

A. M. SOROKINA

MANHATTAN PROMISE

sample

RAISSA BOOKS
VIENNA

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First edition 2012

Printed in Austria

sample

ISBN 978-3-9503366-9-6

Raissa Books e.U.,
Jacquingasse 33, 1030 Wien

www.raissabooks.com

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A telephone rang in the kitchen of a Connecticut house. A dark-haired woman ran through a number of spacious rooms to answer it; she had to stop once or twice to turn on the lights, but managed to pick up the receiver in time. She heard a harsh female voice asking,

‘Tanya, is that you?’

‘Yes, it’s me.’

The woman at the far end of the line switched immediately to Russian.

‘It’s Ida Grinyeva once more. I’ve given your number to an American agent, her name is Bernice Auden. She’ll call you in a few minutes. There’s a job for three hundred dollars – a companion for a lady suffering from depression. Say you worked with difficult children.’

‘But I have promised the Fosses I’ll start working for them on Monday...’

‘It shows you are reliable that you care about them. But you deserve a better job. Besides they offered you fifty dollars less than what they told me originally. Wait for Bernice Auden’s call! Goodbye!’

The very moment Tanya hung up the telephone rang again. A woman with a New York accent wanted to talk to her. Having no doubt that it was the American agent, Tanya asked: ‘Mrs Auden?’ and hardly waiting for confirmation, added,

‘Mrs Grinyeva told me me you would call.’

‘Yes, it’s Bernice Auden from Harrison.’

‘Harrison?’ Tanya’s voice sounded anxious, she had never heard the name of the place. It could be far away, and she was afraid that the agent would demand an interview.

‘You go through Harrison to New York,’ Mrs Auden said. ‘There’s a live-in job in Manhattan for three hundred dollars. How old are you?’

‘I’m thirty seven.’

‘What was your job in Russia?’

‘An art teacher.’

‘A teacher, a good job.’

‘I worked with difficult children.’

‘You sound good. And your English is good as well. Here’s the number in Manhattan. Their name is Bademan. Call them in half an hour. Say you have had experience with depressives.’

‘Actually that’s only partly true. I’ve had some experience with mentally sick people.’

‘You should be well dressed for the interview. They are elegant people.’

‘Do they know I have no *green card*?’

‘They don’t ask about that. A New Zealand woman worked a year for them. She was here a few days ago. A very nice person. Now they are looking for somebody else. If they ask how you know me, say Mrs Green cooperates with me. Remember to call the Bademans in half an hour! Bye-bye!’

Mrs Green? Tanya wondered putting the receiver down. Who’s Mrs Green? But almost instantly she guessed it must be Grinyeva’s business name.

The kitchen, as large as the other rooms, was divided in two by a low sideboard. The table in the middle of the dining area was covered with the newspapers left there by Mrs Leperier who used to look through them at breakfast. Tanya sat down and tried to occupy herself with reading them, but couldn’t concentrate.

She felt weary after six weeks' intensive searching for a job, increasingly intense now because of the race against time. There was only a week left until the date of her return air reservation to Russia. It was good luck, however, that the Fosses had not agreed to her coming last Wednesday. Otherwise she would have already taken that horrible job, and Grinyeva would not have proposed this one which not only paid twice as much, but also might be less demanding.

The unexpected telephone ringing made her spring up from her chair. She glanced anxiously at the clock over the cooker: only a few minutes had passed since her conversation with the American agent.

Somebody's calling Marina... it won't last more than half a minute, she thought as she was lifting the receiver. Having heard an unfamiliar masculine voice asking about her, she felt stunned.

'Speaking,' she gasped.

'It's Mr Bademan. My agent Mrs Bernice Auden gave me your number. My wife needs a companion... Are you Russian?'

She collected herself. 'Yes, I am.'

'What town are you from?' The man's mellow baritone sounded tired and somewhat melancholic, his accent British rather than American. Tanya imagined a tall, middle-aged gentleman resting in an armchair in front of a fireplace.

'From Leningrad.'

'What was your job?'

'An art teacher.'

'Do you smoke?'

'No, I don't.'

'Do you like cats?'

'I think I'm indifferent.'

'How long have you lived in this country?'

'Two months.'

'Have you been here before?'

'No, I haven't.'

'Your English is good.'

'But I don't understand some Americans...'

'Do you understand me?'

'Yes, I do. You speak very distinctly.'

'How do you know English?'

'I taught myself; and I have been to England. I have some English friends.'

'Where have you been in England?'

'London.'

'Does the name Arrington mean something to you?'

'Is it the name of a place?'

'No. It's my wife's name.'

'What was her job?'

'She was a dancer.'

There was a short silence; Tanya wondered whether she had ever heard of a dancer with such a name. She had sometimes browsed through the old copies of *Dance Magazine* at her distant cousin's, a dancer in the Kirov Ballet. But she couldn't remember.

'Would you go to the opera and concerts with my wife?' Bademan continued.

'Of course I would!'

'She suffers from depression. Have you any experience with people suffering from depression?'

'Is she violent?' The word depression had not aroused Tanya's confidence: it might be an euphemism used as a cover up for some other mental disease.

'No; but sometimes when she gets excited she takes a taxi and runs away.'

'Some of my friends suffer from depression. My milieu are mostly painters; all of them are crazy.'

'Can you come to us tomorrow for an interview? You live in Redford, don't you?'

'Will you refund me the ticket to New York?'

'Good, I will buy your ticket.'

Tanya was amused with the American expression. 'I'll buy it myself! You can pay me back when I come.'

'Do you know where the Frick Collection is?'

'It's Fifth Avenue, near the Austrian consulate, isn't it?'

'We live in the neighbourhood.' He gave the address, then added, 'You will find our house easily. It has stone stairs with iron lanterns.'

'At what time should I come?'

'Whenever you want.'

'I'll take the train which arrives at Grand Central Station at ten past two. I think the bus...'

'Take a taxi.'

'...so I'll come at half past two.'

'Good, see you tomorrow.'

Tanya hung up the receiver but stood by the telephone motionless for a few seconds. At last a good job, she thought, at last fortune has seemed to smile up on her! She switched off the lights in the downstairs rooms and went up to her bedroom. She was alone in the house. Mrs Leperier, her half sister who she was staying with, had gone to a party.

She lay down on the bed and tried to think over the situation.

Somehow she had a premonition that she would get the job – it was unusual for an employer to call first – and that the job was just what she had been looking for. And it was not the high wages, which most appealed to her. There was something more attractive about it: the people she would be staying with seemed to be educated and cultivated.

On the other hand, however, there was a danger that they might be too rich, their habits too sophisticated, the house too grand. In her country truly educated people were as a rule poor whereas here education was connected with money – particularly the elder generation.

But every job she had been offered during the last six weeks had had some shadowy aspects. This one was certainly the best.

At any rate she would be able to get more hard currency for her son's treatment.

The slamming of the inner door of the garage made her get up and go downstairs. From the landing she saw her sister entering the hall. She climbed hastily down the last flight of steps.

'Marina, I've called my agent. She has another job for me!'

Mrs Leperier took quite a time to react to the news. She opened the door of the cupboard and, unhurriedly, began to take off her jacket. She was more than twenty five years older than Tanya and, in spite of her being well preserved, the sisters might be taken to be mother and daughter. There was a family likeness between them – both had slightly snub noses and greenish-grey eyes. But their foreheads differed: while Tanya's was high, the elder woman's hairline ran low over her brow. Moreover, unlike Mrs Leperier's, the Russian sister's complexion was fair; it had that delicate quality of porcelain for which St Petersburg women had once been famous.

Having hung the jacket in the cupboard, Mrs Leperier demanded, 'Why did you call your agent?'

Tanya grasped she had made a mistake. She should have said that it was Mrs Grinyeva who had called her first, and presented her own call as arising from one made by the agent.

'I was anxious because the Fosses had put off my going to them again,' she said hastily. 'The agent is offering a much better paid job.'

Mrs Leperier, however, did not seem enthusiastic about the prospect of yet another job. She had become too much involved with the Fosses. She had rung them a couple of days ago, had had a friendly chat for half an hour with Mrs Foss, been moved to tears by her old mother's condition, and concluded the Fosses were simple but good people. Certainly Tanya would be happy staying with them.

'Marina, the man has rung me already. His name is Bademan. By the way, have you ever heard the surname Arrington? That's

what his wife is called. She was a dancer.'

The stern look which had appeared on Mrs Leperier's face at the news of the agent's recent proposition vanished.

'Arrington?' she asked briskly. 'Have you never heard of the Arrington Plan in the League of Nations?... Well, it was a long time before you were born.' She seated herself on the bench to change her shoes, and gave Tanya a sign to take a seat by her.

'His wife, Lord Aldburgh's daughter,' she went on, 'was also well known to the public. When young she married an elderly American millionaire who died soon after, nearly ruined by her expensive follies. Then she returned with their two children to England. Her second marriage with Lord Arrington was quite a sensation. I was a child then, but I remember it pretty well... How old is Mrs Bademan?'

'Her husband sounds no more than fifty five.'

'Then she must be Lord Arrington's daughter,' Mrs Leperier stated. 'Though I haven't herd he had any children of his own. Where do they live?'

The address had seemed to impress her even more than the surname. 'Oh,' she said, 'it's the so-called *Museum Area*. Plenty of psychiatrists live there. They treat the rich people of the neighbourhood.'

But there was not much time to discuss the subject: this was the eve of the American sister's departure to Florida where she was going to spend a fortnight in the company of her boyfriend, and she had not yet begun packing. While Mrs Leperier moved upstairs, Tanya went into the kitchen to have a cup of cocoa of whose soothing effect she had once heard from her grandmother.

Mrs Leperier departed early next morning. Left alone, Tanya remembered the agent's advice to look smart at the interview. She had no problem with her dress, coat and shoes, but was slightly concerned about her big leather shoulder bag she had

once bought in Budapest. She had brought it as a present for Mrs Leperier's son-in-law, an official of the State Government in Hartford who had arranged the necessary formalities connected with her trip to the United States. She had hoped she would buy some cheap handbag for herself in America, but it had turned out that she couldn't afford even the cheapest one with the few dollars left after paying the fare from Kennedy to New Haven, since the amount of them she had been allowed to buy in Russia was extremely small.

The bag, however, had an advantage – there was enough room in it for a pair of shoes, so she might put on comfortable trainers and change them for her fashionable shoes in New York.

As she came downstairs the kitchen the telephone rang. It was Mr Burstin, a retired Columbia professor she had met in Leningrad a dozen years earlier, and had seen again in the Kennedy Airport on her arrival in America. He was just calling from his apartment in New York and was much pleased to learn the latest and extraordinary news. Tanya told him she was leaving for New York right now, and promised to call him from there immediately after the interview.

In the hall she cast a critical glance at her reflection in the mirror. She was not satisfied with her hair which she had cut too short the day before. Combined with the spectacles and the shoulder bag, it gave her the appearance of a professional woman, perhaps too professional for the job.

The snow had already gone, but it was still winter, and at the bus stop the wind chilled her to the bone. When she reached the railway station there was not much time left before the departure of the New York train. The queue to the ticket window was rather long, but an elderly railway employee standing nearby told her she might buy her ticket in the front carriage.

She boarded it, and indeed after the train had started the same man who proved to be a conductor approached her and asked, 'Senior citizen?'

Tanya had already learned that, contrary to the statements of communist propaganda, old people in America – at least in Connecticut – had some privileges. She was slightly amused with the man's suggestion of her being sixty, but appreciated his giving her a chance. She nodded, and gave him a grateful smile as she paid her half fare, at the same time feeling uneasy about the small trick they were both performing.

But every spared dollar was important now. Another comforting thought was that the incident might be a good omen. Maybe the interview ahead of her would be successful.

She had already had six of them, of which five had been failures: either she or the interviewer had not satisfied the opposite party. On two occasions both she and her possible employers had been misled: after she had reached the places indicated by the agents it had turned out that it was neither a companion, nor a nanny who had been wanted, but rather a cook. Then the agents had tried to convince her that American cuisine is very simple, and that she should have taken the offered job.

The interviews had given her some experience in dealing with people, but had not increased her self-confidence. On the contrary, after every unsuccessful encounter she would become more uncertain of herself and, as a result, more tense and less self-controlled. Her success at the Fosses' was rather doubtful, considering that she was still not sure of the job, and even more so because of the duties she was supposed to perform there.

Now she repeatedly assured herself that this time she had to succeed, not only because of the deadline she had, but also since the recent proposal seemed to be incomparably better than all the previous ones. Work as a companion for a woman suffering from depression did not appear to her to be hard. Moreover, the cultivated voice of the lady's husband promised an agreeable middle-aged couple.

Mrs Leperier's information about her would-be employers did not contribute much to how Tanya had pictured them. She

was not impressed by Mrs Bademan's origins and address as much as her sister had been. In Soviet Russia aristocracy had not existed since the Revolution, and a good district meant a neighbourhood where there were shops, particularly groceries. And not simply shops, but the ones whose shelves were not entirely empty.

She reflected on how experience can divide people – even sisters. For after all Marina's and hers had been entirely different. She was familiar with her sister's existence mainly from what she had heard from her aunts. There was no doubt that, unlike her own, Marina's life had been a sheltered one. Both communist and Nazi totalitarian regimes had spared her. When in the early twenties the chance to escape from Soviet Russia had appeared for those who had been born in the formerly tsarist part of Poland, their father had forced his first wife, then expecting a baby, to seize the opportunity. He had hoped he would follow her, but his case being not as evident as hers, the procedure had prolonged and a few days before he was to receive his travel documents Soviet-Polish relations had deteriorated: from that moment no ordinary citizen had left Soviet Russia legally and very few, risking their lives, illegally. Therefore Marina was born at her mother's rich relatives' in Poland, for which in the late twenties her father had paid with four years of imprisonment, and in the thirties and early forties with a concentration camp and an exile in northern Russia.

When Nazi Germany had attacked Poland in September 1939 Marina was on holiday in Southern France where she had gone with her relatives. It was there that she had met Mr Leperier, a well connected Belgian, with whom ten months later, a few days after their wedding, she had managed to flee to Mexico before France had fallen to Hitler. Perhaps she had had a hard time when they had waited for the American visas in Mexico. It had been a short period, however, since Mr Leperier, being not only an editor of the government monthly but also a correspondent of

an American newspaper in pre-war Belgium, had had connections both with Belgian diplomats representing the government in exile and with some influential Americans.

It was not for the first time since her arrival in America that Tanya realised that a person who had lived the kind of life of her sister was unable to understand what it is like under communism any better than a native American. Marina believed that after Stalin's death things in Soviet Russia had improved to such a degree that people should be content. When, in the late seventies, she had arrived in Leningrad from Geneva her brief visit to Russia had confirmed this conviction: she had stayed in a hotel for foreigners, visited mainly theatres and museums, and had not noticed that shops in which she bought some attractive purchases were not available to local people. However, when after she had just returned to Washington for good she had invited Tanya to the States she was much surprised that the Soviet authorities had prevented the visit by refusing her sister the permission to take her seven-year-old son with her.

Actually, on receiving another invitation to America ten years later, the passport, though much easier to obtain at the time of the *perestroika*, was not the only problem that Tanya experienced. For apart from finding a substitute for her position in the children's' centre where she was now working in, she couldn't leave her son, his secondary school finals ahead of him, alone. Fortunately – or perhaps unfortunately – her retired ex-mother-in-law had proposed to look after the boy. Since it might have been better not to leave him. That horrible accident of his... Perhaps it wouldn't have happened... Or if she could have taken him with her to America...

When a month after her arrival in America she had received the news of his being threatened with being permanently disabled as a result of an accident she had understood that, like other people from communist countries visiting the States, she had to take an illegal job: she had to gain the money necessary

for the boy's treatment in a Vienna hospital where the operation, unavailable in Russia, was to be performed. The operation itself was to be free. Thanks to connections her father-in-law enjoyed with an Austrian professor the surgeon was to perform it himself. But the other expenses had to be paid, and besides, somebody ought to stay with the boy in Vienna till he was well enough for the return journey. In the letter informing her about the accident, Volodya, her ex-husband, had written that she was the only person who could gain the necessary hard currency. She would have enough time to organise it, since after the first operation which had been performed straight after the accident the doctors were still not precise about when the second one would be possible – a period of up to a year might be necessary for their son's recovery after his numerous injuries. Volodya had already talked to people in the children's centre: Tanya's substitute could perform her duties there, if necessary, longer that had been settled. So, if she found a job, with the grandparents looking after the boy, there was no hurry for her return home at the moment.

The train stopped at a station, people got in and out. A handsome man of Tanya's age took the seat by her. He glanced at her with interest and tried to start a conversation. But she had no desire for any. She simply did not maintain it, and after the exchange of a couple of sentences it flagged. The man meditated for a while, then took a magazine out of his bag, and occupied himself with reading.

Tanya wondered how pleased she would have been to have a chat with him if they had met before she had received the bad news. Then she had wanted to talk to people. During her first railway trip to New York she had watched the other passengers with interest, as she always did when travelling, and taken every opportunity to talk to them. But now to open her mouth seemed to her an effort. Neither did she feel like looking through the window as she had been used to doing before. She already knew the names of some stations by heart. She was bored with

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applicant for a nanny by the dishonest Eurampo agent. After some consideration, however, she had agreed to hire Tanya as a nanny for her two-year-old girl. 'Children are more important than cooking,' she had said. A nice woman and a nice family, Tanya thought.

She looked absentmindedly through the window. The train was just leaving a station. She caught a glimpse of the inscription: RYE. She took the timetable out of her bag to see how far from New York the train was. *Rye, Harrison, Mamaroneck...*

Harrison. Mrs Bernice Auden from Harrison. How grotesque that an illegal agent should have the name of a poet. And another absurdity was that the American agent had recommended her to the Bademans, even though she had never seen her. Neither had Grinyeva. They traded in human flesh without seeing their merchandise.

Both the proximity of New York and the thought of the agents and their dishonesty towards their clients made her alert. She wondered whether Mrs Auden really lived in Harrison and if her name was real or invented. The Russian masseur from Brooklyn had not told her his surname and given only his first name. Grinyeva used two surnames depending on who she talked to: one of them sounded Russian, the other English or German. This woman had not believed at first that she could speak English. Dear God, how much time she had lost because of this mistrust! 'Everybody says he can speak English,' Grinyeva had declared. 'Americans praise me,' Tanya had remarked shyly. 'When I came to America and said good morning everybody praised me,' had been the agent's answer. Tanya had proposed switching to English, but Grinyeva had refused, and so had the illegal agent in the Viking Club where she had been given an interview. She had understood that a person who had recently arrived in the States was not expected – perhaps even not supposed – to speak English.

Four weeks after her first conversation with Mrs Grinyeva, Tanya had called her again, and this time had succeeded in convincing the agent that she could indeed speak English. She had lied that she had been an English teacher in Russia. A job had emerged immediately, the one at the Fosses'. What a piece of luck for her that they had put off her coming to them, and she had telephoned the agent again. Then, just like a miracle in a fairy tale, at the last moment, a new opportunity had arisen.

Sometimes it's good to be under great pressure, she concluded. Had it not been the next week's deadline of the three month return ticket, she would never have lied to the agent. To receive a ticket good for a year she had to pay extra money, one or two hundred dollars, but she only had twenty of them left in her purse after buying the railway ticket.

On the other hand, without the deadline she would not be so nervous about the interview at the Bademans'. She would have time to search for yet another job if she did not succeed now. The Fosses would not be the only alternative, provided the delay had not been caused by their changing their minds.

The most horrible job one can imagine, she thought with resentment. Grinyeva had informed her that a companion for a blind person was wanted. The unhappy old woman, Mrs Foss's mother, had proved to be not only blind but also deaf and lame. A companion was supposed to escort her at least twice nightly to the bathroom.

She had no choice then, she had been pressed for time. She had decided to take the job, even though Mrs Foss junior had not kept her word about the terms of payment. Nor, as it turned out later, had she kept her word about the date Tanya should start.

If I fail now, she reflected, I shall have to take that nasty job. Or, provided the Fosses don't want me any longer, I'll have to go home. Anyway, I must get the job at the Bademans'.

The train was entering the Manhattan tunnel.

When she made her first railway trips to New York she had been impressed by the underground corridors cut into the Manhattan red rock. But now she could think about nothing but the interview ahead. I must succeed, she repeated to herself while reaching into her bag for the smart shoes. Suddenly she noticed the handsome man by her: he was still there looking through his illustrated magazine. Her hand stopped motionless in the bag.

The people in the carriage began to stir and leave their seats. To Tanya's relief, her neighbour shut the magazine, stood up and then, having cast her a regretful glance, he mixed with the people moving towards the door. Now she could change her shoes without embarrassment. She did it hastily, for the train was already entering Grand Central Station.

She was so anxious to be punctual that she paid little attention to the cast-iron lanterns mentioned by Bademan, neither to the house itself. As she was climbing the stone stairs leading to the porch she looked at her watch: it was precisely half past two. After ringing the doorbell she glanced, slightly surprised, at the front door, which was painted in a blood-red colour. She had noticed nothing bizarre about it when she had halted briefly on the pavement to check the number of the house, but now, as the vivid colour occupied her whole field of vision, she was struck by the idea that the door would have suited an asylum.

She had hardly had enough time to read the inscription on the brass nameplate: Arthur Bademan, when the door was opened by a tall, dark maid with a sad face. The woman let her in without a word and took her straight to the sitting room.

Although Tanya was too tense and confused to contemplate its arrangement, her attention being taken up mainly with the people, her impression was of something familiar. It must have been her uncle's room, the ex-parlour in a small, classical manor house which, under Soviet rule, had come to be used as lodgings for the employees of a horse farm. Though she had stayed in the place just a few days as a young child both the parlour and the house had been engraved on her mind with extreme clarity.

In a corner of the room a grey-haired couple were sitting side

by side on a sofa. They were much older than she had imagined them judging from the gentleman's voice on the telephone. The wife seemed to her to be a typical English elderly lady. Her appearance was reminiscent of the portraits by Reynolds or Zoffany, although her features were more pleasant than those of the painters' models. She must have been even more frightened than Tanya herself. She occasionally glanced inquiringly at the newcomer with big, slightly prominent blue eyes, and appeared so gentle and helpless that Tanya took an immediate liking to her.

In contrast to his wife Bademan was rather stocky and plump. He sat by her, bent forwards with his hands placed on his widely spread knees, as if he were her guard and defender. With his small eyes near the bridge of his pointed nose he might have been French; yet Tanya thought that he resembled an American businessman or politician from a newspaper photograph.

'How did you come to America?' he began the conversation after she had taken a seat in an armchair opposite to them.

'My half sister, Mrs Leperier, invited me.'

'What's her job?'

'She is a doctor.'

'I see. Are you married?'

'No, I am divorced.'

'Do you want to stay in this country?'

'No, I don't. But I would like to stay in America as long as possible. My visa is valid until the end of July, but I think I can prolong it.'

'That's like the New Zealand woman. I prolonged her visa for six months. So you will stay with us as a friend?'

Tanya nodded in understanding.

'As a friend, or as a relation.' The main problem was settled: he knew perfectly well that she had no permission for work in the States.

'Why do you want to take this job?' was Bademan's next question.

'I must help my son; he was injured in an accident and his treatment requires hard currency.'

'Have you any other children?'

'No.'

'Does he live in Leningrad?'

'Yes, I have left him in the custody of his grandmother. But he must go to Vienna for treatment.'

'My stepdaughter studied singing in Vienna. She lived there for two years.'

'Really? Is she a singer? My ex-husband is a singer.'

'No, she gave it up,' Bademan replied.

His wife remained silent. But yet she seemed restless, and occasionally gave Tanya anxious glances. He went on with his questioning.

'What did our agent tell you about the payment?'

'She said it's three hundred dollars a week.'

'That's right,' Bademan confirmed cheerfully, as if he was content that he could afford to pay such generous wages. 'Well, I'll show you the house,' he said, rising from the sofa. 'Cecily, stay here,' he addressed his wife who made a movement as if she wanted to leave her seat to accompany them. However, when Bademan and Tanya moved on towards the door the woman stood up and followed them.

'Cecily, sit down!' her husband roared rudely. Mrs Bademan carried out his order obediently like a little girl.

Tanya cast him an indignant glance.

'We should treat her on equal terms! As a partner!' she exclaimed in a sudden impulse dictated by her instinct of defending the weaker party. She was instantly horrified at her lack of tact, and moreover afraid that she had used the word partner out of context. The feeling of fear that now she surely would not get the job deepened her confusion. She stood unable to move, her eyes fixed on Bademan.

But strangely enough he kept silent. He just gave her a searching, perhaps puzzled, look then made for the door. While following him and passing his wife, she touched the woman's hand compassionately.

'I hope we will be friends.'

'Yes, friends,' murmured the old lady and, with her other hand, momentarily held up Tanya's.

Before Bademan who had halted to wait for her moved on Tanya had caught a glimpse of his small eyes: they watched her intently from beneath the frowned brows. The next moment, when she had joined him in the hall, she relaxed; she was told to hang her coat on the racks, which seemed to augur well. Then she was led upstairs.

The old man walked up in front of her with slow heavy steps, his hands, with fingers almost straight, hanging stiffly beside his body. Still, he had an air of elegance and importance peculiar to rich and successful people, the air of an ageing lion. From the landing on the first floor he showed her through the open doors to his wife's study and bedroom, both furnished with antiques. Pointing to the rococo marital bed in an arched niche, he said, 'We bought it in France.'

He pulled open the next door; Tanya saw a steep flight of steps leading to the top floor. They went up to her predecessor's room. It was immediately under the roof, so the ceiling was slightly sloping. The furniture seemed to be early-nineteenth century, perhaps a little later. Tanya had no time to examine it but found the room delightful. She liked its simplicity and the good taste of the arrangement. There was no doubt that it was the best room she had been offered during her interviews.

In the next room she was lead into, which she assumed to be Bademan's study, the man indicated an early-Renaissance chest. 'We bought it in Italy.' Then, noticing that her eyes rested on an incrustated desk, he announced, 'My wife inherited it from her uncle.'

When he showed her the library she grew quite enthusiastic.

‘Books! And antique European furniture! It’s a European house!’

Bademan was obviously flattered with her interest in his antiques. He answered her questions concerning them with apparent nonchalance, but Tanya could feel that he was proud of his collection. However, the cheerful expression on his face changed suddenly when a creaking of the stairs was heard and, the next moment, the tall figure of his wife appeared in the doorway.

‘Cecily, why have you come up here?’ he exclaimed angrily. Then, apparently realising that the old lady did not intend to leave, with ‘Well, let’s go downstairs,’ he moved towards the door. Tanya’s impression was that he had wanted to give her more details about his wife’s illness, and that the woman’s appearance had frustrated his intentions.

When all three of them had returned to the sitting room he sat down at the small table and dialled a number.

‘Diana? Here is a nice Russian woman, I want you to meet her.’

The answer must have been positive since, passing the receiver to Tanya, he said ‘Speak to my stepdaughter. She will give you the address of her office and tell you how to find it.’

The woman talking on the telephone had the most beautiful feminine voice Tanya had ever heard. It’s a pity Diana gave up her career as a singer, she reflected before writing the address in her notebook and passing the receiver back to Bademan.

He talked for a few minutes then took out his wallet, paid her for the railway tickets and added three dollars for a taxi to Diana’s office. After Tanya had said goodbye to Mrs Bademan he accompanied her to the hall and helped her with her coat.

In the street she took a deep breath: she had a feeling that in spite of her foolish slip the man wanted to take her on.

Twenty minutes later the taxi halted beneath a skyscraper. The fare turned out to be two dollars more than she had been given,

and had it not been for the hope of getting a well-paid job she would have worried about her constantly diminishing cash.

She found the Frogg Publishers' sign on the thirty-second floor. As she entered the office corridor an elderly woman appeared in a doorway, asked her name and, indicating a chair in the room, told her to wait. Then she left her alone.

In a few moments a tall woman with greying hair and a still youthful face ran in.

'So you are Tanya? I'm Diana.'

There was no likeness between the woman and Mrs Bademan, so Tanya was somewhat surprised to hear the name and recognise the voice she had heard on the telephone. The air of masculine efficiency about Diana, her appearance and manners, her movements, quick but lacking in grace like those of a lanky teen-aged adolescent, were in strong contrast to that lovely high-pitched voice which seemed to be the essence of femininity.

Diana gave her an attentive glance and said hastily, 'I must leave you for a short while, I have an appointment. Do you want to see what we do here? Look through this in the meantime; you can keep it.'

She vanished as quickly as she had appeared. Tanya glanced through the prospectus: *Frogg Publishers – Diana Sharkin, Director*. She noticed some titles of books about nutrition which failed to rouse her interest.

Diana's appointment did not last long. She came back and took a seat opposite to Tanya. 'You dye your hair,' she said, 'It's like mine.'

Tanya made no answer; after all it would not be Diana she would be working for.

'So you have a Russian passport?' Diana continued, 'You don't intend to stay in this country, do you?'

'No, I don't.' Tanya took out her passport. 'But I want to work here for as long as possible. I can't return home yet, I've let my

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my mother is half English, don't you? She was brought up in my grandfather's castle in Northumberland. When she was eighteen she didn't leave her room for half a year. Nobody paid any attention to this.'

Tanya smiled. 'Judging from English books there have never been any neurotics in England; there have only been eccentrics.'

Diana seemed not to understand the irony. Ignoring Tanya's remark, she continued her account. 'Her first name is Euterpe. However my uncle called her Cecily; you know, St Cecily was another patron of music. If you become friends you will call her Cecily.'

Tanya was silent. Since her university days she had rarely called her new acquaintances solely by their first names, although adding patronymics to them was even more complicated than Western ways of addressing people.

Diana changed the subject. 'The New Zealand woman used to kiss my mother when she put her to bed.' She gave Tanya an attentive glance. 'I don't know how you feel about that?'

Tanya felt a momentary stiffness somewhere between her heart and stomach. A shadow of a frown appeared on her forehead; she understood that poor Mrs Bademan needed affection like many old people do. However, she did not like the prospect of kissing her just as she would not have liked kissing any stranger.

'Well, I think I should call my mother.' Diana leapt off the chair, ran to a telephone and hastily dialled the number.

At first Tanya did not understand to whom the woman was speaking. Then she realised that both old people must have simultaneously been on the far end of the line; apparently they were talking on two telephones.

After a short family conversation Diana addressed her mother, 'Mom, here is a nice Russian woman. Did you like her? Are you sure you can take a bath in her presence?'

Tanya again had the unpleasant feeling inside her chest, but

instantly brought herself to her senses: perhaps the old woman needed help when getting into the bath tub.

Diana said goodbye and put the receiver down. An expression of amusement on her face, she turned to Tanya.

‘She says you have a nice son. How can she know?’

Tanya relaxed instantly.

‘She is right; he is really nice. Do you want to see his photo? She thinks he is nice because I told her he used to dance in a youth company.’

‘Really?’ Diana looked with interest at a photograph of a blond adolescent in a Russian embroidered linen shirt. Somehow Tanya did not like the expression on the woman’s face: it seemed to her that Diana saw in her son only a young male.

While putting the photograph back into her bag she remembered the Fosses. She asked, ‘May I be sure of the job? You see, I have taken another one, and I’m supposed to go to those people on Sunday. If not I must let them know.’

‘Where do they live?’ Diana asked.

‘In Bronxville.’

‘How much do they pay?’

‘One hundred and fifty.’

‘Don’t tell my stepfather that. He’s an exploiter. You should have money from him for expenses. Yes, he is an exploiter. He gets more and more stingy nowadays. He even dismissed the chauffeur last year.’ She indicated the apparatus on the table behind Tanya. ‘Of course, you can call them.’

Tanya took out her notebook and turned around to make the call. She heard Mrs Foss’s monotonous voice. ‘Tanya, you need a family, don’t take that job,’ the woman said when she had learned the news, ‘You will regret it. Come to us on Sunday. We are waiting for you. You promised us you would come on Sunday. Tanya, you are alone, you need a family.’

‘Mrs Foss, I...’ Tanya tried to interrupt her, but in vain; the aggressive voice repeated, ‘Tanya, you need a family. Tanya,

you'll be unhappy.'

Tanya became hot, she blushed. Diana came and put a short message near the telephone. Tanya read: *I WANT TO LIVE IN MANHATTAN AND TO EARN MORE MONEY.*

'You promised to come to us on Sunday, my mother is waiting for you,' Mrs Foss insisted.

A sudden tiredness took hold of Tanya. Though she was aware she had to defend herself, the way Diana had suggested seemed to her rude. Besides she could not understand why overcrowded Manhattan was considered to be better than Bronxville. 'Mrs Foss, I was supposed to begin work in your house two days ago,' she said, 'but you changed your mind. I was afraid you didn't need me. I waited so long for your answer.'

'Tanya, you will be unhappy. You need a family. How much do they pay?'

'Three hundred dollars; I understand you can't... you can't afford as much.'

'That's right. We can't pay more than two hundred.'

'Mrs Foss, I can't occupy the telephone any longer.'

'Tanya, call us from Connecticut.'

The talk finally over, Diana, who had been impatiently walking around the room, returned to her seat opposite Tanya. The conversation resumed.

'I have a hut in the mountains,' Diana said, 'I will take you there on weekends.' She paused for a second or two, apparently expecting Tanya to reply.

But Tanya kept silent. She was instinctively afraid of making herself dependent, and perhaps doubted whether she could rest in the other woman's company.

Diana went on, 'That New Zealand woman was on my mother's side. I don't know how you will...' There was another brief silence. 'My stepfather was a lawyer,' she said. 'He is educated.' She twisted her mouth. 'Not very educated. He is seventy four, my mother is seventy nine.' She paused again and

watched Tanya who slightly raised her eyebrows; she would have never guessed Mrs Bademan to be so old. 'Now they have separate bedrooms,' Diana added.

'Some couples have,' Tanya observed. 'My parents always had separate rooms.'

'There will be comic aspects,' Diana said, 'but I'm sure you have a sense of humour.' Her eyes looked inquiringly from beneath her long eyelashes, 'Haven't you?'

Tanya did not answer; she did not grasp what Diana meant. Besides it was not important: the only thing that mattered was that she had got the job.

'Now, Tanya, my mother is not always clean,' Diana continued. 'Sometimes she does not want to take a bath.' She stood up, 'At night she uses a bucket. But she does not remember that we women must do it like this.' She performed the proper position, and then, having straightened her lanky legs, she said, 'She does it like that. So sometimes her nightgown is dirty and so is the floor.'

This time Tanya was really frightened. The bucket itself was odd in a country where almost every bedroom had its own bathroom. But even more alarming and incomprehensible was the purpose of the over realistic scene acted out now by the American woman.

Diana sat down. 'One has to encourage my mother when she doesn't want to have a bath,' she said, 'to fill the tub with water without asking her.' She gave Tanya an attentive look again. 'She will love you one minute and hate you the next. Aren't you afraid you will go mad yourself? It's like an infection. You look nervous.'

'That's because I have been looking for a job for six weeks,' Tanya replied briskly, anxious that she might lose the last chance of getting one. She smiled. 'I think I would have gone mad a long time ago if I had had any inclination to.'

Diana glanced at her wrist watch. 'Sometimes my mother

gets excited – she takes a taxi and runs away. Then you must take another taxi and follow her.’

Tanya remembered that Bademan had mentioned it during their telephone conversation. She had been slightly frightened at that moment, but now other aspects of Mrs Bademan’s disease seemed more worrying. Nevertheless, the comforting thought that Diana had not yet dismissed her was stronger than her anxiety about her future duties.

Diana looked at her watch again. ‘I think we should go if you are to take the train at five. I will take you to Grand Central. We can walk, it’s not far from here.’ She glanced at Tanya’s fashionable leather shoes, ‘You have other shoes, don’t you? These ones are not for walking, they don’t look comfortable.’

Tanya obediently took out the trainers from her big handbag. She wondered how Diana could know about them, and moreover, why she herself was carrying out the woman’s suggestion. She was angry that she had allowed herself to be taken by surprise; after all the shoes did not pinch, and she was changing them unnecessarily.

In the street the traffic was still at its peak. They walked silently for a while, then Diana said thoughtfully, ‘There is also the problem of country: Mother should live in England. My sister and brothers live there; you know, my mother had four of us. But my stepfather doesn’t want to leave. He wouldn’t feel right there, he is an American boy.’

Tanya smiled; she was slightly amused with the expression in reference to the paunchy old man.

Diana kept silent for a few seconds, then glanced at Tanya out of the corners of her eyes. ‘Mother is strange,’ she said. ‘Once a friend of mine used the word boyfriend in her presence. My mother said: “Disgusting.” But she herself lived an extremely bohemian life.’

Tanya thought that most old women had their eccentricities; there was no point in paying much attention to them.

They crossed the Avenue they had been walking along and turned into a street. The PanAm Building rose from behind the lower skyscrapers. Diana took up the conversation again.

'I am a bad daughter. I should take care of my mother; I'm not married.'

'Was she a good mother?' Tanya asked.

Diana said nothing, she just twisted her straight, well-shaped nose.

'I think one is not as much responsible for one's parents as for one's children,' Tanya said, 'Our parents are the ones who brought us into the world, not we them.'

But apparently being occupied with her own thoughts, Diana seemed not to hear this statement. The women again walked in silence.

They stopped in front of the western facade of Grand Central Station. From the corner where they were standing Tanya could see, between the two rows of big buildings on both sides of the street, the sun setting beyond the invisible Hudson River. The last reddish beams of the day illuminated Diana's face. Tanya noticed that the woman's eyes were not dark brown, but greenish-golden, just like her son's. Yet his were warm and attentive, while Diana's looked absent, alien, perhaps mad. They stared at Tanya as if they had never seen her before, as though there had been no long conversation between the two women.

end of this sample