

THE NINE-FIFTEEN TRAIN

A play in one act

Written by Toygun Orbay

Translated from the Turkish by Fred Stark

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Characters:

A Woman, middle-aged or older. Nothing about her clothing should suggest that she is either rich or poor.

A Man, the same age and similarly dressed in non-descript clothing.

A Second Man, of the same age and style of clothing.

The Station Master, near retirement age, male. His uniform is clean but worn.

A small train station. The set stands on a platform extending to both sides of the stage. Stage right there is a small room with a door that opens onto the platform, toward the audience, and with a small window looking onto the stage and bearing the legend "TICKETS – INFORMATION." Facing the audience are three side-by-side benches, and behind them lamp-posts with bulbs that give off a weak yellow light. Stage right, near the room, is a post bearing a clock that shows the time 9:15. The stage lighting should suggest night time.

When the curtain opens, the man is sitting on the left-most bench reading a newspaper and wearing headphones that are attached to a walkman beside him on the bench. The station master is sweeping up with a long-handled broom. He gathers the sweepings into a dustpan, leans the broom against the wall, and goes into the room. The woman enters stage left, hauling a suitcase with wheels. She steps briskly to the ticket window and taps on the glass. The station master opens the flap of the window.

SM: Can I help you?

W (anxiously) : Has the nine-fifteen train arrived?

SM: No.

W: When will it come?

SM: I don't know.

W: What do you mean? I just wondered if there's been a delay.

SM: No.

W: What do you mean no? (Points to clock) Look, it's nine-fifteen.

(The station master closes the window, leaves the room, takes the broom and starts sweeping again. The woman watches him in astonishment)

SM: It always shows nine-fifteen.

W (angry) : For God's sake, what time does this damned train usually come?

SM: It doesn't.

W: What do you mean it doesn't?

SM: So far it's never come.

(The station master once again leans the broom against the wall and goes back to the room. The woman is left to her astonishment. She slowly turns, drags her suitcase to the bench beside the man, and sits down. She starts looking at him, but he ignores her)

W: Excuse me.

(He doesn't hear her)

W (louder) : Excuse me!

(Startled, the man removes his headphones and smiles)

W: I'm sorry to disturb you, but what train are you waiting for?

M: The nine-fifteen.

W: Do you know when it's going to come? I just asked the station master but he gave me a lot of nonsense.

M: What did he say?

W: He said it never comes.

M: (laughs) That *is* crazy. It'll come all right. For sure it will come.

W (relaxing) : Is it always late like this?

M : Always? It's never come before.

(Once again the woman is astonished)

W : Never come? Well then, what are you waiting for?

M: I told you, the nine-fifteen train.

W: I'm going nuts here. First you say it won't come...

M: I didn't say that. On the contrary, I said it's sure to come. All I said was it's never come before.

W (exasperated) : All right, all right. Could you please tell me how I can leave this place. It doesn't matter where I go, or how, a cab, a bus, anything will do. Just tell me, please, how can I leave?

M: On the nine-fifteen train.

W: (Without hope) Isn't there any way out of here. Won't there be some other train?

M: No.

W: So willy-nilly we have to wait, is that it?

M: Not so bad, eh?

W: What do you mean, not so bad? Do you love waiting around like this? And how long have you been doing it?

M: I've been here all along. All I do is wait. Actually you're not aware of it (smiles), but you've been here all along too. And why do you complain so? There's nothing wrong with waiting.

W: There's certainly nothing good about it.

M: Oh, come on now. If you're waiting it means you have a goal. In that case, what has to be done to reach it?

W: Wait?

M: (Laughs loudly) There now, you're catching on. The advantages of waiting...

W: Please, I'm in no state to put up with jokes.

M: I'm not joking. But what I don't get is your haste. It doesn't make much sense to me, this wish to run to the finish.

W: Why not?

M: Because I exist.

W: Don't I?

M: Not for the moment. (Points to station master) He doesn't exist either.
Never has.

(There is a moment's silence)

W: I'm keeping you from your newspaper and music.

M: Never mind, we've got lots of time yet.

(Another moment's silence, as each seems to be waiting for the other to speak)

M: Excuse me if I offended you just now.

W: (Laughs) No, not at all. I was thinking about what you said.

M: Well?

W: I must say I didn't understand much.

M: It's because I didn't explain very well. I mean, what we're doing now, how can I put it, it's like eating...

W: (Laughs out loud) Ah, that's the ticket. Now I understand perfectly.

M: Sure, like eating. Listen, why do we eat?

W: To get full.

M: Right! To get full. And as long as you're eating, it's inevitable that in the end you'll be full. Right?

W: Of course!

M: In that case, there's no point rushing madly through your meal and stuffing yourself. Think about it, which is better? To be full, or to sit down to a fine table and begin the meal? Now don't tell me the answer is to be full.

W: I won't.

M: But if you don't undertake your action properly, you can't create your goal or yourself.

W: That's pretty philosophical, but I think I understand. What you're saying is that this blankety-blank train is going to come in any case. And in any case you have to wait in this hell-hole, so you may as well enjoy it.

M: (Laughs) Not exactly. Your aim should be not to catch that train as soon as possible, but to wait properly -- That might translate what I said.

W: Are you waiting properly?

M: Of course. Look, I get a lot of pleasure. I read, I listen to music, and more important I think.

W: (An outburst of laughter) Therefore you exist.

M: No, it's not that simple. The most important thing is I share.

W: With whom?

M : With you, of course.

W: What have we shared so far?

M: We're just beginning.

(Silence)

(The man puts down his newspaper, stretches out his legs and throws back his head)

M: Just look at that!

W: At what?

M: That sky, glittering with stars.

W: I'm not very fond of it.

M: Why not?

W: I don't know. It makes me feel lonely, or rather...

M: Puny?

W: That's it, puny. Helpless.

M: You see those dim stars, the farthest away?

W: Yes...?

M: If you were one of them, would you be terribly powerful? Let the universe put on its show of magnificence. What is it to you? You should just take in the beauty. The universe enfolds us all around, all lights and eyes and insects and movement. A universe of joy. Are you looking?

W: Yes. It really is spell-binding. And tonight it shines brighter than ever, more beautiful.

M: That's because you're looking at it differently.

W: Maybe so.

(Silence)

(The door to the room opens and the station master emerges, approaching with slow steps)

SM: I've made tea. Would you like some? It's good when you're waiting.

W: That's a wonderful idea!

(The station master goes off to bring the tea)

W: What a nice man, don't you think?

M: He's OK.

W: Why do you say it like that?

M: Like what?

W: So half-heartedly.

M: No, he really is OK. Actually he has all the simplicity and purity of being primitive, and with it all the dangers.

W: What's he done to you?

M: He doesn't have to do anything. The primitive has always scared me.

(The station master comes back carrying two glasses of tea)

SM: All right, here it is, steeped to perfection.

M: Thanks, we really appreciate this.

W: Yes, thank you.

SM: You're welcome. Just enjoy it, and if you like I've got more.

M: Thanks.

(The station master heads back toward the room, taking a whistle from his pocket and blowing sharply on it a few times)

W: What's he blowing on his whistle for?

M: (laughing) Oh, power and authority. Name it what you like, this is a proclamation of rule. Listen, he doesn't look at the stars and feel puny. Because those stars have no place in his universe. His universe is this little station and two people besides himself. And being the master of this universe gives him complete satisfaction. He's everything here – the station master, janitor, ticket seller, director and clerk. And the uniform he wears, the whistle he blows, are the most important elements to help him enjoy it. Actually it's the same for everybody, isn't it? We all have our train station, some larger, some smaller. And what we do is basically the same. Swaggering in our rumpled uniform, we constantly blow a whistle. Even if the station over which we hold absolute sway is never visited by a train.

W: But he's happy!

M: Of course. Always happy. Because he doesn't worry about anything, or ask any questions.

W: What's wrong with that?

M: Nothing. It's a choice. But to be yourself, to achieve that, is a hard business, ma'am. It has a price. Disquiet. That's the real catch. Sometimes, when you think about it, being primitive has its very consistent and peaceful side.

W: What keeps you from enjoying it?

M: Nothing, but as I said, it's a matter of choosing.

(Silence)

W: What time is it?

M: Nine-fifteen.

W: Still?

M: It has been all along.

(Silence)

(Each seems to be at a loss for words)

M: If you'd like to read the paper...

W: Thanks, but first you finish.

M: No, no, here, take it, I've got a book too.

(He hands the paper to the woman and takes a book out of his pocket, putting on his headphones before he starts to read. For a time they both seem absorbed in their reading. The man looks up from his book and starts to give the woman the once-over. As if aware that she is being watched, she looks up from her paper. As if caught in the act the man smiles bashfully. The woman responds with a smile of her own, and they both go back to reading)

(There is a brief silence)

(Shouting in order to be heard, the woman speaks)

W: What are you listening to?

M: Rusalka.

W: Who?

M: Rusalka. An opera by Dvorak.

W: It must be beautiful.

(He takes off his headphones)

M: Why?

W: I sneaked a glance at you a moment ago, and you seemed to be in seventh heaven.

M: True. It's a miracle. Art is a miracle in itself. When I spoke of the station master, I didn't mean any contempt for him. But think about it. How can one exist without experiencing this miracle? Trees live too, without art. But that poor guy doesn't read this book, or share this music. His life is just blowing that whistle. He just lives along, breathing in and out, eating, drinking, sleeping and giving thanks to God. If you ask him, he doesn't even know what he's giving thanks for. Actually he should – he only makes enough effort to earn the right to breathe. Of course we musn't forget the whistle...

W: That's pretty harsh.

M: True. You'd think I hated the poor guy. What can I do, sometimes I can't control myself when it comes to what I feel about people. I love humankind so madly, it's hard to understand how I can often be so hard on it. But it must come from that disquiet I mentioned a moment back. Remember? The price that has to be paid.

W (Shamefaced): Meanwhile I'm so embarrassed I don't know where to hide.

M: Why?

W: That opera, what was it called?

M: Rusalka.

W I thought Rusalka was somebody's name. After that your diatribe on primitive creatures who don't appreciate art was very apt.

M: Oh! There's no connection! Please forgive me. And anyway, Rusalka is the name of the girl in the opera. It's not very well known. For that matter, are you under some obligation to know it? I guess I didn't make myself very cl...

(She cuts him off)

W: No, no, I didn't misunderstand or anything. I was just kidding.

(Silence)

M: Want to listen to it?

W: I don't understand opera very well.

M: Never mind. Music is not to be understood, just shared. If you feel something inside, if something breaks free and carries you off, then you understand.

(The woman reaches out, takes the walkman, and puts on the headphones)

W: Are we being carried off now?

M: We'll see.

(He comes up to her and fiddles with the buttons on the walkman. In the background we hear Rusalka's soprano aria ("Mesicku ne nebi hlubokem").

As the melody comes in the lights dim, and the yellow bulb above the woman illuminates only her)

W: Lovely!

(She throws her head back and closes her eyes)

W: What language is it?

M: Czech.

W: What's she saying?

(The man answers while walking slowly around the platform in time to the music)

M: Actually this is a love song. On a summer's night she complains to the bright moon. Please, she says, stay there, don't leave. Tell me where my love is, and light his way.

W: Strange, it didn't feel to me like a summer's night.

M: How did you hear it?

W: As a white winter night. With snowflakes falling.

M: Didn't I tell you we'd be carried away. You're already in the land of the snow. (Whispers) What are you waiting for? Bring down a snowfall to your heart's content.

(Confetti begins to fall from above. The man comes up to the woman, and gently takes her hand. He puts the Walkman in his pocket and they put their arms around each other. Moving slowly, it is as if they were dancing to the music)

M: Here we are, then, in the land of the snow. And there's no train to wait for. Or even if there is, don't you think it's lovely waiting?

W: Very!

M: Then let's wait.

W: Please, don't let it end.

M: Shhhh. Just listen. Don't think of the end, or you won't enjoy it. What's more (He semi-whispers) if it had no end it wouldn't be so beautiful.

(The aria nears its close)

M: Now listen to this finish!

(As the music ends they plump down on the benches, and the lights come up again)

M: How did you like it?

W: It was incredible. Joy and fulfilment.

M: Life and existence. Being aware that we exist. What about the close? Without that beautiful finish, what good would the aria be?

(Silence)

W (shyly): But there's one thing...

M: Yes?

W: I don't know, I feel ashamed.

M: Why?

W: Throwing myself in the arms of someone I've only known five minutes. It's not my style.

M: Well why shouldn't you do it? What's wrong with sharing something beautiful? But always around us there were a bunch of people with whistles. They always lined us up to teach us that some things were shameful, forbidden. In their view everyone was like them. And therefore, to protect us from such people, rules were required. Ruthlessly, they made us memorize their rules. (Louder) Arms forward, tweet. Shoulders back, tweet. Eyes front, forward march, tweet. If a stranger, tweet, puts his arms around you, tweet, in

a godforsaken train station, tweet, he's obviously a pervert, tweeeeeeet. Because we, the whistle-bearers, are true perverts one and all, tweettiritweettiri tweet tweet tweet.

W: (With a boisterous laugh) All right, all right, I apologise.

M: I won't. At the most I'll be grateful.

W: (Bashfully) Me too.

(Silence)

(The station master comes out of his room and approaches them)

SM: Time for some more tea?

(He glances downward, and without giving them a chance to answer says)

SM: Well now! You've covered the place in snow!

M: Wait! We'll clean it up.

W: It was so beautiful. We just had to have snow.

SM: For what?

W: Rusalka. The music. Would you like to listen?

SM: That stuff's not for me.

W: Well I don't understand it either. But it doesn't matter, maybe you'll like it.

SM: No. I know I won't.

W: You haven't heard it yet.

SM: (Grumbles while collecting the empty tea glasses) I won't like it even if I listen. And you can't make me listen to that noise.

(He moves off)

W: How prejudiced can you get?

M: It's not that. He was a little upset.

W: Well, I guess he has every right. Just look at the platform!

M: We'll make it up to him.

(The station master reappears broom in hand)

SM: All right, pull your legs in for me.

M: Wait, give that to me and I'll sweep up.

SM: Never mind, just pull your legs in.

M: Wait a minute. We're embarrassed as it is, at least we shouldn't put you to any trouble.

SM: (Softens a bit) No, no, it's no trouble, just a couple minutes work. I mean it doesn't matter, but if everyone were a little careful...

M: You're right.

(The station master begins sweeping. The man, a bit shy, tries to win him over)

M: You have a hard job.

SM: Well, it *is* hard. Keeping the station clean, sweeping up, swabbing the benches... And then there's the selling of tickets, and keeping the books.

W: Do you sell a lot of tickets?

SM: So far, none.

W: Oh, that's right, I forgot. I haven't bought my ticket yet. We don't want to rush things at the last minute, you finish up here and then I'll buy it.

SM: No ticket's needed for the nine-fifteen train.

W: What do you mean?

SM: It's true, you don't need one.

W: (taken aback) Well then, what trains do you sell tickets for?

SM: I told you, no other train ever comes.

W: What do you sell at the window?

SM: (Somewhat impatient) Tickets.

W: You said no other train ever comes.

SM: If one comes we'll sell the tickets. Actually the nine-fifteen train doesn't come either.

M: It will. It's sure to come.

SM: If it does I'll have my hands full.

W: How so?

SM: No train can go through here without me. First the telephone in there rings, they notify me from the preceding station, and I leap to put my cap on.

W: Why is that?

SM: Every job has it's serious side, madam. Would a mighty train get permission from someone without a uniform and cap?

W: Are you the one who gives permission?

SM: You bet I am. You must have seen how the railroad workers have a stick with a green and red disc at one end. I wait by the track, and if I hold the red side toward the train it can't pass, there's no way it can pass.

W: Do you decide then? Whether it will be red or green?

SM: Noooo, I show the green. Those are my orders.

W: And you've never shown the red?

SM: Or the green either.

W: I see.

SM: So it's not as easy as it looks.

M: And it's a big responsibility!

SM: (Proud as he heads back to his room, muttering) That's life. Someone has to do it...

(He enters the room)

M: (Mocking) The exalted top director of Grand Central Station!! I don't know whether to laugh or cry, be angry at him or love him. I guess I have all these feelings at once.

W: It must be hard to keep track of tickets that are never bought by passengers that don't exist at a station where the train never comes! I feel sorry for the poor fellow.

M: We may feel sorry for him, but he's happy!

W: How can that be?

M: I told you before. Because there is no such man!

(Silence)

(The station master returns with two glasses of tea)

SM: I tell you this is delicious tea. I've poured you another glass each. Enjoy it.

M: Thanks a million.

SM: (heading back) You're welcome.

(The man reaches into the inside pocket of his sports jacket and pulls out a metal flask)

M: Look what I've got here.

W: What's that?

M: Brandy. Have you ever tried lacing tea with it?

W: My dad used to drink tea that way.

M: A man of good taste, then. Hold out your glass. But first drink a little off the top.

(The woman takes a few sips from her glass. The man pours a bit of brandy into first her glass and then his own, and they each take a sip)

M: How do you like it?

W: It's terrific. It burns your whole chest, but it's really nice.

(Silence)

(The woman is lost in thought)

M: This brandy has robbed you of your tongue.

W: I told you, my father used to drink it. It took me back. (Haltingly) I remember the stove... My mother and father... their faces anxious in the light from the burning wood... It must have been the first of the month, when he got paid... I recall the same picture, repeated at regular intervals... My father's wallet on a small table in front of the stove, a pencil stub and a piece of paper in his hand, and my mother with a dish towel drying her hands, red from the dishwater... She doesn't take her eyes off my father. They sit across across from each other... His gaze is on the scrap of paper as he murmurs something, afraid that we will hear... In any case we were forbidden to take part in this ceremony... We would follow it from a distance, enthralled... But the end was predetermined... Both of their faces would light up as the flames from the wood leapt. It must have been with the announcement that we would get through another month. And for us children, it was time to join in the ceremony. Now we had permission to huddle up in their laps... My father would run his big, callused hands through my hair, and I would feel protected by a great mountain... My brother would be on my mother's lap, those weary eyes deep in their sockets carressing me and my father from a distance. And the brandy steaming from the glass in his hand would burn my throat.

M: Wonderful!

W: Is poverty so wonderful?

M: It's easy to share wealth, my good lady. The admirable thing is to share poverty.

W: Yes, but why was poverty always what they had to share. Do you think they deserved it?

M: I'm sure they were worthy of much better, but I'm getting at something different... To be human, to live like a human being, you don't have to be surrounded by riches. Those people knew war and deprivation, and had to fight to get a square meal and keep warm, to meet needs which we take for granted. And they brought up children. Trying to teach them virtues like honesty, humlity, honor, love and charity. We made an effort to teach the same things to our children, but with a difference. They believed in what they were teaching, because they knew how to share poverty.

W: Don't we believe?

M: Not really. We learned how to share wealth.

W: That's a good one! Pretty soon you'll be extolling the virtues of poverty. I guess you don't want to see the facts. Those people had to scrape out an existence all their lives. Do you think my mother was terribly pleased with her life, slaving away till midnight as she

ruined her own clothes trying to have our new ones ready by the morning of the holiday? I remember hearing the sound of the sewing machine in my sleep, and seeing my mother bent double under a feeble light. As for my father, he'd have slept long since. He'd crawl into bed, not so much to get up early for work as to take refuge from the knowledge that he couldn't provide the money to buy his children a new outfit. And those people existed, is that it? No! At the end of their lives, this world owed them a lot. Unfortunately they were never able to collect.

M: You mean their lives were meaningless and wasted? But the meaning of their lives (indicates the woman) is standing right here beside me.

W: Look, your fancy theories can be as justified as you like, I still feel very sad. Because I love those people.

M: I understand.

W: (Slightly miffed) I hope so.

(Silence)

(Gently, as if embarrassed by her previous outburst, the woman says)

W: Or there may be another explanation?

M: Such as?

W: (Laughs out loud) We're getting old!!! Throughout history mankind has progressed. And old fogies have always grumbled about it. Don't you remember? Weren't the oldsters in your family constantly griping, that the world was going to the dogs? What I mean is, maybe we've taken over.

M: (Smiles) True. That mankind is going to progress, and that we're aging. And even that we're slowly becoming strangers to this planet. But I for one am not hopeless about the future! On the contrary, mankind will correct its errors in time to come, and then people will tell their children the meaning of virtue and believe it.

W: That's all well and good, but we won't be part of mankind then. What a terrible fact to face!

M: What's so terrible about it?

W: Everything. We were given a life, one which at the beginning seemed as if it would never end no matter how freely we spent it. I remember how in my childhood, old age seemed infinitely far away. It seemed almost impossible that I could ever be as old as my mother. It would take so long! And when I looked at the age of people who were

described as “still in the prime of life,” I’d feel amazement. How could someone in their forties still be young? How could one ever reach that age? It wasn’t even worth a thought. And my parents, people who at that time were well along, who had done their reaping and hung up the scythe, looking back now I see they were really very young. And as for us, we weren’t even in our youth yet. But what about now? You compared life to a meal. Well, we’re having dessert. At the most there’ll be a cup of coffee afterwards, and then we’ll wait for the check.

M: How would you prefer it? To gorge yourself, and then go on eating until you burst? Just imagine a table where you have to sit forever – even if it were spread with the choicest food, how unbearable it would be, how dreadful! The important thing, my good woman, is to rise from the table when it’s time. Neither too soon nor too late. At the end, as you sip your coffee, how satisfying if you can say you ate your fill.

W: Have you?

M: Most certainly. Don’t get me wrong, I’m in no special hurry to leave the table. But let’s put our hopes from life on a more solid footing. Take a look at me. With a body that’s more like a droopy sack each day, how much longer should I ask of life? Ten years? Twenty? Or should it be fifty? No, no, thank you very much. How about you? How much further? Where do you draw the line on this greed, just tell me? Sure, life still offers me some beauty. Tonight, for example. And, glowingly full, I sip my coffee with great pleasure. Pleasure that will continue unabated, believe me. But I wouldn’t dream of objecting when the check comes.

W: Do, if you like. If it will change anything, object. You accept that check because you’re helpless. Argue all you wish, I know very well that you’re afraid of old age, too. Tell me, if we had met in this queer station thirty-five years ago, is this what we’d have talked about?

M: (laughing) No doubt we would have talked about something very different, that’s for sure... And it wouldn’t have been so bad!

W: All right, then, WE’RE... GROWING ...OLD.

M: Well, at least you *can* grow old. What more do you want? Isn’t that a privilege in itself?

W: (angry) Well, it’s too bad, but I can’t be as strong as you. Okay? (Raises her voice) I’m not full yet, I’m greedy, and I hate getting old. Any comments?

(Silence)

(The man goes back to his book, while the woman turns a few pages of her newspaper in annoyance before putting it down. She seems to regret

her display of anger, and says in a gentle voice)

W: You know something?

(Without looking up from his book, the man answers)

M: What?

W: Why I was angry just now.

He looks up from his book.

M: Must have been my know-it-all attitude.

W: Certainly not!

M: Then what?

W: (smiles) Old age!

M: (laughs out loud) That's a good one. But don't do yourself an injustice. If we're sharing something here, it's just as natural for you to be angry as pleased.

W: So you're not hurt...?

M: Of course not. Actually, just think, at this time of night, in a deserted train station, it's just plain good luck to run into you.

W: Thank you.

(Silence)

M: What does the phrase "people in our time" make you think of?

W: Loneliness?

M: Exactly. We're like caterpillars who have spun their own cocoons and then complain of the solitude inside them. Even when we buy a train ticket, we ask for a single seat. We're afraid that someone like us, a breathing human soul with a beating heart, who can feel joy and sorrow, love and hate and anger, who swears and smiles and could look at us, right into our depths – we're afraid that someone like that might sit down beside us – what a terrible thought – and share a few hours with us. When someone sits across from us, we don't even look at them. For fear our eyes might meet. We look outside, out the window. The person across from us has probably done the same, but this doesn't give us

a common ground, inside or out. Whereas if you weren't here, or the station master, what good would I be anyway? Who would take a liking to me because I made snow fall on their hair? Or get upset, because I spilled snow on the platform?

(Silence)

(The man goes back to his book, and the woman to her newspaper. A short time later there is a flash of lightning and the sound of thunder)

W: I think it's going to rain.

M: We've already had a few drops.

(Silence)

W: We won't be able to read.

M: Right. We'd better gather up our things.

(They hastily pick up the book, newspaper and walkman, then take shelter under the overhang in front of the ticket window. The station master has emerged from his room)

W: It's really coming down.

SM: Won't last, don't worry. Be over in a few minutes. This time of year, the rain in these parts just peeks in and then moves off.

M: Are you from here?

SM: Born and raised here. My father, too. He was a railroad man like me.

M: So you followed in his footsteps.

SM: That's right. Of course he wanted me to be a mechanical engineer. But, dammit, we were too poor for me to study.

M: Couldn't they afford to send you to school?

SM: Oh, he would have died to have me get an education. But with a mother who had never been to school, or even been on a swing, who started nursing us when she was a child of sixteen herself... (smiles) And a father who dropped out in the sixth grade. We lived in a single room, four children in one bed, so this is the best I could do. Actually, I

don't know whether it was really my fault after all. Back then I never gave a thought to the future.

M: Is your father alive?

SM: He died when I was seventeen.

M: If were alive today, he'd be proud to see his son a station master.

SM: (mockingly) And how! Chief of trains that never come.

(Silence)

SM: But hopefully my son will be an engineer.

M: Is he doing well in school?

SM: The older one's no good, just a lazy rascal. But his little brother is very bright. Not old enough to go to school yet, but you can tell he'll get somewhere. He's going to get an education, and be an engineer. He'll build the locomotives, not stand at attention for some dumb machine. He'll understand that music you were listening to, and when you ask him if he wants to listen, he'll say, sure, isn't that... What was the name?

M: Rusalka.

SM: Isn't that Rusalka? I've got a better rendition. When he's waiting for a train he'll sit here and read a book. Then maybe he'll strike up an acquaintance with the station master, and say, "My father was a railroad man too. He wanted me to be an engineer. He would have died to see me get an education."

M: And he'll be proud of you.

SM: Never mind. The main thing is, I'll be proud of him.

(Silence)

SM: Look, it's stopped raining. Just wait a sec and I'll dry off those benches.

(Goes back to the room, approaches the benches with a cloth, and begins drying them off)

W: (Turns to the man, whispering) What do you think?

M: I don't know. I guess I feel ashamed. And I've really taken a liking to him.

W: Me too.

(The station master has finished with his drying)

SM: Well, that's got it, I guess. You can sit down.

M: Great!

(They sit down)

(A moment's silence)

M: Yes, we did him an injustice. At least he's making some effort, his life has some meaning. Or rather, by giving meaning to another life, he tries to make his own meaningful. (Laughs) Better than nothing, don't you think? But if I get upset with these people, it's not with the individuals.

W: So who do you get upset with?

M: At the approach they symbolize, the judgements, the values that hem us in and squeeze us like a vice, to the last drop. These humanoids are found in great numbers everywhere, my good woman. All over the world. Black or white, male or female, adhering to this or that faith, they all resemble each other incredibly. That's the dreadful part. (Emphatically) THERE ARE SWARMS OF THEM. Swarms! Which means? Which means they rule the roost. The judgements of society, its morality and prohibitions are all set by these people. Social criteria of taste, for instance the approach to art, all serve their criteria. And their beliefs... They constantly pump even their beliefs into our brains. And they check up on your own beliefs. Just try being different, or having a different belief, they'll destroy you. And if you dare to *think*, to use your brain. That, madam, is the unforgivable sin. Because if you think, you may acquire views, values and judgements that are different. Whereas their values are not the product of thought. They simply have beliefs, accepted without examination, beliefs which they command you to share. They are absolute truths, never to be discussed. And as for their values and judgements, they are simply tools of power. (More loudly) The rule of the average!!! That man you feel sorry for, my good woman, he is your master. And a ruthless one to boot. When thousands of them, millions, come together, they smother you. At any rate, there's no need for them to come together, they always *are* together. What's more, they hide behind their insidious, helpless, powerless, clueless nature, till one day they suddenly sink billions of sharp teeth into your throat. They're pitiable, madam, but they know they rule the world. (Calms down) The one who doesn't know is you. You're not aware what powerful masters you're slave to.

W: So this should be a world for the elite, like you, is that it? There's no room for the little man. There should be no vain hopes, senseless passions, love, misery, is that it? Where would humanity be then?

M: But that's just what I'm saying! We agree that humanity is a simple mammal! What I can't stomach, never mind its primitiveness, what I can't take is its vanity!

W: Why shouldn't it be vain? Do you know of a more intelligent, more highly developed creature on this earth?

M: That's the problem! (Sarcastically) The best on hand, anyway! Compared to insects and frogs, a genius!

W: Well, I'm sorry, but you'll have to make do with what's on hand.

M: Unfortunately, that's true... At least for the moment. But such people have passed through our world, it's hard to believe we belong to the same species. So the problem is not in the limits to mankind's ability, but as I said a moment ago, in the rule of the pitiable.

W: What a rule! (points to the ticket window) This tiny sample of humanity has lived wretchedly throughout history. And still does!

M: If he could manage to exist, he wouldn't be miserable.

W: (Fed up) No! We won't be able to agree!

M: We don't have to! As I said before, the important thing is to share.

(A brief silence)

M: But on one point you're right. I did do this poor fellow an injustice.

(Silence)

(The man picks up his book, and the woman throws her head back to gaze at the sky)

W: It's like a dream.

M: What is?

W: Everything. This station, the nine-fifteen train, that clock, the station master, even you. Nothing seems real.

M: Reality itself is usually a dream, madam. Like life.

W: You mean there's no such thing as reality?

M: What you perceive is real to the extent that you perceive it. Or do you think there's just one reality? Look, you see that man over there?

(He points to the rear of stage right, where it is dark)

W: What man?

M: Standing there, look...

W: There's no man over there!

M: You say there isn't because you haven't seen anyone. But I tell you I see him. If there's only one reality and you don't see a man there, then according to you I'm a liar.

W: I guess so.

M: Can't you just assume that I really see him?

W: But if you say you see someone who's not there, how can I believe it?

M: Someone who's not there? You jump to very definite conclusions just because you don't see him.

W: Oh, come on now. You say that right there...

(She suddenly pulls up short, staring at the rear right of the stage.
A dim light there reveals the Second Man. Astonished, she says)

W: Yes... He's there.

M: Who?

W: The man. He's there...

M: I don't see him.

W: What are you talking about? He's standing right over there, as if waiting for the train.

(The lights on the Second Man go out, and he disappears)

M: Where?

W: (Hesitates) He was there...

M: Well?

W: But now he's gone!

M: Fine. Since you've seen a man who isn't there, it means we've switched roles. Now would you please tell me what the case is. Which of us is telling the truth, and who's the liar?

W: I don't know... I'm not really sure...

(Silence)

W: All right, how can we arrive at the truth then?

M: There's only one way we can trust. Science. And science recognizes no absolute truth. For the moment, there are only truths. Science is skeptical. That's why it runs counter to the "absolute truths" that have been imposed throughout history, the dogmas and systems of belief that we are asked to accept without examination.

W: That's all very well, but what is this thing called science based on? Doesn't it come down to human observation and the senses?

M: Yes, but science is deterministic.

W: What does that mean?

M: It's based on replicable experiments and observations that can be tested. So if you swear there was a man over there, or I bear witness that there wasn't, it has no scientific value. Because neither of our assertions is based on a replicable observation.

W: Are you a scientist?

(He hesitates momentarily)

M: No, don't do that. Or rather, let's us not do it. Look, I don't even know your name, nor you mine. We stand here simply as a man and a woman. And we're sharing. A friendship very much without preconceptions, wouldn't you say? Just think, just suppose, that I'm a lawyer, or a green-grocer, a scientist, civil servant, electrician or a seller of women. Would I be the same me in your eyes? Whereas I'm very happy with how I stand with you right now. And with how you stand.

W: You're right. Between a seller of women...

(He interrupts)

M: Or to give it the real name...

W: No, let's say a seller of women.

M: Well, there you have another strange side of humanity. Hypocrisy, actually, the result of centuries of conditioning. Both words describe the same business, don't they? I mean, the person we think of in using one of them is the same as when we use the other. But one of them is acceptable, while the other is rejected as crass, vulgar, not to be borne. All right, is the problem with certain sounds and letters of the alphabet, or with a vulgar profession?

W: (Laughs loudly) Well, anyway... What were we talking about?

M: (Sarcastically) Certain middle-men.

W: OK. I was just going to say that I'd prefer you to be a scientist.

M: Me too.

(Silence)

W: Hey, what ever happened to that man?

M: Which one, yours or mine?

W: Well, of course they're the same!

M: How do you know? Maybe they were different men... And maybe there never were any such men.

W: Maybe.

(Silence)

W: Just now when I asked your occupation, it wasn't just out of curiosity. You have this attitude, very self-assured, knowing everything, very dominant.

M: I shouldn't take that as a compliment, right? It's like these oldsters who say, "Son, you're in the way," or "If you slam the door like that it will break, and other people won't be able to make use of it."

W: Please don't get me wrong. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. I just meant... Actually I put it wrong. I was going to say you seem to have been around, to have a kind of wisdom, and I made a mess of it.

M: Not at all. Actually my story isn't worth telling. Like everybody else I've lived and loved, been loved in return, been betrayed and done some betraying myself, but I've always thought I was in the right. My life has been full of success, disappointment, joy, sorrow, happiness that always seems to be behind me, raw ambition, greed, sacrifice, continual lies – especially lies I told myself – good deeds, beauty, jealousy and wickedness. Just like your life.

W: You mean, whoever we may be, we can't choose the shape of our lives?

M: On the contrary, everything I just mentioned simply makes up the framework of life. Whereas what makes us exist is always our choices. And we're not aware of it, but we've been presented with a boundless freedom.

W: (sarcastically) With this boundless freedom we enjoy, we have to wait for a train that's going to come God knows when.

M: No, our freedom gives us the role we assume. And there are infinite possibilities for playing that role well. All of us use our freedom to determine our actions, and those actions are what make us exist.

W: Or not!

M: That's right. If you fail to use your freedom, or don't use it in time, you can't exist. Freedom cannot be postponed, ma'am. If anything, it can be wasted. And there is no place for regret in this struggle to exist. To live means to assume a great responsibility. To be able to render an account to yourself for everything you do, every step you take... To exercise choice in your actions... Remember, the most despicable thing is to regret your actions.

W: No!

M: It's not me who says this, but a great philosopher.

W: I'll bet he regretted saying it.

M: (Laughs) If he could have heard our conversation, he might have felt regret.

(The woman laughs too)

(Silence)

W: All right, then, in your opinion we're free at this moment too, aren't I right?

M: Absolutely!

W: What kind of freedom is it if we're stuck in this crummy station waiting for a train that may never come! Doesn't this place make you stir crazy?

M: Listen, if we draw the boundaries of this station, we divide the world in two. And one of those two territories is ours.

W: My, what a just partition!

M: What's unjust about it?

W: By this reckoning, what percentage of the world is ours?

M: Lovely! So the problem is not to possess something, but how much we possess. That means our eye is on something bigger – we want more. Don't you think that's a little greedy?

W: But it's just human nature. If man didn't strive to obtain more, humanity would never have gotten anywhere.

M: Please! I don't think humanity owes very much to its greed. Do you believe that a large portion of human desires have a valid cause? Here's a simple question: Let's pretend I'm the genie in the tale, and I suddenly appear before you from the magic lamp. If you had to wish for something tangible, but really tangible, something you could name and define – no health, happiness or piles of money – what would you wish for?

W: Well, I don't know, on the spur of the moment like that...

M: (laughs) My good woman, genies don't usually give appointments a week in advance.

W: (also laughing) All right, I'd ask for a nice house, with a big yard.

M: You see? You've pointlessly wasted the chance of a lifetime. What is a house after all, when you think about it?

W: What do you think it is?

M: Just hold a magnifying glass to our galaxy, which is only a small bit of this vast universe. Then, among all those billions of points of light, find our sun, and then magnify our world, if you can find it among the tiny planets. Take a bigger magnifying glass to blow up the continents, and even the countries. Blow it up still further, and the cities will come into view...

W: OK, let's say we can see them.

M: Well, there you will make out thousands of little concrete boxes. People call them houses. Every morning, billions of people leave these concrete boxes and get in their tin boxes, and those move – cars, trucks, trains, whatever – to take them to other concrete boxes. Those are their offices, factories, schools, shops, hospitals... Then, when it's growing dark, once again they get in their metal boxes and go back to the concrete boxes they left in the morning. And the same ritual goes on until finally they're buried in a much smaller box. Do you think the meaning of this whole round should be a larger house, a larger concrete box?

W: All right, what would you ask the genie for?

M: For him to go back into his lamp.

(A brief silence)

W: Fine, then, you're right about mankind's stupid obsessions. But you still haven't answered my main question.

M: About what?

W: Our freedom!

M: Freedom doesn't depend on the conditions surrounding you.

W: So what does it depend on?

M: (Pointing to his head) This. Or rather, what's inside it. Our most precious organ. And because it's the most precious, the least used. Our brain. The greatest reason for our struggle to exist, and its greatest tool.

W: Very well, to render this struggle meaningful, is it absolutely necessary to have one's statue in a park? (He begins to laugh) Listen, I don't think that's so laughable. If I want to live like a simple person, with all my stupid obsessions and fears, is that so terribly wrong?

M: It's your choice, and once again you're using your freedom. But I was laughing at something else. When you brought up statues in the park, it put me in mind of some lines by one of my favorite poets.

W: How do they go?

M: your best men die in alleys
 under a sheet of paper
 while your worst men
 get statues in parks

for pigeons to shit upon for
centuries

W: (laughing out loud) Very nice! What's happened to your thesis, though? All that meaning of life? All that struggle to exist? Is it all in vain, then?

M: The reproach here is meant for something else, madam.

W: What would that be?

M: The quest for permanence. The longing for perpetuity. Remember, even the universe will have an end. And there won't be a single pigeon to soil things.

W: Doesn't that scare you?

M: Not as long as I exist.

W: What about when you're gone?

M: Then there won't be any me to worry about it.

(Silence)

W: (looks at him and smiles) This won't be very convincing, but...

M: What?

W: I think I understand.

(He smiles too, and goes back to his book)

(There is a bit of silence)

(The station master emerges from his room, approaches slowly, takes a cigarette out of his pocket, and lights up)

SM: That rain really cooled things off

W: As long as it doesn't turn chilly.

SM: No, we don't get cold weather in these parts.

M: Why don't you sit down with us. Enjoy that cigarette.

SM: If the phone rings I've got to jump to it, so I'd better be on my feet. In this line of work you've got to be on the alert. And just think if you didn't hear the phone, all the runs would be thrown off.

W: What runs?

SM: That's not for me to know. Whatever runs they see fit to have. But I've got to be constantly prepared. As if the nine-fifteen train might come at any minute. It's my job. Actually, I think it would be nice to have a switch at the entrance to the station. Of course that would make things hard for me, but it would be better.

M: What good would a switch do?

SM: What do you mean, what good would it do? Then we'd hang up two signs, one here and one here. Track One and Track Two.

M: But it would be the same station, and the same train.

SM: No way! It's always more important to be a station master with two tracks. Then I'd take that old switch and route the train directly to track two. Or I'd change my mind and say, OK, make it track one again, I won't touch the switch. Just think, that mighty train would go wherever I chose. But sometimes I tell myself, why are you asking for trouble? For God's sake, fooling with a switch. And then you'd have to make an announcement, people would have to know where the train was coming, or else they couldn't board. You'd have to drop everything else to take up the microphone – "Attention please, the nine-fifteen train is about to arrive on track two." And then you might get the tracks mixed up. It's just a lot of trouble for nothing.

M: Still, it seems to me you'd like it.

SM: Like what?

M: A station with two tracks. A switch to throw.

SM: Well, actually, I'm not afraid of a little work. If they built fourteen tracks here, I'd handle it. But we'll see. Whatever's in the cards, that's what we'll get.

M: You mean two tracks or fourteen?

SM: That's not for me to know. A hundred and fourteen, it that's in the cards. It's all a matter of fate.

M: How simple, then!

SM: Excuse me?

M: Oh, nothing.

(Silence)

(Suddenly the silence is broken by the ringing of a telephone in the room)

SM: Telephone!

W: I heard it too!

(The phone rings again)

(The station master rushes to the room. Flustered, the woman says)

W: I think it's coming. You heard the phone ring!

M: Don't get excited, ma'am. It's bound to come. If not after this phone call, then the next one.

(The station master bursts out, frantically trying to put on his cap, signal pole in hand, he races stage rear, to the edge of the platform. And a train whistle is heard)

W: (shouting excitedly) It's coming! You hear that, it's coming! Come on, move it! Get ready!

M: There's nothing for me to get ready for. And don't lug that suitcase around so pointlessly, they don't take baggage on board the nine-fifteen!

(She hasn't even heard him. Dragging her suitcase anxiously toward the edge of the platform, stage rear, she says)

W: Come on!

(The man remains unperturbed)

(Suddenly the lights go off. The sound of a whistle rises and then falls, to give the impression of a train passing at speed. Lights projected onto the wall at stage rear, along with the sound in the background, should give the impression of light from the windows of a rapidly passing train and the rattle and roar of the cars. The sequence of lights suddenly ends, and the sounds gradually fade into the distance. When the stage lights come up again, the

woman stands baffled, looking at the station master. The book and walkman are there on the bench where the man had sat, but he is gone)

W: It didn't stop!

(Heading back toward the room, the station master disgustedly says)

SM: It never does.

W: Very well, where's the gentleman?

SM: What gentleman?

W: What do you mean, what gentleman. The one who was sitting right here. Who we were talking to.

SM: There was no gentleman there, madam. Never has been.

(He goes into the room)

(Baffled, she walks slowly toward the bench where the man had been sitting. She eases herself down onto it, takes up the book, and slowly turns the pages. Meanwhile, from stage left, the Second Man enters, dragging a heavy suitcase behind him. Hurriedly he asks)

2nd M: Excuse me, has the nine-fifteen train been through?

(She looks up from the book and smiles)

W: No, not yet.

2nd M: Is it delayed?

W: No, there's no delay.

2nd M: (pointing to clock) But it's nine-fifteen.

W: That clock always reads nine-fifteen.

2nd M: I don't understand. Does this train always come late?

W: I don't know. No one can know. It's never come before.

(As the 2nd Man, perplexed, drags his suitcase to the bench where the woman had earlier been sitting and parks himself indecisively on it, the Woman, with

the book open on her lap, puts on the headphones of the walkman and leans her head back. She closes her eyes as the lights go down, leaving only the yellow bulb overhead to illuminate her. The aria from Rusalka comes up in the background, and snowflakes begin to drift down on her as the curtain closes)