

Prostitution

by

Ákos Németh

translated from the Hungarian by

Eugene Brogyányi

Scene 1. *In an office*

WOMAN I: I'm listening.

MAN I: I don't know what to say. I have nothing to say about myself. I'm a Balanchine Prize winner, but that's not relevant. I'm just a dancer, that's all there is to it. A dancer, and I do choreography.

WOMAN I: And why did you apply for this job?

MAN I: I want a change. To make a basic change in my life. I...

WOMAN I: This involves dance, and you're a dancer.

MAN I: Was a dancer. Not any more. It's an age-dependent field, and I'm past the age when...

WOMAN I: Okay, you *were* a dancer. Could you tell me something about yourself?

MAN I: I have a memory. Let me share it with you. One of those revealing childhood memories. I mean they say a lot about a person. Do you mind? Here goes. Is it all right if it's long? It won't take long.

I'm holding my father's and mother's hand. I can walk already, and talk, but my sister's not in the picture yet. My mother was the daughter of a village carpenter, and she was won over by my father's education and his car the moment they met, but for some reason we're traveling by train.

We're at some village station, changing trains on the way to my maternal grandparents. We're hurrying to make our connection when some good-natured alcoholic starts bargaining with my parents. "I'll take this big boy with me," he says. To my surprise my mother doesn't say a word, just starts walking faster. I'm squeezing my mother's hand in despair, my father's too, even though I don't like him, in fact I'm afraid of him sometimes. The way I see it, if I let go of their hands, if I don't hold on tight, they'll abandon me. I'm afraid of this good-natured guy, but what really worries me is that my parents don't say a word, as if they were resigned to the situation. I'm overwhelmed by feelings of solitude. I'm squeezing my parents' hands, trying to hurry them on. The jolly drunkard doesn't let up, he's enjoying his shenanigans, he grabs me as if to take me with him, my parents respond with a forced laugh, which scares me. I'm terribly scared, which I try at first not to show, but then I abandon all self-respect and start pulling my mother away from that horrible face. This amuses the drunkard. My mother ignores it. To me she seems to have given in. In my panic I'm pulling and tugging, my mother reluctantly follows, the drunkard laughs, my father laughs, my mother laughs, it seems like everyone besides me is in agreement.

WOMAN I: That's it?

MAN I: That's it. Did you like it?

WOMAN I: What was the point, telling it just now?

MAN I: You didn't like it?

WOMAN I: It's like a bad dream. I don't know why you told me.

MAN I: It's not a dream. It really happened.

WOMAN I: You seem like an unusual person. Sensitive.

MAN I: I got over that.

WOMAN I: You're not sensitive anymore?

MAN I: I'm totally immune to sensitivity. I'm insensitive. No one can cause me pain. I can't be offended. Once, when...

WOMAN I: Why did you tell that childhood story of yours?

MAN I: I'd like to choreograph it.

WOMAN I (*laughs*): Well, you won't get a chance to do that here.

MAN I: Of course, of course.

WOMAN I: How old are you?

MAN I: Excuse me?

WOMAN I: How old are you?

MAN I: Is that important?

WOMAN I: Sure it's important.

MAN I: Fifty-eight. I'm fifty-eight. But in spirit I'm twenty-eight.

WOMAN I: Married? Family?

MAN I: My wife is a monster. Life with her...

WOMAN I: I'm only asking because what's she going to say about you working nights. That's part of it.

MAN I: Of course.

WOMAN I: Well?

MAN I: I'm divorced. I mean we're separated.

WOMAN I: So this won't be a problem?

MAN I: There's never a problem. With me there's never been. Not now or ever, because...

WOMAN I: Mornings you won't be needed. Your mornings'll be free.

MAN I: I could come in any time.

WOMAN I: I'll be your boss. Does that bother you?

MAN I: Come off it. Why would it?

WOMAN I: A lot of people are bothered by a female boss.

MAN I: Not me.

WOMAN I: Especially if she's a lot younger.

MAN I: You're not *that* much younger.

WOMAN I: I'm twenty-five.

MAN I: That's not a big difference any more. Fifty-eight, twenty-five, we're on the same side of the divide.

WOMAN I: I don't get it.

MAN I: We're adults, and we've come to understand that we're going to die some day.
We've grasped the finiteness of life, which has a beginning and an end. Those who haven't resigned themselves to that still have all of life ahead of them.

WOMAN I: I don't want to talk about death.

MAN I: Of course. Actually neither do I.

WOMAN I: And we're not on the same side of the divide. We're on two different sides of the divide. You're old and I'm young.

MAN I: You didn't have to say that.

WOMAN I: Keep this in mind, I say whatever I want here.

MAN I: In fact... (*slight pause.*)

WOMAN I: You were saying?

MAN I: Nothing. I wasn't saying anything.

WOMAN I: And why do you want to work here? You're an artist, aren't you?

MAN I: I was.

W: You won't find much art around here.

MAN I: I wasn't expecting to.

WOMAN I: I would imagine you're famous, too.

MAN I: At one time I was well-known, yes.

WOMAN I: Let's just say I don't give a shit about that.

MAN I: Excuse me?

WOMAN I: As far as I'm concerned you could be world-famous, I still don't give a shit.
Just saying.

MAN I: I understand, but... (*slight pause.*)

WOMAN I: But what?

MAN I: Could you express yourself a little more politely?

WOMAN I: Here, I express myself any way I want. I'm the business manager here. I bet you're wondering how come at twenty-five I'm the business manager of an establishment as big and highly regarded as this.

MAN I: Not my concern.

WOMAN I: I agree, but that's not what I asked you. What did I ask you?

MAN I: Okay, you tell me. If you want to.

WOMAN I: Well, I like talking about myself. To be exact, I don't like it when others talk about me behind my back. Anyone who does that is out of here. It's happened.
Understand?

MAN I: Of course.

WOMAN I: Well, the reason I'm the business manager is that I'm the owner's girlfriend.

MAN I: I see.

WOMAN I: I don't want you using any other word. Only girlfriend or business manager.
Clear?

MAN I: Of course, no problem.

WOMAN I: No problem?

MAN I: None. No problem. I'll use only words you want to hear.

WOMAN I: Otherwise any problems? With anything else?

MAN I: No problems.

WOMAN I: All right. Tell me: How much did you drink today?

MAN I: Beg your pardon?

WOMAN I: Today, how much did you drink? Which word don't you understand?

MAN I: How... how dare you!

WOMAN I: Well?

MAN I: Naturally, I had nothing to drink. And even if I had, it's none of your business.

WOMAN I: Like hell it isn't. I don't tolerate drunkards here. This is a serious place of business.

MAN I: Where's this coming from? Why would you even bring this up?

WOMAN I: So typical. An on-the-sly boozer, lying your way through life. I happen to have grown up with a boozer for a father. I hate boozers. From the bottom of my heart I hate them. The reason I fell in love with the owner, whose girlfriend I am, as I mentioned, is that even though he works in a place like this, he doesn't drink. And he doesn't tolerate boozers, not him either.

MAN I: I'm not an alcoholic.

WOMAN I: That's not what I hear.

MAN I: I have nothing to say.

WOMAN I: You don't need to get offended. It was a simple question.

MAN I: I had some trouble... some problems with alcohol.

WOMAN I: What kind of problems with alcohol?

MAN I: An alcohol problem.

WOMAN I: Come off it, is that what it's called?

MAN I: We haven't talked about money yet.

WOMAN I: There're a lot of things we haven't talked about yet.

MAN I: It's not at all certain I'll accept the position.

WOMAN I: It's not at all certain I'll offer it to you.

MAN I: I can do this job with one hand tied behind my back.

WOMAN I: Really?

MAN I: I can train dancers, and I know how to deal with people.

WOMAN I: These aren't dancers. That's exactly where you'd fit in.

MAN I: They're the kind of girls who can be taught a few basic...

WOMAN I: They're prostitutes.

MAN I: I don't know what to say to that.

WOMAN I: This is a prestigious agency, which procures girls for prestigious assignments. These girls speak proper English, to some extent anyway, and they cut a fine figure. Your job involves that fine figure. The goal is prostitution. Does that word bother you?

MAN I: Sweetheart, nothing bothers me.

WOMAN I: You're not allowed to call me sweetheart.

MAN I: Sorry.

WOMAN I: I'm the owner's sweetheart.

MAN I: Sorry.

WOMAN I: If he'd heard what you just said, you wouldn't be sitting here calmly, smiling.

MAN I: Could we talk about the money?

WOMAN I: Tell you the truth, I don't like the way you're smiling. It's irksome.

MAN I: Irksome? What's with the fancy vocabulary?

WOMAN I: You have a problem with that?

MAN I: I was just thinking, you must've been, at one time, one of those ... girls.

WOMAN I: Prostitute. Are you familiar with that word?

MAN I: And from there you... how shall I say... worked your way up.

WOMAN I: You, here and now, are at a job interview, and it's none of your concern what the person sitting in the chair in which I'm now sitting, what that person was at one time, or what that person is now. As for the pay, it's in the five figures, as I informed you over the phone. Isn't that why you're here?

MAN I: How about a more exact figure.

WOMAN I: We can discuss a more exact figure, but that's not the issue at the moment.

MAN I: What is?

WOMAN I: The issue is the way you're smiling. The way you're smiling while I'm talking.

MAN I: I'm in a good mood.

WOMAN I: I see.

MAN I: Why wouldn't I be? Sure, I've fallen on hard times, so I'm strapped, no point denying it. That's why I'm here. But now, so it seems, everything is changing. I'll have a well-paying job, involving work that's not too taxing, and a beautiful young woman for a boss, with whom I'm discussing things right now. Why wouldn't I be smiling?

WOMAN I: That's how you assess the situation, is it?

MAN I: Right. Exactly the way I described it. I had my problems, maybe I had some problems with alcohol, I definitely had problems with my wife, I had problems with my adolescent daughter, with my career I had problems. But that's all behind me.

WOMAN I: Could you please stop swaying back and forth on the chair?

MAN I: Of course. Bothers you, does it?

WOMAN I: You could say that. How do you mean: problems with your career?

MAN I: I don't want to talk about that.

WOMAN I: You brought it up.

MAN I: I brought it up, okay, I mentioned it, but I don't want to go into details.

WOMAN I: Still, I wouldn't mind hearing what you were thinking of.

MAN I: Well, I was thinking about the critical reception.

WOMAN I: I see. You were thinking about the critical reception.

MAN I: Yes, what the critics had to say. The bad reviews.

WOMAN I: But you're a Balanchine Prize winner.

MAN I: For what that's worth.

WOMAN I: Must be worth something. No?

MAN I: Believe me, my dear young lady, that's no longer worth anything. Stature has died, respect has died, everything has died.

WOMAN I: I've already told you not to mention death.

MAN I: Oh, sorry, you did. You really did. Why, by the way?

WOMAN I: Why what?

MAN I: Why shouldn't I mention it? Death. Why shouldn't I mention it?

WOMAN I: None of your business.

MAN I: Sorry, you're right.

WOMAN I: You know what? I'll tell you. I'll tell you why you shouldn't mention death. And if I tell you, maybe you'll pay better attention.

MAN I: I'm paying attention.

WOMAN I: Well, it's because of a death. That's why you shouldn't. A death in my family.

MAN I: Death occurs in everyone's family. That's the cycle of life.

WOMAN I: This was a -- so to say -- an exceptional death.

MAN I: Aw. Gramma died. And the little girl took that real hard. You cried a lot, right?

(Pause.)

MAN I: Sorry.

WOMAN I: Don't let that happen again.

MAN I: Sorry.

WOMAN I: In my childhood there was a... an extraordinary death in the family.

MAN I: I see.

WOMAN I: Though of course every death is extraordinary.

MAN I: Yes. That's true.

WOMAN I: On the other hand, if you think about it, every death is completely regular and not at all extraordinary. There is no extraordinary death.

MAN I: That's true. There isn't.

WOMAN I: As for "the cycle of life," I hate that expression.

MAN I: I understand.

WOMAN I: Now about your job. You'll have to teach the girls to move presentably on stage, teach them some simple choreography.

MAN I: I understand.

WOMAN I: Generally solo.

MAN I: I understand.

WOMAN I: What I mean is erotic choreography. During which, let's say, they rid themselves of their clothes, that sort of thing. I'll leave it to you. Call it artistic freedom. That won't bother you, will it?

MAN I: No. I'm way past that.

WOMAN I: Oh yeah, the booze.

MAN I: I'm not impotent, if that's what you're getting at.

(Pause.)

MAN I: I like girls, if that's what you're getting at.

(Pause.)

MAN I: What are you getting at?

WOMAN I: That you don't like either women *or* men, you don't like your wife either, or your daughter. You don't even like money. You're an alcoholic. That's what I was thinking. Don't forget, you're talking to an alcoholic's daughter, who made a decades-long study of the phenomenon. I have a Ph.D. on the subject. Don't ever forget that when you talk to me.

MAN I: This conversation is starting to get on my nerves.

WOMAN I: I'm devastated.

MAN I: On the other hand, the job you're offering is ridiculously easy.

WOMAN I: Today, yes. But what about tomorrow? Or the day after, if you have a bad day?

MAN I: I was one of the best dancers in the country.

WOMAN I: Nobody cares what you were yesterday.

MAN I: As a matter of fact, it really irritates me, the way you're talking to me. Shall I show you something?

WOMAN I: Oh my God, don't tell me you want to dance.

MAN I: Not even every woman can do this.

(He attempts a split. Struggles a while. Fails.)

WOMAN I: What's this you're doing?

MAN I: I should've stretched this morning. I stretch every morning.

WOMAN I: I don't expect you to do a split.

MAN I: I can do one any time. Various types of split, any time.

WOMAN I: Not necessary.

MAN I: Just a moment.

(Another attempt, another failure.)

(Pause.)

MAN I: You know what I think of you?

WOMAN I: Are you sure you want to tell me?

MAN I: I think you're a hypocrite.

WOMAN I: Hypocrite?

MAN I: Yes. Hypocrite.

WOMAN I: That's a new one.

MAN I: High time you found out. High time someone told you to your face. Here you are, lecturing me on the evils of alcoholism, and all the while on the mantelpiece... *voila!* I've been staring at that since I came in.

WOMAN I: What's on the mantelpiece?

MAN I: Turn around and you'll see. Behind you.

WOMAN I: I know where the mantel is.

MAN I: Well, what's on it?

WOMAN I: A clock, a vase. What?

MAN I: Between them.

WOMAN I: Oh, is that where I put them?

MAN I: I see it's no surprise to you.

WOMAN I: I've been looking all over for them.

MAN I: Pretty casual about it, aren't you?

WOMAN I: Why shouldn't I be?

MAN I: Those are hypodermic needles, if I'm not mistaken.

WOMAN I: Your point being?

MAN I: Now you're going to tell me you gave yourself an infusion to prevent dehydration.

WOMAN I: That's an unopened package of needles. I haven't used them for anything yet.

MAN I: My God, you've got the gall. Tell me, what is it you inject?

WOMAN I: I'm diabetic.

MAN I: That's the official version?

WOMAN I: Let's just say it'd be none of your business if I were using smack.

MAN I: Are you using smack?

WOMAN I: Are you feeling all right?

MAN I: Why wouldn't I be?

WOMAN I: It's just that... judging from your pallor... let me know if you're getting sick.

MAN I: Dumb little junkie cunt.

WOMAN I: I've been expecting this tone.

MAN I: The boss's little whore, lecturing me.

WOMAN I: I knew this would happen.

MAN I: Lecturing me, really? Me? I was the greatest dancer in the country when you were in a schoolgirl uniform servicing pedophiles.

WOMAN I: And all this because you couldn't do a split.

MAN I: I don't give a shit about the split.

WOMAN I: Neither do I. I'm not the least bit interested in whether you can do a split. You wanted to prove you could.

MAN I: Well, I can.

WOMAN I: Do you need a glass of wine?

MAN I: I don't need anything.

WOMAN I: Your hand is shaking.

MAN I: I don't think so.

WOMAN I: Have a look. Do you know where your hand is? You have to look down.

MAN I: Filthy little bitch.

WOMAN I: Very sad... to hear you talk like that. So out of control. For such a... such a person.

MAN I: I'm not such a person.

WOMAN I: I meant it in a good way. A great artist of days gone by.

MAN I: You're a dime a dozen. A business woman, of course. Junkie whore. I'll dance on your grave.

WOMAN I: I've told you...

MAN I: Even better, I'll choreograph a funeral dance for you. For two girls, one of them will have...

WOMAN I: I've told you not to talk about death in this place.

MAN I: Oh, how could I forget! The death in your family!

WOMAN I: You remember, don't you?

MAN I: Dear me, is it possible? The kitty-cat croaked? What's to be done with the pink bow?

WOMAN I: I asked you, didn't I?

MAN I: Strange little girl. You tolerate being called a whore, but you believe in eternal life?

WOMAN I: Calling things by their name is not a problem. Things have names, they can be called by those names, it's another question whether the subject needs to be broached at all. I did, in fact, make my living that way. And while I find it discourteous of you to raise the issue, there's no reason to fear sincerity. Vulgarity is just bad form. You just don't know how to talk to women.

MAN I: I wouldn't call you a woman.

WOMAN I: You're aware, aren't you, that I'm going to punish you?

MAN I: Oh dear, I'm so scared.

WOMAN I: You'll soon stop laughing.

MAN I: Ho-ho!

WOMAN I: I asked you so kindly. You have no idea what memories it brought up in me. Terrible memories. Terrible.

MAN I: What's that to me, little girl?

WOMAN I: You're going to experience them.

MAN I: Beg your pardon?

WOMAN I: You're just an artist, not a man. You feel nothing, you know nothing, you're good for nothing, you're just a mirror, there's nothing behind it. I'll tell you my memories. Is that what you wanted? I'll show you. You'll experience them, and then you'll want to die. You won't want to live anymore. I can be of help to you.

(End of Scene 1)

Scene 2. *In a room*

MAN II: I already paid.

WOMAN II: No problem, I put it away.

MAN II: In advance, as usual.

WOMAN II: Right.

MAN II: So?

WOMAN II: What?

MAN II: You're looking at me so strangely.

WOMAN II: I was thinking about something.

MAN II: Oh. You think, do you?

WOMAN II: When I have the time.

MAN II: Tell me... I always wanted to ask. How many men... how many clients do you have?

WOMAN II: Why do you ask?

MAN II: You'll find out.

WOMAN II: Depends.

MAN II: You're asking yourself why I'm asking you, right? Why is this man asking me this question? What's he getting at? Am I right?

WOMAN II: No.

MAN II: I thought I nailed it.

WOMAN II: No. No offense, but something completely different has been on my mind lately. That's all there is to it.

MAN II: What?

WOMAN II: Well... Eh, it's stupid.

MAN II: I could tell your thoughts were elsewhere, not just now, before too.

WOMAN II: Happens.

MAN II: And are your thoughts elsewhere when you're...?

WOMAN II: When I'm what?

MAN II: Well, when you're with them.

WOMAN II: You mean all of you? Yes. Even in the act.

(Pause.)

MAN II: Is Monday good for you?

WOMAN II: Monday? What time?

MAN II: I don't know exactly. Eveningish.

WOMAN II: Seems fine, but call me. Not the day of, because I might be booked by then.

MAN II: When do you study?

WOMAN II: Nights.

MAN II: And... what are you studying?

WOMAN II: This isn't an appropriate topic of conversation. You've got to go now, because...

MAN II: Okay, okay, I'm just interested. Which college...

WOMAN II: Not college. I'm studying bookkeeping. Full-charge bookkeeping. At the National Business Institute. But there's tuition, which explains...

MAN II: I understand. Sorry for asking.

WOMAN II: So? Anything else?

MAN II: Well, may I ask how old you are?

WOMAN II: What for?

MAN II: I can't even ask?

WOMAN II: Why would you need to know?

MAN II: Aside from your name, I don't know anything about...

WOMAN II: That's not my name, what you call me. Not my real name.

MAN II: Well, let's just say I suspected as much.

WOMAN II: Obviously.

MAN II: I was just thinking we could get to know each other, as long as we're...

WOMAN II: I don't want to get to know you.

MAN II: Why not?

WOMAN II: You're not the type I tend to want to get to know.

MAN II: Why not?

WOMAN II: No offense, you're just not my type, that's all.

MAN II: But what's your problem with me? You can understand why I'm interested. You take my money...

WOMAN II: That's just it.

MAN II: What is?

WOMAN II: I would never get to know a man who pays for this.

MAN II: Oh.

WOMAN II: So that's it.

MAN II: In other words, you took the money, but...

WOMAN II: That's another matter. I worked for that.

MAN II: It could've been good for you too.

WOMAN II: It wasn't.

MAN II: I understand.

WOMAN II: Don't take offense. That's not the issue. I've just got something else on my mind.

MAN II: Well, I've been thinking about something too, and... Are you even listening?

WOMAN II: Of course.

MAN II: I wouldn't say my business is doing well.

WOMAN II: Sorry to hear.

MAN II: I'm past forty, my life is just dribbling away. Nothing exciting, nothing changes. What's left? I mean in life, not my line of work. Do you know what I do?

WOMAN II: No.

MAN II: Not that it matters much.

WOMAN II: I agree.

MAN II: Utilizing various methods, equipment and supplies, we clean and sanitize industrial and commercial properties.

WOMAN II: I see.

MAN II: Does that sound complicated?

WOMAN II: No. I get it.

MAN II: Well, it's a quote from our website. In theory we do painting according to health code standards, decontamination, soil, water, buildings, whatever it takes. But in practice it often just comes down to mowing. As in the lawn. For that there's demand. Was demand.

WOMAN II: I see.

MAN II: Well, the market's in a slump now.

WOMAN II: The grass stopped growing?

MAN II: It's not growing for me.

WOMAN II: Sad.

MAN II: Well, it's not like *your* line of work, is it? Business always booming, men always showing up.

WOMAN II: I haven't thought of myself as a market.

MAN II: Sorry. That's not what I meant to say. In other words, my business is dying, my marriage is pitiful...

WOMAN II: Are you sure you want to tell me about all that?

MAN II: You don't want me to?

WOMAN II: No. I don't. I don't think I need to hear about it.

MAN II: Well, I'll tell you what I was thinking.

WOMAN II: You need to get going.

MAN II: I've been married eleven years. I've always lived with the same woman. Always. Her name... never mind. We never argue. Which is rare, in case you didn't know. You're young, of course, so... But that's beside the point. We don't talk at home, my wife keeps to herself, and I keep to myself. But there's never silence. We don't like silence. There's music playing, or the TV's on, whatever. We don't watch it, of course, nobody watches that crap. But it's on. Maybe the remote's been lost, so it's always on. Tell you the truth, I really don't know. One night, two months ago, my wife – this was unexpected – broke down crying. Sobbing. She says she can't understand why I use this aftershave. It disgusts her. Makes her nauseous. I've been using this aftershave at least twenty years. Maybe longer. She's been my wife for eleven years. I was dumbfounded. And, she asks me, why did I buy a green car. How could I do that. A green car. At first I wasn't sure I understood, because she was crying so much. And also, you need to know this, I've had this car for five years. On top of which, she's never in it, because she's got her own, she drives around in her own. And she went on and on about all sorts of things that are green. All kinds of ... things. I won't go into that. But it was pretty insulting. For instance... no, what's the point, really. And that I drink beer out of the can. I told her I don't even drink beer, I

don't like beer. I never drink it. But yesterday you drank beer, she says. Out of the can. And she can't stand it any longer, she can't stand living with me. I was dumbfounded. It took me a while to say, for God's sake, why didn't you tell me before now? And also, let's not let this stand in our way, I'll pour out the aftershave, I'll sell that fucking car, or get a paint-job, or I'll just set fire to it in the middle of the yard, just stop crying. But she didn't stop.

WOMAN II: Are you sure you want me to hear this?

MAN II: I was completely clueless. When you come right down to it, we have a pleasant enough life, no complaints, though my company isn't doing well. It's a small firm, we recently gave up our downtown office and moved to an industrial park, to be closer to our clients. Oh, my wife. That's what I want to talk about. I mean, not about her, but... No, there's no one else in her life, she said. She just can't stand me. It's not even me per se, but the way I eat. That I drink beer, that I read the financial section and throw the rest of the paper on the floor. And she can't stand that my car is green. She can't stand green. Even though it's not really green... She can't stand it. And she cried. Sobbed. So much that she couldn't say anything else. Tell you the truth, I couldn't be sure what she was saying, she was crying so much. And then it occurred to me we've been married eleven years. Here's this woman, sitting in front of me. A stranger. Living with me for eleven years. For eleven years she says nothing. Actually, before, we lived together for a year, which makes twelve. Christ almighty, twelve! Says nothing the whole time. She hates green, she hates the ham and eggs I eat for breakfast, she hates the smell of my aftershave. When I drink beer out of the can. Or if I drink beer at all, that wasn't clear, I couldn't make it out through the crying. And she hates green. And she never told me. I could see she was suffering, the woman I'd been living with, sleeping in the same bed with, spending all my free time with, whose scent I know, and for five years she doesn't tell me she hates the car that's parked next to hers in the garage, she hates me drinking beer out of the can, the way I dress. What else does she hate? And she has no other feelings? She's a stranger I know nothing about. I feel like some traveler who one day takes the wrong exit off the highway, and comes to some dark, never-before-seen tract, and can't find any way back. All you can make out is that this tract is infinite. You drive aimlessly in the dark, around and around, and you realize you're lost, the moon turns to blood, you can't see where the land and the sky meet. I looked into her eyes and the horizon disappeared.

WOMAN II: Why are you telling me this?

MAN II: Ever since then, we've been living as if we were in the home of severely ill person. We don't speak out loud. We avoid each other. My car is blue. I use a new aftershave. But the TV's on. Always on. I haven't found the remote yet.

WOMAN II: Why me, exactly?

MAN II: I just wanted to ask you something. And don't even answer, I mean, not now.
Think about it. I know you're basically a good girl, or rather: were. Or rather: are...
In other words, the way you live now, this isn't what you want to be doing with your
life, is it?

WOMAN II: What are trying to say?

MAN II: I was thinking... What if... What if you cancelled everybody? The men, I mean.
Has it ever occurred to you? How good it would be? I mean besides me. I know
everything costs money. You have to pay for everything in this world. How much
would it be, the loss to you? Are you listening? It's as though you weren't even here.

WOMAN II: I am. I'm listening. In other words, you'd support me, right? The problem is,
I've gotten used to earning a lot.

MAN II: Yeah, but what do you think?

WOMAN II: And meanwhile you'd be going home to your wife? In other words, you'd be
leading a kind of double life?

MAN II: For a while I'd have to, because...

WOMAN II: All right, I get it. And could I lead a double life too?

MAN II: You mean...?

WOMAN II: Yes. That's what I mean. I could go home somewhere else too.

MAN II: Well, that's not how I imagined it.

WOMAN II: I understand.

MAN II: I see you were thinking.

WOMAN II: I guess I was.

MAN II: And what do you think?

WOMAN II: This isn't what I was thinking about.

MAN II: Okay, then what is?

WOMAN II: It's not important.

MAN II: Of course it's important.

WOMAN II: Honestly, makes no difference.

MAN II: It does to me. Let's start from there.

WOMAN II: What an idol is, is what I was thinking about, if it's so important for you to
know, if you won't leave me alone about it. That's what.

MAN II: Idol?

WOMAN II: Idol.

MAN II: Idol...?

WOMAN II: Idol, yes. What that is. Why, do you know? Of course I've heard the word before, but what exactly does it mean? What does it look like? And is it even a living being or just a concept. Or some object. Idol.

MAN II: It's a kind of thing.

WOMAN II: And?

MAN II: Well, it's a kind of... thing. What's it to you?

WOMAN II: Because that's what everything comes down to. I'm beginning to think that if I can just figure that out, then I'll be able to understand why everything turned out the way it did. And why I live in it the way I do.

MAN II: Live in what?

WOMAN II: Well, in this life I'm living in.

MAN II: Good God. You think about this kind of stuff?

WOMAN II: Why? Why do you think my life is the way it is?

MAN II: Well, let me say this. This problem is yours, but I can help you with it. You have no money, and... But if this isn't the way you want to live your life, why don't your parents – just saying – help you out.

WOMAN II: Okay, let's leave them out of it.

MAN II: Are they still living?

WOMAN II: They are, they're fine.

MAN II: In the city?

(Pause.)

MAN II: I take it that's off limits too.

WOMAN II: That's right.

MAN II: But in the city?

(Pause.)

MAN II: Okay, in the city or not in the city. Is there anyone, who...

(Pause.)

MAN II: Well okay. What's this idol stuff?

WOMAN II: It's in one of those handouts from somebody. A pamphlet.

MAN II: I have to assume you didn't get this pamphlet from the Business Institute.

WOMAN II: You think? Somebody in the street gave it to me.

MAN II: But why do you talk to just anyone?

WOMAN II: What do you mean just anyone?

MAN II: You shouldn't be talking to just anyone.

WOMAN II: Why not?

MAN II: Why not? Are you stupid? Because it's dangerous.

WOMAN II: What could happen?

MAN II: What do I know... you could be robbed.

WOMAN II: I never carry cash.

MAN II: Raped.

WOMAN II: Oh, is that what you're interested in? What that's like?

MAN II: Why? Would you want some lowlife to force you...

WOMAN II: You mean like this, here?

MAN II: Okay, chill.

WOMAN II: The point is, there's this sentence I don't get. In this pamphlet.

MAN II: What's the sentence?

WOMAN II: Why so agitated?

MAN II: Because! What's the sentence?

WOMAN II: Look, if you're agitated, I don't...

MAN II: What's the sentence?!

WOMAN II: Ephraim is joined to idols.

MAN II: That's the sentence?

WOMAN II: That's the sentence.

MAN II: Joined to idols.

WOMAN II: Right.

MAN II: Ephraim.

WOMAN II: Right.

MAN II: Who is this Ephraim?

WOMAN II: No clue.

MAN II: Look, dammit...

WOMAN II: But that doesn't matter. The idol's what matters.

MAN II: Excuse me to death, but if something happens to somebody, it matters who that person is.

WOMAN II: Oh, no! I knew it...

MAN II: You knew what?

WOMAN II: That it'd be hard.

MAN II: You gave me a hard assignment. There's this guy, nobody knows him, something happens to him, and I'm supposed to figure it all out. Well, thank you very much.

WOMAN II: I shouldn't have asked you.

MAN II: And what comes next.

WOMAN II: What do you mean?

MAN II: Is that all there is?

WOMAN II: No, it isn't.

MAN II: And?

WOMAN II: And what?

MAN II: Aren't you going to tell me what else there is? Maybe that'll tell us.

WOMAN II: I understand that part.

MAN II: Well, I don't, because I don't even know what it is.

WOMAN II: But that's not your concern.

MAN II: What do you mean not my concern? Is this some confidential publication?

WOMAN II: It's not confidential.

MAN II: All right then. It is my concern.

WOMAN II: Well yes, it's your concern. I mean it could be your concern too, only it wasn't written for you.

MAN II: For who then? This is like pulling teeth.

WOMAN II: For me. It was written for me. Is that clear? For me, me alone.

MAN II: May I hear it?

WOMAN II: This comes next: They drink to depravity, and they treat women like whores.

MAN II: And that was written for you.

WOMAN II: I live through this every day. They drink to depravity and treat women like...

MAN II: I get it. Who wrote this?

WOMAN II: Doesn't matter.

MAN II: Who wrote it? Like hell it doesn't matter.

WOMAN II: You don't know him.

MAN II: Well?

WOMAN II: Hosea.

MAN II: I don't believe this!

WOMAN II: I told you, you don't know him.

MAN II: Hosea and Ephraim, together again! And how do you know them?

WOMAN II: I don't know who they are.

MAN II: Is there anything you do know?

WOMAN II: One of them is in the story, the other one wrote it.

MAN II: Give it to me.

WOMAN II: What?

MAN II: That goddamn pamphlet. Let's have it.

WOMAN II: Okay, but don't tear it up.

MAN II: I'll control myself somehow. Where's the part?

WOMAN II: Here.

MAN II: Ephraim... you read this kind of stuff?

WOMAN II: It's clear that everything comes down to the idols.

MAN II: Who gave you this?

WOMAN II: Doesn't matter.

MAN II: Who was it?

WOMAN II: Some guy in the street.

MAN II: Hosea, huh? Why do you talk to just anyone? Why?

WOMAN II: Are you going to hurt me now?

MAN II: I'm not going to hurt you.

WOMAN II: But you want to.

MAN II: Okay, listen to me...

WOMAN II: Don't drink any more.

MAN II: Who's the publisher. Let's have a look.

WOMAN II: Aren't you going? You need to get going.

MAN II: New World Publications. Never heard of it. So who gave it to you?

WOMAN II: A witness.

MAN II: A witness.

WOMAN II: Right.

MAN II: An eyewitness or what? Was there an accident?

WOMAN II: One of those Jehovah's Witnesses gave it to me.

MAN II: Holy shit! A Jehovah's Witness gave it to you.

WOMAN II: Yes. I told you.

MAN II: And you read it.

WOMAN II: I have a lot of time. Why shouldn't I read it?

MAN II: And this is what's on your mind?

WOMAN II: It is. It says exactly how I live. They get drunk and use women. Meaning the men do. Meaning you too.

MAN II: Well, you just amaze me. You're studying bookkeeping, you're going to be a full-charge bookkeeper, and you read this kind of thing.

WOMAN II: I don't read this kind of thing. I've read this one thing. Let's be precise.

MAN II: How could we not be, you're studying bookkeeping.

WOMAN II: And accounting.

MAN II: Well, there you go! Okay, so what's next?

WOMAN II: Right here.

MAN II: I see it. I mean, I don't. Where?

WOMAN II: Here. Don't touch me.

MAN II: I touched you before.

WOMAN II: That was then. You paid me for that.

MAN II: Is my time up?

WOMAN II: It's up.

MAN II: The next guy's coming?

WOMAN II: Not yet.

MAN II: How do you know he won't show up early?

WOMAN II: He calls me when he's arriving. Like you.

MAN II: So may I stay a while?

WOMAN II: We can talk about what's in the pamphlet as long as it doesn't get you agitated and you don't touch me.

MAN II: Because my time's up.

WOMAN II: Yes.

MAN II: And if I pay you again?

WOMAN II: Can't.

MAN II: Ah-hah. The next one's on the way... You're silent, so that's how it is. And you don't want to talk about it.

WOMAN II: You have an hour, like everybody. I do everything we've agreed to. I don't do anything we haven't agreed to. And once your time is up, you can't touch me.

MAN II: Okay, show me that goddam pamphlet. Where is that part exactly? Wow, your nails are so nice, even without polish. I never noticed you don't use nail polish. I get it, we can't talk about that either. Here it is. They drink to depravity and they treat women like... hmm, and their shields dearly love dishonor. Does that mean the women are shielded? By Ephraim? He doesn't protect his girlfriend? Hey, why did you close it?

WOMAN II: That's enough. You've got to go.

MAN II: Your phone hasn't rung yet.

WOMAN II: You're making fun of me.

MAN II: We haven't finished reading it.

WOMAN II: Almost.

MAN II: Which means we haven't.

WOMAN II: The end's all that's left.

MAN II: And what's at the end?

WOMAN II: It doesn't matter.

MAN II: But what is it?

WOMAN II: You wouldn't understand it anyway.

MAN II: Why wouldn't I?

WOMAN II: Because I don't understand it either.

MAN II: Well then let's hear it. Read it to me.

WOMAN II: Okay. Here goes. The wind will wrap her in its wings, and they will be
ashamed. Does that clear it up for you?

MAN II: Well... I can't say, just yet. I might be able to figure it out, only I don't know who
it's about.

WOMAN II: The woman.

MAN II: Ephraim's?

WOMAN II: Maybe.

MAN II: The one they didn't protect.

WOMAN II: Maybe.

MAN II: In other words, you don't know either.

WOMAN II: I've already told you I don't. It all goes back to the idol. From there I don't
follow it.

MAN II: Well, this isn't a very comforting text.

WOMAN II: That's exactly what it is.

MAN II: Your place is nice, by the way. I've always meant to tell you. I never really had a
chance to look around.

WOMAN II: This isn't my place. My place isn't like this. I don't live here.

MAN II: Well, of course

WOMAN II: I don't water the plants, I don't prepare food in the kitchen, I don't sleep in the bed, the name on the door isn't mine.

MAN II: Well, of course.

WOMAN II: It's rented.

MAN II: By you?

WOMAN II: What do you think?

MAN II: Okay, no. My wife...

WOMAN II: I don't want to hear about your family.

MAN II: I don't have kids. But I could have a daughter your age. Well all right, almost. I see you're not interested. Why don't you ask the person you got the pamphlet from about this idol thing?

WOMAN II: I don't see him around anymore.

MAN II: And what's the answer to my question?

WOMAN II: I've got to think about it. But I'll probably say no.

MAN II: That pamphlet got you all mixed up.

WOMAN II: And your new blue car got you all mixed up.

MAN II: It's not new. Paint job.

WOMAN II: Then it's your wife who's all mixed up.

MAN II: She's all mixed up too.

WOMAN II: Is that why you were thinking there ought to be a fixed point in your life?

MAN II: A what?

WOMAN II: Not what, who. Meaning me.

MAN II: Will you be the fixed point in my life?

WOMAN II: No, I don't think so. I'm a little afraid of you.

MAN II: I'm a fearful person, who decontaminates on an industrial scale.

WOMAN II: You're a fearful person who drinks to depravity.

MAN II: I don't even drink.

WOMAN II: Even so.

MAN II: And if I promise not to drink beer from the can?

WOMAN II: That doesn't seem like much.

MAN II: What's to become of us?

WOMAN II: What else. I'll study bookkeeping, become a bookkeeper, and we'll find you a great big industrial-scale contamination.

MAN II: No, really, what if you asked the guy who gave you the pamphlet.

WOMAN II: The problem is, as I said, he doesn't come around here anymore.

MAN II: But really, what's to become of us? What?

WOMAN II: I can't come up with anything better than that.

(End of Scene 2)

Scene 3. *In a tanning salon*

MAN III: Have you heard this one? This dumb blonde comes home after her driver's test, and her husband says, so what happened, did you go belly up? Yeah, she says, with three examiners, but I got my license. Okay, sorry, that was crude. Blondes don't much care for dumb blonde jokes. How about this one: This guy has his buddy over for dinner, and after dinner the guy says to the wife, hey, you big white bird, get me a beer, would you? And the wife glides in with a bottle of beer. A couple of minutes later she says, hey, you big white bird, would you get me a cigarette? And the wife runs out to get the cigarette. While she's gone, the guest asks the guy, why do you always call her a big white bird? She's such a sport, says the guy, I can't very well call her a silly goose.

WOMAN III: Do you hear me not laughing?

MAN III: Yeah, I see you're in a rotten mood. Holy shit, can that kid cry!

WOMAN III: I'd appreciate it if you didn't tell any more jokes.

MAN III: I was trying to break the ice.

WOMAN III: I'd prefer it if we didn't talk at all.

MAN III: Not feeling too well, huh?

WOMAN III: Why wouldn't I be?

MAN III: When would you, somebody like you, ever be?

WOMAN III: I'm feeling fine.

MAN III: You've got the sweats.

WOMAN III: I'm not using, if that's what you're getting at.

MAN III: Ha-ha-ha. Do you hear me laughing?

(Pause.)

MAN III: All right. If you don't want to, we don't have to talk. Let's see the money.

WOMAN III: I haven't got any.

MAN III: How do you intend to pay?

(Pause.)

MAN III: I'm listening. You come here because you want to buy something...

WOMAN III: Like last time.

MAN III: I need money. That kid, chrissakes, how am I supposed to do business with that crying?

WOMAN III: I'll do anything. Whatever it is.

MAN III: Get a grip.

WOMAN III: Anything.

MAN III: Jesus Christ.

WOMAN III: What's wrong?

MAN III: At least look a person in the eye when you say something like that. Of course, then you'd have to take off your sunglasses.

WOMAN III: Anything.

MAN III: Step into the light.

WOMAN III: Okay.

MAN III: Jesus Christ.

WOMAN III: What's wrong?

MAN III: You look like shit.

WOMAN III: You told me...

MAN III: I know. I told you you're beautiful. When did I say that? Huh? Three years ago. Or four. Five maybe. Look at you. Take a look. You're hideous and you reek of disinfectant. Junkie cunt. Who the fuck would want you? Huh?

WOMAN III: Last time...

MAN III: Last time! Who the fuck gives a shit about last time. You're gross, you look like death warmed over, you smell disgusting. You're disgusting, that's all there is to it.

WOMAN III: I don't have any money.

MAN III: You already told me that.

WOMAN III: I'll do anything you ask.

MAN III: Well, that's good to hear, little prom queen.

WOMAN III: I was never a prom queen.

MAN III: Funny, I thought you were.

WOMAN III: I was first runner-up.

MAN III: Zowie! First runner-up. Good for you! Silver sash.

WOMAN III: I never talk about things like that. How do you even know?

MAN III: You told me yourself. You even put on the gown last time. Don't you remember?

WOMAN III: Yeah. I think so.

MAN III: That was the only way you could get me interested. But not any more. It's not even that you're so ugly, it's that you look so scary. Like you're about to die.

(Pause.)

WOMAN III: What if I put the gown on again?

MAN III: You don't own it any more.

WOMAN III: I don't?

MAN III: You don't. You sold it to me.

WOMAN III: Oh yeah. I remember.

MAN III: The hell you do.

WOMAN III: Can I put my sunglasses back on?

MAN III: Get outa here. Get the fuck out.

WOMAN III: Gimme one. One hit... Couldn't you give me one, for old times' sake?

(Man III laughs.)

WOMAN III *(with hatred)*: The only reason you don't want me is 'cause you're a faggot. It's not 'cause I'm ugly, it's 'cause you're a fag. You're a big pussy and women make you sick.

(Pause.)

WOMAN III: Sorry. I'll kiss your hand. I'll suck your...

MAN III: How 'bout you get the fuck outa here.

(Baby cries.)

MAN III: That kid's gonna drive me crazy. Whose is it anyway?

WOMAN III: Mine.

MAN III: Yeah, no shit. Very funny. I meant who's the father. But it was a dumb question, excuse me for asking. Of course you don't have the foggiest idea.

WOMAN III: I do know who the father is.

MAN III: Not the foggiest is what I said. Got that? You've got no idea.

(Baby gets louder.)

MAN III: Shut that kid up. It's wailing like a siren. It'll scare people away.

WOMAN III: You're closed now, aren't you?

MAN III: You'll damage my reputation.

WOMAN III: What reputation?

MAN III: This is a reputable place. And I own half.

WOMAN III: Congratulations.

MAN III: Where is the kid?

WOMAN III: Out there.

MAN III: Where out there?

WOMAN III: Out in the reception area, on the counter.

MAN III: You left it on the counter?

WOMAN III: It seemed warmer out there than in here. Anyway, it's covered.

MAN III: But what if somebody comes in?

WOMAN III: Nobody's comes in here. You always say.

MAN III: This is a tanning salon, goddammit, open night and day. Anybody can come in any time.

WOMAN III: You're closed at night.

MAN III: I'm closed from two to six, goddammit. And what fuckin' time is it now, huh? What fuckin' time?

WOMAN III: I don't know.

MAN III: It's fuckin' midnight, you stupid junkie. Don't you even own a watch? Or a phone?

WOMAN III: Nobody's gonna hurt the baby. I couldn't imagine that.

MAN III: You couldn't?

WOMAN III: I don't have a watch. And I do have a phone.

MAN III: Where? Show me. You don't have one.

WOMAN III: At home. It's at home.

MAN III: And you're not using, huh? Then why are you here? If that brat doesn't shut up, I'll go out and chop it to pieces. That screaming!

WOMAN III: That's why I'm here.

MAN III: It's unbearable. Go stop it.

WOMAN III: I can't.

MAN III: Whaddya mean you can't? You're the mother. It's driving me crazy.

WOMAN III: I need a little help.

MAN III: Help?

WOMAN III: Right. Help.

MAN III: So that's what you call it nowadays. Help. It's had so many names already.

WOMAN III: Okay, let's just say I need first aid.

MAN III: The thing is, I remember you from your prom-queen days.

WOMAN III: We've already covered that topic.

MAN III: Whatever. I remember. And it always gets me going, how you looked down on me, what a conceited bitch you were! Fucking little princess. You didn't deign to speak to me.

WOMAN III: I don't remember.

MAN III: It wasn't so long ago. You were unapproachable.

WOMAN III: I don't remember.

MAN III: You looked right through me. Didn't even notice me. Didn't even know my name.
Shut that kid up!

WOMAN III: I can't, believe me.

MAN III: Is it sick or what?

WOMAN III: Let's just say, not in good shape.

MAN III: How old?

WOMAN III: Just turned twelve months.

MAN III: That's a year.

WOMAN III: Yeah, a year.

MAN III: Then why don't you say that? One year old.

WOMAN III: When they're this little...

MAN III: What? That screaming is so loud I can't fuckin' hear you.

WOMAN III: When they're this little, their age is counted in months.

MAN III: It's probably because I was sweating all the time. Let's just say I wasn't exactly slim then either.

WOMAN III: What're you saying? What sweating?

MAN III: That's why you didn't talk to me, ever. That was one reason. Let's be honest, I'm not exactly a good-looking guy. Never was. And I've been getting worse. You're not laughing, huh? It's funny though.

WOMAN III: Why's it funny?

MAN III: Because I think you're even uglier than I am now. You look like a ghost.

WOMAN III: I don't sleep.

MAN III: Withdrawal, huh?

WOMAN III: No, not withdrawal. The kid crying. Always.

MAN III: Well, yeah, I get it.

WOMAN III: I quit.

MAN III: Then why are you here?

WOMAN III: You hear it, don't you?

MAN III: I hear what? What am I supposed to be hearing?

WOMAN III: The way the baby's bawling.

(Pause.)

MAN III: I don't believe this.

(Pause.)

MAN III: The kid needs it? This is for the kid?

WOMAN III: Yes, the kid, who won't sleep or eat, or do anything.

MAN III: You stupid cunt. Your kid's a year old and has withdrawal? How is that possible?
How?

WOMAN III: Born that way.

(Pause.)

MAN III: Holy shit. This is unbelievable. I've seen a thing or two, but... and why don't you take it to some fucking doctor?

WOMAN III: Because the child is suffering.

MAN III: What are you saying?

WOMAN III: I'm the mother.

MAN III: What are you saying?

WOMAN III: It's been breaking my heart.

MAN III: So a fix is the answer?

(Pause.)

MAN III: I don't believe this.

WOMAN III: It stops the crying.

MAN III: I don't believe this, for real.

WOMAN III: What mother lets her kid suffer?

MAN III: I'm listening to you and I'm thinking this conversation is not happening... Of course, you didn't stop using when you were pregnant.

WOMAN III: There was no way to avoid it. It was in my milk. If I didn't breast feed right away... it's better if you don't know. Then after a while I didn't have any more milk, so then... the favorite little spoon. It's in the crib now too, I can't take it away.

MAN III: Fuck me, for this I've got to sit down.

WOMAN III: Just a child's portion. I've been careful, I'm not stupid. Just a child's portion, that's all.

MAN III: Tell me more. Your son's childhood fascinates me.

WOMAN III: Daughter. I've got a daughter. A little girl.

MAN III: Girls can't scream that loud.

WOMAN III: Give me all of it. I'll do anything for it. I want some sleep.

MAN III: So the kid's on the counter?

WOMAN III: Should I bring her in? Her name is...

MAN III: I'm not interested in the name.

WOMAN III: You're not?

MAN III: Don't you dare bring it in. It's screaming so loud, they'll think somebody's being murdered in here. A child's being murdered.

WOMAN III: She's suffering.

MAN III: Anyway, her name's no mystery. What kind of name would a dumb prom queen think of? The head cheerleader. Melissa, or Jessica, yeah Jessica, or no, Jennifer.

WOMAN III: No.

MAN III: Are you sure it's a girl?

WOMAN III: The name doesn't matter. Give her a new name if you want.

MAN III: Why would I? You and your brat are none of my business. Go away, the two of you. Come back when you've got money on you.

WOMAN III: You can give her a boy's name, if you prefer.

MAN III: You know it's pointless coming here if you can't pay. It just gets me worked up. Do I really have to smack you around again?

WOMAN III: Go ahead, if you want to.

MAN III: It'll just get me dirty, and anyway I'm tired. Last time I got all skuzzy, with you bleeding all over everything. Disgusting.

WOMAN III: I'm sorry.

MAN III: Take that brat away from here. Why's it me you come begging to? Go to that asshole over on...

WOMAN III: You're responsible.

MAN III: Excuse me?

WOMAN III: You owe me.

MAN III: Don't let me hear you say that again. I don't have the foggiest idea who first sold you what. I wasn't there, and even if I was, who remembers a bunch of skanks. At times like this, they all say: it was you. But why would it have been me? And even if it was, what then? Why did you buy it? Why did you use it? Why did you even go looking for it? Nobody asked you to. You're an adult, an adult, for chrissake. It's none of my business. I'm not responsible for you.

WOMAN III: Not me. You are responsible, but not for me.

M: Whaddy mean, not for you. For who?

WOMAN III: I'm not here because of me.

MAN III: So tell me, because of who?

(Pause.)

MAN III: What're you getting at?

WOMAN III: You're responsible.

MAN III: What're you saying?

WOMAN III: You know what I'm saying. I'm an adult, that's right. You're not responsible for me. But you are for your daughter out there.

(Pause.)

MAN III: Tell me I'm dreaming.

WOMAN III: You're not dreaming. Go out there and take a look, on the counter among the brochures, take a look. I covered her with a poster, I think an ad for cosmetic tattoos, the one with the gorgeous chick you once said I was better looking than, and now she's still beautiful... so anyway I took it off the wall. Sorry. The point is, you're responsible for her.

MAN III: Cut the shit, I'm serious.

WOMAN III: Why would I be shitting you?

MAN III: You rotten junkie skank.

WOMAN III: Hit me, of course.

MAN III: Goddammit. God-fuckin-dammit.

WOMAN III: You won't take a look?

MAN III: How old, exactly?

WOMAN III: Twelve months.

MAN III: Plus nine, right? Wait... that makes it impossible, because...

WOMAN III: No. It's very possible.

MAN III: Fuck me. I can't handle this. A girl? What's her name, what'd you say?

WOMAN III: You can give her any name you like. Give her a new name. Go out to her, get to know each other. Be a good daddy to her.

MAN III: Which cosmetic tattoo poster? The big one or the little one?

WOMAN III: The one with the gorgeous chick.

MAN III: They all have a gorgeous chick.

WOMAN III: The one you said I was better looking than.

MAN III: You were better looking than all of them.

WOMAN III: The big one. The small one I crumpled under the basinet to stabilize it.

MAN III: Fuck me, this too. That stupid poster is Linda's favorite. She's gonna kill me.

WOMAN III: The baby kicks so hard, I was afraid she might fall out.

MAN III: Why don't you tie her in?

WOMAN III: You think I never did? We're way past that. I'm at the point where I'm ready to stuff her mouth to stop the screaming.

MAN III: Well, if you don't, I will.

WOMAN III: You're a better man than that. That's why I fell in love with you.

MAN III: Don't go there.

WOMAN III: I will. You're a good person.

MAN III: I'm a disgusting person, that much I'm sure of.

WOMAN III: You're good looking and a good person.

MAN III: Look, stop this, okay? I put on thirty pounds just since the last time somebody said I look repugnant. And I even slap you around, last time too. That doesn't count?

WOMAN III: You had good reason. I got on your nerves. You had every reason to.

MAN III: No-no, you're not gonna drag me into this. An hour ago I was sitting here without a care in the world, practically happy...

WOMAN III: Go out to her.

MAN III: This is pretty harsh, making me a father, all of a sudden like this. I'm not prepared. I'm still young, and...

WOMAN III: Go out to her.

MAN III: Does she look like me?

WOMAN III: You won't be able to tell right now. She's all blue from the bawling.

MAN III: Me too, when I holler. My face turns blue, in fact...

WOMAN III: I hope you two get along.

MAN III: What're you doing?

WOMAN III: Leaving.

MAN III: Good idea. You finally caught on. Thanks for dropping by.

WOMAN III: But I'm leaving her here.

MAN III: What?

WOMAN III: I've run out of strength.

MAN III: What do you mean?

WOMAN III: I don't have what it takes to take care of two of us. I can't go through each day with two people to be responsible for. My strength is gone, simple as that. Completely gone.

MAN III: I'll run after you with her.

WOMAN III (*laughs*): By the time you hoist yourself out of that easy chair, I'll have vanished. You have no idea where I live.

MAN III: You're gonna leave your child here? Are you serious?

WOMAN III: Just for a while. I just need some time.

MAN III: I don't know what to do with a child.

WOMAN III: You can give her the only thing she really needs. You're the source.

MAN III: And what if I turn out to be some pervert? What if I'm a child molester?

WOMAN III: No. You're a good guy. You sweat, you're asthmatic, you use some kind of body spray instead of showering, but you're a good person. You have a sense of responsibility. You sold me my first hit, even though you didn't want to. You were in love with me. The reason you sold it to me was so we'd have a connection. To get close to me. But you didn't want to.

MAN III: I don't remember that.

WOMAN III: I do. I'm leaving now. Be a good father. I just changed her diaper.

MAN III: Don't you fucking do this, goddammit.

WOMAN III: I'll give her a hug on the way out. The only reason I told you is I don't want to turn this into a relay race, so don't come running after me. I just want to give her a hug. I wouldn't be able to leave otherwise. I'm leaving now, okay? (*Exits.*)

MAN III (*clammers up, goes out after her, comes back with the baby*): This is serious. She really left it here. This is no small thing.

So now... do we go to some nursery or... I don't know.

(*Pokes around in bassinet*) A national health-insurance card, what's this, identification. Wow, a person this little has personal ID. You've got to be careful not to let it lapse, you hear? (*Reads the papers*) Nice name, cute little girl. Pretty. Well sure, she *is* my daughter. Looking at me, are you? Looking and wondering who this guy is, huh? Well, it's me. (*With satisfaction*) And she's not crying. She feels secure. Your mother's been driving you nuts, right? She drives me nuts too.

(*Reads the documents*) And she's not one year old. She's a year and a half. But that would make it winter, and in the winter I was... (*computing with his fingers*) Fuck me! She tricked me. She tricked me! The kid's not even mine... She put one over on

me, the tricky bitch. That's how much you can trust a junkie, little girl. Never trust a mother. She bows out, and that's that. Mothers... that's what they're like.

I'll put her in the tanning bed. I'll turn it on... at least she won't be cold. At least she'll get a tan, right? Wanna get a tan? Lookin' at me, huh?

She'll come back for her in any case. No doubt... one or two days. Won't she be surprised, getting back a happy, suntanned child.

Well, okay, she can stay with me till morning. Then we'll see, in the morning. Morning's far off yet. Listen to me, little girl, sometimes you just think about whether you'll even make it to the morning.

Anyway, she really does look like me. You look like me, you know? Just like me. Little fatty. She fell asleep, finally.

Two days, three days, we'll see. She'll never come back for her. Am I supposed to buy milk now? What kind? Fat free or what? Oops, we need a diaper... where's the instructions? Not in the box. No problem, we'll look it up on the net. There must be something on You-tube. We'll find some diapering page on the net.

It's so damn cold here. So warm when I hold her!

What now?

I'll take a selfie with her, I never had a kid before. *(Exits.)*

(End of Scene 3)

Scene 4.

WOMAN IV: A little boy's mommy and daddy took him out to the woods and left him there. Well, that can happen. But he outsmarted them, because he suspected what they were up to when they took him way-way into the deep-deep forest, and he dropped pebbles, so he could find his way back home. So, then, his mommy and daddy were really upset, and his daddy spanked him real hard, and his mommy yelled at him, the way mommies are supposed to. So, then of course everybody made like everything was really good, everything was fine and dandy. We all know how that goes. So then, they took him out to the woods again. The little boy thought about outsmarting them again with pebbles, but he couldn't find any, because this time they didn't take him through the playground – there's this playground with gravel, other kinds of playgrounds too, but they didn't take him through those either – so guess what he thought of? He found this really old bread at home, one of those French breads, a baguette, that's what they're called, did you know that? So then, he crumbled it into crumbs, and he dropped those when the monster mommy and monster daddy were taking him into the deep-deep forest. Except, oh no! the wicked crows ate up all the crumbs, and they flew around the deep-deep forest, and sang in a voice like when wet wood weeps in a fire. The little boy wept too, a lot.

But miracle of miracles! All of a sudden he hears the fluttering of emerald wings, and the good fairy alighted next to him on the sad ground and said "I am the good fairy." That's how you could tell she was the good fairy, because she said so, and you could tell from the way she looked too, with her giant blue eyes, and her silvery porcelain arms, and her gold crown melted into ice. "Why are you crying, little boy?" "Who wouldn't cry, who wouldn't, I can't find my way home." "Come with me, come on, don't be afraid."

And they set out. It was slow going, the trip was tiring, like they were walking down dream-stairs, and oh, no! the fairy wasn't looking at him the same way as evening fell and the tiny yellow light ran away whimpering as the dogs of the night chased it.

"Boy oh boy, did I get hungry," said the fairy in her velvety voice, "so hungry," and the trees perked up. "Me too," said the little boy, "I got hungry too," because he didn't understand anything. "But the problem is, my little one," said the fairy gently, "the only problem is, I'm hungrier," and no matter how fast the boy ran, the fairy caught up with him, tore him limb from limb, and the blood spurted up to the sky, and all you could hear in the deep-deep forest was her chomping and munching in the dark night.

That's what can happen if you're not careful.

My name is Anna. I'm five years old, and everybody calls me Annie. I hope you liked my story. I made it up. Of course, there aren't stories like that in real life.

That's something Lewie told me, by the way, when I got my turtle. Wanna hear how I got my turtle? I'll tell you. He wants to be called Lewie, even though he is a grownup. When I got to know him... this is sad... was when Chirpie died. I mean my parakeet, of course. Who knows why. I gave him birdseed, water, I petted him, I gave him water, I already said that. I liked stroking his feathers. Then one day he was just lying there, all matted, his eyes were covered with this sticky goo. It was really disgusting. I couldn't pet him or anything. Daddy took him to the doctor. Birds have doctors too. But that didn't help any more either. I got up at night and looked in the birdcage. He was breathing real hard. Kind of fast, like this. He was all scrunched up, huddled in the corner, looking at me. I was a little scared. He was just looking, looking, then he wasn't any more. Well, that's when he died. I watched him die. I knew the minute he died. Well, then I cried, I sure did. But I watched him.

So then Lewie... you see mommy took me down to the playground to bury Chirpie. We buried him and sang a hymn, then mommy went home to throw out the cardboard box we brought Chirpie down in, and left me there to pick flowers for Chirpie's grave. I was alone, but I wasn't afraid, I can see our window from the playground, and I know all the kids. And mommy hates the other mommies in the playground, and says she watches me from the window. She doesn't say she hates the other mommies, but I know she does. She never chats with them, and she says they're dumb slobs. Not to me, she says that to daddy at home, when they fight about moving someplace else. Why are we living here with these dumb slobs, she says.

I don't want to move someplace else. And I don't think the other mommies are dumb slobs. The kids are the dumb slobs.

So mommy, before she left me there with the dumb slobs, dusted off my nice black clothes. See, I crawled through some bushes. She likes dusting me. I don't like being dusted. I make her life miserable. I know I do. I'm so much trouble. Well, yeah. If your mommy's mad, never let her brush your hair. Well, she brushed mine. So anyway, she went back up with the box. That's when she said she was gonna watch me from the window. But I don't think she ever watches me from the window.

So then what happened was, Lewie walked came over to me. He was never there before. I mean, he might have been, but not when I was. I don't know why he came, why he comes there, I don't know. Maybe he likes kids. I asked him once, and he said he does, he likes kids a lot, all of them.

Well, so then Lewie... I call him Lewie even though he's a grownup. But he doesn't have kids. So he's not a daddy, only a grownup. But he doesn't like being called Mister. Maybe 'cause he doesn't have kids. I asked him about that too, later on, and he said he doesn't, that's why he goes to the playground. I can understand that, there's lots of kids there. I like being where there's lots of kids too, so I totally understand that. It's understandable. Everybody can understand that.

Well, so then Lewie came over to me. By the way, his voice is like a lady's, it's soft and cheery. He asks what I'm doing? Well, I was crying, of course. I said I'm mourning. I was dressed in black too, so he could tell from my black tee shirt, and I have black tights. Which tore right then, because I had to crawl through these bushes for the flowers, but never mind. Black shoes I don't have. I did, but I outgrew them. Just last year, I wore them on my last day at pre-school, at the party. They were so tight I almost peed myself.

But in the playground I was all in black, that's how I buried Chirpie, everybody can understand that. I had a pail, and a plastic shovel, but those are red, never mind. That's what I dug the grave with. A black shovel woulda been better.

So anyway, Lewie brought some flowers too. For Chirpie's grave. I liked his black car best of all. It was just right, black. He said I should get in, so we can go buy flowers. That was understandable, you need to buy flowers. So we bought flowers. The lady, the flower lady asked what kind of flowers, she asked Lewie, so then he asked me. I liked that a lot, and the flower lady gave me the kind I asked for. Really. It was a bouquet as big as my head. It had these blue flowers, and red, and sorta white. It was very pretty. It even had paper on it. And a ribbon.

Then it got dark, got to be evening, and Lewie asked me, if he takes me back and we put the bouquet on Chirpie's grave, and I have to go home, do I want to meet him tomorrow too. Could we go for ice cream? That's what he asked me. Well, duh! Good question. So then this'll be our secret, is what Lewie said when he was driving his big black car. Don't tell your mommy, mommies don't understand things like this. Well of course I won't. He was right about that, mommy wouldn't let me. I was wondering what kind of ice cream I'd be getting. And mommy wouldn't allow it, he was totally right about that, that's understandable, everybody can understand that.

Then he asked me, when we went for ice cream, do I like boys. I told him I can't stand them. Do I play with them? I said I can't, because they're idiots and they don't even know how to play. Do I have any friends who are boys? I don't. So that's the kind of thing we talked about, then came the raspberry-stracciatella, chocolate, vanilla, lychee. First four-scoop ice cream cone I ever had. It was as big as... really big. I didn't even know what I asked for, for the fourth. That's why it was lychee. I don't know what that is. But I could tell Lewie was getting impatient, and I didn't want him to change his mind. That's why I said that one. It was the lychee, now I know. But this is a secret. Not the lychee's the secret, but the whole ice cream thing. I didn't tell mommy. Coming home, Lewie asked me, do I have a brother, a big brother. That's all I need! Do I know any boys. Not too many, good thing. Do I play with them. Never. So that's the kind of thing we talked about, but I was getting tired of all those questions. The lychee though, that was good.

I never had a secret before. I mean a real secret. Not like the secrets I had with Betsy in the pre-school, or the one... never mind. I mean a secret like this. How I met

Billy. He's really called Bill, only Lewie calls him Billy. Lewie told me to get to know Billy, who's really Bill, and he's older than me. By one year, so he's almost a big little-boy. Okay, not so much, but he is six, after all. So Lewie told me to make friends with Billy, that's how he said it, make friends, and to call him over. And it's a secret. He told me not to tell. He asked me if I know what a secret is. That's how stupid grownups are, they don't know that kids know what a secret is. I had secrets in pre-school with Betsy. Well, so then we all went to buy me a turtle in place of Chirpie. But then we didn't buy it after all, because I didn't know what to say at home, how come I have a turtle. I thought about telling mommy that somebody rang the doorbell and I went out to see who it was, but the person already ran away and left the turtle. I do that sometimes, ring a bell and run away. Except I don't leave anything. But Lewie said that's no good, we still gotta work on the problem. He said that too, that we gotta work on the problem.

Then they left, him and Bill. Well, I don't know what they did, why they went away, but I stayed there in the playground, I played by myself, then I went home. That's all that happened.

Next day we all met again in the playground, it was summer after all, summer vacation. Not for me, I'm not in school yet. I start next year.

We had ice cream and all, then Lewie wanted to go away with Billy again, but Bill cried, because he didn't want to. That made Lewie nervous, he was afraid somebody was watching Bill cry, but nobody was. No mommies in the playground ever look when another kid cries, they even turn away. It's bad enough when their kid cries. But Lewie was nervous, he said the way Billy is crying, it sounds like when wet wood weeps in a fire.

I don't know what it sounds like when wet wood weeps in a fire, I never saw anything like that. Lewie said he saw it when he was a child. Okay, so he saw it. Big deal. I thought Bill was crying like a puppy whimpering. It got on my nerves too.

Well, then they finally went away. I was thinking about the turtle. Maybe I could say I found it in the playground.

Bill never came back to the playground. Neither did Lewie for a week maybe. Then he came, and pointed at a little boy. His name was Freddy. So I called him over to play, because Lewie wanted me to.

So then we went for ice cream and everything, like before. Freddy cried too, when they came back. Well actually, Lewie didn't even get out of the car, just dropped him off. I could tell he was nervous. I woulda been nervous too, the way Freddy was crying.

But after a while Lewie came again, and took me to another playground. I was never there before. He pointed at a little boy. I think his name was Tommy. He was really little, the littlest so far.

Now we go to the square. We take Tommy for ice cream. I'm thinking about the turtle. Mommy says I can't take presents from strangers. So that kills that.

Now Lewie has a good idea. He says I should say I won it in a drawing contest. But what should I draw? Whatever you want, whatever you like. Well, I can't think of anything. Well, draw the playground. Oh, come on, Lewie, that's boring! So draw the sun. You can't win a contest with that, mommy wouldn't believe me! Grownups are stupid sometimes. Draw a story. A story? A whole story? Yeah, sure, says Lewie. Now that's worth thinking about. A whole story, that's too much. But guess what? I'll draw a fairy, the good fairy. A fairy, there ya go!

So that's how I got my turtle. Because of the good fairy. See? That's all there is to it.

(End of Play.)