

Stanislav Stratiev

It's a Short Life

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stanislavstratiev.org

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Translated from the Bulgarian by Svetlin Stratiev.

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CHARACTERS:

ARCHITECT

MAN

WOMAN

PERSON

SCENE ONE

A mass of grey, uniform and uninhabited tower blocks. Amid them is Architect Stilyanov. He has a document folder in one hand – while his other hand is holding up his trousers. To the left and right of him are the Man and the Woman, wearing clothes that look neither ordinary nor completely outlandish, holding cymbals. The Man and the Woman are harlequins, characters who narrate the story, mouthpieces of Fate, figures directing the action while simultaneously explaining, complicating, hampering, facilitating, provoking or prompting it, doing everything that cannot be done by the protagonists themselves. They strike their cymbals loudly.

MAN: Once upon a time there was a... new housing estate. As far as the eye could see there was nothing but tower blocks. Blocks, blocks, blocks, a mass of blocks – grey and uniform – a residential desert. There he stood, Architect Stilyanov, in the midst of this as yet uninhabited desert.

WOMAN: This morning he had woken feeling a vague yearning and aching with melancholy. The spring wind was rattling the window frames and the small peach tree in the garden had bloomed overnight. It was then that the architect suddenly realized that things couldn't go on like that anymore. That he had lived his life in the wrong way all those years and yet another spring had come and would pass by.

MAN: He was drifting along just like everybody else, day after day, year after year.

WOMAN: His life seemed quite normal, quite intellectual – friends, concerts, Bach, Beethoven, talk about Gaudi and the social function of architecture.

MAN: Summers by the seaside at Sozopol, balmy warm nights, and Elsa, who understood him better than everybody else. The sense of superiority, the feeling he belonged to a spiritual sphere located higher up on the spiral of human development. A Lada 1500 and his personal mechanic, who was honest in his own way.

WOMAN: Invitations to exhibitions by the best graphic artists.

MAN: And the Friday poker game...

WOMAN: And the theatre premieres, which he attended without fail...

MAN: Raising, as it seemed to him, the audience's overall intellectual level... And the endless arguments on postimpressionism, surrealism and the foundations of magical realism...

WOMAN: And Fellini's "The Ship Sails On" and Bergman's "Fanny and Alexander"...

MAN: And this year's festival of Wagner's music and the Autumn Festival and Avignon, where Peter Brooke and Giorgio Strehler...

WOMAN: His life was made up of all of these, yet he realized that he simply reflected the talent of others, the courage of others and the madness of others. He was the one who joined in. Approving or critical. But where was he himself – Architect Stilyanov? Where was the evidence of his work, of his brain, of all he would be justly proud of? (*Strikes cymbals.*)

MAN: He was nowhere!

WOMAN: That was precisely why this spring morning, with the wind pressing against the window panes and this vague restlessness weighing on his mind, the architect Stilyanov decided to change his life and thus do something to prevent the senseless multiplication of disposable lives that are lived only for the sake of eating, mating and

sleeping and vanish overnight without a trace. Without the slightest memento that one had existed on this Earth! (*Strikes cymbals.*)

MAN: So he decided to start with the most specific of things – something Fate herself had sent his way. This day, as chairman of a commission, he had to give his approval for five disgustingly designed and even more disgustingly built apartment blocks, which, after all, were supposed to house human beings.

WOMAN: There were countless such block already built and countless people lived in such blocks.

MAN: He had often approved such blocks as chairman of various commissions.

WOMAN: But today this was not going to happen. Everything would be restored to its rightful place. He was going to rubbish the whole enterprise starting with the roots – with the architectural design – and ending with the execution. He was human and other humans would have to live in these blocks. He was not going to give his approval for these blocks, he would reject them and thus once and for all he would put an end to compromises and do away with this blasted “Nothing you can do”. (*Strikes cymbals.*)

MAN: Full of fight, the architect Stilyanov drained his cup of café latte, gulped his Energix energy drink, snatched his document folder and strode out of his home. With measured steps he reached the outer suburbs of the city and found himself in the moonscape of the huge half-built housing estate.

WOMAN: Pits, craters, mud, no roads, iron girders, abandoned concrete pipes and defective modules... It was there, while he hopped over the muddy puddles...

MAN: At first he barely noticed it. He had already cleared yet another muddy puddle and it was only when his trousers slid down to his

knees and he managed to stop them at the last moment that he realized that... (*Strikes cymbals.*)

WOMAN: He had lost a button. The only one on his pair of trousers with a zipper, which he never wore with a belt. He had to hold his trousers with both hands or else they would fall instantly down.

MAN: Then he rummaged in his pockets for a pin or safety-pin, but of course there was none.

WOMAN: He looked round hopefully for the button. There was so much mud that, had he lost an elephant, it would have been equally hard to find.

ARCHITECT: So what if I find it? How am I going to stitch it back on? Stupid business! Today of all days! Just when I decided to start anew, turn the page and live differently... stop compromising with what matters most... The non-conformist, finally bent on open rebellion, determined as commission chairman not to approve these five hideously built apartment blocks, which, after all, are meant for human beings, not for chickens, arrives at the battlefield holding up his trousers with his hands!

The Man and the Woman laugh.

ARCHITECT (*looks at them*): No way, the commission will laugh their heads off. No point. Can you talk seriously to a man whose trousers keep slipping down? Can someone in his underwear plead in favour of a just cause? Totally ridiculous!

MAN: The Architect angrily kicked at a piece of brick.

ARCHITECT: Excuse me but who are you? (*The two shrug silently.*) So stupid! The late 20th century, mankind got to the moon and here I am,

blocked by a button. Sounds absurd even as you say it. I never paid attention to buttons. But of course it's easy to lose a button jumping like a kangaroo among all these puddles. The only possible way of moving here is with a lunar vehicle.

WOMAN: He looked ahead in the direction of the five blocks, where the commission was waiting for him.

ARCHITECT: So frustrating... Barely a mile from the goal... Now they are waiting for me over there, wondering what has happened. Of course, as bad luck would have it, there's no wire, no string around, just reinforcing bars. I can't tie this iron bar round my waist, it's an inch thick.

WOMAN: How long are you going to stay like that, holding up your trousers?

MAN: He must be hoping a pair of trousers with the buttons all sewn on will fall out of the sky for him.

ARCHITECT: Excuse me but who are you? Is this any of your business?

WOMAN: Giving us your monologues won't change a thing – you have to act, man!

MAN: Act, Architect Stilyanov, act!

ARCHITECT: How can you act, all around me are just blocks, empty like a desert. No living soul. Act but how?

WOMAN: He thought.

ARCHITECT: That's life. Just when we humans imagine we are the crown of nature's achievement, the summit of its thousands of years of work, that our reason knows no bounds – we lose a button. So stupid! How can you find a button in this mud! Mud baths have less mud in them than these new housing estates! Despite all the speeches and all the print...

MAN: Architect Stilyanov looked desperately round. Alas, there was no hope in sight.

ARCHITECT: Here I am – Robinson Crusoe stuck on his island without so much as a prospect of a ship sailing along.

WOMAN (*prompting him*): Do something on your own.

ARCHITECT: Yes. That’s it, I must do something on my own.

MAN: So he went on. He strode with determination, though he did not quite know where he was going, moving clumsily in his shoes, heavy with the caked mud.

WOMAN: In ten or so minutes he reached a grey ten-storey block. Its balconies had flower pots and TV aerials, signalling human presence.

ARCHITECT: I’ll have to swallow my pride and ask for a safety-pin. No other way.

We see the Man and the Woman arrange several doors on stage to recreate a corridor in the apartment block.

MAN: Doormats. Peep holes. Flower pots. A door sign that says “Georgiev”!

WOMAN: He pressed the doorbell with his forehead, since his hands were busy holding up his trousers. (*The architect presses the doorbell with his forehead.*) He stood thus, with his head against the bell button, as the door opened. He did not see the woman standing on the threshold, just her leg, clad in a red stocking.

SCENE TWO

The Woman stands behind the door saying “Georgiev”. The door is placed so as to allow us to see perfectly well what happens on either side. The Woman plays the role of the housewife and of several other persons behind the doors. The Man will similarly perform several roles.

ARCHITECT (*raises his head slowly*): Good morning. I beg your pardon. You do not know me. But I found myself in this stupid...

MAN (*from the side*): At this point he shut up, because he saw the woman goggling at his undone zipper.

ARCHITECT: Architect Stilyanov, how do you do!

WOMAN: Sex maniac! Architect? Is that what you call an architect!!!

ARCHITECT: But please, I really am an architect.

WOMAN: Get lost or I'll call the police!

ARCHITECT: But please, you are wrong, today I ...

WOMAN: Today you haven't raped anyone yet, have you? You are only just starting! Dirty bastard, look at your face, doing the rounds of the blocks like a postman! With your zipper undone, to save time!

ARCHITECT: But please, please, nothing of the kind, this is not at all the case!

WOMAN: People like you should be shot rather than let loose to roam the housing estates! (*She slams the door in his face.*)

ARCHITECT: I am out to do you guys good and what do I get? “You should be shot.” Some gratitude!

He goes over to another door that has a peephole, presses the doorbell with his forehead and jumps back quickly in order not to be caught in this posture again. There is silence on the other side of the door. The Man looks through the peephole.

ARCHITECT: Why are you looking at me like that, through that peephole. Do I look like an alien or what?!

MAN: What d'you want, pal?

ARCHITECT: Look, I am the architect Stilyanov, chairman of a commission. We are going to approve five residential apartment blocks. Or rather, we are not. But in order not to approve them, I have to go there, you see... But I lost a button. Just when I wanted to take the big step... You understand?... So now...

MAN (*shouting*): Sweet'art, come quick, you're missin' the show!... Another of them loonies!... Come 'ave a look!... Quick!... There 'e is!... Says 'e wants to take the big step. Look at'im, jus' look a 'im! (*The Woman comes behind the door and looks through the peephole.*) Thinks 'e is some sort of chairman! Not one of them claims to be a deputy chairman, you know! This building's crawling with loonies, the guy's the fourth one today!

WOMAN: 'e 'as a folder, this one. 'olding it with his chin. I'd give 'im ten points.

MAN: For the performance?

WOMAN: For the level of difficulty. Straight ten points.

MAN: Look at 'is mug – just like a nut's. Nine point five from me!

WOMAN: Jus' look at the way 'e's starin' at us! No kiddin' – straight ten! Completely off 'is rocker!...

MAN: And you put the TV on! There's never anythin' that's fun in the mornin'... But 'e doesn't get a ten!

ARCHITECT (*bitterly*): O, damd' Iago! O inhuman dog!

WOMAN: Did you 'ear that? What 'e said? Straight ten! (*The architect smiles bitterly and moves on to the next door.*)

MAN: Pity 'e went away. Let's 'ope another nutcracker comes along, we've another hour till lunchtime.

The architect is already standing in front of another door. He presses the doorbell with his head, holding his trousers up with his hands.

WOMAN (*she speaks without opening the heavily barred door at all*): Who is it?

ARCHITECT: The architect Stilyanov.

WOMAN: What do you want?

ARCHITECT: Look, could I possibly... a safety pin...

WOMAN: What?!...

ARCHITECT: A safety pin?

WOMAN: Anything else?

ARCHITECT: A thread and needle would be best, if possible. And a button. Any kind. Just not an overcoat button. I can sew it on in no time, if you don't have a safety pin.

WOMAN: So while I'm giving you the stuff, you will hit me on the head and then rob the apartment. Just like in block number eight. Only there they asked for an electric iron, pretending they were the upstairs neighbours. But there are no more suckers around! So bugger off!

ARCHITECT: But please...

WOMAN: Scram! Go rob other apartment blocks. No more suckers here! (*Suddenly the door opens an inch and the out comes the muzzle of a double-barrelled shotgun.*) I'm going to count to three – one...

ARCHITECT: I get it, I get it, I'm going!... I get it!

Shocked, he comes to the next door and unthinkingly touches the doorhandle. Suddenly a siren starts screeching. The architect jumps back. The siren stops. The man inside screams in despair, holding a hand grenade.

MAN: I won't open! Tell Petrov to stop sending you guys over! What does he expect – that you can fool me you're the water meter reader so I'll let you in and then you kick me out of the apartment? Tell Petrov to go to hell! I know him, I know he's around the corner on the staircase, only waiting for me to open the door. No way! I haven't opened this door to anybody for seven months, I'm not opening it for you either... You can't kick me out of the apartment, is that clear! I may have moved in without a proper authorization but it was the right thing to do. Everybody knows how he got the authorization! Who does he intend to put up here? Do I have to sleep in the street while he's building up his nice little collection? One for his son, one for his daughter, one for himself, the fourth one to go with his office, a fifth one he rents out. But this won't happen; I haven't been out of here for seven months and will stay another seventy if that's what it takes for justice to prevail! Don't you even think of getting in by force – this place is fortified like a castle. I have direct electric current wired to the door handle – hitting you like a sledgehammer. You just touch it and the wind will scatter your ashes. (*The architect touches the door*

handle to check if this is true and the electric current makes him shudder.) The switch is on! Even if you cut the power supply you could only enter with a tank – there are barricades everywhere! (*The architect manages, but only just, to let go the handle.*) But even if they give Petrov a tank, which I’ve no doubt they will, you can’t take a tank to the third floor. The lift is out of order. You’d have to knock down the whole block – there’s no other way. But if you do – I don’t get an apartment, but Petrov doesn’t either!... That’s it!... I’ll never open! Never!

Startled, the architect steps back from the door.

ARCHITECT: What am I doing here, going from door to door like a missionary? For what? For five blocks? There are hundreds of such estates and I am making a fuss for five blocks? I should go home, take a shower, put Beethoven on the stereo and not think about anything. Just relax. (*Speaks in an ironic tone to the Man, who has already resumed his role of a harlequin.*) Down the stairs you go. (*Takes a couple of steps.*)

MAN (*detaining him*): Yet he suddenly stopped.

ARCHITECT: No, this isn’t about Beethoven or about the blocks, this is about me. I must start living differently. I cannot carry on like that!

He heads resolutely to another door and rings a bell. Someone plays the violoncello behind the door. The music stops. The Woman comes to the door with the violoncello.

WOMAN: Electricity, water, heating?

ARCHITECT: Architect Stilyanov.

WOMAN: There is no such rate.

ARCHITECT: This is not a rate, I am the architect Stilyanov.

WOMAN: Oh, so you stick wallpaper, do you? With glue that you invented yourself? And you not only stick the wallpaper, you do fine art on it. You are Van Gogh.

ARCHITECT: No, I am the architect Stilyanov. Let me explain...

WOMAN: Aha, so you do tiles as well? Applied art, isn't it? Roman mosaic. Almost for free. You create masterpieces in people's bathrooms. Why don't you guys stick to architecture but go on ruining people's apartments? It isn't as if what you design isn't enough of an offence. You have to finish us off by putting wallpaper. Why do you go round doing what you cannot do, why are you so greedy, are your salaries that low?

ARCHITECT: Please, I beg you...

WOMAN: It is too late to beg. Your colleague, the trainee architect, has already been round. He put our wallpaper in such a way as to drive my whole family into psychiatric care. They managed for three days and were taken away on the fourth. I escaped because I was away playing a concert out of town. On top of everything we cannot take the wallpaper off the walls. They peel off together with the whole prefab partition. The glue is of a mysterious origin. I myself live on the balcony to avoid going crazy.

ARCHITECT: But I don't peddle my services, I don't put wallpaper. I just want a safety-pin.

WOMAN: I could have given you one if you hadn't said you were an architect. But I don't want to give anything to an architect. Even poison.

ARCHITECT: Please, I am in dire need of a pin!

WOMAN: And you think I had no need for my wallpaper? You think I didn't need my family and wanted to commit them to psychiatric care? No. I will give nothing to an architect! Now if you were an engineer, I'd give you five pins, but since you are an architect...

ARCHITECT: But ... this has nothing to do with this situation. It's a totally different case.

WOMAN: Whatever. I won't give you anything! I don't give anything to architects!

The Woman moves away from behind the door. The Architect stands stunned in front of it. The Man resumes playing the role of a harlequin.

MAN: For some time the Architect stood stunned, his stare a blank.

ARCHITECT: No! I must try another way. If I must fight, I must find another way. A different approach. I must think of something.

He heads resolutely toward the next door and presses the doorbell. Behind it is the Man, now in his role as head of a household; the Woman is by his side. They are the family living there.

MAN: Who is it?

ARCHITECT: The architect Stilyanov.

MAN: This may be so.

ARCHITECT: Look, I don't want you to trust me or open the door. Let's make a business deal. I slip a quid under the door and you slip me back a safety-pin. OK?

MAN: OK.

ARCHITECT: Thank you. (*Takes a banknote from his pocket and slips it under the door.*) Here you are.

MAN (*takes the note*): I can't see your quid. Must've got wedged somewhere.

ARCHITECT: How do you mean wedged, it went in very smoothly.

MAN: Whatever you say, but it is not here. (*Looks at the Woman and giggles soundlessly. She snorts with suppressed laughter, stopping her mouth with one hand.*)

ARCHITECT: All right. Here goes another one. There... (*slips another banknote*) Do you see it?...

MAN (*taking the note*): It's not here.

ARCHITECT: Impossible! Could there be some kind of a crack?

MAN: There are no cracks. Apparently it's you who are not doing anything. (*The Man and the Woman giggle soundlessly.*)

ARCHITECT: Of course I am. OK, now I'll slip another one, but I'll hold it by the edge, so we see where these banknotes end up. (*He slips it and holds the edge, but the Man pulls it out of his hand.*) Someone pulled it from me, was it you?

MAN: No.

ARCHITECT: You're pulling my leg! Please give me a safety-pin, I'm in a hurry. You can keep the money.

MAN: All right, but only if you slip another quid.

ARCHITECT (*rummages in his wallet*): I only have a larger note, two quid.

MAN: That's all right, I'll give you change. (*The architect slips the note under the door and tries to trace its progress but cannot see anything.*) I'll go get the pin. You wait here.

ARCHITECT: I'm waiting... (*He stays like that, kneeling in front of the door, but nobody comes for a long time.*) He's not there. Squeezed such a lot of money out of me. Is he looking for a pin? (*He stays on his knees some more, then rises.*) What kind of people are these? What kind of people, I ask you? Didn't even open the door! So what am I kneeling for? Why do I humiliate myself? For a button! A safety-pin! This is so idiotic! Savages! I'm here to help them and look at what they... What kind of people are these?

MAN (*now in his role as harlequin*): Suddenly the architect felt his anger surge and moved on to the next door.

ARCHITECT: You'll have to give me one! You can't not give me one! Can a whole apartment block not cough up one single pin! You'll have to give me one!

WOMAN (*already standing in front of the next door*): So he stepped resolutely to the next apartment door. He rang the bell. A beautiful young woman stood in the door and smiled at him. (*She looks smiling at the Architect, who has just rung.*)

ARCHITECT: Give me a safety-pin! Please! One puny safety-pin! Is it so much to ask? We are all human, aren't we? We're all Bulgarians?

WOMAN (*smiling*): Just a moment. (*She leaves the door open and disappears in the interior of the apartment.*) Honey-bunny, come out for a second, please!

ARCHITECT: I found good people! I found good people! I knew I would!

MAN (*Comes to the door grinning widely*): Are you the one looking for a pin?

ARCHITECT: Yes, that's right. (*Beams back happily.*)

Then the Man takes out his right hand from behind his back – he has a boxing glove on. He hits the architect hard on the chin and goes back inside. The door closes.

MAN and WOMAN (*now as harlequins*): Architect Stilyanov took a step, then another, but his legs gave way. So, like a boxer who's been knocked out, he collapsed next to the flower pots in the corridor. All thoughts vanished from his mind and everything sank in darkness.

The Architect is supine on the floor. Next to him are his scattered papers.

MAN: Then the door across, on the other side of the landing, opened. (*Another apartment door opens.*)

The Woman comes out of that door with a watering can. She steps over the supine body of the architect, waters the flowers, humming to herself, steps back over him again and goes back.

WOMAN (*now as a harlequin*): The Architect came to in a few minutes. He rose with difficulty, shook his head once, twice and staggered to the staircase window. He opened it and breathed the fresh air in avidly.

MAN: With the fresh air, his mind cleared and he saw the sign on the shopfront of the ground floor of the neighbouring apartment block – SPECIALISED SERVICES BRANCH.

ARCHITECT: As always, the answer is very close, right next to you, you just need to reach for it. But you have to look round.

WOMAN: Perhaps not all is lost yet, he thought. They'll sew my button on in a couple of minutes, and then I'll rush and reverse the course of events.

ARCHITECT: Right. They'll sew my button on in a couple of minutes, and then I'll rush and ... (*He rushes down the staircase.*)

SCENE THREE

The Person is sitting behind a huge sewing machine with a big wheel the size of car tyre. Like a spider, he is tangled in a web of motley tape measures, threads, ribbons, strings and various utensils. He is thoughtful, immobile, staring straight ahead.

MAN: The Specialised Services Branch. Sewing machines, coat hangers, a cutting table, motley skeins of tape measures, thimbles. Among them there was a person with violet-grey eyes. He was deep in thought and stared with unseeing eyes at the tools lying all around him.

The Architect rushes like the wind into the Specialised Services Branch, holding up his trousers with his hands. The document folder is under his arm. He is impatient, in a hurry.

ARCHITECT: Could I ask you something? My trousers...

PERSON (*not looking at him, deeply immersed in thought*): Questions should be addressed to the information desk.

The Architect looks round, trots to one end of the room, then to the other, looks behind the screens, under the table – but there is nothing. No information desk. Inside the branch the world is different – calm, slow, thoughtful, time runs differently.

ARCHITECT: I am sorry but I do not see it. Is it perhaps in another building?

WOMAN: No answer came. Just silence, calm and thimbles. This seemed to be another world and time here ran differently.

ARCHITECT: I can't see it! The information desk!

PERSON: It's me. Go ahead, ask your question.

ARCHITECT: Can you sew a button on for me, please? I lost it and it is most awkward. The zipper won't stay up without a button.

PERSON (*without looking at him*): We only work with materials provided by the client.

ARCHITECT: How's that – materials provided by the client? What do you mean?

PERSON: Button provided by the client. Needle provided by the client. Thread provided by the client.

ARCHITECT: Thread provided by the client?!

PERSON: And scissors to cut the thread. I forgot to mention the scissors.

ARCHITECT: If I had all of these, I'd do it myself. It's not nuclear physics.

PERSON: Well, go ahead then, do it yourself. Since it is not nuclear physics. (*He becomes thoughtful again.*)

ARCHITECT: Please, come on, you must be joking, how come scissors provided by the client?

PERSON: We are a specialized services branch.

ARCHITECT: But this... this branch is completely nonsensical. This is crazy.

MAN: The Architect was about to explain the whole pointlessness of the existence of this branch but then decided this wasn't quite the appropriate moment. He was in a dreadful hurry, let there be a branch like that, if only they will sew his button on.

ARCHITECT: Look, my trousers will fall off at once if I do not hold them up with my hands. I can't go on doing that indefinitely, can I? Couldn't you make an exception, this is a special case. I am the architect Stilyanov, a buildings approval commission is waiting for me. Five apartment blocks, you see, five blocks that are built so badly as you cannot imagine. If I don't go, they will approve them, they couldn't care less. Make an exception!

PERSON: I don't know about that. You should ask the tailor.

MAN: The Architect made another tour of the place but could find no tailor.

ARCHITECT (*finishing the tour*): Where is the tailor? On leave?

PERSON: It's me. Say what you have to say, I'm busy.

ARCHITECT: What? You were the information desk, weren't you?

PERSON: I cover both positions. So?

ARCHITECT: I just didn't realise...

PERSON: You're wasting my time and I have a productivity target.

ARCHITECT: All right. I lost a button. A trouser button. Right here. So if I let go with my hands, my trousers will fall down.

PERSON: Right. So what do you want?

ARCHITECT: But I told you! I want you to sew a button on.

PERSON: You may have told the information desk about it. Not me.

WOMAN: The architect opened his mouth to blast him off the face of the earth but then struggled to remain calm.

ARCHITECT: I wanted a button to be sewn on my trousers. Right here.

PERSON (*looking closely*): It can be done.

ARCHITECT: But they told me you only performed tailoring services with materials provided by the client. Button provided by the client. Needle provided by the client. Thread provided by the client.

PERSON: And scissors. To cut the thread.

ARCHITECT: I have a penknife.

PERSON: Can't do it with a penknife. It's not listed in the inventory.

ARCHITECT: Mine has a bone handle.

PERSON: Whatever the handle. A penknife won't do. Every profession has its subtleties. Its specificities. You, for instance, what do you do?

ARCHITECT: I told you I was an architect. And that I was in a dreadful hurry.

PERSON: You see? In your field there is also some specificity. Is there or isn't there?

ARCHITECT: There is, but if it is possible...

PERSON: It isn't.

MAN: The Architect felt his blood boil.

ARCHITECT: All right, is it so important the way you will cut the thread? I can bite it off with my teeth, after all. Or are teeth not listed in the inventory either?

PERSON: They are not. We are a modern undertaking. We do not bite things off.

ARCHITECT: I see but does it matter at all? After all, the thread will be cut anyway.

PERSON: To you it may not matter, but to us it does. We cannot change the technology.

ARCHITECT: All right, can you not do the service up to the cutting stage? The rest I'll do myself.

PERSON: We do not perform partial services. They are not on the price list.

ARCHITECT: All right, you write down that the full service has been provided, and I'll pay for the whole of it.

PERSON (*going very red in the face*): Cheat the state?!

ARCHITECT (*embarrassed*): Why cheat? It is effectively going to make a profit.

PERSON (*looking at him with disdain*): This is not possible. Our services are to be provided in their totality.

WOMAN: The Architect decided to change tactic.

The Architect smiles, then winks and reaches for his wallet. However, the Person stops him.

PERSON: We don't take bribes!

ARCHITECT (*Closes his eyes and breathes in deeply, because he thinks he will go off like a bomb*): All right then, perform the service in its totality. Make an exception – this is a special case, as I told your colleague at the information desk. A commission is waiting for me.

PERSON: The commission is your problem.

ARCHITECT: But maybe your children will also live in one of these blocks!

PERSON: I've had houses built for my children. You didn't think I was going to wait for you architects to provide for my children, did you?

ARCHITECT: At least look at the penknife, you may like it.

PERSON (*after a moment of hesitation*): Where is it?

ARCHITECT: Here it is, in this pocket... No, the other one. On your left.

The Person takes the knife from the Architect's pocket and examines it. He scrutinizes the bone handle. He feels it thoughtfully. For some reason he raises it against the light and closes one eye, then opens the blade and runs his finger alongside it.

ARCHITECT: Another ten minutes and they will approve them! And then everything will go down the drain! Because of what – because of a button! Why is this type taking so long, this is a perfectly ordinary

penknife, not the atomic nucleus. If he keeps looking at it another five minutes, I'll go crazy. (*He says this aside, so the Person does not hear him.*)

PERSON: The knife isn't bad. For want of anything better we could cut the thread with it. Even though we shouldn't work with substandard instruments. This is expressly forbidden. There is the BSS!

ARCHITECT: The what?

PERSON: The Bulgarian State Standard.

ARCHITECT: I see, thanks.

PERSON: And the button?

ARCHITECT: What button?

PERSON: The one we are going to sew on. Where is it?

ARCHITECT: It flew off somewhere... in the tram... there was a crush, too many people. It must have got lost there.

MAN: And at the same time he thought: "God, why I am lying to him, why not tell him the truth? What tram, I lost it a hundred yards from here! What is the matter with me?"

PERSON: So you have no button either?

ARCHITECT: I have no button either.

PERSON: Too bad. How about a needle?

ARCHITECT (*Confesses*): No needle.

PERSON: How do you mean "No needle"?

ARCHITECT (*with extreme embarrassment*): I have no needle either.

PERSON (*looks at him suspiciously*): What then? The way this is going, you will turn out not to have a thread either!

ARCHITECT: I don't. I have nothing A-Z – neither needle nor thread.

The Person stares at him in amazement. He simply cannot believe this.

PERSON: You have no thread either?!

ARCHITECT (*to the audience*): But this is idiocy; why do I not tell him this is complete idiocy; what is he rattling on about needles and thread for? He is a mere tailor, and an ignorant person at that – I can see it, he certainly never reads books, he probably never laid so much as a hand on a copy of “War and Peace”, he's a total savage. Why do I not tell him that; why do I behave like a petty thief caught red-handed with the stolen hen? How come I am obliged to carry needles and thread on me, like I was some sort of haberdasher? (*He turns to the Person but suddenly says something quite different.*) I don't. I have no thread. Would you be so kind, I shall pay whatever is necessary...

PERSON: But why are you wasting my time? Why didn't you say so immediately? What was all that nonsense about your bone handle!

ARCHITECT: That was no nonsense; the handle is really made of bone. Don't you have a needle and thread? After all, this is what you work with? Why don't you do me a service, we are all human?

The Person looks at him sceptically, stands up slowly, takes off his black satin vest and remains in his shirt sleeves. He starts doing gymnastic exercises energetically.

ARCHITECT (*amazed*): What's wrong?

PERSON: Workplace gymnastics. From eleven till eleven-thirty. Combined with an airing of the premises. To increase productivity.

The Person exercises, then goes behind the screen, splashes water all over himself, dries himself energetically. Then, naked to the waist, he starts running round the sewing machines. The Architect watches him in bewilderment. The Person finishes his rounds, lies supine on the table and engages in yoga-like meditation.

ARCHITECT: But please, I am in a hurry, don't you have a needle and thread so we can sew the button and be done with it!

PERSON (*Stands up angrily*): No, we don't! We did have them at the time! It used to be full of needles and thread in here! But citizens kept complaining that we allegedly stole thread, buttons and other materials! That we requested more needles than we used in reality! That we wrote off new pairs of scissors as worn and then pinched them for ourselves! That we stole pins and that pin after pin we got to buy second homes! Then, to remove the possibility of abuse and corruption and to serve citizens better, they reformed the branch and made it a specialised one – so we only sew with materials provided by the client. (*He lies down again and meditates.*)

ARCHITECT: So can no one help me? I am off to do a good deed and nobody wants to help me! I cannot go like that, do you understand, I am an architect! There will be a debate. How can I debate with my trousers falling off?

PERSON (*without getting up*): Then do not debate.

ARCHITECT: How's that? How do you mean? How do you mean? Do not debate! How about pluralism? Exchange of views? The exchange of

views in society is like metabolism. If it gets disrupted, if it stops, the organism is finished!

PERSON: Here we sew things, we do not exchange views. This is a specialised branch.

ARCHITECT: But after all I am doing this for you! God, where am I going? What for? I am doing this for the people, so they can live better, aren't I! Do I have an interest in this? No! I can go back home and listen to Bach.

The Person, who meanwhile has put on his clothes and resumed his seat at the sewing machine, thoughtfully watches the Architect voice his sorrows, produce a box of sedatives and slide several pills into his trembling palm. Then he rushes at the Architect, hits his hand to scatter the pills and stamps on the scattered pills.

PERSON: What are you doing? Suicide?! Here?! This is the easiest way out, isn't it? Swallow these and all problems are resolved. You move on to a better world. This is not the way to act! We are counting on you, on such young, intelligent, capable people, to build our future – and you are ready to give up at the slightest difficulty. What a generation! Reaches straight for the pills. Is that why we've fought? Is that why we've suffered hardship? Is that why we've kept building? Your life does not belong to you alone; it belongs to all of society! People attain happiness in fighting, not in swallowing pills, they should think about the others, not only about themselves. Egoist! Rat! Deserter!

The Architect, astounded by the sudden turn of events and crushed by the resounding condemnation, stands mute, not knowing what to do.

The Person stops for a while, looks at him and goes to him, then slaps his shoulder and hugs him.

PERSON: There is always a way out! There is one more source of hope – the branch manager. The branch manager may allow this. He alone.

ARCHITECT: Thank God! How do I find him? Where is he?

PERSON: It is me. What can I do for you?

ARCHITECT: But... how... Aren't ...

PERSON: I do all three jobs. To economise on human resources. So what brings you here? How can we help you?

ARCHITECT: What do you mean?! I've just told you my problem... what have I been telling you... why, about the button! I showed you a handle! Made of bone, with pearls. What do you mean "how can we help you"?!

PERSON: Please, sir, explain the situation calmly. A button? You seem to have mentioned a button?

Suddenly the Architect erupts. He starts shouting.

ARCHITECT: This is idiocy! Total, unconditional, absolute idiocy! Who are you? Is this branch your property? What are you here for, you philosopher with your tape measure round your neck? To drive people crazy?! To send them to the psychiatrist? Are you perhaps a specialised branch of the loony bin? When are you going to get it into your heads that you are here for me, and not me for you! That if I do not come to you, you will die of hunger! You are supposed to provide me with services, not terrorise me! Isn't that clear to you, hasn't anybody

hammered it into your dumb tailor's head?! What are these absurd branches that seem like the invention of a Neanderthal! Yes, a Neanderthal! They cannot impose total control, so why not set up idiotic branches to drive citizens crazy! Will society benefit if I go crazy? Do you know who I am? Do you know how many buildings I have designed? How many schools, and two hospitals! Do you know that the nerve cells making up the human brain never recover? Do you know, I ask you! Why do you keep blinking! The times when it was possible to destroy a man are gone! Do you know that these times are gone? Or did they find you during excavations, which would explain why you haven't noticed that fact! Are you a mammoth? No, you're too small for a mammoth! You are just a bedbug! And if you don't give me a needle and thread this very second, you and your idiotic branch will rot in hell! I'll tear it to pieces, not a shred will remain of it or of you! ... Got it?

PERSON: You've fallen silent? Thinking about something?

ARCHITECT: What? Oh, yes, I thought about something. Look, it's about my button. But I told you...

We understand that this whole monologue by the Architect was only in his mind; he wanted to say it but for some reason did not say it out loud.

PERSON: You may have told the tailor. Or the information desk. I am the branch manager.

ARCHITECT: But you are the same person, after all?!

PERSON: I perform conscientiously the duties of all three posts. One duty should not lead me to neglect the other. Isn't that so? What do you want me to do – neglect my duties? Stop caring? Mix them all up

and let the place descend into chaos? Is that how I should repay the confidence placed in me?

ARCHITECT: On the contrary, I would like you to perform your duties ... fast!

PERSON: Well, if that is the case – how can we help you?

The Architect suddenly begins pacing nervously up and down.

ARCHITECT (*aside*): No, I'll kill him! I'll stick the penknife in his chest right up to the bone handle! Nobody has ever treated me like that! How dare he! I've studied in Switzerland, I speak two foreign languages...

PERSON: You seem a bit nervous.

ARCHITECT (*Goes back to him*): No, not at all. I am as calm as a piece of rock.

PERSON: I am all yours.

ARCHITECT (*aside*): But there will be too much blood flowing from his throat; I'd better aim for the heart. But the other thing, my greater aim, those blocks, my life. No, he must sew my button, damn it, he must!

PERSON: Well?

ARCHITECT: My... er... you know, I lost it and...

PERSON: Yes?

ARCHITECT: And I have no needle, nor thread, nor, of course, button. There was such a crush in the tram – you could easily lose your trousers, not only a button. You know what public transport is like!

PERSON (*Nods*): Yes, in certain places. Only in certain places!

ARCHITECT: Since this is a special case, a commission is waiting for me; I cannot appear in front of them like that, so we talked about a small exception.

PERSON: What exception?

ARCHITECT: They told me you could allow the use of your materials to sew the button.

PERSON: Who told you that?

ARCHITECT: The tailor.

PERSON (*frowns*): Passing the responsibility. So he doesn't have to do the arguing. So we can be the bad guys and they can be the good guys. That's easy – send them to the boss, let him deal with the hot potato. I should have a talk with this tailor; he has no respect for discipline these days. But let us deal with you first. So you require that we use our materials?

ARCHITECT: I do not require this! I plead for this!

PERSON: It can be done, as an exception. We do this very rarely, in exceptional cases.

ARCHITECT: Precisely my case.

PERSON (*nods*): However, you will have to fill in and sign in your own handwriting a declaration that you are giving up the use of your own materials and wish that we use our materials instead.

ARCHITECT: I couldn't do it in my own hand, because my trousers will slip down.

PERSON (*scratches his head, dismayed at the unusual obstacles*): All right, I'll fill it in for you, you just sign. I'll hold your trousers while you are signing. I'll do this to show you we are human.

ARCHITECT: Thank you, I'm very much obliged.

PERSON: Here we go. Name, surname, profession?

ARCHITECT: Peter Yankov Stilyanov, architect.

PERSON: Not so fast, I cannot follow you. Yanov.

ARCHITECT: Yankov!

PERSON: All right, all right, Yanov. Ar... chi... tect. Address, employer, DOB, permanent residence, passport number, social insurance number?

ARCHITECT: What do you need all this for? Are you going to open a file for me?

PERSON: If necessary, we shall open a file for you. These are the required fields in the form. Everything must be filled in. In words. You cannot put dashes instead. Words: "yes", "no".

ARCHITECT (*He is at the end of his tether but manages to keep calm with a supreme effort*): 6 Tintyava Street, Sofia, Sofproject, passport number B 3987654, social insurance number 243030.

PERSON (*writing down*): ...tyava. So-of... pro-o...ject, So-o-fi-ia, Tintya-ava-a. Tintyava seems to be repeated a lot. And Sofia as well.

ARCHITECT: Well, these are the required fields in the form.

The Person fills in the form, with sweating brow. The Architect is nervous, looks at his wristwatch and paces up and down.

ARCHITECT: If he keeps filling in this form for another five minutes, everything will become pointless, the commission will go away. Faster, man, faster, we could have sewn that button ten times already.

PERSON (*wiping the sweat from his brow*): So. Clean police record, any relatives abroad?

ARCHITECT (*Grips his forehead then starts hitting his head with his fists*): Clean police record, I have no relatives whatsoever.

PERSON: What? None?

ARCHITECT: None. I was created via division.

PERSON: I don't get the division bit. I'll put down "none". Participation in voluntary work? Membership in civil society bodies?

ARCHITECT (*aside*): Total idiocy. What is he doing to me? Why am I playing along? Why do I not tell him to his face that this is idiocy?

PERSON (*repeats*): Participation in voluntary work?

ARCHITECT (*suddenly shouting*): Yes!... Yes!... Yes!

PERSON (*looks at him*): What was the third "yes" for?

ARCHITECT (*mad*): For all other questions. Whatever they are. Wherever your perfidious inquiry takes us. Why don't you tell me straight that you suspect me of links with alien powers? Why are you beating about the bush? What sort of inhumane interrogation technique is this? Why don't you put me to the lie detector test? Or, still better, put me straight on the electric chair! Is the trial going to be public or in camera? What sort of an idiotic investigation are you conducting here, man!?

PERSON (*suddenly speaking in a very loud voice*): At ate-e-en-tion!... (*The Architect involuntarily stands at attention.*) The inquiry that we are conducting and the way we are conducting it is our business. Where we put you is our business too. Yet rest assured that we shall put you in your rightful place. Rest absolutely assured about that. Ha-

a-h! We all want to sew your button. But there is a procedure to follow. We are making an exception and on top of it you shout at us. There are no deaf people here, is that clear? Behave, even if you are an architect! We are all equal. In front of a button we are all equal, architects, agronomers or whatever. Is that clear?

ARCHITECT (*guiltily*): That's clear. Sorry.

PERSON: I would also like to ask you not to address me as "man".

ARCHITECT: Yes, of course, excuse me.

PERSON: As soon as one gives people a little leeway, they start calling one "man"! Sign here. I'll hold your trousers. (*Holds the Architect's trousers while the latter signs.*) So. So far, so good. If you have declared false data, you are liable to prosecution – that should be clear. Is it?

ARCHITECT: Aye, aye, sir!

PERSON (*Looks at him, pleased*): Well done, Yanov, well done! Good man! You answer very well! Oh, wait, we've omitted to fill in the "color of the thread" field. What colour should the thread be? Similar to the fabric of the trousers or another colour? Red... green...

ARCHITECT: Similar. Similar, if possible.

PERSON (*Writes this down*): Si-mi-lar! So. (*Looks at the declaration once again.*) The order has been registered. Would you like the express service, or the fast service or perhaps the ordinary service?

ARCHITECT: Express, express! Please!!!

PERSON: Express. I see. (*Writes it down.*) Express! (*Puts a stamp on.*) You can leave the pair of trousers with me and come pick it up in three days.

Pause. The Architect is stunned and cannot absorb what he has heard.

ARCHITECT (*shocked*): What?!

PERSON: Leave the pair of trousers with me and come pick it up in three days. You can come on the morning of the third day, if you are really in a hurry.

ARCHITECT: I leave the pair of trousers with you?!

PERSON: We do not offer services at the client's domicile.

ARCHITECT: I leave the pair?! Here?!

PERSON: And you come back to pick it up in three days.

Suddenly the Architect snatches the tape measure around the Person's neck and uses it as a belt to tie his trousers. Then he charges at the Person, grabs him by the neck and shoves him with all his might against the wall. The wall collapses on top of the Person. The Architect then pulls the Person from beneath the rubble and punches him, sending him sprawling on the table. Then the Architect snatches a pile of ribbons and tries to strangle the Person. The latter kicks vehemently, manages to wrestle free and runs around the branch, while the Architect pursues him with a big pair of scissors, catches up with him, strikes him again and sends him crashing against the screen. The screen falls down, and the dummies and coat hangers come down with it. The Architect stamps on all of this.

Everything the branch has been scattered and destroyed. The Architect, breathing heavily, looks round – only the light bulb hanging from the ceiling has survived. He grabs a template and shatters the bulb with one stroke, then tosses down the template, gets his folder and leaves.

PERSON: You say you're in a hurry and yet you make these long pauses. You got carried away again.

We realise that all of this, the Architect's storming of the Specialised Branch, took place in his imagination alone. The branch is intact and so is the Person. The Architect stands in front of him as before.

PERSON: Well? Any other questions?

ARCHITECT (*aside*): What is this? Have I really not so much as even touched him? Why? Why do I keep silent and do nothing? Why don't I at least slap him in the face a couple of times? Why do I stare at him, doing nothing? This is idiocy. This cannot be. Who is he? What right does he have to do this? I have designed silos in Syria, I am not your average Tom, Dick and Harry. Why do I behave like a schoolboy caught smoking in the loo?

PERSON: Any other questions?

ARCHITECT (*aside*): He is having me on. In three days! Why don't I tell him to his face that all of this is idiotic and that I am not a sheep? I am human! I am human!

PERSON: I said do you have any other questions?

ARCHITECT: Pardon me?

PERSON: Questions? I said do you have anything to say?

ARCHITECT: I have not. (*He takes off his trousers silently, stands in his underpants, takes his receipt and leaves. The Person remains on stage – contemplative, deeply immersed in thought, looking with unseeing eyes as he did in the beginning.*)

The end.