

Stanislav Stratiev

Empty Rooms

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Translated from the Bulgarian by Svetlin Stratiev.

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CHARACTERS

ALEXANDER

JEAN-PAUL SARTRE

NIA

VLADIMIR

Bedroom and lounge in a prefab apartment. There is nobody in the lounge. Bookshelves, pictures, a lounge cabinet with carvings on the doors, a telephone with an answering machine on one of its shelves. ALEXANDER is in the bedroom, his back against an inclined prefab wall, his shoulders propping it up. There are photographs on it – his wedding, his son in uniform doing National Service, his parents ... A mirror hangs at an angle to this wall like a plumb line. On the opposite wall there is a hand-made tapestry facing the wall; we can see the colored threads and knots on its reverse side. ALEXANDER is propping the wall, Atlas-like. The prefab panel forming the wall has detached itself from the other walls and the ceiling and is kept upright only by ALEXANDER's back.

ALEXANDER: Keep calm! ... Don't panic! ... Cool analysis – that's what's needed! ... Just the facts! ... What are the facts? ... There I was, sitting in the kitchen, prosaically having breakfast. Suddenly there was this creaking noise from the bedroom. So I ran there and I saw the wall splitting off from the rest. I stood staring in disbelief and then the wall began to fall ... Naturally, I moved in and propped it up. That's all ... *(Pause)* On the one hand, this wall panel is squashing me, on the other, I can't get away. I went too far in ... too near the center. That's me ever since I was a kid – go in first, think afterwards. When thinking's no longer any use ... *(Pause)* All this is gibberish anyway, there's nowhere for me to go, because if I don't prop up this panel, it will fall. What's to guarantee that the other walls won't fall in turn? ... They support each other ... What's to guarantee that once the bedroom's down, the kitchen, lounge, everything else won't crumble? ... What's to guarantee that once my apartment collapses, the floors above won't come crashing down, and then the floors below, the neighboring staircases, the entire block? ... There's no guarantee. That's the problem – no guarantee about anything.

Anything can happen – and unfortunately it does happen. You get squashed like a cockroach, clueless.

But this apartment matters – two generations have lived here – one generation was conceived on this here bed, not to mention the fact that at least one generation before them had a dog's life saving the money for the apartment ... If it crumbles, I'd better die buried in the ruins ... No, I must bear this, I must keep propping this panel up till my wife comes home from work! ... Whatever it takes. *(Pause)*

In fact, I have nothing else left ... not much of a choice ... Can't run; if I scream, nobody will hear ... Oh well, they'll hear all right, but they won't come ... It's a long time since anybody paid any attention to people talking or screaming beyond one's own walls ... When we moved in, it was different – we would start at every noise, we would hurry to the rescue at every scream ... Now, even a nuclear blast next door ...

Completely useless, screaming; I'd only waste my energy, and I need every bit of it now. Because this weight ... *(Pause, he tries to adopt as comfortable a posture as possible, shifts his shoulders, wipes the sweat off his brow with his hand.)* ... I'm sweating and my legs are trembling ... I've always had strong legs, let's hope they won't give in now, of all times ... My dad had strong legs too ... Same for my Granddad ... I've noticed that our family have very strong legs ... *(Pause)*

Well, OK, I could have been a little luckier – the lounge wall could've collapsed instead ... the one by the telephone ... then I'd have been able to make a phone call ... while propping it up ... call somebody ... But no, it was the wall furthest from the phone that collapsed ... I was never lucky ... I've never won the lottery or anything just like that, without efforts, out of the blue ... I've worked like a termite, worked myself to death; the results, on the other hand, however generously you judge, can hardly be called brilliant ... Still, I've lived some sort of a life. But now that the

walls themselves have started falling down ... I'm not complaining, not at all, it just seems a little over the top, that's all ... It's just that I wouldn't say I am Fate's favorite ... No, I'm not complaining, no, it's a sober attitude, one might call it ... being aware of realities ... I'm not rebelling against ... not at all ... I suppose it had to happen. A necessary accident. Or an accidental law of nature. Somewhere, the cards were dealt that way. Fate. I'm not challenging Fate, not at all ... I'm not one of those ... who do nothing but bemoan their fate, curse and things like that ... Quite the contrary, I believe in destiny ... This is not to say I drift with the current, no, I don't drift ... I simply trust Fate, I've thrown myself into her arms ... (*Pause*)

Anyway, there's nothing I can do. I've nothing to put under that wall to prop it up. I am like a cockroach waiting to get crushed. An excellent prospect, what! (*Pause*) The panel seems to get heavier. I can feel myself softening up. Am I turning into pulp under its weight or is that an illusion? Damn it, one has one's breakfast peacefully one minute, and is under a panel, fighting for his life the next! Is that what you call life? (*Pause*) Oh, yeah, go on, start crying, get all soft and squishy, start wallowing in self-pity – just the right moment for that. Do I dare lash out against Fate? If I do that, who knows what will happen next.

The telephone starts ringing in the lounge, which is separated from the bedroom by a partition wall.

VOICE (*From the answering machine*): Sasho, I've found a great carpet only I don't have enough cash. I'll go get some cash after work. So don't worry about me!

ALEXANDER (*Shouting*): No! No! Come back right now! ... (*The answering machine switches itself off.*) Of my God, so she'll go shopping.

And I'll die in here. My closest person. The mother of my children. ...
Not worry? I'm going crazy, and she tells me not to worry about her! No, dearest, I won't, corpses don't worry! *(Pause)* I'd hardly opened my mouth to complain and Fate punished me. Salvation backed off. *(Pause)* Maybe my son will come back all of a sudden ... No reason why he shouldn't... He's always done surprising things ... ever since he was a child ... it's just like him really ... Very fine young man ... His big dream is to walk over Niagara on a tightrope ... I understand, we all have dreams ... Well, it is a bit of a surprise to me, I must admit ... after all, he's studying engineering ... In the middle of the rope out there, over the waterfall, he would meet his own self ... there alone ... said he couldn't possibly meet his self anywhere else. There's nothing wrong with this, of course. Trouble is, the meeting might not happen after all ... if the wind gets stronger. I shudder to think. Well, youth is unpredictable, like it or not ... I'd never have dared dream of such a thing. *(Pause)*

It's heavy, this goddamn panel! ... *(Squirms to find a more comfortable posture.)* It's flaying me! ... Damn it, the wall with the tapestry could have fallen instead! If Providence wanted to topple something in any case! ... For once this tapestry would've served a purpose! ... It could have provided padding for my back ... rather than just hang there facing the wall until my mother's next visit. When we would turn it round in order not to hurt her feelings. She rarely comes these days. Spends her time in the square selling tapestries. Handmade. By her hand. Hasn't sold anything, but that doesn't stop her weaving a few per month. Won't sell a thing of course, who would buy a tapestry of Marx and Engels, or Lenin and Stalin?! ... Oh boy, did we try to convince her to change the subject. No way ... she's been weaving their portraits since secondary school. She earned us a living this way, taught this art in schools, even had exhibited in East Germany. Can't shake the habit. Her hand moves on its own, she

weaves them by heart. Won't make a fortune in this business, but it keeps her in shape. Question is, why can't she come right now and save her son. If she comes, I'll hang another of her tapestries on our wall, honest to God ... in the lounge ... And I won't turn it round ... *(Pause)*

Jean-Paul Sartre appears in the lounge. He moves silently, looks round, studying the place. Accidentally he knocks down a vase. It falls. Alexander hears the noise in the bedroom.

ALEXANDER *(Joyfully)*: Mother! How did you know?! Poor dear Mum, she's broken the vase again! It's her hallmark. Leave that vase alone. Come to the bedroom. I'm trapped under a wall panel. Can't move. I've been propping it up for twenty minutes now. *(Jean-Paul Sartre stays frozen in his tracks. Pause)* Mother! ... Come on, I won't make a fuss about the vase! ... *(Pause)* Forget the pieces! ... Come on, I can't take it any longer, didn't you hear me, a wall panel's going to crush me! ... Can you hear me?! Mother! ...

JEAN-PAUL: It's not your mother.

ALEXANDER: What do you mean, it isn't?! Then who is it?!

JEAN-PAUL: Anything I told you would be a lie.

ALEXANDER: Who are you?! What are you doing in my apartment?!

JEAN-PAUL: I came to misappropriate a few things.

ALEXANDER: What?!

JEAN-PAUL: But now that I've had a look, I despair. It's pathetic. *(Takes books out of the bookcase, leafs through them, shakes them to loosen any money which might be hidden between the pages.)* I was never lucky. I always seem to come across types who spend their money on books. There you are ... a small sculpture.

ALEXANDER: It was a gift.

JEAN-PAUL: Decent people invest in electronics, expensive cameras and stuff. But these types – they will spend it on books, small sculptures, any such junk. (*While speaking he opens the cabinet, rummages, peers behind it, under it, tries the floorboards, all places where valuables could be hidden.*) Now a good European would buy jewels ... gold watches ... have a safe ... behind this here picture ... (*Takes the picture, looks at it and condescendingly hangs it up again.*) full of antique coins ... rare stamps ... At once expensive and easy to carry. If you can't spend properly, at least save. Hide the money in a secure place ... say right here ... (*Takes a metal skewer out of his pocket and probes the compost in the large flowerpot where the rubberplant is.*) or under the floorboards ... (*Knocks on the floorboards.*) or out on the balcony ... (*Tries there too.*) Nothing! ... (*Pause*) What a vulgar nation! Unstylishness will be what destroys us. Spending seventy-four percent of our income on food?! What other nation spends all of its cash just to fill its stomach?! ... No, no, there is a total cultural void, that's the word. Enough to give the world's wildest optimist a depression. There, I got stressed again! ... (*Takes his own pulse.*) As if I wasn't anemic already. I need to sit down. (*Drops into the armchair and lights a cigarette.*) I should try to think of other things. (*Smokes, pause.*)

ALEXANDER (*from the bedroom*): Can you spare a cigarette?

JEAN-PAUL: No way.

ALEXANDER: Why?

JEAN-PAUL: You'll see me.

ALEXANDER: I've a very poor memory for faces.

JEAN-PAUL: Oh yeah? I almost fell for that.

ALEXANDER: Honest. I look in the mirror and find myself thinking:

“Gee, I know this guy ... but who was he?”

JEAN-PAUL (*Shakes his head negatively*): No chance. (*Pause*)

ALEXANDER: Do you have a piece of string?

JEAN-PAUL: What if I do?

ALEXANDER: Why don't you tie a cigarette to the matchbox and throw it? Without showing yourself ... just throw it this way.

JEAN-PAUL: Why would I do that?

ALEXANDER: Life might trap you, too, somehow, one day.

JEAN-PAUL: As I gather, you weren't trapped by life. You went into the trap yourself.

ALEXANDER: Well, what was I supposed to do? Allow my apartment to fly apart like a house of cards? ... Where would I be without a home?

JEAN-PAUL: All right. (*Produces a string, ties the box of cigarettes and the matchbox together, goes up to the open door and throws the package inside with a swing.*) Did I miss?

ALEXANDER: Three feet more to the right. Thirty-five inches.

JEAN-PAUL: How do you expect me to deal with inches? I only have your voice as bearing ... (*Pulls the package back by the string and makes a second attempt.*) OK now?

ALEXANDER: Now it's ... Ooh ... Ooh (*Makes a frantic effort to reach the package with his foot and finally does.*) Got them! Thank you very much.

JEAN-PAUL: Don't worry about giving them back. Just untie the string. (*Pause, they both smoke.*)

JEAN-PAUL: So how long are you going to keep propping this thing?

ALEXANDER: Till my wife comes back.

JEAN-PAUL: When will she come back?

ALEXANDER: Maybe any moment now, maybe in the evening. One never knows.

JEAN-PAUL: Not that I want to alarm you unduly, but you could turn into a cockroach this way.

ALEXANDER: What do you mean?

JEAN-PAUL: You never know, but one cannot live constantly under such pressure. The body will surely suffer and change.

ALEXANDER: One thing I'm sure about – if somebody has to suffer, that's me. Safe bet.

JEAN-PAUL: Well, you might become a bit flatter ... what of it ... may turn out to be for the better ... and you'd be smaller. (*Demonstrates with his fingers the size of a cockroach.*)

ALEXANDER (*Pessimistically*): I'd have a long climb to sit on my chair.

JEAN-PAUL: Now look, this would have its positive aspects.

At that moment the telephone starts ringing. It rings ... and rings.

ALEXANDER: Would you mind answering that?

JEAN-PAUL: Yes, I would.

ALEXANDER: Oh, of course, I'm sorry. (*The answering machine switches itself on.*)

VOICE: Sasho, I'd better not disturb the cash that's in the account. So I'll come back instead and take those three hundred dollars which are ...

ALEXANDER (*Shouts*): No! Don't say this!

VOICE: ... in the small sculpture. Don't worry if you find out they are missing.

JEAN-PAUL: I would have checked inside the sculpture anyway, but it doesn't seem right. You withheld information.

ALEXANDER (*Shuts up and remains silent.*)

JEAN-PAUL (*Turns the small sculpture upside down, takes the dollars out, counts them*): It was your wife, right? (*ALEXANDER is silent.*)

They're not three hundred! (*Counts again.*) Two hundred and sixty. Someone's stealing money from you.

ALEXANDER: Tell me about it.

JEAN-PAUL: I'm providing you with information. He who controls the information controls the situation.

ALEXANDER (*Bitterly*): Some control.

JEAN-PAUL: You won't always be squashed under this panel. After all, at some point ...

ALEXANDER (*Remains silent.*)

JEAN-PAUL: Don't lose your spirit.

ALEXANDER: Shut up ...

JEAN-PAUL: I don't see why you should get irritable. Your wife will come back in no time and you'll be all right. I should be irritable, because I'm leaving empty-handed. A paltry two hundred and sixty dollars!

ALEXANDER: Paltry to you, maybe, but to me ...

JEAN-PAUL: What a piece of work is man! Why, not two minutes ago you were neither dead nor alive, and now you start worrying about money.

ALEXANDER (*Angrily*): Don't you talk to me about man! You mutant!

JEAN-PAUL (*Bitterly hurt*): So who do you think you are? Prometheus bound?

ALEXANDER: At any rate I don't rob people while they are trapped under panels! You aren't even a normal thief!

JEAN-PAUL: Are you normal then?! What normal person walks under a falling wall panel of one's own free will? What normal person keeps propping it up the whole day?

ALEXANDER: If you weren't amoral, you would know why I keep propping it up.

JEAN-PAUL: He risks dying, but he wants to save his apartment, you know.

ALEXANDER: It was not just my apartment that was at stake. What about this floor? The staircase? The block? ...

JEAN-PAUL (*Ironically*): ...The City.

ALEXANDER: You know what? I'll pretend you are not there. I'll assume you are a product of my own consciousness, an *idée fixe*. And I'll start thinking of something else! ...

JEAN-PAUL: Retreating in your shell!

ALEXANDER: You are gone already. I'm thinking of something else.

JEAN-PAUL: You are a depressive type!

ALEXANDER (*Remains silent.*)

JEAN-PAUL: I know you are not thinking about anything.

ALEXANDER: You are just a vision. An absence of desire.

Before JEAN-PAUL manages to reply, the telephone starts ringing. It rings for a while. The two of them wait in silence for the answering machine to come alive. It does.

VOICE: Sasho, there's no point coming all the way home, Laura will lend me the cash, she lives near here. Don't worry if I am late. It's a beautiful carpet, I just don't want somebody else to snap it. (*The answering machine switches itself off. Pause*)

JEAN-PAUL: The situation's just hit the fan, as they say.

ALEXANDER (*Remains silent.*)

JEAN-PAUL: Don't despair.

ALEXANDER (*Remains silent.*)

JEAN-PAUL: It might've been worse.

ALEXANDER (*Remains silent.*)

JEAN-PAUL: Our panels are among the lightest. They save on the materials. Now if it was German ...

ALEXANDER (*Remains silent.*)

JEAN-PAUL: So what, maybe it hasn't got better, but it hasn't got worse either. Practically your situation hasn't deteriorated. Isn't that quite something?

ALEXANDER (*Remains silent.*)

JEAN-PAUL: It's just that nothing changed. Do you know how many people there are who dream of a world without change?

ALEXANDER (*Remains silent.*)

JEAN-PAUL: Don't lose spirit. You'll be able to endure it. We are a tough nation.

ALEXANDER (*Remains silent.*)

JEAN-PAUL: All our history is actually a process of enduring. We've endured everything.

ALEXANDER (*Remains silent.*)

JEAN-PAUL (*Diagnoses*): This is Phase One – speech disappears. Next, he will grow antennae, a proboscis and stiff insect wings. If he turns out to be the flying variety.

ALEXANDER (*Shouts*): Beat it, vulture! Filch whatever you want and be gone!

JEAN-PAUL: I understand things are hard for you right now, but that doesn't give you the right to insult me.

ALEXANDER: And shut up! Shut your big mouth!

JEAN-PAUL: Do you think I'm happy in my line of work? Let me confess, I do it without enthusiasm. I don't take pleasure in it. I don't feel satisfaction ... not at all ... I'd rather be a messenger and bring only good news. That was my childhood dream. A herald bringing nothing but good news. I always wanted to be that and failed. You are robbed but I am defeated.

ALEXANDER: So I am the victor, am I?

JEAN-PAUL: You are vanquished too, we all are. A defeated generation.

ALEXANDER: How do you know what generation I am?

JEAN-PAUL: You are carrying a panel on your shoulders, my friend.

Therefore, you are my generation.

ALEXANDER: Nonsense!

JEAN-PAUL: Books in the bookcase, three hundred dollars in a small sculpture: there's no mistaking that, my friend, you are my generation.

ALEXANDER: I'm not your friend.

JEAN-PAUL: Not important enough, not timely enough, not great enough and at the same time not backward enough – that's what we are, my friend.

ALEXANDER: Do you always rob your friends?

JEAN-PAUL: Nothing personal, that's only business. Why shouldn't we be friends?

ALEXANDER: Then call my wife, my friend. Tell her to come this instant.

JEAN-PAUL (*Shakes his head*): That's pointless, my friend. Your wife is at Laura's now, then she'll go shopping for the carpet. OK, give me her number, I'll call. (*Says this in a melancholy voice, full of sudden bitterness.*)

ALEXANDER: I don't know Laura's number ... I don't know any Laura. Call the police. The fire brigade. Somebody must come.

JEAN-PAUL: Let's face the truth, my friend – nobody will come. And you know this better than me. What shall I tell them – that there's a guy here who's sorely burdened. That he has a pre-fab panel on his back. If they don't hang up on me, they'll just laugh out loud. Sorry to add to your worries, my friend, but I'm afraid your children won't come either. I know it and you know it too ... It is only the uninvited who come ... like

me ... As in an ancient tragedy, what happens to us is what we have wanted least of all.

ALEXANDER: You're rather well-read for your profession.

JEAN-PAUL (*With a melancholy smile*): What is a profession, my friend? We all have one profession – human beings. But few of us practice it. A profession is contingent – you do one thing today, another thing tomorrow. Tomorrow I'll be in your shoes and you in mine.

ALEXANDER: But that's tomorrow! Tomorrow you'll already be chasing me under the cupboard, trying to squash me with your slipper.

JEAN-PAUL: To be frank, I like cockroaches. Their asceticism. The stoicism with which they endure everything. The fact that nobody loves them. They are also intelligent.

ALEXANDER (*Involuntarily*): I've heard that too.

JEAN-PAUL: It's absolutely true. And let me tell you something else – I am trapped too. Under a much heavier panel than yours ... unimaginably heavier.

ALEXANDER: So what's trapped you?

JEAN-PAUL (*Moodily*): There is no glory, there is no eternity, what is given will never come back and everything which you let go from your hand is lost forever. Life is a constant and irreversible letting go. There is no Utopia, there is no alternative. What greater panel than that? You are always in that trap. I was planning to steal your telephone too, but melancholy struck, it simply overwhelmed me and I don't feel like doing anything any longer, I don't even feel like living. It happens more often these days. I'll just go home and lie down ... close my eyes. Have courage, there's nothing else I can tell you! (*Moves to leave.*)

ALEXANDER: See you later!

JEAN-PAUL: Better for both of us if we didn't see each other, my friend!
(*Goes out.*)

ALEXANDER: Damn it, the way everything's got messed up, one can no longer be sure if it is a thief in one's house or if it is Jean-Paul Sartre turned burglar. *(Pause)* To be fair, he is right about cockroaches – they are intelligent ... And, come to think of it, not really that disagreeable. *(Pause)* Stop thinking like that or you'll grow a proboscis. *(Touches his nose just in case.)* He was right about something else too – nobody'll come. None of my closest people ... wife ... children ... dog. What is the point of having a dog, if not for cases like that. A dog is supposed to feel instinctively that you need help. But right now he must be begging by the bus-stop with never a thought about me. You cannot even say he's hungry – no, he isn't, he's not dying of hunger. Doesn't overeat, mind you, times are hard, but we do not let him go hungry ... not at all. He just goes out in the morning and off to the bus-stop to beg. Pretends he's lame. Limpes to break your heart. Drags his legs as if somebody beat the life out of him. With tearful, resigned eyes – as if to say 'Life sucks but I don't complain'. Goes out in the morning and comes back in the evening with a guilty stare and a bulging belly.

ALEXANDER lights a cigarette and strides angrily round the room with the panel still on his back. He resembles a bizarre animal - a giant butterfly, a mutant turtle, a new species of dinosaur. Or the first monoplane.

ALEXANDER: There are dogs who can dig twenty feet deep into avalanches to save a human. And have cognac flasks round their necks. Now with our dogs here, if you fit them with a flask, they'll drink up the cognac and ignore the avalanche. *(Pause, he strides angrily, smokes.)* We spoiled the dogs, too. Jean-Paul Sartre was right, this is not living, it's enduring. A permanent process of enduring – enduring the slavery, then enduring the freedom ... enduring one's own self, enduring the others.

Somewhere else, people may live and enjoy life, achieve things. We just endure. Such a lot we have endured. *(Pause)* This thief will turn out to have been right about everything. Was he a thief at all? Or was he an envoy, a messenger bringing bad news? Herald of bad news. Damn it, am I going to turn into a cockroach next? *(Pause)* I'm beginning to talk crap. It's because of the weight, it crushes me! I've never imagined that a panel could be so heavy. *(Pause)* I'll have to climb a long time to sit on my chair. Actually, why would I need a chair? What am I going to do on a chair, I could easily lie down and relax under the stove ... or the cupboard. *(Pause)* How do cockroaches have sex? I've never been interested in this issue. One is strangely passive about certain issues until they hit you. This much is certain – they can outlive a nuclear holocaust. *(Pause)* So what, it'll be an act of enduring, again. As a human or a cockroach I always endure things. *(Pause)* Did I have a choice – that is the question? Was I allowed a choice? Not really. Only a choice between greater and lesser evil. *(Pause)* Was that all there was to life? *(Pause)* Has it passed – just like that? *(Pause)* I have missed so many things. That type was right – life is a constant and irreversible letting go. So there I am now, crushed by the panel, asking myself questions ... turning into ... something ... with wings and antennae.

ALEXANDER paces to and fro, the panel on his back, without realising that it is not in its normal place, attached to the floor, that it is heavy and so on. Gradually we, too, should stop paying attention to this fact, interpreting the panel rather as a metaphor for life itself, for things we have lived with, things for whose sake we have lived ... and because of which we are now turning into something with wings and antennae.

ALEXANDER: Did I have any choice, though?

NIA: Of course you did. But you did not fancy making choices. You preferred to have no choice.

NIA comes into the bedroom, young and radiant, smiles at ALEXANDER and sits on the bed. She looks at ALEXANDER with a smile that betrays her love for him.

NIA: This way Fate was to blame for everything.

ALEXANDER: No, not you, why are you coming? You were there later. I wasn't thinking about you. It's always you who comes.

NIA (*Keeps smiling*): Maybe you were thinking about me – subconsciously.

ALEXANDER: No, no, I was thinking about something else. Go away.

NIA (*Smiling*): Just like the old times. You wanted to be with me and yet you didn't. You were afraid of complications.

ALEXANDER: Not true.

NIA: You thought you'd get mired.

ALEXANDER: You are talking nonsense.

NIA: And yet you loved me.

ALEXANDER: I wasn't scared.

NIA: Everything could have been different ... our whole life.

ALEXANDER: I had a family.

NIA: This was about you.

ALEXANDER: You could never understand.

NIA: What is there to understand? There's the summer, the glass and the wine.

A summer tune starts playing, one of those hits that you think you could never forget, yet they go away with the autumn.

NIA: Come on... come, let's dance.

She grabs him by the hands, pulls him to the middle of the bedroom and they start dancing. They are a curious sight, he – with the panel on his back, she – smiling, looking at him.

ALEXANDER (*Breaks away from her and the tune stops*): To you, it is all too simple.

NIA: You just got scared.

ALEXANDER: I hate it when you talk like that.

NIA: You were afraid of following your wishes.

ALEXANDER: Stop!

NIA: And then you say you have no choice.

ALEXANDER: I did not have a choice.

NIA: One always has.

ALEXANDER: They postponed my life ... for never.

NIA: Good poem, the one you're quoting.

ALEXANDER: And I couldn't do anything.

NIA: You didn't dare.

ALEXANDER: You are just a thought and I can get rid of you at any moment.

NIA: You can't.

ALEXANDER: Yes I can.

NIA: Then why am I still here?

ALEXANDER (*Does not respond immediately – pause*): I wanted to devote my life to birds. I was fascinated by birds since I was a kid. I would spend hours watching pigeons, starlings and blackbirds.

NIA: Then why did you become an engineer?

ALEXANDER: Don't know. It just happened.

NIA: You don't know?

ALEXANDER: I grew up and ...

NIA: You can't admit it even in your thoughts.

ALEXANDER: Get lost!

NIA: It is not up to me to get lost.

ALEXANDER: All right! So they forced me! ... They didn't even force me. It's just that somehow nobody asked me. It was decided by default.

NIA (*Ironically*): Fate?

ALEXANDER: I did not object. I respected my family. I didn't agree but I didn't object either. I don't like arguments. I hate conflict.

NIA: But you love birds?

ALEXANDER: I love birds but that's the way I am ... I get sick when ...

NIA: I'm getting cramps just listening to you!

ALEXANDER: You don't get it! I dreamed of doing something connected with birds, but ... I didn't particularly object to engineering either. Get it?

NIA (*Ironically*): I get it.

ALEXANDER: I met my wife there. (*Pause*) I wasn't quite the ambitious socialite she desired ... but I became one. I changed. I couldn't not meet her expectations. I couldn't disappoint her.

NIA (*Shaking her head hopelessly*): Oh my love, my love!

ALEXANDER: I underwent a metamorphosis.

NIA: Something's dripping inside my head.

ALEXANDER: She believed in me.

NIA: I wish I'd slaughtered a black rooster, I'd put its gizzard in the chimney and hung its feet over the door on a red thread. So that trouble could see them from afar and be scared.

ALEXANDER: I hate disappointing anybody.

NIA: I wish I'd never met you.

ALEXANDER: I am not different. I never was.

NIA: I close my eyes and I find myself sitting once again on his knees, this damned Thursday, in my cousin's attic. With all the darkness in the world massed inside me and outside.

ALEXANDER: I never even wanted to be different.

NIA: Skin and lips ... and yellow eyes.

ALEXANDER: I just wanted ... *(Pause)*

NIA: A line on his left arm, a scar on his knee, the big rock by the wild fig trees.

ALEXANDER: I lived like everybody else.

NIA: He stutters when he's lying.

ALEXANDER: We went to work. Children were born. I was expected to be a good father so I was. Life as usual. It was good.

NIA: What about the blackbirds?

ALEXANDER *(Failing to understand)*: What?

NIA: The blackbirds. What happened to the blackbirds?

ALEXANDER: Oh yes. *(Pause)* I kept putting that off. I felt there was something important ... I had this vague sensation ... but I kept putting that off. I never articulated it. This is the first time I'm saying it out loud. The first time I'm talking about these things.

NIA: Is that why I'm here?

ALEXANDER: I avoided even thinking about it.

NIA: Because we are looking for the other life?

ALEXANDER: You were one of them. A possible facet of happiness.

NIA: Nightingales, wagtails, larks ...

ALEXANDER: Like a river that ran through my fingers without my being able to drink more than a handful. The thief was right – it is a constant letting go.

NIA: Starlings, orioles, blackbirds.

ALEXANDER: Irretrievable. That is what he said. Irretrievable and irreversible.

NIA: Blackbirds.

ALEXANDER: Dammit, why irretrievable!? I can still sense that time. I remember your petticoats were starched, smelling of cleanliness. And the moonlight had painted the greenery white and your hair was ...

NIA: Past tense!

ALEXANDER: What?

NIA: Past simple.

ALEXANDER: What past simple?

NIA: Irretrievable past ... it's that simple.

ALEXANDER: But I am bringing it back. And the rock by the wild fig trees, your towel, the thorns, the shadows of fish on the bottom.

NIA (*Shakes her head hopelessly*): Oh my love, my love...

ALEXANDER: Aren't you here with me now?

NIA: I am.

ALEXANDER: Don't you love me?

NIA: I love you.

ALEXANDER: Then I can ... I can (*Pause*) Nia?

NIA: Yes, my love?

ALEXANDER: It seems I can't do anything ... can I, Nia?

NIA: Of course you can.

ALEXANDER: That's what you used to tell me then – of course you can. You can do anything you want.

NIA: That's right, my love.

ALEXANDER: Sometimes ... very rarely ... I asked myself ... what had happened to you ... where you were ... what you were doing.

NIA: In wintertime the last train leaves at seven. I have to catch it. Then it starts snowing and you are snowed under. For six months.

ALEXANDER: Of course. There's a train leaving somewhere and you have to catch it. I cannot imagine what trains, planes and ships would be doing without you.

NIA: I'm leaving, you know?

ALEXANDER: Of course you are. You're always leaving. At first with that Frenchman to Laos. Then somebody talked to you in Perth, Australia, when you were leaving for Cape Town to join a firm trading in tea or indigo or something. I ran into your cousin by chance, you know, the one with the attic, she said you wrote last from Minneapolis, you were leaving for some lakes in Canada. What are you looking for? Why do you keep moving? Why don't you stay put for longer?

NIA: I don't know.

ALEXANDER: You don't want to tell me. You think I wouldn't understand.

NIA: I only know I keep saying to myself – don't give anyone your hat.

ALEXANDER: You even wrote without punctuation marks, in order not to stop. Why? What are you searching for?

NIA: How could I know ... probably ... for myself ... probably for something that will make me stop. I've no idea.

ALEXANDER: Why can't I understand you?

NIA: There is another world, but it is inside this one. You have to recognize it. I read this in a book.

ALEXANDER: I don't understand you. I could never fully understand you. With you, I felt like Friday listening to Robinson Crusoe's explanations about the world.

NIA: Man Friday.

ALEXANDER: What?

NIA: You felt like Man Friday. Robinson gave him a full name. He's not simply Friday – that's the translator's omission.

ALEXANDER: There. I could never make a single move without learning from you that something which I'd known for years was quite different. Pronounced differently, used differently, felt differently ...

NIA: That's what happens when you recognize things.

ALEXANDER: You refuse to accept this world, so you invent another one?

NIA: You don't invent it. You recognize your own world.

ALEXANDER: Feels like I'm twenty years younger.

NIA: It was always on Thursday, always in the attic, someone quite close was always removing nailed laths.

ALEXANDER: Maybe that was happiness. Maybe I should have ...

(Stops without finishing his thought.)

NIA: The odd-number day of an odd-number week of an odd-number month. Why does one have cousins?!

ALEXANDER: Someone was always removing nailed laths and it was always Thursday. Seems like the epitome of happiness now. Back then I never noticed it. I didn't pay attention. It was ordinary.

NIA: Someone quite close is always removing nailed laths.

ALEXANDER: Are you leaving?

NIA: How did you guess?

ALEXANDER: My thoughts are getting repetitive.

NIA: One September, with yellow sulphurous eyes... *(Kisses him.)*

ALEXANDER: Don't go! Don't vanish!

NIA: I know where to find you

ALEXANDER: Nia!

NIA *(Smiling)*: Any day of any week of any year. Here, always here.

ALEXANDER *(Desperately)*: Nia, I'm turning into a cockroach! I could turn into a cockroach!

NIA *(Smiling)*: Of course you can, my love! *(She leaves.)*

ALEXANDER (*Shouting*): Nia! ... I love you! ... Irretrievably and irreversibly! Can you hear me, Nia? (*Pause*) She went ... the moment I gave the cockroach a thought, she went.

Slowly, with the panel on his back, he returns and stands in his original place, next to the other walls, propping up the panel with his back. Silence.

ALEXANDER: I wonder if cockroaches talk to one another ... if they share information. They must communicate ... in some special way of theirs. They must exchange observations ... and alarm signals. Do they have the feeling that they are... But I'm wasting too much time on ... insects. Yes, insects. Sounds better than vermin. If I'm going to turn into something, I'd better be an insect. There are good insects. The bee, for instance. (*Skeptically.*) But I won't turn into a bee, of course. Not me. Anybody else would, but I would turn into a cockroach by default. That's me ever since childhood. No luck. Some people turn into whatever they want just like that, no effort, but I am dying slowly and painfully under this here panel. (*Pause*) I'm overdoing the pitiful note. Shouldn't complain too much. I'm sure there's worse. Let us not tempt Fate. Somebody is sure to come. 100 percent. They can't fail. The probability that nobody comes is negligible. Practically zero. They have come before. Why shouldn't they come now? Why should they break the tradition? I'm sure it's just a matter of time. Somebody is on their way, 100 percent. They just need time to get here. Now think of something else. Give friends a chance to come ... give them a little time. Think of something abstract. (*Pause*) Why the hell can't I think of anything abstract! I keep thinking about ... Life went by, and I haven't once thought of anything abstract. Not once. If only I had thought about it once... if only I had tried to understand ... (*Pause*) Lifelong waiting for your life to come.

(Pause) No one will come! My friends stopped being friends long ago. No apparent reason, things seemed as usual, but they would stop calling, we would stop meeting except by chance, when we would behave as if nothing had happened. We keep sending each other Christmas cards. We talk on the phone if one of us needs something. But we are no longer friends. One by one friends stop being my friends. Perhaps I, too, am no longer someone's friend. Perhaps I just fail to notice it. I've very little energy. *(Pause)* The truth is, I dream of being a puddle. As a puddle you just lie down looking at the sky. You meditate. You are washed clean. You don't move, you don't talk, you don't initiate action. You don't think. If there's wind, you might get rippled. Or then again, you might not. Depends on the angle the wind is blowing. That's the best thing about being a puddle – nothing depends on a puddle. It just is, and nobody needs it to do anything. This is a perfect state. You are not to blame. You are not responsible. They do not walk all over you. You just lie staring at the sky. Cuckoos fly by. Snow falls. You get a thin ice cover. It reflects the clouds and if the sun breaks through, you shine. You have no memories, nor future plans. The perfect state... *(Pause)* If this terrible weight keeps pressing, if nobody comes, I wouldn't be too far from taking some drastic action. But what? *(Pause, he thinks.)* Damn, I can't think of anything, I'm not at all into drastic stuff. I never was ... drastic! *(Pause)* VLADIMIR: If someone carries a flask of cognac tied round his throat and his ears are drooping, it doesn't necessarily mean it's a St. Bernard. It could be me!

VLADIMIR, ALEXANDER's 24-year-old son, enters the room. He bows flashily, expansively in the fashion of an old French nobleman, with much flourish, knee-bending, posturing, gesticulation, sitting back etc. ... He is wearing a mime's costume, has a bottle of cognac hanging from his neck and make-up on his face. The bow

reveals that he is horribly drunk but tries to conceal it. He actually sways and lurches from time to time during his elaborate bow, makes an enormous effort not to fall over, manages to stay in control and continue bowing. All this should be restrained rather than drunkenly farcical.

ALEXANDER: Vladimir!

VLADIMIR (*Having finished his bowing*): I tied this cognac round my neck because I kept spilling it ... (*Lurches.*) ... The bottle kept tipping over ... In this way it is stable and doesn't tip over ... (*Falls down.*) unlike me ... The string is long enough to ... to ... (*Lying on the floor, he gropes for the bottle, gets it and drinks.*) drink ... without letting go of it. (*Pats the bottle affectionately.*)

ALEXANDER: Vladimir! You're drunk!

VLADIMIR (*Gets up with difficulty, keeps his balance for a while, lurches again, regains control and only sways lightly from time to time*): I'm not.

ALEXANDER: What do you mean 'I'm not'?!?!

VLADIMIR: I'm not drunk! ... I'm dead drunk!

ALEXANDER (*Desperately*): Oh God, not this too!

VLADIMIR (*He has become sober all of a sudden, there is no trace of his former behavior*): It wasn't exactly a brilliant performance, but will do for keeping in shape. (*Does another short pantomime.*)

ALEXANDER: You're not going to be an engineer, of course?

VLADIMIR: No. (*Does another short pantomime.*)

ALEXANDER: I knew it as soon as you told me you wanted to walk on a rope over Niagara.

VLADIMIR: The family had no rope-walker.

ALEXANDER: Do you rope-walk?

VLADIMIR: Basically, I'm a mime.

ALEXANDER: Mime?

VLADIMIR: Yes, I perform pantomimes. Partly because of the language barrier, and partly because of my inborn revulsion of words. I prefer silence.

ALEXANDER: Mime.

VLADIMIR: I changed a number of trades before I mounted the tightrope. I was a doorman, then I walked foxes, then I planted trees. I worked for a while on a ship.

ALEXANDER: A tightrope, then?

VLADIMIR: It turned out balancing was an inborn skill for me. Hereditary. I got it from you and turned it into a job.

ALEXANDER: Are you blaming me?

VLADIMIR: I'm just explaining that this turned out to be my deepest, strongest instinct. I invested all my capital in balancing and I succeeded. This proved to be a great resource.

ALEXANDER: I wasn't extraordinary. I had no crazy passions, no manias. I couldn't afford it. There is nothing harder than being quite ordinary.

VLADIMIR: It was almost unnatural the way you walked right down the middle ... Always! ... In a straight line! ... Without ever going wrong! ... The middle part of the middle way.

ALEXANDER: That saves you.

VLADIMIR: You never swayed once.

ALEXANDER: That's the only way you can raise your kids. And have a decent life.

VLADIMIR: I'm saying this as a professional.

ALEXANDER: And sometimes even the only way to stay alive.

VLADIMIR: With a certain envy.

ALEXANDER: Let me tell you that: I walked over a much more terrifying Niagara than yours. There is no more terrifying Niagara than ordinary life. You have to walk over it – not a couple of hours, your whole life.

VLADIMIR: I think you've been great.

ALEXANDER: I just acted responsibly.

VLADIMIR: I'm telling you this as an insider. I have to deal with such stuff every day.

ALEXANDER: Responsibly – and nothing more.

VLADIMIR: Of course, I, too, have my humble successes. If your act is not just rope-walking but performing pantomime on a free-swinging wire, there is demand. You get more contracts than the others. Simple acts, of course ... nobody's talking King Lear. I sometimes take a bass viol with me on the tightrope. I play a short piece ... some golden oldie.

ALEXANDER: You never played any instruments.

VLADIMIR (*Explains*): You can use the bow to balance. And the body of the viol, of course. A trick of the trade.

ALEXANDER: You left here just to walk to the university hall.

VLADIMIR: The other trick is to concentrate. Mrs Fishburne, whose foxes I walked, taught me that. Concentrate, she kept saying. I know it's hard ... having in mind where you come from. But without concentration, without specialization, you won't make it. Here it is only the most concentrated guys who beat the rest to it.

ALEXANDER: And then you vanished. Without a trace.

VLADIMIR: Of course there are other tricks.

ALEXANDER: And then there was this small ad in the paper. It kept appearing every day for months on end.

VLADIMIR: But you know this best.

ALEXANDER: I'm sure it was you who sent that ad. "For sale: narrow room, childhood, adolescence, a tapestry facing the wall, cute father with too many front teeth. Father maybe half-price. Montreal, Quebec, Canada, postcode such and such, PO Box, hold until claimed. I wrote but my letters kept coming back. With huge red stamps. "Unknown person." "No such person." "Box not rented."

VLADIMIR: They missed the most important thing – the person may not have claimed the letter. The box must be checked.

ALEXANDER: I was sure it was you.

VLADIMIR: The place where I'm now, rope-walkers are much respected. You may say we are revered. But then I make a terrific sight on the tightrope – tall and slim, eyes like hot ashes, a well-ironed white shirt – the kind favored by mass murderers, bass viol in my arms! Some sight. It's worth seeing.

ALEXANDER: You never wrote a word.

VLADIMIR: In my spare time I indulge my passion – destroying words. One word a day. Alone, I close the windows tightly, I draw the curtains. There's no hurry. I choose the word carefully, almost lustfully, I take a sip of my whisky and then I forget it! I cross it off my mind. I don't use it any more. It's as if I've never heard of it. Sometimes I succeed, sometimes my victory is only temporary and it comes back in a month or more. But I forget it again. I got the idea from a book by some crank. It was as if it was written for me. I was rotting with words. Of course, there is a long way to go until total silence but I'm making progress.

ALEXANDER: No doubt I wasn't an inspiring example. I can't have been. Everything happened without me. I was always absent from all events. I thought I was doing the right thing by choosing not to choose. So this has not been exciting for you. But you vanished in thin air.

VLADIMIR: Have you noticed? We have never talked for so long. In twenty years we haven't said a quarter of what we've told each other now.

ALEXANDER: Without a trace. You just melted away.

VLADIMIR: I write letters to you with the words that still survive. Shorter and shorter letters with fewer and fewer words. I don't know what makes me write, it's probably the call of the blood, that much-talked-about DNA handed down the generations. I devote much of my time to writing. I try to save my energy for this and I buy the best writing paper I can find. Then I sit down to write. I seal the letters in cognac bottles. I don't throw them in any rivers or seas, just store them in a room. When I fill the room, I'll rent another one. And, I suppose, when I rent a third room, I'll be free of everything. Then, perhaps, I may be reborn.

ALEXANDER: Don't go.

VLADIMIR: Do you remember, when I was a kid we had a dog with no tail. I wasted my time with it day and night so you decided to take it away. You took it to your cousins at the other end of town. The next morning it came back. You took it on the train to the other end of the country. In three days it was back in front of the door. That's how it went on. Wherever you would take it, it would always come back to us. Again and again. Always. I am like this dog. I am silent but I keep coming back. From anywhere. At night I cover the distance and I am there in front of the door in the morning. Don't know why. I don't want to. But I am. Be careful opening that door.

ALEXANDER: Vladimir!

VLADIMIR: Be careful opening the door in the morning.

He walks across the room as if on a tightrope, arms stretched sideways and to the front, as if over Niagara, looking up and ahead, and leaves the room.

ALEXANDER: He went away ... I can't hold him back. Even in my thoughts. Walking over his waterfall. Damn, I'm losing my strength ... I can't take it any longer. I've endured everything up until now, but I can't go on. I've managed to endure everything ... like cockroaches do. What if I was a cockroach to begin with ... a cockroach pretending to be a human ... thinking it was a human ... or strongly desiring to be one. I don't know. Anyway, that's how I've lived. It's time to go back to my real essence. Farewell, starling, perched in the top of the rose-bush! Farewell, blackbird, stuck like a bone in my throat, all my life! Farewell, skylark in the tree – farewell! Farewell, my love and you, my son, wherever you are, living or dead, farewell! Farewell, I'm going to the crevices, the cracks and the crannies ... where I belong. It's all over ... I'm finished with words, explanations, smiles, everything ... I'm finished with people ... I'll lurk in my old hideout, in the cracks, under the stove, alone against silence, silent ... And let's talk no more ... let's not talk ...

Silence, the light contracts slowly, very slowly, as if cooperating in the metamorphosis, in ALEXANDER's turning into a cockroach, until it finally shines on his face. It is as if he is in the hideout, in the darkness of cracks and crannies. Silence. Then the telephone rings sharply. Again and again. The answering machine switches itself on. We hear the wife's voice.

VOICE: Sasho! ... Sasho! ... Answer the phone! ... What's the matter with you? Hello, Sasho, can you hear me?! ... Sasho, answer please! ...

ALEXANDER: There is nobody here. Just empty rooms.

VOICE: Sasho!!!

ALEXANDER is silent, the answering machine switches itself off, the silence is complete. The light is shining only on his face, on his eyes and nose, a narrow beam

like a crevice, a crack, a cranny ... Then suddenly, with a bang, it disappears.
Darkness.

THE END