

The Dog
A Tragedy
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Translated by Benjamin Sher

Personnages

A Man

A Woman

A Dog

The dog should be played by a young girl, preferably, nine to twelve years old. Although we shall henceforth characterize her stage action in "canine" terms (e.g. "she wags her tail", etc....), the actress ought to play her role in "human" terms.

Place: Somewhere in Russia

Time: Contemporary

ACT ONE

(An uncomfortable room with bare walls. The room is furnished with nothing more than a desk, a chair, and a bench. A dilapidated door leads into the interior of the building.)

A woman, wearing a shabby smock, is sitting at her desk. She is sewing a fancy evening dress. Every now and then she glances at a fashion magazine.

Enters a man holding a little puppy in his arms. The puppy is wrapped in a jacket. See note above about how the puppy should be played.)

MAN. Good morning.

WOMAN. *(Tears herself away from the sewing machine. Gives him a dirty look.)* How do you do?

(Resumes her sewing.)

(After removing his jacket, the man carefully lowers the puppy onto the floor. The puppy scurries nimbly about the room sniffing his unfamiliar surroundings. The man keeps shifting his stance. He obviously doesn't feel in his element and doesn't know how to strike up a conversation.)

MAN. Sunny, don't you think? Too bad it's so damn cold out there! Who'd have thought?..

(Woman goes on with her sewing without responding. Man sits down, reaches for his cigarettes, flicks his lighter.)

WOMAN. No smoking on the premises. *(Points to "No Smoking" sign.)*

(Man puts the lighter and cigarettes away.)

MAN. Imagine! One day about six weeks ago I was sitting in my apartment with nothing to do... So I said to myself: "Why not go to the store and pick up something?"

(Expressive gesture.)

So I open the door to my apartment, and -- would you believe! -- this little puppy darts right in. You'd swear she'd been hanging around for just this. A little brown puppy with a white spot on her chest, intelligent little eyes, drooping ears. The cutest little thing. This wasn't a dog. It was a bundle of joy! But why am I going on like this? There is no need to describe her. Here she is right before your very eyes. Isn't she gorgeous?

WOMAN. *(Glances at the dog, refuses to answer.)*

MAN. At first, I was sure she was an abandoned dog. Then, after looking a little closer, I changed my mind: She couldn't be a stray dog. She was so affectionate, so sleek, so fat, you could lick the soup off her lips. So I say to myself: "So long as no one comes looking for her, why not play with her for a while?" So I pour milk into a bowl, pat her -- and still no sign of the owner. So I say to myself: "How the hell is the owner supposed to know that his dog is here?" So I go outside, hang a "Dog Found" flyer on the front door of the store and at the bus stop, you know: DOG FOUND AT SUCH AND SUCH A PLACE ON SUCH AND SUCH A DAY. FOR DETAILS CALL SUCH AND SUCH, ETC. I return home, wait for someone to call, and -- would you believe it -- no one calls.

WOMAN. *(Indifferently.)* Abandoned.

(Goes on sewing.)

MAN. *(Indignant.)* Abandoned? This cute little puppy? Impossible! Lost, I am sure, but... Anyway, I wait for awhile, then I say to myself: "No one's bothered to claim her, so I might as well give her a bath. After all, who knows what filthy gutters she's been hanging around... So I pour a little warm water into the bathtub, put her in. Suddenly, I'm terrified. What if she starts screaming? Or scratching? Nothing of the sort! She takes one look at the water, sniffs at it, laps it with her tongue for a minute, then

stands there as calm as can be. Just stands there looking at me. So I pick up a bar of soap and say: "Bubbles, give me your paw!" And, would you believe, she raises her paw just like I told her to!

WOMAN. (*Perplexed, listlessly.*) And why "Bubbles"? What sort of name is this?

MAN. (*Confused.*) I really don't know... It just came into my head. She is a feisty little puppy... and she is little... and she is a girl. So there you have it: "Bubbles". Of course, it could've something to do with the bubbles in the bathtub. She's some bulldog, you know!

WOMAN. She's a boxer.

MAN. Boxer?! I thought she was a bulldog.

WOMAN. (*Coolly.*) No. Pure-bred boxer.

MAN. Now you tell me! And all this time I thought she was a bulldog!... Now, where was I? -- Oh, yes, so I washed all four of her little paws, then her back and wrapped her in a towel. Then I put her on my lap, and all of a sudden, she starts licking my face... Then and there I knew I'd never give her up!

(*Calling Bubbles.*)

Bubbles, come here!

(*The puppy runs up to her master.*)

Shake!

(*The puppy raises its paw.*)

Now the other paw!

(*The puppy offers the other paw. The man caresses his dog. Bubbles lies down at his feet.*)

WOMAN. What about the owner? Did he ever show up?

MAN. No, and thank God he didn't! (*He pats the dog.*) Ever since then my life's changed around completely. No matter where I am, night or day, I rush home as soon as... I open the door and, would you believe, she is jumping all over, beside herself with joy. And me too, I am so happy I could cry. So I go out and buy her own little rug and her own little bowl.

I even start cooking soup for her... She's so full of life, so playful. And, boy, is she smart!...

(Reaches into his pocket and pulls out a little stick..)

You don't believe me? Well, just watch! Bubbles, here Bubbles!

(He tosses Bubbles a stick. She pounces on it, catches it in her mouth and returns it to her master, who takes the stick out of her mouth and pats her. He turns to the woman and says with pride.)

See what I mean?! There was a time when I knew nothing about them. In fact, I couldn't have cared less for these bulldogs... eh... I mean boxers then. It's those jaws, you know. Lots of people are scared stiff... And it's true -- on the surface they look so vicious. But deep down you couldn't find a gentler soul. And they really aren't that ugly... As a matter of fact, Bubbles' face has kind of grown on me. So what if she isn't the most beautiful dog in the world? To me, she is gorgeous.

WOMAN. And just why are you telling me all this?

MAN. Who else can I tell all this to?

WOMAN. Whomever you please.

MAN. Aren't you interested?

WOMAN. No, I'm not, and besides I am up to my neck with work. Can't you see?

(Pause.)

MAN. Everybody kept telling me: "A dog is nothing but trouble."... Trouble? What trouble? Joy! Nothing but! Except, of course, that she catches colds easily. But, don't worry! I have seen to that. I've knit her a little vest. In fact, I intended to put it on her today, but when I looked through the window, it looked so warm outside. The sun can really fool you. So I had to carry Bubbles in my arms all the way here. I'm walking along and suddenly I see her curious little eyes peeping from behind my jacket. Funny, isn't?

(Pats dog solicitously.)

I hope she doesn't get sick.

(Takes off his jacket and covers the dog with it. Pause.)

WOMAN. Well, have you talked yourself out yet?

(The man doesn't answer. The woman pushes her sewing machine aside, opens a big ledger on her desk, picks up her pen and says.)

First name, please?

MAN. I have already told you: "Bubbles"

WOMAN. No, not hers. Yours.

MAN. *(Reluctantly.)* Michail.

WOMAN. Surname?

MAN. Kovalyov.

WOMAN. Do you have your certificate of registration?

MAN. What certificate?

WOMAN. Those are the rules. Every pet must be registered with the Veterinary Station in the owner's name.

MAN. I don't have a certificate. Why do you need it?

WOMAN. That's the way it's done. The dog could be somebody else's, you know.

(Starts writing.)

Your address, sir?

MAN. For God's sake, could you please stop writing for just one minute... We'll think of something, won't we? Just look at her! So affectionate. Positively gorgeous? Don't you think?

WOMAN. All boxers are affectionate.

MAN. And, boy, is she smart! Positively amazing! Let me tell you a story. You won't believe it. We were walking along...

WOMAN. *(Cutting him off.)* Please, sir, no more stories. When it comes to dogs, I assure you I wasn't born yesterday.

MAN. But please, Madam, just hear me out... We were...

WOMAN. Enough is enough! I'm not much for idle chatter.

MAN. Why on earth must you have such a stern look on your face?

WOMAN. Because that's just the way I am.

(Picks up pen.)

MAN. That's a shame!

WOMAN. Why, am I being rude?

MAN. No, not at all, but...

WOMAN. Am I violating any rules?

MAN. No, of course not!

WOMAN. Or am I detaining you with long-winded conversations?

MAN. No, heaven forbid, nothing of the sort!...

WOMAN. Or perhaps you expect me to get up

(Gets up, advances toward him.)

and offer you a cup of tea? -- *(Ironically.)* "While you're at it, Ma'am, why not throw a piece of cake into the bargain?" -- Is that what you want? And to think, my goodness, that I forgot to express my profound gratitude for your visit: *(Ironically.)* "Thank you, sir, for your gracious visit. Be sure to look in on us more often... It has been a great pleasure..."

(Sits down, regains composure.)

MAN. *(Pulling back.)* Please don't blow your top, Ma'am!. I really didn't mean it the way it sounded. I was just carried away.

(The woman picks up her pen silently and reaches for the ledger.)

WOMAN. Address?

MAN. Don't you think she might qualify as a show dog? I am serious! I've trained her myself.

(Gives command..)

Bubbles, sit!

(Bubbles leaps up in the air and wags her tail..)

I said: "Sit!"

(Bubbles rubs her nose against her master's feet and, looking him in the eye, tries to understand his command. The man addresses the woman apologetically.)

She's just a puppy, you know.

(Protectively.)

Just give her time, you'll see...

(To Bubbles.) Sit!

(Bubbles sits down and looks up devotedly at her master. The latter, beaming with pride, continues.)

Did you see that? And look at the way she is sitting-- paws to the side, head tilted... Pure pedigree!

WOMAN. *(Appraising the dog with her eyes.)* Yes, she is purebred!

MAN. *(Excited.)* You bet! She's gonna win some medals all right!

(To Bubbles.) You will, won't you, honey?

(To the woman.) The Kennel Club will pounce on her!

WOMAN. No, they won't.

MAN. And why not? What do you mean?

WOMAN. She doesn't have any papers... As proof of pedigree.

MAN. So?... Take a good look at her and tell me she isn't pedigree!
Besides, she isn't some fancy countess, so why does she need papers?

WOMAN. That's just the way it's done!

MAN. You mean there's no place for her here without a certificate?

WOMAN. None.

MAN. And why is that?

WOMAN. *(Sighing.)* For a dog lover, you are incredibly naive. I assure you the Kennel Club won't take her.

MAN. What's wrong with them? Aren't they human?

WOMAN. That's just the point. I mean, they are human.

(Pause.)

MAN. Well, couldn't she be a watchdog someplace?

WOMAN. No, they only take German Shepherds for that. And only males. Yours is bitch.

(Silence. The man reaches for a cigarette.)

No smoking! Remember?

(Points to sign.)

MAN. I'm sorry.

(Thrusts cigarettes back into shirt pocket.)

WOMAN. Why did you bring her here, anyway, sir? Was it your wife's doing? Perhaps the dog got in her way?

MAN. No, I live alone.

WOMAN. How is that?

MAN. The usual thing... Wife ran off with the kids.

WOMAN. Just got up and left, huh? Why, didn't she like you?

MAN. The hell with her! That... I don't want to say anything bad about her. And don't ask me to say anything good about her either. There isn't any.

WOMAN. Really? Nothing good?!

MAN. Please, let's not talk about her. OK.?

WOMAN. So, how are you getting along now?

MAN. Oh... So and so... I am sort of a loner. There's only one thing in the whole world that's mine... Come Bubbles, come!

(Pats dog.)

WOMAN. So why not keep the dog at your place?

MAN. And work at the same time?

WOMAN. Everybody works, sir. Why should a dog be a problem?

MAN. That depends on the kind of work. For example, I work for the railways. I'm always on the road...

WOMAN. Somehow, you've managed quite well till now, haven't you?

MAN. That's just it: "Somehow". At first I took vacation leave-- three weeks worth. Then I got lucky: I caught a cold! So I called in sick... Finally, I had to drag myself back to work. Tried to tell them no, but... But I didn't go on the road, at least not right away... I worked at the depot. But this was no solution. Bubbles was home all alone, whimpering, howling. The neighbors swamped the Complaints Bureau with abusive letters, cursing, frothing at the mouth, threatening to beat her to a pulp-- and me too! *(Momentary silence.)* And they'll do it, too, those swine! You know what sort of people we are dealing with here, don't you?

WOMAN. I certainly do!

(Pause.)

MAN. *(Beseechingly.)* So what should I do? I'm at my wits' end.

WOMAN. It's not so bad. It's a little hard at first, but when she grows up, she'll get used to staying home alone.

MAN. Yes, yes, but I can't be bothered forever with this business. They need me on the road. The crew is getting restless. They're saying: "Stop dragging your feet, Misha! Why don't you quit and let somebody else have your job?!" So you see, don't you, I'm at a dead end.

WOMAN. Couldn't you leave your dog with someone while you're away? You know, for a day or two?

MAN. For a day or two, maybe ... but not for a month or how about three?

WOMAN. Three months?! I've never heard of trips lasting that long. You could go around the world in that time. Are you serious?

MAN. *(Helplessly.)* I'm afraid so, lady. You see, we are refrigeration specialists. We work for the railroads.

WOMAN. Refrigeration specialists?

MAN. Yes. We're in charge of the refrigeration cars. *(With a hint of self-mockery.)* It's our professional responsibility to maintain the appropriate temperature wherever needed. You know what I mean?

WOMAN. But why do your trips take so long?

MAN. How else could you do it? For instance, we load up with fish in Murmansk and unload in Tashkent in the south. In Tashkent, we stuff our cars with fruit and drive on to the Pacific. We then dump the fruit and load up on meat. From there, Moscow is only a stone's throw away. And so on. Sometimes we are on the road for six months at a stretch. So, tell me, who has time for a dog?

WOMAN. Have you tried finding a home for her with your friends?

MAN. *(Dejectedly.)* Yes, but nobody wants her. One person complains that his apartment is too crowded, another says he is going away for the summer. No one has time for a dog. Everybody puts up such a fuss...

WOMAN. I know... Nobody has any time.

MAN. There's this one kid on our block who hangs around the yard all the time. He pestered me for days on end: "Let me have Bubbles, Mister, please, pretty please!" So I gave him the puppy. He was in heaven.

WOMAN. So what happened then?

MAN. His mother comes running back with the puppy: "I'm sorry, sir, Bubbles is keeping my boy from his studies. I won't allow it!" While she raves and rants, the poor boy is standing right behind her crying his heart out. *(Pause.)* So I take Bubbles to my sister's-- she'd been moaning about how she wants a dog for ages. Well, believe it or not, Sadie says no. Why not, you ask?

(The woman shrugs her shoulders.)

You'd never guess! Pedigree! "A royal poodle I would take," she says, "but boxers, well... they're out of fashion these days." That's my Sadie for you. What do you make of that?

(Strokes Bubbles while talking to her.)

Listen, Bubbles! You aren't in fashion any more! Did you know that? Sadie wants a poodle. Not just any old poodle, honey. A royal poodle!

WOMAN. It's true. Boxers are no longer in fashion.

MAN. In fashion?! What do I care about fashion? Bubbles isn't some piece of clothing!

(Pounds with his fist on the desk.)

How can you talk about fashion when it comes to living things! Maybe you and I are out of fashion! Did you ever think about that?

(Jabs his finger into the fashion magazine lying on the woman's desk. Sarcastically.)

So what are those chic fashion magazines of yours saying about us? Ha! Sooner or later, we'll all end up in the dumpster!

WOMAN. *(Recoiling from him.)* Pipe down, sir, pipe down, please! Why all this rage? *(Silence. The man reaches for his cigarettes.)* Please, sir, no smoking! *(Points at sign. The man puts the cigarette away.)*

MAN. *(Restless.)* So I sweated over this business all week until finally last Tuesday I took Bubbles and rode with her to the other end of town. Well,... and I left her there... I said to myself: Someone will give her a home. Then I came back. Would you believe, the moment I stepped inside my apartment, I felt like howling. One look at her bowl and at the little ball she used to chew on and this horrible feeling comes over me... Three days pass. Late one night I hear someone scraping at the door. I open the door-- it's her! It's Bubbles! Thin as a rake, pooped out... and what's the first thing she does? She leaps all over me, licking and barking... I felt like scum... real scum...

(When Bubbles senses that she is being talked about, she jumps up, wags her tail and curls up at her master's feet. Man's voice trembles.)

Tomorrow, it's back on the road.

(Pause.)

WOMAN. *(Unexpectedly severe.)* Now look here, sir! This is no place for heart-rending farewells! I have enough to do around here as it is.

MAN. Why, am I in your way?

WOMAN. (*Spitefully.*) No, why should you be? You're a great help!
(*Pause.*) So, have you decided to give up your dog or not?

MAN. (*Flaming up.*) Give up? Why, you dog! You bark and carry on...
You just wait! Soon you'll be biting like a dog. Yes, you sound just like a
bitch!

(*Catching the woman's unfriendly glance, he proceeds a little more
cautiously.*)

... I'm sorry, Ma'am, but that's the only word that fits.

WOMAN. It's all right, sir. I really don't consider it an insult.

MAN. So much the better.

WOMAN. Of course, if you keep on running off at the mouth, I shall have to
show you out. You can't conduct yourself here as if you were at home.
This is a respectable establishment. (*Silence.*) Well, sir, do you intend
to sit here all day? Do you see that hallway?

(*Pointing to side door.*)

I'll bet there's a line forming out there right now.

MAN. It's so hard for me to make up my mind. Do you understand?

WOMAN. If it's so hard, then you shouldn't have come. People are waiting,
while you rattle on and on.

MAN. There wasn't anybody waiting when I came.

WOMAN. Yes, but it's almost closing time, so people are swarming in at the
last minute.

MAN. Lady, you don't have a heart. That's what's wrong with you.

WOMAN. That's the way I am.

MAN. You could use a little feeling, you know.

WOMAN. (*Ironic.*) Why, what for?

MAN. (*Surprised.*) Why a little feeling?

WOMAN. Yes.

MAN. What kind of question is that?

WOMAN. And you -- you have this "feeling"?

MAN. Another strange question! Sure, I'll give you an answer! What I'm trying to say is that you're...

WOMAN. *(Cutting him off.)* Leave me out of this, please! *(Pause.)* Who is giving up the dog, you or I?

(The man becomes silent.)

Well, now that we agree on something, why don't we drop all this prattle about feelings, and get on with the business at hand. *(Long pause.)* Is your dog registered?

MAN. No, she's not.

WOMAN. *(Maliciously at first, then with quiet triumph.)* In that case, I won't take her.

MAN. And why not?

WOMAN. Regulations, sir! First, you'll have to pay a five ruble fine for illegal possession of an animal. Then come and see me. And with a receipt.

(Slams the ledger shut.)

MAN. *(Confused.)* Where do I pay the fine?

WOMAN. At the Third Veterinary Station.

MAN. *(Exasperated.)* Receipts, vets, shmets! What will they think of next?... Just to add to our misery!

(The woman doesn't respond.)

What if I pay the fine directly to you?

WOMAN. No need for that, sir!

MAN. OK, forget the five. How about ten?

(Hands her the money.)

WOMAN. *(Sneering.)* Aren't we being generous today?

MAN. (*Disturbed.*) What's the matter? Not enough? I have lots more where that came from

(*Again reaches into his pocket.*)

WOMAN. I've already said there is no need for that.

MAN. What difference does it make where I pay the fine?

WOMAN. For me-- a big difference!

MAN. Why should I've to drag myself from office to office?

WOMAN. That's your problem, sir.

MAN. You mean-- otherwise you won't take her?

WOMAN. Precisely!

MAN. (*Sighing.*) So where is this Vet Station of yours?

WOMAN. (*Reluctantly.*) It's close by. In the adjacent building.

MAN. Thanks.

(*Prepares to leave. Stops in his tracks. Defiant.*)

No way, lady! I won't go! Here, take it!

(*Again reaches into his pocket.*)

Do you have change for 100 rubles?

WOMAN. (*Laughing.*) If I had that kind of money, I'd be married before you could say: "Come here!"

MAN. You mean you're not married?!

WOMAN. No, I'm afraid not.

MAN. (*The man ponders the situation for a moment. His face beams..*) I have an idea... (*With delight. Authoritatively.*) May I respectfully propose that you take Bubbles home with you? You won't feel so lonely then.

WOMAN. And I thought you were about to propose... to me.

MAN. *(Looks at her significantly for the very first time. With bravado.)* Now that you mention it, I'm all yours. Just give the word.

WOMAN. Just like that?

MAN. Sure, why wait? I've got a train to catch tomorrow.

WOMAN. I'll bet you would do anything for your dog, wouldn't you?

MAN. What makes you say that?... We'd make a great match, lady! You and me!

WOMAN. But I don't have a heart. Remember?

MAN. Maybe so-- but what character! I'll take the risk.

WOMAN. How brave you are! You aren't afraid of anything, are you?

MAN. Afraid? Of what? After putting up with my ex? Nothing could be more terrifying than her.

WOMAN. You must have been in love with her. You can't seem to get her out of your mind.

MAN. Well, to be frank, she really wasn't bad. She was just like any other wife. I could've lived with her, even if she did nag me to death... I'd just play deaf. I could forgive her an awful lot, but *(voice rising.)* what I could never forgive her for

(pounding the desk with his fist.)

is... leaving me. I'll never forgive her for that!

(Bubbles jumps up, startled. The man calms her down..)

Sit down, sit down, honey. No need to be afraid.

(Once again the dog curls up at her master's feet.)

WOMAN. Why did she leave you?

MAN. Why don't you ask her yourself... I don't really know. I guess there was something missing in her life. We had a fine house crammed with everything under the sun. Everything worked like magic: the doors, the faucets, the locks. As smooth as a machine. There were shelves and dressers and cabinets everywhere you looked. Would you believe, I

made them all with my own hands!... And when it came to money... boy oh boy!... You know, lady

(looking directly into her eyes as he leans over the desk.)

I rake in more money in one month than a dozen poor stiffs in a year.

WOMAN. And where do you get this kind of money, may I ask? Do the railroads pay that much?!

MAN. *(Satirical.)* Of course! If you don't mind waiting till doomsday!...
(Haughty.) We manage very well on our own, thank you!

WOMAN. How is that?

MAN. *(Slightly embarrassed.)* Well, when we load up with fish in Murmansk-- we put away some of the action for ourselves.

WOMAN. "We"? Who is "we"?

MAN. The gang. The buddies I work with on the refrigeration cars.... We then dump the fish in Tashkent. They can never get enough of it. We then load up with fruit and off we go to Siberia.... That's how I earn...

WOMAN. Your daily bread?

MAN. Bread? *(Laughs.)* Not only bread, Miss! Try bread and butter. And, you guessed it, everybody wants to get on our gravy train. *(Laughs again at own humor.)* "Sure," we say, "you can join, but how about ten grand for starters." *(Boastful.)* Even then, who knows, I may not want to give them a piece of the action.

WOMAN. You have done well for yourselves, haven't you?

MAN. *(Proud.)* Sure, a man has gotta make a living, don't you think? But, believe me, it's not been all downhill. We have problems, too, like everybody else. If you want to make a killing in this business, you gotta know how to manage. Nothing gets done by itself. Sometimes we come into a station and hang around for three weeks before they load the train. That smart Alec Director -- you know, of Warehouses -- well, he passes our cars like he doesn't know who we are. The bastard just keeps staring at the sky, while our precious goods are rotting away.

(Emphasizes with hand gesture while looking directly into the woman's eyes.)

No grease, no action! Know what I mean, lady?! ... Then come the big shots. They all want their cut... But don't worry, I've been at this refrigeration business fourteen years. I've got customers everywhere... The gang sticks to me like glue.

WOMAN. Why, are they children or something? Don't they know how to take care of themselves?

MAN. (*With bravado.*) Where would they be without me? They are greedy little bastards, but brains they ain't got. Just recently, we got stuck at a station in Georgia. So I went to investigate, to see what's what. Meanwhile, the guys get a whiff of brandy from some tank close by. They pick up their bottle... would you believe, a 20 gallon milk can... (*laughing.*) we had this can put aside for just these occasions -- and then they fly off like a band of gypsies to pour themselves some. And -- you guessed it --they leave the cars unguarded. And I keep beating it into their heads night and day: "Never leave the car unprotected!"

WOMAN. (*Cutting him off.*) Wait a second! What do you mean by "pour themselves some"?

MAN. Well, there are all sorts of ways... In fact, by the time we're done with it, the can is full, but so is the tank! (*Laughs.*) -- and no one is the wiser... so they "pour" it, all right (*Still laughing.*) Then they turn around and go back. Just then I show up on the scene -- would you believe, no car!

WOMAN. And then?

MAN. The usual thing, you know... We run around in circles, some here, some there, until we wear our butts off. By a miracle, we found our refrigeration cars two kilometers away. Right next door we found a freight truck, and in this truck we saw a bunch of no-good crooks making off with carcasses -- I'm talking dozens of carcasses -- from our cars. So one guy grabs a crowbar, another grabs a monkey-wrench and, boy oh boy, we finally get our car loose. But the meat truck scampered off and the milk container is nowhere in sight. Must've happened while we were hacking away at the tow chains.... (*Mocking.*) "Are they children or something?" Is that what you just asked?! Are you kidding?

WOMAN. You do lead a strange life.

MAN. Not really, it's all quite normal.

WOMAN. And your buddies? Aren't they strange?

MAN. As normal as you and me. They're just a little more clever.

WOMAN. And you?

MAN. Well, I could teach them a lesson or two. As a matter of fact, I'm sort of "leader of the pack". I've got to stay on top or else they'll chew me to pieces.

WOMAN. So what was it about you that your wife couldn't stand?

MAN. (*Taken aback.*) What?!

(*Reflecting for a moment.*)

Well, you see, she was bored. I work my ass off like a mule. I dress her up from head to toe and she is "bored"! Do you have any idea how many dresses she's got, not to mention every other piece of junk she's managed to squeeze out of me? You could run a train for a whole year on her wardrobe. And all I ever heard from her was: "Give up your job! Quit that job of yours, honey!"

WOMAN. She didn't like those long separations, did she?

MAN. That, too. But even when I was home, would you believe, she wouldn't let my buddies come over to play dominoes. "It's enough," she'd say, "just trying to get you to see the kids." And I...

WOMAN. (*Cutting him off.*) Are the kids grown up?

MAN. Well, now they're grown up. My son just finished school, and my daughter is in ninth grade... No, I take it back, in eighth...

WOMAN. (*Reflecting. Tinge of sarcasm.*) I understand!

MAN. And, on top of that, she took offense because I wouldn't call or write. What is there to call about? It's always the same routine with us: we load up and get a move on, we move on and we unload.

WOMAN. I understand.

MAN. She didn't know how to wait, wouldn't stay faithful... (*Pats Bubbles.*) Take a look at this bundle of joy with drooping ears! She's so loyal to me. She is just like... a wife to me.

WOMAN. You said it. I didn't.

MAN. *(Making a fist.)* The bitch... She was lucky, she got away with it. She ran off before I had a chance to... If I had caught her with that bastard... I would've beaten them both to a pulp. *(Silent for a moment.)* ...Anyway, good riddance! That's all in the past, and I'll never take her back now! But, why don't you tell me something about yourself?... So, why aren't you married?

WOMAN. Just like that? You expect me to spill out my guts to you? Just like that?

MAN. And why not?

WOMAN. *(A hint of rudeness.)* Well, I'll have you know, sir, that I don't go around spilling my guts out to strangers.

MAN. Boy, you are a feisty gal, aren't you?

WOMAN. I'm sorry, but that's the way I am. *(Pause.)* Well, are you giving up the animal or not?
(With trembling fingers, the man reaches for his cigarette pack and thrusts it back into his shirt pocket.)

MAN. She won't feel anything, Miss, will she?

WOMAN. No, don't worry. It won't hurt. A little jolt and it's all over.

(The man looks at the dog. Catching his gaze, Bubbles wags her tail in delight. The woman picks up her pen and leans over the ledger.)

MAN. *(Ill at ease.)* What are you writing there?

WOMAN. I am recording your dog's...

MAN. *(Slams the ledger shut.)* Wait a minute! Why are you in such a hurry? ... For you, Bubbles is just another animal. But to me she is a lot more... You may think it's funny, but -- would you believe -- she makes me feel like a human being again. At long last, somebody really needs me. But the main thing is that she doesn't love me for my money or my job... not even because I'm kind to her. She just loves me, that's all. *(Pause.)* And how she waits for me everyday. It's such a joy to come home.... I turn on the TV and there she is lying at my feet. Such a cute, warm little creature. You know, we watch television together... In fact I've even given up drinking... Do you understand? I'm a god to her! I'm everything to her! And now you want to turn on the knife-switch on her?!

(Pause.)

WOMAN. In that case, why don't you wait for a while. Think about it for a day or two. Maybe you'll find a way out.

MAN. I can't wait any longer. I'm out of time already. I've gotta get back to work.

WOMAN. Can't you wait just a little longer?

MAN. No, I've already dilly-dallied long enough. I've already taken time off, changed shifts, asked friends to house-sit for me... *(Sighing.)* I don't have any more strength left in me.

WOMAN. *(Decisively.)* Well, then, why don't you hand her over and be done with it?

MAN. But how can I live without her? I couldn't take it, coming home from work, with everything so damn quiet. Like a cemetery! Nobody to greet you, nobody to curl up next to you on the sofa...

(From behind the wall we hear the muffled howling of dogs. Bubbles looks around uneasily, whimpers quietly and presses tightly against the man. The man listens intently as if in alarm.)

What's that?

WOMAN. *(Reluctantly.)* It's the dogs. They are howling.

MAN. What dogs?

WOMAN. The ones we catch.

MAN. Where?! Why?!

WOMAN. We have a special squad of dog catchers... They round up all of the homeless dogs at night and bring them here. Didn't you know?

MAN. And you kill them?

WOMAN. *(Spitefully.)* No, we tie little pink ribbons around their necks and parade them up and down Main Street.

(Silence.)

MAN. And what do they do with the dogs they kill?

WOMAN. They load them up onto a truck and send them off for salvage. The hides are used for fur, the carcasses for bone flour... They say that it makes good feed for the poultry farm. Very lucrative, in fact.

(The man takes Bubbles in his hands and holds her close. The howl continues unabated.)

MAN. And do they catch many of them?

WOMAN. On a good night-- a dozen or so.

MAN. Where on earth do they find so many homeless dogs?

WOMAN. *(Dryly.)* Don't you know? Somebody gets fed up with his dog, takes it some distance from his apartment and abandons it: "Well, maybe somebody will take it home." That's what they all say.

(The man lowers his eyes.)

At night, our dog catcher drives around in his big truck with a net at the ready. For every dog he catches he gets three rubles...

(The howling grows louder.)

MAN. Why do they've to howl like that? *(She doesn't answer.)* Don't you kill them right away?

WOMAN. The dogs that are brought in by their masters are killed right away. But the ones we catch ourselves we hold for three days.

MAN. What for?

WOMAN. That's just the way it's done.

MAN. *(Listening to the howling of the dogs.)* You do feed them, don't you?

WOMAN. *(With bitter sarcasm.)* Feed them? Feed them what?!

MAN. But why make them wait and suffer? Wouldn't it be better?..

WOMAN. *(Cutting him off. Sympathetically.)* Don't you understand? We want to give the owners a chance to claim their missing pets.

MAN. And some people claim them?

WOMAN. Some. And you should see them when they do. They're beside themselves with joy. Not only the people. The dogs, too. *(Momentarily*

silent. Adopting official tone.) Excuse me, sir, I really don't have time for conversations just now. Work is piling up, as you can see. Now, sir, let me have the dog.

(The woman takes the carefree puppy by the leash and leads it into the interior of the building. Rooted to the spot, the man follows them both with his eyes.)

MAN. *(Coming to his senses.)* Stop! Stop! Where are you taking Bubbles to?

WOMAN. I'm taking her... where you want me to take her.

MAN. For God's sake, I never meant to that place! *(Nods in the direction of the inner chamber.)* ... I just wanted to find out, you know, what's what.

WOMAN. Well, you found out, didn't you? *(She tries to lead the dog away.)*

MAN. No! No! *(Tries to force the leash from her hand.)*

WOMAN. *(Refuses to let go of the puppy.)* You won't help matters with all this fine talk of yours. You made your decision -- there's no point in putting it off.

MAN. No, let me tell you! *(Grabs the leash from her hand.)* Bubbles -- as bone meal?! I won't let them!

WOMAN. *(Quickly.)* It's your affair. In that case, good-bye.

(She pushes the man towards the entrance.)

MAN. Couldn't you be a little more courteous, lady?

WOMAN. Get going! Get going!

MAN. Don't you worry, I'm leaving. Maybe you can stand this business -- hanging around here for days on end -- but I can't! *(Solemnly.)* It turns my guts inside out!

WOMAN. Come on now, sir, please go!

MAN. I'm going! I'm going! *(Sarcastic.)* What a sweetie-pie you've turned out to be! And I'll bet you aren't even ashamed of rotting away in this crummy job of yours... So tell me, how many dogs have you killed this week?!

(The woman winces from his words as if she had just been slapped in the face but doesn't answer. Man continues..)

You know, I've been trying to figure you out from the moment I got here. Just why the hell did you come here? So you can get rich on five ruble notes, is that it?!

(The woman, cut to the quick, can barely control her emotions.)

So what's your angle, lady? What's the matter, can't you talk?

WOMAN. Please, my friend, be so kind as to leave...

MAN. I'm not your friend! But tell me: Aren't you ashamed of telling people where you work? Huh? Look at yourself! You know what you look like? You're a witch, an evil, clawing witch. I bet you forgot what it means to be a human being.

WOMAN. *(Ominously.)* Are you finished?

MAN. *(Pulling back physically.)* No, I'm not finished. Not quite!

WOMAN. Are you going, or am I going to have to throw you out?

MAN. *(Contemptuously.)* I hope I never lay my eyes on you again as long as I live! Phew! Let's go, Bubbles!

(Leaves with Bubbles.)

WOMAN. Don't forget to have her registered! The Third Veterinary Station! Next door!

(Silence. The woman makes her way slowly to her desk, thinks about something for a long time -- apparently having to do with herself -- then opens the ledger, studies the entries, puts on black protective rubber gloves and exits into the interior of the building. A little later, we hear a droning sound, the light in the room turns dim, the tension drops and we hear the brief sound of a dog's scream. This procedure is repeated three times. The woman returns to her desk more depressed than usual. She removes her gloves, tosses them on the bench, sits down at her desk, makes three entries in the ledger, reaches for her cigarettes and lights them up. She inhales deeply.)

END OF ACT ONE

ACT TWO

Without leaving the stage during the intermission, the woman finishes the cigarette, moves closer to the sewing machine and resumes sewing where she left off.

The man enters. He is without his dog. The woman greets him icily. Silence.)

WOMAN. Where's your dog?

MAN. Over there! Behind the door. I left her in the hallway.

WOMAN. Don't forget to tie a stone around her neck when you dump her in the river. Dogs are great swimmers.

(The man doesn't respond.)

Why have you returned?

MAN. Why are you always talking to me like that -- as if you were condemning me for something?

WOMAN. Condemn? On the contrary, can't you see that I am trying to give you some good advice?

MAN. Thanks.

WOMAN. You're welcome.

(The man sits down meekly on the edge of the bench.)

MAN. I thought... since you are single, perhaps you'd be willing to take the dog...

WOMAN. No, I can't.

MAN. And why not? Just look at her! What a splendid creature. Doesn't bark, doesn't make any noise, really doesn't need any care at all. Just throw her a bone, take her for a walk twice a day, and you're done with it. She'll show her appreciation like never... You'll never regret it.

WOMAN. No, listen, please...

MAN. (*Cutting her off.*) And I'll show my appreciation, too. Just ask, and I'll give you all the money you'll ever need. Buy her the best that money can buy. And when I'm in town, I'll drop in and take her off your hands.

WOMAN. (*Insistently.*) I've already told you I can't! And, besides, why torture yourself? A dog is just a dog.

MAN. That's easy for you to say... You have a heart of stone. Boy, thank God I'm not like...

WOMAN. (*Cutting him off.*) So, it's the heart business again.

MAN. Well, you just said so yourself: "Why torture yourself?"... And, you know, you're right! Come to think of it -- what do I need a dog for? No, she needs me! She needs me to feed her, take care of her, etc. But what use is she to me? She's just a king-size headache.

WOMAN. You see what I mean!

MAN. Just the same... I felt a lot less sorry when me and my ex separated. Seriously. And what was there to be sorry about? I am a good cook. I do my own wash. When you're on the road as much as I am, you pick up a lot of things.

WOMAN. And is that all a wife is good for, in your opinion -- doing the laundry?

MAN. (*Continues thinking aloud without responding to the woman's sting.*) How strange! All my life I've tried to make life as comfortable as can be. I sweated, busted my behind, dragged my loot home like an ant-- so where the hell is happiness?... Sometimes I wonder if there isn't a crack somewhere.... Everything keeps slipping away. Before, I was positively content with my life... Now-- I don't know... There is something missing. But what? Could it really be a dog?

WOMAN. (*Softens up a bit.*) Are you really that attached to Bubbles?

MAN. No, I'm just pretending.

(*The woman turns on the electric teapot.*)

So what should I do?

WOMAN. (*Shrugging her shoulders.*) How should I know?

MAN. Well, I don't know either.

WOMAN. Couldn't you change jobs? Don't tell me they won't let you quit the railroad?

MAN. Change to what?! It's become a habit, like smoking. Besides, it's all I know.

WOMAN. I understand that you are a refrigeration mechanic. Right?

MAN. You bet! And a damn good mechanic, too! Finished Trade School!

WOMAN. That's what I mean. They could use someone like you in the factories, in commerce... not to mention in household repair. Couldn't you settle down with some job?

MAN. But what about my seniority? You think I'd let it slip out of my hands? Would you believe, in just two years, they'll be calling me "Esteemed Railroad Worker." Then, there is the pay boost, the pension... And where else am I going to find such an easy job? We don't have to break our backs. Do you understand what I mean? We refrigeration specialists live on automatic... We change the padding once a week... The rest of the time we sit around playing cards in our cozy little den. The rails thunder and boom-- and the work takes care of itself... True, we have to work our butts off at the stations. But that's no problem. Everybody works like a dog then. It's for our own good and we all know it. I've tried to explain this to you once before. And, believe it or not, I have my pockets full for working on this health resort on wheels! (*Haughtily.*) Try making that kind of money in the big city, lady!

WOMAN. So that's what it's all about! (*Disgusted.*) You're right, could anyone rake in that kind of money in the city? Sure, Bubbles, love me to death-- that's just dandy! But just don't get in my way. Right?

MAN. Why do you keep looking at me like that-- like a wolf? Like some Inspector-General. What am I? Some kind of criminal... or crook?! I'm just an ordinary person, like everybody else.

WOMAN. And you think that's enough?

MAN. (*Defensively.*) Well, if you are such a do-gooder, why don't you take the dog off my hands? Won't you please?

WOMAN. No!

MAN. You see what I mean!... It's easy to find fault in others, but when it comes down to the nitty-gritty, your kind chickens out.

WOMAN. We bring in hundreds of dogs every day from all over the city. And you want me to take them all home with me?

MAN. Who said all of them. Just Bubbles. *(With feeling.)* I've gotta admit it. I'm pleading with you as a human being. I'll even get on my knees, if you like... What's the big deal, lady? You live alone.

WOMAN. I don't live alone.

MAN. But you just said...

WOMAN. *(Cutting him off.)* I do not live alone. I already have three dogs living with me. Three! Just buying meat scraps for them all has nearly ruined me...

(Nodding in the direction of the sewing machine.)

If it weren't for the sewing, I'd have been a beggar long ago. Do you have any idea how little they pay me here?

MAN. You're already taking care of three, right? So what's another dog? Now the meat scraps...

(Reaches into his pocket.)

You'll have thirty rubles daily -- and that's just for starters.

WOMAN. Are you trying to buy off your conscience? *(Pushes the money away.)* I don't need your pieces of silver. I've already told you I can't. I can hardly move around in my apartment as it is!

MAN. Come on, please take her! I'm begging you! Maybe money can't buy everything, but it can't hurt... By the way, why so many dogs?

WOMAN. "Why?"... Why so many dogs?!... Someone has to take pity on them, for goodness' sake! So every now and then I'll take some of them away from this place... I manage, somehow. I ring up my friends... You know I've already organized this entire Animal Protection Bureau... Otherwise, what's the point of my working here?

MAN. You can't save them all. Three dogs, even thirty, is just a drop in the bucket.

WOMAN. I know, I know. But we must do something... anything. *(Momentarily silent.)* There is one awful thing, though. I'll never get them used to... you know what I mean... the knife-switch.

MAN. You've gotta leave this place!... You've got to get married.

(Surprised at what he's just said.)

You've got to find yourself a good man...

WOMAN. You have somebody in particular in mind?

MAN. Now that you mention it, how about me?

WOMAN. *(Bursts out laughing.)* You must be kidding!... Thanks but no thanks. *(Still laughing.)* I haven't laughed this hard in ages.

MAN. So what's so funny? You are single, and so am I. Why shouldn't we give it a try? Have you ever been married?

WOMAN. Yes, I was.

MAN. And how did it go? *(Awkwardly.)* I mean... the lovey dovey stuff.

(The woman makes a vague gesture.)

Didn't quite work out, ha? And who was to blame? The husband, I'll bet. No?

WOMAN. No, it was my fault.

MAN. *(Surprised.)* Your fault? Why? You didn't love him?

WOMAN. On the contrary, I loved him too much. Madly, blindly. Could never have enough of him. *(Falls silent.)* You think it's funny, don't you? An old witch like me talking about love!

MAN. Nothing funny about it. So what happened?

WOMAN. Nothing. Who needs a love like mine these days? It's hard enough just tolerating it.

MAN. But I still don't understand why you blame yourself.

WOMAN. I am like Bubbles. Once I'm attached to someone, it's for good. Until I'm abandoned or killed. And I expect the same from a man. And this is so stupid. Where could you find someone today who'd not deceive or betray you, who would live only for you?!... No, I'd much rather love dogs.

MAN. But you mustn't... what are you saying?

(Without saying a word, the woman turns off the boiling teapot.)

WOMAN. Would you like some tea?

MAN. No, thank you.

WOMAN. It's piping hot.

MAN. All right. I guess I'll have some.

(The woman spreads a tablecloth on her desk, then places the teapot on it along with cups, pastry and a can of preserves.)

I'll be right back. I just want to check on Bubbles.

(The man exits as the woman prepares the tea. The man returns.)

WOMAN. Well, how is she?

MAN. As usual... Keeps looking at everybody with those clever little eyes of hers.

WOMAN. At "everybody"?

MAN. Yes. There's already a line in the hallway... People with their dogs.

(The woman's expression turns gloomy again. She picks up a piece of plywood on which CLOSED has been crudely inscribed in red ink and exits into the hallway. After a brief pause, the sound of discontented voices is heard, along with the woman's curt replies and the barking of dogs. Then silence. The woman returns to her desk.)

So, a big crowd? Were they violent?

WOMAN. *(Shrugging her shoulders resignedly.)* No big deal.

MAN. You really can't blame them for being upset, can you? They come here from all over and wait and wait when, all of a sudden, the door is slammed in their faces.

WOMAN. It's nothing. Believe me, they'll survive another day with their dogs.

(Momentarily silent.)

Besides, someone might change his mind.

MAN. But how did you explain it to them?

(Looking at the clock on the wall.)

It's not closing time yet...

WOMAN. I don't really have to explain anything to anybody...

(Hesitating at first, she reaches for another piece of plywood with the inscription CLOSED FOR INSPECTION.)

Go on, hang it on the door for me, please.

(The man takes the sign and exits. The woman takes off her smock and combs her hair before a mirror. Returning, the man stops dead in his tracks, astonished by the change that has taken place: Instead of the hard, cold, prickly "witch", he sees before him an attractive, youngish woman wearing a light-colored blouse. She, in turn, looks in puzzlement at the man.)

Well, what?

MAN. Nothing.

WOMAN. Have they gone away?

MAN. Yes.

WOMAN. Splendid! Let's have some tea!

(Picks up teapot.)

MAN. *(Tries to take the teapot out of her hands.)* Let me help!

WOMAN. No, that's a woman's job.

(Pours tea into cups.)

MAN. *(Sipping the tea with pleasure.)* You know, you are really beautiful.

WOMAN. *(Flirting.)* And why shouldn't I be beautiful?!

MAN. You are right. Why not?

WOMAN. Why don't you try some of the pastry?

MAN. Thanks.

(Tasting.)

Did you bake this yourself?

WOMAN. Who did you think?

MAN. Tastes great!

WOMAN. Perhaps you'd like something to eat? I brought some sausage with me today.

MAN. No, thanks. I'm not hungry... Of course, I'll bet Bubbles...

WOMAN. In that case, bring her in! Why should she sit out there all bored.

(The man exits. Meanwhile, the woman unwraps a roll of sausage. The man returns. Bubbles is at his heels.)

MAN. *(Uncomfortably.)* You know, there is a man out there... sitting in the hallway. He looks kind of distinguished... He asked about you.

WOMAN. Did he have a dog?

MAN. No, a mustache.

WOMAN. *(Laughing.)* Ha-ha! A mustache. Ha-ha!... Please sit down. *(Offers the man a piece of sausage.)* Won't you please have some?

MAN. *(Takes the sausage. Cheerfully.)* Come here, Bubbles! Well, are you coming? Have we got something for you!

(Bubbles runs up, sniffs the sausage, licks it, takes a bite and chews on it with delight.)

You like it, hah? I knew you would! Good girl! Go ahead, eat it all! You'll grow up strong and healthy in no time, trust me! *(Offers Bubbles another piece of sausage. She takes another bite. Now the man takes a bite. They chew the sausage with hearty appetite. In due course, they manage to consume a fair portion of the sausage. The woman, who has been observing them all this time, breaks out in a boisterous laugh..)*

Why are you laughing?

WOMAN. You look so funny -- the way both of you are devouring that sausage!

MAN. *(Puts down the remaining piece of sausage on the desk.)* Oh, I'm sorry! We haven't left you a thing.

WOMAN. Don't worry about me! Eat all you want!

MAN. *(Suddenly turning serious.)* For the record, why do you hang around here?

WOMAN. For the record, just where should I be?

MAN. *(Nodding in the direction of the hallway.)* Well, for one thing, that fellow with a mustache... is waiting for you.

WOMAN. *(Smiling.)* Oh, don't worry about him. He can wait.

MAN. Maybe he's already left.

WOMAN. If you're that interested, why not go into the hallway and see for yourself!

MAN. *(Takes a piece of the sausage.)* Let's go, Bubbles, you'll finish it off in the hallway.

(Using the sausage as bait, the man leads the dog into the hallway. A minute later he returns alone.)

He's still sitting out there!

WOMAN. Good! Let him sit!

MAN. And why won't he come in?

WOMAN. Because I won't let him in. *(Momentarily silent.)* .. I'll be right back!

(The woman exits. The man reaches into his pocket for his cigarettes, puts a cigarette in his mouth. Then remembering the ban on smoking, he returns the pack to his shirt-pocket. The woman has come back.)

MAN. Well?

WOMAN. I showed him out.

MAN. And what about Bubbles?

WOMAN. *(Smiling.)* Standing guard. Do you want some more tea?

MAN. I won't say no.

(Brings his cup closer so the woman can pour the tea.)

I can't help wondering how you ever ended up in a place like this.

WOMAN. What's the big deal? A job is a job.

MAN. You haven't always been an executioner, have you? You must be a vet or maybe a specialist or something.

WOMAN. You're getting warm. Actually, I'm a modeler by trade... Finished trade school...

MAN. A modeler? What's that?

WOMAN. A dressmaker... a very good dressmaker.

MAN. High class clientele, I'll bet. You must be swamped with orders.

WOMAN. It's true. I used to be swamped with orders all the time. That is, when I worked at the atelier de luxe.

MAN. Oh!

WOMAN. That's just the point: "Oh!" High class! Nothing but the choicest of the choice... Money, connections... what have you!... *(Resignedly.)* In short, I lived then exactly the way you live now.

MAN. *(On his guard.)* Well, go on. So what happened then?

WOMAN. Nothing... I just couldn't go on with it anymore.

MAN. And why not?

WOMAN. *(Sneering.)* Don't you get it?

MAN. Get what?

WOMAN. In that case -- have a fine day!

MAN. No! You started it, you finish it! What weren't you happy with? An atelier! And a chic, high-class atelier at that! Doesn't that mean something to you?!

WOMAN. *(Emotionally.)* Sure it means something: High-class intrigues! High-class black marketeering! That's what!

MAN. What do you care? Let them play their little games. You just keep on sewing!

WOMAN. With what? Where am I going to get the materials I need? You can't turn out anything half-way decent without materials: buttons, trimmings, and so on. And where do you go for that?! -- to the black market! It all boils down to this: You have to scrounge around for every little thing yourself.

MAN. What did you expect?

WOMAN. At the trade school they said I had talent. I was just a little girl then... *(Wistfully.)* My big dream was to make all women beautiful... I came up with all these elegant designs... *(Somewhat indignant.)* Those clients of mine were such brazen, high-class peddlers! It was like quicksand... Another step and I'd have been swallowed up...

(Looking uneasily at the man.)

You aren't bored, are you?

MAN. Oh, no! No! Not at all!

WOMAN. I'd be pinning a cute little ribbon on some lady's enormous behind, and I'd ask myself: Whatever happened to all those simple, good women I dreamed of dressing up?... *(Pensive.)* Of course, who can blame them? They don't bother hanging around these ateliers de luxe... So, I went on taking orders, cut out patterns, stitched, sewed and so on. But all this time one agonizing thought ran through my head: Is this really what I was meant for? Is this what my life is all about?

MAN. *(Looking at her intently.)* I guess you're not quite...

WOMAN. *(Somewhat defiantly.)* Normal? Is that you wanted to say? Haven't you ever asked yourself that question?

MAN. Me?... No.

WOMAN. *(Ironically.)* You mean it's all crystal clear to you?

MAN. Well, at least it's clear to me how you sank into this mire.

(Nods at the wall. From behind the wall we hear the rising chorus of the howling dogs.)

WOMAN. *(Upset.)* You mean, how you sank into the mire.... I pulled myself out of it.

MAN. This kind of thoughts won't do you any good.

WOMAN. It all depends on what you mean by "good."

(Pause.)

MAN. OK, so that takes care of your work. But how about your husband?
What was his problem?

WOMAN. Nothing. He turned out "just like the rest of them", to use your expression.

MAN. *(Tinge of sarcasm.)* So what's the matter with "just like the rest of them?" Maybe you want something out of the ordinary?

WOMAN. Out of the ordinary?... All I ask is that he really loves me... That'll do just fine.

MAN. *(Reflecting for a moment.)* So one fine day you just quit your job and left your husband.

(Snaps his fingers.)

Just like that!... And for what? I just don't get it!

WOMAN. Well, maybe not "just like that!" At least not in one day... In fact, I probably wouldn't have made up my mind for a long time, were it not for...

MAN. For what?

WOMAN. *(Changing her tone. Letting down her guard.)* Oh, what's the use?

MAN. Go on!

WOMAN. Oh, it's nothing. Really!

MAN. For goodness' sake, spit it out!

WOMAN. No.

(Brief pause.)

MAN. Forgive me, Miss, but in my opinion your whole problem is simply that you don't have a... companion.

WOMAN. I am talking about the meaning of life, and all you can talk about is finding a husband.

MAN. Sometimes, it amounts to the same thing.

WOMAN. You might have a hard time believing this, but I have my share of admirers. I even get proposals now and then.

MAN. You mean-- like that mustachio over there...

(Nodding towards the hallway.)

WOMAN. Maybe.

MAN. I bet he's really stuck on you...

WOMAN. Why, would you like to unstick him?

MAN. Always glad to lend a helping hand!

WOMAN. Forget it!

MAN. So what's this all about?

WOMAN. It's just that none of this is for real. I've already tried to explain it to you.

MAN. *(Tinge of sarcasm.)* And you won't settle for anything less than real. Right?

WOMAN. *(Taken aback.)* And what else should be there?

MAN. *(Sympathetic. Waxes "philosophical".)* You've got to take life as it is. All of it -- what's real and what's not so real.

WOMAN. You mean everything? Everybody? Is that what you mean?

(Ponders his statement.)

No, no way! That's not what I was taught!

MAN. And that's precisely what's wrong with you, lady.

WOMAN. Perhaps.

MAN. *(Momentarily silent.)* So what do you want from me?

WOMAN. I want from you?

MAN. Isn't that why you invited me to have tea?... I'm an old hand at these things... You can't fool me. You need something from me, don't you?

WOMAN. Nothing, nothing at all... I assure you.

MAN. Come on, Miss, you don't really mean that!

WOMAN. Of course I do! I mean, nothing, I don't need anything from you. Just keep Bubbles away from here.

MAN. You feel sorry for somebody else's dog?

WOMAN. No, it's not the dog... It's you I feel sorry for.

MAN. Why on earth would you want to feel sorry for me?

WOMAN. If you give up your dog, you're doomed. Perhaps you're already doomed.

MAN. So you're writing me off? Is that it? *(A little angry.)* I'll have you know it's you who are doomed, not me! Everything is hunky-dory with me. You bet! *(Pause.)* Of course, I do feel sorry for Bubbles. But when you come down to it, a dog is just a dog. *(Bravado.)* If I feel like it, I can always go out and buy a new dog any old time. They say you can get the best puppy in the world for *(snaps finger.)* a few thousands rubles cash!

WOMAN. *(Shaking her head.)* I see... I guess there's no way to knock some sense into your head, is there?

MAN. Now, look, it's time you listened to me. *(Incoherently.)* .. I really like you, Miss.... You're a good woman. A very good woman. But you are unhappy. There's something missing from your life. And what you don't have I do!... *(Thinks for a moment.)* I've gotta admit, though -- I'm unhappy, too. There's something missing from my life, too. It's something different. But, just the same, something is *(pensive.)* ... missing. And Bubbles won't be any better off, either. Do you know what I mean?

WOMAN. Not quite.

MAN. Well, take, for instance, the refrigerator. It has three parts: the compressor, the coil and the frame.

WOMAN. *(Completely confused.)* So?

MAN. Each part is completely useless by itself. You might as well throw the whole contraption in the dumpster. But, put them all together, and you have a refrigerator! Now you understand? All of them working together!

WOMAN. So you are still proposing... Is that it?

MAN. *(Overjoyed.)* Yes! Yes! This time I'm for real. Honest!

WOMAN. No, I've had enough.

MAN. Why is that?

WOMAN. Because!

MAN. *(Coming up from behind, the man puts his arms around her shoulders. Empathetically.)* Don't worry! You won't regret it. I'll take you away from this revolting place. We'll throw your smock into the fire. And, if you don't feel like working at all, be my guest! So don't worry, we'll be loaded! ... I'll dress you up like a doll...

WOMAN. *(Sighing.)* I've been trying to tell you... Oh, what's the use! You'll never understand.

MAN. *(Ignores her.)* I'm a hard-working fellow. I'm really not so bad. In fact, I'm rather obliging.

WOMAN. And where shall we live?

MAN. Well, we could live at my place. We'll live off the fat of the land.

(Suddenly inspired.)

Come to think of it, I've just put the finishing touches to my apartment, and what a lovely sight! The choicest furniture -- import -- picked it up in Lithuania, the finest carpets from Turkman. Color television-- you'll never be bored! A few more rubles, and I'll have a dacha...

WOMAN. *(Tired.)* No, you haven't understood a thing!

MAN. You'll have all you ever need... Then it's settled!... Let's go. Right now! I'll help you move later.

WOMAN. With four dogs?

MAN. Well, not exactly... that is a bit too many. Just Bubbles. That'll do.

WOMAN. (*Insistent.*) And what about the others? What am I supposed to do? Dump them here so they won't get in the way?

MAN. Well, I don't really know...

WOMAN. (*Dryly.*) That's just it: I don't know either.

MAN. Don't be so obstinate! Everything will work out. Believe it or not, I liked you the moment I first laid eyes on you. Really!

WOMAN. I, on the other hand, never liked you!... From the moment I first laid eyes on you!

MAN. (*Cut to the quick.*) But... why?

WOMAN. Because a good man would never bring a gorgeous little puppy like Bubbles here!

MAN. (*Irritated.*) Circumstances... you know, there are circumstances...

WOMAN. (*Contemptuously.*) What circumstances?

MAN. You know, it hurts me more than...

WOMAN. (*Sarcastic.*) Oh, you poor little thing!

MAN. Don't make it harder for me than it already is. Here you come along.... Besides, no one is more precious to me than Bubbles... Would you believe, I'd sacrifice everything for her!

WOMAN. (*Venomously.*) Sacrifice? Like what? Like shoving thirty rubles into my hand? Or a hundred? Or maybe a few thousands? Now that would be a pity, wouldn't it?! With that kind of money, you could buy yourself a new puppy, couldn't you? Well?!

MAN. (*Threateningly.*) Stop it! Stop it! I tell you. Or else, God forbid... I've got a real temper, I'll have you know.... I might knock you down...

(*Making a fist.*)

WOMAN. Go ahead, knock me down!... Who do you think you are, anyway? Kill me if you must, but (*lowers her voice.*) just tell me one thing: what sacrifices are you ready to make? Well? What sacrifices? (*Screaming.*) What sacrifices?

MAN. (*Recoiling from her.*) Phew! You are a witch...

WOMAN. (*Whispers under her breath.*) So you are ready to sacrifice everything? Well, let me tell you something. I once had a dog, too. A long time ago. Every morning when I'd go to work, I'd leave her on the balcony. (*Voice rising.*) She was so happy on that balcony!... One day, she looked down and saw me running to catch the bus. She must've thought somebody was chasing after me because she started barking... Of course, I couldn't hear her. And it was then that she jumped down from the fifth floor trying to help me...

MAN. Was she hurt?

WOMAN. (*Spitefully.*) And what do you think?... But she didn't die right away. And while there was still breath in her, she crawled towards me. About two hundred feet or so. Meanwhile, I jumped on the bus and drove off without noticing a thing. Later, my neighbors told me everything.... (*Sneering. Pause.*) Tell me, would you crawl to me if you were dying?

MAN. What's this got to do with me?

WOMAN. That's just it: Nothing. Or rather, you've nothing to do with it! (*Shaking her head.*) And to think that for one fleeting moment I considered marrying this man. (*Talking more to herself than to him.*) His wife waited for him, the kids were lonely without him, but he couldn't think of what to say to them on the telephone. He couldn't even remember what grade his daughter was in. All he can think of is playing God to his buddies. (*Contemptuously.*) "Leader of the pack". Hah!

MAN. That's easy for you to say! You really think I'm happy with my life?

WOMAN. Of course, you're happy! You yourself said so. And why not?! No family to worry about, no obligations, no reason to feel bored at home... All you have to do is sit in the train car with your buddies, knock some dominoes around, guzzle up all the vodka you want... You can believe it! (*Laughing.*) It really is a health resort on wheels. And let's not forget the "gals"-- one at every stop, I'll bet!

MAN. Now you're going too far, lady. I won't argue with you about the vodka. (*Confidentially.*) You know how the gang is -- they've gotta get their kicks sometime. (*Diffidently.*) Now about the gals -- there ain't nothing to it! I assure you!

WOMAN. (*Mocking.*) Right you are! "There ain't nothing to it!" And how could it be otherwise? There's hardly enough time for business -- for haggling over fish, loading meat, dumping fruit -- right? Well, I've had it with making deals. And now you want to trade in your dog. For what? For the life of a wolf?

MAN. That's not true! That's not true!... And how could you talk like that about my family? It's my wife that's to blame! Nobody but her! Why won't you believe me?

WOMAN. *(Cool.)* I would believe you if you hadn't come here with Bubbles. *(Passionate.)* Why does she have to take the blame for all this?

(The man is silent.)

You come in here slobbering all over, pouring out your heart, when all you really care about is yourself: "Look at me, folks! Ain't I wonderful? Isn't it grand how I feel for my dog?!"... You're just like the rest of them! All goody-goodies so long as they don't have to pay up.... Actually, none of us really cares. None of us really knows how to love. Besides, we don't need to be loved all that much, anyway...

MAN. We're all experts when it comes to blaming others. Aren't we? But take a good look at yourself: Are you any better than me? All right, so I don't know how to love. But what about you, do you know how?

WOMAN. *(With icy contempt.)* Don't worry, I do.

MAN. Sure, you know how to love, but who? love who? *(He yells unexpectedly.)* You know how to love dogs, that's who! You don't love people... You love dogs! Because you yourself are a dog, a bitch! As a matter of fact, you hate people!

WOMAN. *(Shaken.)* What makes you say that?

MAN. What does it matter? The point is you don't love people.

WOMAN. *(Dejected.)* It all depends on what kind of people.

MAN. No, you don't love people, period! At work you found them all disgusting. You said so yourself. Your husband was good to you, but you left him. And the minute I walked in here, you found me disgusting, too. Take a good look at yourself in the mirror. Thank God you don't bite-- not yet, at least.

WOMAN. You want me to love every Tom, Dick and Harry?

MAN. Oh, yes, of course, you're looking for a "real man." You need a great, pure love. The ideal! Just like in the movies. It's easy enough to love the idea. *(Looks directly into her eyes.)* Try falling in love with me! A simple ordinary man with flaws and wrinkles! But you've never learned how to love simple people. You lock yourself up in this slaughterhouse,

in this convent, shut off from the world,-- and then you bitch about "the good and the true." So is that what life is all about?

(Pause.)

WOMAN. So tell me, what should I love you for?

MAN. *(Exploding.)* For nothing! Just for being me! What good is love if it's for something? Just look at Bubbles. She loves me and never asks why!

WOMAN. And is this how you reward her for it?!

(Man is silent.)

Look, you just proposed that we live together. But, while we are living "together," you'll be running around all over the country. Isn't that right? And I'll be stuck with your color TV, trying not to get bored. But what if I do get bored-- and lonely? Or what if I get sick? Will you send me to the bone flour factory, too, so that I won't get in the way?

(Man remains silent.)

I have no need for the ideal. All I want is love. Can you give me that?

(Shakes her head.)

No! You can't! You wouldn't even take my love if I handed it to you on a silver platter! You won't take anybody's love unless it's convenient for you to do so! Well, that's not good enough for me.

(Smiles bitterly.)

A dog is just a dog. And that's just the way I am.... Well, so we had our little chat, after all. Didn't we? But enough is enough!

(She removes the tableware from the desk, puts on her smock, sits down and leans over the registration ledger.)

So, are you giving up your dog?

MAN. Listen, lady, ...

WOMAN. I've already told you: Enough is enough! Are you giving up your dog or not?!

MAN. *(Hesitating, furious.)* No!

(He walks out. The woman frowns, then smiles ever so slightly, slams the ledger shut, removes the teapot, puts the sewing machine away and tries to take off her smock. Just then, the man returns, leading Bubbles by the leash. Bubbles is as irrepressible as ever. Seeing the man, the woman questions him with her eyes. The man evidently feels uncomfortable.)

Excuse me, Miss, I don't mean to disturb you again, but, you see, now that I got Bubbles, what... what I mean is... Where am I going to take her?

WOMAN. What do you mean "Where?"... Home, of course!

MAN. I know what you mean, yes, a home is a home, but...

WOMAN. But what?

MAN. But I have to leave tomorrow.

(The woman sinks onto the bench. Looks away while talking.)

Not tomorrow... Late tonight.

WOMAN. *(Confused. Sighing.)* Oh, what's the use? Give her to me. I'll keep her with me for a while. We'll think of something when you come back.

MAN. No. There's no point in that.

WOMAN. Why?

MAN. Because! If I wanted to, I could just take more sick leave. I have a doctor friend... Sometimes, I send patients his way.... One phone call from me and, presto,...

WOMAN. So what's your problem?

MAN. I... just don't feel like it.

WOMAN. And why not?

MAN. I just don't feel like it.

WOMAN. Just like that, without any reason?

MAN. Everything was so normal before... Now, everything is screwed up. My sister is grumbling, the neighbors are snapping and the boss is breathing down my neck. To top it all off, my gang is driving me out of my mind!

WOMAN. (*Comforting him.*) Take it easy!.... No need to torture yourself!... (*Softly.*) It'll all work out. Believe me!

MAN. (*Emphatic.*) No, it won't work out. Maybe you can take it easy, but I...

WOMAN. Would you like a cigarette? It's okay. You can smoke.

MAN. No... You see... I used to be in my element in those days, like a fish in water. Now everything is so strange, so different. The trips, the gang... And my big house, crammed with goodies... is empty...

WOMAN. So?

MAN. Oh, nothing. Why do you keep pestering me with questions?

WOMAN. I just want to know one thing.

MAN. What's it to you?

(*The woman looks silently at the man.*)

Don't look at me like that!

WOMAN. What's wrong with you?

MAN. I don't know. It's terrifying. One more day of this and I'll end up in the slaughterhouse myself. And I sure don't want to.

WOMAN. So you can't wait to go back to your gang, can you?

MAN. That's my business, lady!... (*Quietly but obstinately.*) If it's all right with you, I'm gonna leave her here just the same.

WOMAN. (*Severely.*) I'm sorry, sir. Come back tomorrow.

MAN. I can't. I won't be in town tomorrow.

WOMAN. It's too late. The work day is over. Can't you see?

(*Points at the clock on the wall.*)

MAN. *(Hint of triumph.)* Not quite. There's still another fifteen minutes left on the clock.

(The woman turns to the ledger, then pushes it aside again.)

WOMAN. No, I'm not taking anybody else today.

MAN. Why is that?

(The woman is silent.)

You don't have the right to...

WOMAN. *(Triumphantly.)* I'm sorry, sir, but your pet is not registered, and the Veterinary Station is closed for the day. I won't take you without a receipt.

MAN. But I did register her. Here, look!

(He shows her the receipt.)

WOMAN. *(Shaken.)* When did you have time to reg... ?

MAN. Right after I left. Remember. You ran into the hallway after me and yelled: "Don't forget to have her registered!"

WOMAN. *(Barely audible.)* Well, all right, then. Leave your dog and go.

MAN. Do I have to sign some papers or something?

WOMAN. No.

MAN. *(Reaching into pocket.)* What's the usual fee?

WOMAN. *(In a tone of resignation.)* Nothing. Nothing at all.... It's free.

(The man takes the dog in his arms and hugs it..)

MAN. Well, Bubbles, good-bye

(The dog fawns upon her master. Tears well up in the man's eyes.)

Good-bye, Bubbles. I...

(He sobs, lowers the puppy gently onto the floor and takes out his handkerchief.)

WOMAN. (*Angrily.*) All right, that will do!

(Calls the dog.)

Come here Bubbles! Come here!

(Bubbles retreats in fear.)

Bubbles!

(The dog presses against her master's body.)

MAN. (*Petting the dog.*) Don't be afraid, Bubbles! (*To the woman.*) You'll be real quick, won't you? (*Sentimental.*) Be gentle with her, will you? She's such a sweet little creature...

WOMAN. (*In a fit of temper.*) For goodness' sake, go!

(We hear once more the muffled howling of dogs. The man is very jittery.)

MAN. Why are they howling like that?

WOMAN. (*Furious.*) Why?! My God! You innocent little thing! Don't you understand?!... "Why are they howling?!"... Because their masters have abandoned them! Because they're lonely and hungry! Because they don't want to die!... You would be howling, too, if they led you to the slaughterhouse.

MAN. But they don't understand...

WOMAN. They don't understand?! ... By God! They understand everything! They're just like you and me! In fact, they are better than you or me! Would Bubbles ever desert you for a scrap of meat? Would she send you to the deathhouse to make her life a little more comfortable? Why, she would do anything in the world for you... And you... (*Sneering.*) ... Esteemed Railroad Worker...

(She picks up the man's jacket left behind on the desk, then hits him over the head with it. The man defends himself feebly. Growling, Bubbles courageously runs to her master's defense, jumps, tries to bite the woman's hand, then pulls her by her dress. The woman continues attacking the man without paying attention to the dog.)

You are not killing your dog, you're killing your soul! I'd rather kill myself than... Get out of here, get out!

(Kicks him out and throws his jacket after him.)

(Pause. The woman, breathing heavily, returns to her desk. Not noticing in the heat of battle that her master had disappeared, Bubbles sniffs restlessly around the room, runs up to the entrance and scrapes at it with her paws. The woman, in utter disbelief, repeats confusedly.)

WOMAN. He's gone... Oh, God, he's gone... Really?

(From behind the wall we hear the muffled howling of the dogs. We are reminded of a requiem. The woman sighs, picks up the receipt left by the man, moves the ledger towards herself and makes a little mark in it. She then puts on rubber gloves and opens wide the door leading into the interior. Instantly, the room is inundated with the deafening howls of dogs condemned to death. The woman walks up to Bubbles, who, in terror, clings to the floor. The woman takes her by the leash and drags her into the interior. The dog holds her ground obstinately.)

Come here, Bubbles, come on! Here, here Bubbles!... What can we do? It just can't be helped.

(Bubbles resists. The woman pulls harder. The puppy digs deep into the floor with all four paws. She's too weak and the rope drags her towards the dark chamber within. The woman drags Bubbles right up to the chamber entrance. But when she looks at the dog, the leash slips out of her hand, and she falls wearily to the floor. At first, Bubbles hesitates but then walks up to the woman, licks her face and sits down beside her.)

END

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