

'RIDICULOUS'

An extract from the radio play by Phil Tong

SCENE 1

SFX 1 : WE HEAR THE ENDLESS DRIPPING OF WATER; THE SOUND ECHOING IN AN EMPTY ROOM. THE VOICES BLEED INTO THIS.

POPRISHCHIN

I haven't the strength anymore.

MAGGIE
When memory disappears...

POPRISHCHIN (CONT'D)
What can I offer them?

MAGGIE (CONT'D)
Something more than memory gets lost.

POPRISHCHIN (CONT'D)
I have nothing left.

MAGGIE (CONT'D)
This is how the world begins to unravel. And caregivers can, unwittingly, become part of that chaos.

SFX 2 : THE SOUND OF DRIPPING WATER IS TRANSFORMED INTO THE TOLLING OF A SINGLE BELL.

STEPHEN

Ask not for whom the bell tolls. It tolls for thee.

SCENE 2

SFX 3 : THE SOUND OF THE BELL IS LOST IN THE ROUSING SOUND OF CRYSTAL PALACE FOOTBALL FANS SINGING 'GLAD ALL OVER' BY THE DAVE CLARK FIVE

FOOTBALL FANS

(singing) You say that you love me (Say you love me) / All of the time (All of the time) / You say that you need me (Say you need me) / You'll always be mine (Always be mine) / And I'm feelin' (clap x2) Glad All Over, yes I'm (clap x2) Glad All Over / Baby I'm (clap x2) Glad All Over / So glad you're mine.

FADES INTO

SFX 4: THE SOUND OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS ARRIVING IN A LARGE LECTURE HALL. THE STUDENTS SETTLE AS THE LECTURE BEGINS.

STEPHEN

Good afternoon everyone and welcome to Unit One of this, the first module in this course, an Introduction to Russian Literature. If I may, I'd like to begin with a quote... "A strange occurrence has taken place today.

**SFX 5: THE SOUND OF A MOSCOW STREET
SCENE INCLUDING THE SOUND OF HORSES'
HOoves ON COBBLESTONES.**

SCENE 3**SOPHIE**

Excuse me?

STEPHEN

Yes?

SOPHIE

I don't mean to interrupt, Sir, but I wondered if you could help me?

STEPHEN

Of course. But please, call me Stephen.

SOPHIE

Sorry. This is all a bit new to me.

STEPHEN

I doubt Russian Literature has been part of the daily diet for many sat here in the lecture hall today

SOPHIE

I just wondered if there was a reading list? Something I could look at before the next session.

STEPHEN

Full marks for application. I didn't catch your name.

SOPHIE

Sophie.

STEPHEN

Well... Welcome to Russian Literature, Sophie.

SCENE 4

SFX 6: THE ROAR OF A HOWLING WIND

MIXED WITH A CONCATENATION OF THE
FOLLOWING VOICES AND PHRASES.

POPRISHCHIN

Something more than memory is lost.

SOPHIE

The world is unravelling.

STEPHEN

I'm lost.

MAGGIE

Diagnosis is not a lament.

POPRISHCHIN

Everything is lost!

SOPHIE

Skewed, out of whack.

STEPHEN

Lucidity is seductive. But when it's gone...

POPRISHCHIN (CONT'D)

When it's gone, what's left?

STEPHEN (CONT'D)

Repeat!

POPRISHCHIN

Repeat!

MAGGIE

Repeat. Repetition becomes a refuge.

SOPHIE

A safe place.

STEPHEN

A place of safety.

**SFX 7: THE SOUND OF A FOOTBALL CROWD
CHANTING**

FOOTBALL FANS

(chant and repeat) You don't know what you're doing! You don't know what you're doing!

FADES INTO

SCENE 5

**SFX 8: THE SOUND OF A SHARP KNIFE
CUTTING THE NIBS OF QUILL PENS ON A
WOODEN DESK.**

FADES INTO

SFX 9: A RETURN TO THE AMBIENT SOUND OF

STUDENTS SETTLING DOWN IN A LECTURE
THEATRE

STEPHEN

‘A strange occurrence has taken place today.’ These are the opening words of ‘Diary of a Madman’, by Nikolai Vasilyevitch Gogol, a short story published in 1835. So why Gogol, I hear you ask? What is his significance in an understanding of Russian Literature? Well... for many critics, he’s seen as the first Russian realist. His biting satire, comic realism, and descriptions of Russian provincial life can be said to have influenced many of those masters of Russian Literature who would come later: Tolstoy. Turgenev. Dostoyevsky.

SCENE 6

SFX 10: THE SOUND OF A COCK CROWING.

POPRISHCHIN

October 3rd. I didn’t want to go into work today, perhaps that was why I was late. The department chief is in the habit of saying to me, ‘Is there something wrong with you Poprishchin? Is there something wrong with your head?’

SCENE 7

SFX 11: THE SOUND OF A KETTLE COMING TO
THE BOIL AND A POT OF TEA BEING MADE
WHILE STEPHEN SPEAKS

STEPHEN

I feel ridiculous. In fact, that’s how I feel most of the time these days. And nobody ever tells you what it’s going to be like. You just stumble across it. Wake up one morning and there it is - your life. Suddenly, you find out that’s how most people regard you.. Not that they say it. Not straight out. Not to your face. People who once listened, now tell me things; feel the need to explain things to me. It’s odd. And if I say anything, they just think I’m being difficult. I’m not. I’m just trying to work out why.

For instance, there’s a shop I go into on the High Street. And there’s a fella in there, half my age, says, “What can I do for you, young man?” Why does he feel the need to say that to me? Does he think it makes me feel better? It doesn’t. So why does he do it? Do you want to know what I think? I think he does it because he can. In fact, what he’s saying to me is, ‘I’m in charge here, so don’t mess with me, old man.’

It’s all about testosterone, you see. It’s like all those nature programmes on the TV. David Attenborough and whatnot. The old bull taken down by the young bucks and driven out of the herd. That’s what it feels like; like I’m being driven out of the herd. So how come David Attenborough gets away with it?

(MORE)

STEPHEN (CONT'D)

He gets wheeled out on TV every so often, to celebrate this or that, and nobody ever says to him, "David, you're dribbling."

MAGGIE

Is that what people say to you?

STEPHEN

I don't dribble.

SCENE 8

SFX 12: THE SOUND OF THUNDER AND A
HEAVY RAINSTORM. THE SOUND ECHOES AS IF
IN AN EMPTY ROOM.

THE SOUND FADES

SOPHIE

Hi.

STEPHEN

Hello again.

SOPHIE

Thanks for the reading list.

STEPHEN

I hope it was helpful.

SOPHIE

It was. A massive help. Thank you.

STEPHEN

Good.

SOPHIE

I enjoyed today's session.

STEPHEN

Thanks.

SOPHIE

I'll see you around.

STEPHEN

Yes. I expect so.

SCENE 9

SFX 13: A HORSE DRAWN CARRIAGE PROCEEDS DOWN A COBBLED STREET AND DRAWS TO A STOP. WE HEAR THE CARRIAGE DOOR OPEN.

FADE TO

SFX 14: THE AIR IS SUDDENLY FULL OF THE SOUND OF FLAPPING WINGS; A MULTIPLE FLOCK OF BIRDS TAKING FLIGHT INTO THE AIR.

POPRISHCHIN

Out walking I chanced upon the Director's carriage drawn up outside a shop. That can't be the Director I said to myself; he has no place in a shop like that. It must be his daughter. A lackey opened the door as I pressed myself close in to the wall so as not to be seen. It was just as I expected. She fluttered out, right there in front of me and floated into the shop. What are the chances we should meet like that? But now, as a consequence... I am lost. Totally lost.

SCENE 10

SFX 15: THE SOUND OF A MASSIVE CAR CRASH; THE AIR IS FULL OF THE SCREECH OF TYRES AND THE SOUND OF BENDED AND TWISTED METAL.

STEPHEN

(whispers) Life's a car-crash. However cautious you try to be, you're always waiting for it to happen. So I try to be careful. Very careful. Certainly these days. I don't take any chances. Not now. Not anymore.

(speaking normally) I understand the law of averages will kick in one day and send me spinning. Probably something quite unexpected. That's how it happens. Isn't it? Or so I'm led to believe. So I'm on my guard. Always alert.

But, that's not what this is. Is it? I'm quite well aware what's going on here. They think I don't know, but I do. They've contrived together somehow to put me in a place where I begin to think that this is the end; that I'm sitting, bloodied and bruised amongst the wreckage. Then they can rally round to rescue me. Make themselves feel better about everything. And I'm supposed to be grateful; compliant. The trouble is - I'm being done over. Aren't I? It's a scam.

SCENE 11**STEPHEN**

Is that why you're here? Because whatever it is they're saying, it's not true.

MAGGIE

No one's said anything, Stephen.

STEPHEN

So why are you here?

MAGGIE

I'm just here to listen.

STEPHEN

So you just appeared out of nowhere, for no reason. Is that it? It makes no sense. None of it. None at all. It defies all logic. All reason.

MAGGIE

I'm just doing my job, Stephen.

STEPHEN

Well you've heard all you're going to hear from me, so you can piss off now!

MAGGIE

You were making me a cup of tea.

STEPHEN

Oh, yes. And now you think I've forgotten what I'm supposed to be doing.

MAGGIE

I don't think anything of the sort, Stephen.

STEPHEN

So go on then, why are you here?

MAGGIE

You had a fall, Stephen.

SCENE 12

THE DIRECTOR'S DAUGHTER THROUGHOUT THE PIECE SHOULD BE VOICED BY THE SAME ACTRESS WHO PLAYS SOPHIE

SFX 16: OUTSIDE IN THE STREET (MOSCOW 1835) A DOG BEGINS TO BARK.

SFX 17: WE HEAR THE SHOP DOOR OPEN AND A BELL TINKLES AS THE DIRECTOR'S DAUGHTER EMERGES BACK ONTO THE STREET TO TALK TO HER DOG WHO SHE HAS LEFT OUTSIDE THE SHOP,

THE DIRECTOR'S DAUGHTER

Meggy! There's a good girl.

SFX 18: THE DOG BARKS A GREETING FOR HER MISTRESS.

THE DIRECTOR'S DAUGHTER (CONT'D)

Now I want you to be good girl and wait quietly for me here. Can you do that? There's a beautiful dress in the shop that I just have to try on. Is that OK? I won't be long poppet. Kiss, kiss!

SFX 19: THE SHOP DOOR OPENS ONCE MORE AS THE DIRECTOR'S DAUGHTER GOES BACK INTO THE SHOP. WE HEAR THE BELL TINKLE AND THE DOOR CLOSE BEHIND HER.

POPRISHCHIN

I watched as she petted the dog and then turned back into the shop. I was pleased she hadn't seen me because I was upset. The fashion nowadays is to wear cloaks with a long collar, mine has a short double collar and of, clearly, inferior quality. Why would I think a young woman like that would look twice at me? I watched her slip back inside and then, to my astonishment, I witnessed something quite remarkable. Meggy, now patiently waiting for her mistress by the shop doorway struck up a conversation with two other dogs as they passed by. And I was able to discern every word they had to say. It was...extraordinary.