am asking you what have you done with yourself?

WOMAN: Good evening Mr. Iavorov.

MAN: Good morning Mrs. Iavorov.

WOMAN: Go on, make up a title.

MAN: What do we need a title for?

WOMAN: For my tableau.

MAN: Leave that thing and come here. I found the wine.

WOMAN: Make up a title.

MAN: Free woman. The title is 'Free woman'.

WOMAN: Oh, and you are a playwright? (*She exits.*)

The man pours some wine into the glass. The woman comes in. Her face is serene and she is smiling.

When we, the dead, awake.

MAN: What?

WOMAN: 'When we, the dead, awake'. Don't you like it?

MAN: I found the wine.

WOMAN: Did I scare you?

MAN: If Ivan Andreichin had seen you he would've put you on the front cover.

WOMAN: I would have to have been naked. In his magazine mortals are always naked.

MAN: Tell Theodora to take that thing away.

WOMAN: Which thing?

MAN: The mask.

WOMAN: Theodora said she won't be coming to our house any more.

MAN: Why?

WOMAN: Because of what happened today.

MAN: Why? What happened today?

WOMAN: You turned her out.

MAN: Did I? Did I really?

WOMAN: Why do you look at me with such horror. Is what I've just said so terrible? (*This time he is sitting on the stool. She comes behind him, she buries her fingers in his hair.*) We'll buy that house by the garrison, I'll buy you a writing table as big as this room, a marble ink-pot and a silver pen. Then I'll lock the door with ten keys.

MAN: Why?

WOMAN: In case somebody tries to steal you.

MAN: Somebody who has a garden. To use me as a scarecrow.

WOMAN: Let me see. A white hair. You have a white hair. I'll pluck it out.

MAN: Leave me alone!

WOMAN: I wonder how you'll look when you get older. With white hair on this black face.

MAN: Like an old Gypsy.

WOMAN: I'll pluck it out.

MAN: Lora!

WOMAN: A woman told me you were the most handsome man in Sofia.

MAN: Really?

WOMAN: Since you came back from France. Since you've started to dress smartly.

MAN: Who is she? I'll buy her a drink.

WOMAN: She also dresses very smartly.

MAN: Do I know her?

WOMAN: You do. You threw the handkerchief in her lap ten times tonight.

MAN: Here we go again!

WOMAN: (*her fingers still into his hair.*) It doesn't matter how she dresses, she'll always be a provincial.

MAN: Let go of my head!

WOMAN: And the shoes she was wearing! She bought the blouse and the skirt from 'Poltzer' but her shoes...

MAN: What are you doing?

WOMAN: Common flirt. Tota. Her name is Totka. Tota! From Lovech. She changed it to Dora.

MAN: Ouch!

WOMAN: I plucked it out.

MAN: What are we doing here? What are we doing here in the middle of the night with these glasses?

WOMAN: Drink! I can't.

MAN: I can't either.

WOMAN: Tota!

MAN: She's your friend, isn't she?

WOMAN: She is not.

MAN: Sit down. Sit down here. (*She sits on the stool this time. The man stands behind her. He leans and kisses her on the hair.*) Why did Theodora get so cross today?

WOMAN: She didn't get cross. She was embarrassed and she left.

MAN: Two women in the dead of winter sitting on a bench and talking about poetry. One couldn't help laughing.

WOMAN: You didn't laugh. You were nasty. Sarcastic.

MAN: There must have been a reason.

WOMAN: Of course. A bourgeois, a dilettante, a housewife with big ambitions sitting on a bench and reading the poems of her husband to an actress. Of course it was funny.

MAN: I couldn't stand by that bench and start explaining what I wrote and why, could I?

WOMAN: Nobody asked you to explain anything. I only wanted you to confirm that the poem was not about her.

MAN: Who's 'her'?

WOMAN: You know very well.

MAN: I don't.

WOMAN: If I call her 'Miss' will you give me that murderous look again?

MAN: Why don't you call her by her name?

WOMAN: Minka. The poem was not written about Minka.

MAN: It was about her.

WOMAN: You want to annoy me.

MAN: It was about her.

WOMAN: (*She opens a book.*)

So come, the day is cold and dead

This moonlit night, hair tumbling round your eyes,

Lower your head...

MAN: I know it.

WOMAN: (*She keeps reading.*)

And breath into my face,

Come, warm my chilly heart with your embrace

MAN: Stop reading. I know it.

WOMAN: (*She keeps reading.*)

This moonlit night, beneath the starry skies.

(*She throws the book on the desk.*) This was written about a woman that you'd made love with. Love like 'love', in the bedroom.

MAN: Yes.

WOMAN: And it was the...young one? Minka?

MAN: No, it wasn't her. Read the last verse. I don't remember it.

WOMAN: (*She opens the book.*)

I woke up in the blackest darkness,

My tears shed sad and hot.

I wept and cried out with all my heart

For you and for my wretched lot...

MAN: THIS is about Minka.

WOMAN: Why do you want to annoy me?

MAN: I wrote this poem in Straldja. I was a telegrapher there too.

WOMAN: In the last century.

MAN: Why?

WOMAN: How old were you when you wrote that?

MAN: I don't know. Nineteen or twenty. No. More. Twenty two.

WOMAN: You see - in the last century.

MAN: Yes.

WOMAN: Mina was five years old. Or she hadn't even been born.

MAN: Why? She was twenty when she died.

WOMAN: However old she died, you didn't know her at that time, in that village Straldja.

MAN: I knew another woman. When Minka died and I was putting the book together I changed the last verse.

WOMAN: (*She opens the book.*)

I woke up in the blackest darkness

My tears shed sad and hot
And wept, and cried out with all my heart
For you and for my wretched lot...

MAN: Yes. But I changed the second verse too. The whole poem.

WOMAN: How was it? Before you changed it.

MAN: I don't know. I can't remember.

WOMAN: What about her?

MAN: Who?

WOMAN: That woman, from that village.

MAN: She was a teacher. From Sliven.

WOMAN: Where is she now?

MAN: I don't know.

WOMAN: But she's still alive?

MAN: Probably.

WOMAN: I wonder which poem will you change when I die.

MAN: Why? I'll write a new one.

WOMAN: Will it be beautiful?

MAN: I'll try my best. (*Pause.*) Tell me, please, aren't you sick and tired of talking about death all the time?

WOMAN: I don't think you loved her either.

MAN: Maybe.

WOMAN: Do you know what I am talking about?

MAN: What are you talking about?

WOMAN: I am talking about her again. About the young one.

MAN: A-h-a.

WOMAN: And the flowers you took every day to her grave in Paris, and your silence, and your solitude - everything was very beautiful but I didn't believe you. I didn't believe you then, I don't believe you now either. You spoke about your faithfulness to her, about your pain...

MAN: Did I?

WOMAN: I knew her well. She was a very nice girl. But then, in Paris, after all those words you said, I lost the feeling of her being real. A creature from another world. A delicate lily in the slough of the Bulgarian province. The white arms of an angel. The smile of a child. The eyes containing the whole black melancholy of the world...

MAN: I didn't!

WOMAN: ...intriguing as the evening sky, like the mysterious twilight in Paris.

MAN: I didn't say those words!

WOMAN: You didn't. May be I've mixed them up with some other poem of yours. I don't remember the exact words, I remember the meaning.

MAN: Didn't I tell you anything else but empty words?

WOMAN: How you'd met secretly in Tsar Shishman Street. How her parents hated you. How her brothers were after you and you weren't allowed to say good by to her in the sanatorium.

MAN: They wouldn't let me in.

WOMAN: And about the funeral service in the Russian church.

MAN: You asked me.

WOMAN: I wanted to know what was true and what was imagination.

MAN: Did you find out?

WOMAN: Yes, I did. You'd been in love with an illusion.

MAN: Fine.

WOMAN: And when I tried to talk about real things to you, about earthly things, you told me that you see her every day, waiting for you, leaning on her marble cross...

MAN: Stop it!

WOMAN: Your words were very beautiful but there wasn't a drop of human kindness in them.

MAN: Do you think you found the most appropriate place in Paris to offer me your friendship?

WOMAN: What place?

MAN: Mina's grave.

WOMAN: I didn't love you any longer by then. Before that I'd been thinking about you for a very long time. I'd imagine where we would go and what we would do. Once, I can't remember if it before or after our meeting in Paris, I was sitting on a wet chair. It was on the terrace in front of the London house. It was wet and misty everywhere and I was alone on the terrace. And I saw you coming towards me. Can you imagine it - me, at one end of Europe, you - at the other and between us nothing but mist. I couldn't see anybody but you when I thought of Sofia. Nobody - my mother, my child, my husband. Only you, at the other end of the world. Coming towards me as you used to when I was waiting for you in the park. You stepped over Germany, France, across the Channel and you leaned over me sitting in that wicker chair. Apparently I had fallen asleep and I woke up because of the cold, it was very cold. When you wake up so suddenly you have these insights sometimes. When your head is empty and you see nothing but the most important. No divorce, relatives, child, gossip, politics, parties, money, holidays, business trips, filthy trains from Sofia to London - nothing - but you and me on both sides of Europe. One step. I had such plans for us...What did I care about the grave? What did it matter where I told you? It wasn't the grave that stood between us. You chose that French woman, the blond one you found on the streets. You chose her instead of me. Why?

MAN: I didn't compare you with her. This thing with her - it was not love.

WOMAN: Why were you frightened of me?

MAN: I don't know.

WOMAN: Is it true that you ran like mad one night on the streets of Paris, escaping from a woman?

MAN: What woman?

WOMAN: A woman chased you and you took to your heels.

MAN: Nonsense.

WOMAN: You even lost your hat while running and you were afraid to go back to look for it.

MAN: What nonsense! Who's been telling you such nonsense about me?

WOMAN: I said it's nonsense. But now I think it might be true.

MAN: What's true? That I ran away?

WOMAN: You ran away from me too, as though from the plague.

MAN: I remember now. That woman was either insane or drunk. There was a chain rattling behind her. Like a dog let loose. And it wasn't in Paris, it was in Nancy.

WOMAN: Are you afraid of me?

MAN: Yes.

WOMAN: Very?

MAN: Very much.

WOMAN: I don't feel like drinking wine. Will you bring me a glass of water?

The man goes out. The woman tugs the handle of the locked drawer again. Then she pulls out the drawer next to it, hunts inside for a key, finds it. She opens the drawer, takes the gun. She hears the steps of the man coming. She puts the gun in the pocket of the jacket hanging on the chair.

MAN: I was feverish all the time in Nancy. All the time I was running a temperature.

WOMAN: Why?

MAN: My shoes were leaky. I'd paid a subscription for 'Mercure de France' instead of buying new shoes.

WOMAN: Poor you.

MAN: Not at all. I felt fine. Those seven months in France turned out to be the best time of my life. I've told you, haven't I, that I am like that - the worse things are, the better I feel. I was absolutely alone. I knew nobody and nobody knew me and I didn't have any money. From time to time I would sneak in the theatre. During the night - in the park. I stepped on a snail once there. Poor creature, also looking for something. And it occurred to me that I would see nothing and I would understand nothing about this world around just like the snail. Because I am born in a shell. And I am carrying all the misery of the

Balkans on my shoulders. I'd never thought about Bulgaria as much, as I did then in Nancy.

WOMAN: And you call that the best time of your life?

MAN: Yes. I was writing a lot. So many things were turning round my head - I thought three lifetimes won't be enough to write all of them down. Now I sit over the blank page and I can't write a word.

WOMAN: Why?

MAN: Even the postcards I wrote in verse. On each postcard - a poem.

WOMAN: What about her? Did she write back?

MAN: Yes. She did.

WOMAN: (*She jumps onto her feet, pushes the stool, picks up some of the things in the room, puts them back. Finally she stands by the door her hands behind her back.*) You have to answer some questions tonight.

MAN: Why? Why exactly tonight?

WOMAN: Because you've never looked at me in the way you did tonight at the party.

MAN: How did I look at you?

WOMAN: With hatred. (*Pause.*) I do have a past. Is that what's bothering you?

MAN: I don't care about your past.

WOMAN: Some rotten fool has been telling stories all over the place about what he did with me in London.

MAN: I haven't heard.

WOMAN: He did nothing.

MAN: I don't care.

WOMAN: And that I ran off with Peter Neikov after I was already engaged to Drenkov - haven't you heard that either?

MAN: How many times do you want to tell me this silly story?

WOMAN: Men still chase after me. Vasilev followed me the other day all the way from the theatre.

MAN: I see.

WOMAN: When we reached the butcher's shop on Graf Ignatiev Street I told him I'd slap his face but he didn't stop talking.

MAN: Why were you on Graf Ignatiev?

WOMAN: Don't you want to know what he was saying?

MAN: He's never learned how to chat up women.

WOMAN: He has.

MAN: Why don't you pass by the museum? I always go that way.

WOMAN: You're pretending you don't care.

MAN: Well, I do. What did he say?

WOMAN: That's exactly like you. Mr. Iavorov says: you want to kiss me - kiss me. You want to go - the door is open. You want to stay - stay. But whatever you do it's all the same to me, infinitely the same, because I don't need you, I am absolutely happy with what I am and that's plenty for me. That's you from the beginning to the end of our story. You must agree that it is exhausting.

MAN: For whom? For whom is it exhausting?

WOMAN: The story goes that I am like a cuckoo. That I spat in my nest. That I've made a fool of my husband, I've abandoned my child to roam the wide world... I want to be a cuckoo. I weep for every minute I spent with that man. But instead of being a cuckoo I've turned into a dog, sitting and waiting by your side. To be petted.

MAN: Don't I do that?

WOMAN: Even Tsar Ferdinand turned tail when I gave him a glance. Although I was only a girl of seventeen. The Tsar! He sent a message he wanted me to go to a party in the Palace and I pretended I was ill. The next morning my mother came into my room in a furious mood and dragged me out of bed. He had called her to say: 'She wasn't ill enough to miss her ice skating'. I knew he had seen me on the lake. I was just taking my skates off when His Majesty passed by in his carriage. I tried to hide behind a friend but he saw me. And still I didn't go.

MAN: Because you wanted to annoy your mother.

WOMAN: Not at all, Mr. Iavorov. Because I am the daughter of Petko Karavelov. He didn't mince his words with anybody. (*Pause.*) Go and put something on the pianola.

MAN: What?

WOMAN: Whatever you want.

MAN: (*without leaving his place*) They asked me to write something on beauty after that contest for the most beautiful woman in Sofia.

WOMAN: I know. I've read it.

MAN: It was published in the same newspaper, just below your picture. They'd given you second prize.

WOMAN: Are you saying I don't deserve even second prize?

MAN: I'd tried to explain that female beauty was not something physical that a sculptor could catch in marble. For me beauty is rather a quality of the soul. I didn't like the other two women who got first and third prizes.

WOMAN: Did you like me?

MAN: Yes.

WOMAN: For my soul. Thank you.

MAN: No. It wasn't exactly like that.

WOMAN: All right. It was for something else. Now you are married to the most beautiful woman in Sofia. What's next?

MAN: You are not. You are not beautiful. Not now.

WOMAN: I see.

MAN: I liked your pride. Your intelligence. Your strength of mind. Your laughter. I couldn't even imagine that some day I'd hold you in my arms.

WOMAN: Why am I not beautiful any more?

MAN: You were like a dream for me.

WOMAN: Have I grown old in the last couple of years?

MAN: You were proud and inaccessible.

WOMAN: Am I old?

MAN: How could you think that I'd like her more than you?

WOMAN: How have I changed?

MAN: She's stupid.

WOMAN: Stop it!

MAN: You are still the most beautiful. But tonight, when I saw your ugly suspicions, my love was turning into spite.

WOMAN: What? What...did you say was turning into spite?

MAN: Didn't you hear me?

WOMAN: I heard.

MAN: You weren't the same Lora tonight...

WOMAN: (*quietly*) Say nothing. (*Pause. She goes into the next room. In a second we can hear loud dance music. She comes in.*) Get up.

MAN: Why?

WOMAN: We'll dance.

MAN: But how?

WOMAN: Like this.

MAN: I can't dance.

WOMAN: I'll teach you.

MAN: What kind of dance is that?

WOMAN: A tango. (*She puts his arm around her waist.*) Listen to the music. I'll do everything. (*They dance.*) That's right. (*They continue to dance.*) I did a very silly thing. The very first day. When I came back from Paris.

MAN: Let's stop.

WOMAN: Do you know what I did?

MAN: I know. You made me wait for two hours on 'Station Road' so I could raise my hat when your carriage came along.

WOMAN: No. From the station I went straight into Grabner's photo studio. With the carriage and all the suitcases. And I asked a the picture of... tonight's flirt... the one that you threw your handkerchief to.

MAN: Why are you telling me this?

WOMAN: When I saw it I realised she couldn't be my rival.

MAN: Why did you make all those scenes tonight then?

WOMAN: It was deliberate. I was joking. To have fun.

MAN: That's it.

WOMAN: I'll play it again.

MAN: Wait.

WOMAN: Don't you like it?

MAN: I do. They were playing it in the casino, those Czech musicians.

WOMAN: Do you know what happened to them? They drowned.

MAN: Really? The musicians?

WOMAN: They were on that boat, the 'Titanic'. They played till the very end. Till they went under.

MAN: How do you know?

WOMAN: I read it in the newspaper yesterday. One of them was in love with me. Poor boy. To lie on the bottom of the ocean in that ice cold water.

MAN: Apparently you don't go to the bottom. The water throws you back up.

WOMAN: What's the difference? You are still in the water, For ever. Always in that black water.

MAN: Lora! What's the matter with you?

WOMAN: There's a very frightening poem. There's a poem of yours that I fear.

MAN: Which one?

WOMAN: Nirvana. The title is 'Nirvana'.

MAN: What's so frightening about it?

WOMAN: Eternal waters sleep, infinite waters sleep.

Unfathomable waters don't reflect the starry skies...

What's next?

MAN: I don't know.

WOMAN: You do.

MAN: And sleepless we are wandering around
And shuddering in the mute face of the abyss.

WOMAN: Eternal waters sleep, infinite waters sleep
Unfathomable waters don't reflect the dark horizons...

And next?

MAN: I don't know.

WOMAN: You do.

MAN: And hopeless our gaze we fix
And shiver at the twilight intrigue
Whose answers can't be found.

WOMAN: Why 'Nirvana'? Why is the title 'Nirvana'?

MAN: It's an Indian word. It means a state of peace. Of total bliss.

WOMAN: I know. But one does not wander and shiver in a state of peace and bliss. How does peace go with 'we shiver at...' What was it?

MAN: The twilight intrigue.

WOMAN: 'And shiver at the twilight intrigue, whose answers can't be found.' What kind of bliss is that. The last words were... 'Sleepless, hopeless, torridly thirsting.' How could one be 'torridly thirsting' and 'blissful' at the same time? What kind of nirvana is that?

MAN: I don't know. Maybe it's not right. Maybe it's not a good title.

WOMAN: What is this poem about?

MAN: I don't know.

WOMAN: Don't you really?

MAN: Maybe it's about death. I think it's about death.

WOMAN: I think it's not about death. When someone dies they don't wander and shiver. Neither are they torridly thirsting.

MAN: When I was about to write the poem I was gripped by a kind of fear. Of the Universe, infinity, our own insignificance. But there also seemed to be that kind of sweet joy that death did not exist after all. Because I don't believe that I, that intelligence, that the meaning of every thought can die. I don't believe that my consciousness could be nonsense. Because it would be great nonsense for something to exist if it has to die. Do you understand me?

WOMAN: Yes.

MAN: You remember Petrarch, don't you? 'Although I am only a body made of earth, my desire has come from the stars.'

WOMAN: What desire? What stars? What are you 'torridly thirsting' for?

MAN: We are all afraid to live. We ask ourselves what's the meaning of life, but the meaning of life is probably life itself. 'We wade through water but we stay thirsty'. And so we drift between life and death.

WOMAN: Do you want me to ask her to our house tomorrow?

MAN: Who's that?

WOMAN: The flirt.

MAN: I don't know who you have in mind.

WOMAN: Dora.

MAN: You ask her here all the time anyway.

WOMAN: I'll invite her with her husband.

MAN: Why?

WOMAN: Because I am shivering at a... twilight intrigue too.

MAN: What intrigue?

WOMAN: That we don't live as we should. Maybe everything should be different. We'll shut ourselves in the room and we'll play the 'handkerchief game'. If you throw the handkerchief to her I leave. If I throw it to him - you'll leave.

MAN: Indeed? I didn't know you liked him.

WOMAN: I don't. If I did I would leave you. As I left my first husband.

MAN: Fine. Then there is no reason to shut ourselves in the room and to play the handkerchief game.

WOMAN: There is. Yes, there is. You told me once that you could love several women at the same time. You may love as many as ten if you like but I don't want to be in your harem.

MAN: That's why you read to me that old newspaper about the Turkish Sultan.

WOMAN: That's why. I can't love several men at once. I can love only one. And I want him to be everything to me. And I want to be everything to him. The nearest friend, the dearest sister, the most desirable lover. Everything. That's why I am saying that we don't live as we ought to. Marriage only make sense when those three thing are there. All three at once. Otherwise it's not worth it. Otherwise we should separate. Immediately. I don't want to be your jailer.

MAN: Right.

WOMAN: What's right?

MAN: When I said that I could love several women at the same time I wasn't serious.

WOMAN: You were. You were serious.

MAN: I might have had in mind a kind of...half-love.

WOMAN: That's it.

MAN: Because...

WOMAN: I don't need your half-love.

MAN: Because with you it's different. You have all those three things you've been talking about. You have the qualities of a friend and of...And I can't but love you.

WOMAN: What is this? ... Mathematics? What do you mean?... You have qualities therefore... I can't but love you. What is this? A lesson in logic? What is this, I'm asking you?

MAN: Calm down. Sit there and calm down!

WOMAN: You have qualities therefore...

MAN: Yes. You are right. It sounds silly.

WOMAN: You have qualities... What qualities do I have? No qualities at all. I am not able to sacrifice anything for instance. Don't take it into your head that I am ready for sacrifices. All I have is egotism. And that's how I understand happiness. A perfectly satisfied egotism. And that's all. I need you. And that's all. (*Pause.*) It's vulgar, isn't it? I am a vulgar materialist. But even so I don't need the habit or sex from you. I want your soul, your heart, I want your tenderness. If I did care about sex I would've stayed with my ex-husband. He was sexual enough... You were the poet, the idealist but you didn't offer nothing from your soul to your love. Nothing. I'll say it again - you don't deserve my feelings.

MAN: Sure. Surely you are right.

WOMAN: Oh God, how ridiculous all this is. If only I knew that once you had loved somebody truly. That you have been something more than a piece of ice. I would be happy that I wasn't mistaken about you. Tell me! Tell me one thing. About some great, strong feeling you have had.

MAN: I don't know. I've had such awful, unbearable feelings many times. So strong that I've wanted to tear my heart out, to explode into tiny pieces... or smash my head against a stone wall. For women, too. I must admit - for women too. It's all in the past now... just a few poems left here and there. There is one thing I can't forget and I feel it now as I did then. When my mother died. Even now I can feel her around, sitting and watching me. In the morning I used to meet the sun by her grave. I'd light two candles. One on my behalf and another one. Mina was still alive then. They merged into one - my mother and Mina. They held out their hands. She was a child, she was seventeen. But that's not why I couldn't touch her in the way you touch a woman. Every time I'd come close to it I could feel the eyes of my mother telling me: 'Don't do it. You are embittered and cruel, and dissolute. Have pity for this child. Don't seek revenge. Have pity for her.' I could watch her for hours and feel I wanted to cry. From joy that she simply existed. When she did. Now, every time I think of mother Mina also appears.

WOMAN: And me?

MAN: You, what?

WOMAN: Where am I? Your mother, Mina, Macedonia, the revolution, the stars, the Universe... Where am I?

P a u s e.

MAN: Lora!

WOMAN: Yes.

MAN: How did it happen that you, who are considered the freest woman in Bulgaria, and me, who I've always thought unsuitable for marriage, are trapped in this house like in a tomb, guarding each other from going out?

WOMAN: Go. I won't stand in your way.

MAN: I was in a hall full of mummies once, in an Egyptian hall in a museum. It was dark and kind of dreary, I was all alone. And I saw a statuette behind a glass, between the mummies. Two animals in an amorous embrace. But in a human way - face to face.

A lion and an antelope. Their mouths, their lips pressed upon each other in a human kiss. Their legs clasped around their bodies. Only then I saw that he was eating her. The lion was eating the antelope. Or the other way round. It's all the same. Kissing and devouring. And I couldn't tell you the horror that seized me. Even now I can feel the empty hall, the stones, the cold, the mummies. And that deadly kiss. Why? Why love and destruction?

WOMAN: I asked you about something else.

MAN: When I was a socialist at the age of nineteen I gave a lecture on the issue of women. Not that I knew much about it... But I do remember a sentence from the Communist Manifesto saying that the family will disappear one day. And that is self-evident.

WOMAN: Really? Are you still a socialist?

MAN: Still.

WOMAN: And how will people live in your socialism? In herds?

MAN: I don't know. But I hope their love will be love and not self-devouring.

WOMAN: Which of us is the lion and which is the antelope?

MAN: At least they did kiss, that lion and that antelope. We don't even do that.

WOMAN: Will you ask Mr. Jordan to fetch my passport tomorrow?

MAN: Are you leaving?

WOMAN: I am leaving.

MAN: No. You are not.

WOMAN: Really?

MAN: Really.

WOMAN: How do you know?

MAN: I know.

WOMAN: I won't go. I'll stay here and destroy you. Slowly, day after day.

MAN: There is no life in me left to destroy. There was, when I was writing about the Armenians and about the starving people. But the starving remained hungry and the Armenians have been slaughtered long since. And I am sitting here at this precious desk warming my hands on your French lamp. What life will you destroy?

WOMAN: Smash it!

MAN: What do you want me to smash?

WOMAN: The lamp. Aren't you a revolutionary? Smash! Crush! Bang! Pick up the lamp and hit me.

MAN: I'm not a revolutionary. Revolutionaries don't live to thirty six. Who would let you live to thirty six if you are a revolutionary. I wrote in that book you're holding in your hands: 'With my blood I'll draw a cross.' That's what I thought. A cross. With my blood. To all four corners of Bulgaria. I drew nothing.

WOMAN: Last night, no - the night before, I came to you and you pretended to be asleep. Were you really?

MAN: Why did you come?

WOMAN: Were you really?

MAN: Why did you come?

WOMAN: I was cold.

MAN: I'm not a stove.

A long pause. The man lies back on the sofa, rests his shoulders on a large pillow, covers himself with the blanket, lights up a cigarette.

You come to my bed like a child to his mother. Because you are cold and scared. You'd curl up in my bed and you'd try to fall asleep. Or we have to talk, again to make you sleep. That's why I pretended I was sleeping. I didn't feel like talking.

WOMAN: Isn't there anything else? Isn't there anything that counts but physical love?

MAN: When I was leaving for Macedonia...

WOMAN: That's enough about Macedonia!

MAN: I don't know. I don't know anything anymore. I'm feeling cold too but you are standing in your black dress by that wall and we're talking. We've been talking and talking and talking all night long. What for?

WOMAN: Fine. I'll take my dress off, I'll take everything off and I'll come to you. Is that all?

MAN: It's not. I don't want you come to me as a duty. Or, only when the fire is out, to curl up like a puppy in my bed, and if I hold my hand to stroke you to hear you saying: 'Don't.'

WOMAN: Was it? Was it always like this?

MAN: Almost always.

WOMAN: Haven't we had long nights together when we didn't sleep? Haven't we had other nights?

MAN: I don't know. Now, I think you were pretending.

WOMAN: Me? Why? Pretending what?

MAN: I wonder why too. Surely because of that theory of yours. That the woman should be three things. How was it? The best friend, the best lover...

WOMAN: I'm not good enough. I'm not good enough for a lover. Is that it?

MAN: It's all pressure. Pressure and tension. It's not worth it.

WOMAN: What's not worth it?

MAN: You come to me only because you know that that's how it should be. Because you think that if it's not you it will be somebody else. That's what you think.

WOMAN: What are you saying! What are you trying to say!

MAN: Why do we stay and talk all night long?

WOMAN: Because...

MAN: Why always about other women?

WOMAN: Because...

MAN: Why ? All night long?

WOMAN: Because you think about other women.

MAN: No, I don't.

WOMAN: You do.

MAN: Even if I do, so what? I've never been unfaithful to you.

WOMAN: But you could be.

MAN: No.

WOMAN: If I'm not enough for you. If I'm not good enough.

MAN: Who told you this?

WOMAN: You did. Just now.

MAN: You misunderstood me.

WOMAN: I understood you very well. Fine - I am not. I am not the best...no way I am. I am nothing. A jailer! A criminal! I've locked up Bulgaria's poet in a cage. I've made him betray his great love. He stopped writing. He forgot about the revolution. And I don't satisfy him in bed. I am only disturbing his sleep. I should be killed! Hanged! Up side down!

MAN: Hold on!

WOMAN: I'm not good for anything. Even for a whore! The only thing he needs me for.

MAN: Hold on a bit!

WOMAN: I'm good enough! But I don't want to!

MAN: You misunderstood. May be it's just the way you are. I don't blame you for anything. I put up with it. I say nothing. But try to understand. That I can feel frustrated. It's not that easy to have and not to have a wife.

WOMAN: You mean you have a wife and at the same time you don't have a wife? You mean I'm not a wife?

MAN: You are the most beautiful, the most intelligent...

WOMAN: Therefore I can't but love you. Do you know what I'll do with this logic of yours? I'll break it, I'll smash it, I'll tear it to pieces! (*She grabs the chair on which the jacket is hanging.*)

MAN: What are you doing?

WOMAN: I'm biting! Your jacket. (*She stands back by the door. The gun is in her hand.*)

MAN: Leave the gun alone!

WOMAN: (*she speaks very slowly, pausing after each word.*) Perhaps it's very hard not to have a real wife but you'll see that it's even harder not to have a friend. You'll see it, now.

MAN: Leave the gun! It's loaded.

WOMAN: (*She points the gun at her chest.*) You'll write poems about me. You did it for so many. You'll do it for me too now. I want them to be beautiful. I deserve it.

MAN: Don't, don't hold it like that!

WOMAN: Don't move! Stay there!

MAN: The gun is empty.

WOMAN: How do you load it?

MAN: Don't! There is no point. There is no bullet inside. There is no point.

WOMAN: Isn't there? (*She loads the gun.*) Don't move!

MAN: It's loaded! If you pull...

WOMAN: If I pull...

MAN: Whatever you want...however you want...I'll do it. Just drop it.

WOMAN: You'll cry for me for the rest of your life. For the rest of your life. And do you know why? Because no one will love you as I did.

MAN: Lora!

WOMAN: I love you so much.

MAN: Don't!

A shot. The man jumps and grabs the falling woman.

Lora!... What have you done! Lora! (He puts her on the bed, he tries to unbutton her dress then rushes out.) Mrs. Belenska!...Help!... Help! She's dying!

The body of the woman convulses, stretches again and slides from the bed. The man comes in, kneels by the body, stands up, looks at her for a few seconds. Then he moves towards the desk, takes a sheet of paper, and dips the pen-holder into the ink-pot. He picks up the gun from the floor, loads it, sits on the chair. He watches the lifeless body on the floor for a couple of moments. Then he points the gun to his temples. A shot. The lamp dies out.

Lights up. All the things in the room are covered with white dustsheets. The woman is on the bed, the man is on the chair.

WOMAN: Eternal waters sleep, infinite waters sleep.

Unfathomable waters don't reflect the starry sky.

MAN: And sleepless we are wandering around
 And shuddering in the mute face of the abyss.

WOMAN: Eternal waters sleep, infinite waters sleep.
 Unfathomable waters don't reflect the dark horizons...

BOTH: And hopeless our gaze we fix
 And shiver at the twilight intrigue
 Whose answers can't be found.

THE END

