

## Why Does Everything

By Rafael Spregelburd

Translated from the Spanish by Samuel Buggeln and Ariel Gurevich

In addition to being a prolific playwright, Rafael Spregelburd is one of Latin America's most prolific translators of English-language plays into Spanish. In developing this translation, Ariel and I were glad for several line-by-line working sessions with him. In these sessions Spregelburd also provided a significant amount of information—often describing a staging moment or clarifying a dramatic beat—that doesn't appear in the original published version of the play. Additionally, after the original text was published, Spregelburd performed in the multi-year Buenos Aires run of the play, during which time a number of textual changes evolved. At the playwright's suggestion, therefore, this version adds a number of stage directions and incorporates some line changes that do not appear in the published Spanish text.

At the playwright's suggestion, some character names have been changed to ones that have a more appropriate connotation to an English-speaking audience.

The original Spanish title is *Todo*, or simply, *Everything*. In Spanish this "Todo" is clearly echoed by the "todo" in the titles of the three parts ("¿Por qué todo Estado deviene burocracia?" "¿Por qué todo arte deviene negocio?" and "¿Por qué toda religión deviene superstición?"). These resonances are much less clear in English, notwithstanding the "every" in "Why does every state become a bureaucracy?" For the English version we agreed to adjust the title both to make this relationship clearer and simply because in English *Why Does Everything* is a better title.

In the introduction to the published Spanish text, Spregelburd describes *Todo's* characters as using "fallacious reasoning, drunk on sophistic velocity and ridiculous seriousness." While I hope most readers will recognize this strategy on the page, I reproduce the note here as insurance that these moments of illogic and inappropriate (and even fake) words are not mistaken for mistranslation.

In perhaps a related vein, when directing this play in other countries, Spregelburd reports finding that casts have at first had difficulties grasping what he calls the "intermittence" or "flickering" rhythm of, if you will, the play's reality principle. He stresses that productions should not strive to resolve questions such as: in Act I, the crossing wires between the story being told and the "meta-story" of the mime being inconsistently used to tell it; in Act II the truth about Dai Chi; and in Act III the identity of the Visitor. On the contrary Spregelburd urges that productions stress the unresolvability of these questions, and not shy away from incompatible and/or logically contradictory choices.

Finally, a note about Buenos Aires theatre in general: Porteño theatre makers (and citizens in general) are unafraid of very fast talking and a lot of chaotic overlap. Many lines can be spoken simultaneously. My frequent experience of watching an Argentine play I've read in advance is of the text coming at me as if out of a fire hose. Spregelburd's company is particularly known for this trait. The running time of *Todo* in Buenos Aires was two hours.

**Nominee, María Guerrero Prize**  
Best National Author: Rafael Spregelburd

**Nominee, Florencio Sánchez Prize**  
Best Director: Rafael Spregelburd

**Nominee, Florencio Sánchez Prize**  
Best Supporting Actress: Andrea Garrote

**Quim Masó Prize**  
for the Catalan production

**Projectes Escènics de L'Ajuntament de Palma de Mallorca Prize**  
for the Islas Baleares production

A play commissioned for the **Schaubühne Theatre**, Berlin, for the festival

**digging deep and getting dirty**

**International Authors' Festival on Identity and History**

**TODO – a production of El Patrón Vázquez (Buenos Aires)**  
and **Schaubühne am Lehninger Platz (Berlin)**.

**TODO is part of the project “60 Years of Germany. Approximating an uncomfortable identity” – with the support of Kulturstiftung des Bundes.**

**Première as a work in progress March 19, 2009 in the FIND Festival, Schaubühne Theatre, Berlin**

Cast:  
Belén / Dai Chi and Narrator (II) / Celina  
Nelly / Diana  
Guillermo / Del Mónico / Doctor Carpio  
Client and Narrator (I) / Fano / Ramiro  
Omar / The visitor and Voice of the visitor (III)

Andrea Garrote  
Mónica Raiola  
Pablo Seijo  
Rafael Spregelburd  
Alberto Suárez

Music: Zypec  
German Translation: Sonja and Patrick Wengenroth (Suhkamp Verlag)  
German Narrators: Urs Jucker, Judith Rosmar, Thomas Bading  
Video: Alejo Varisto, Juan Schnitman, Agustín Mendilaharsu  
Video postproduction: Alejo Varisto  
Scenery and lights: Santiago Badillo  
Assistant director: Lalo Rotavería  
Photography: Nicolás Levin, Heiko Schäfer  
Photography for videos: Dario Feal, Cecilia Szalkowicz  
Producer: Corina Cruciani  
Director: Rafael Spregelburd

**Première in Spanish October 15, 2010 at the Beckett Theatre, Buenos Aires.**

With the support of INT and the Ministry of Culture of Buenos Aires<sup>1</sup>

Cast:  
Belén / Dai Chi and Narrator (II) / Celina  
Nelly / Diana  
Guillermo / Del Mónico / Doctor Carpio  
Client and Narrator (I) / Fano / Ramiro  
Omar / The visitor and Voice of the visitor (III)

Andrea Garrote  
Mónica Raiola  
Pablo Seijo /  
Mariano Sayavedra<sup>2</sup>  
Rafael Spregelburd  
Alberto Suárez

Music: Zypec  
Video: Alejo Varisto, Juan Schnitman, Agustín Mendilaharsu  
Video postproduction: Alejo Varisto  
Light and scenery: Santiago Badillo  
Costumes: Julieta Álvarez  
Assistant director: Ignacio Bozzolo  
Photography: Nicolás Levin, Blu Mambor  
Photography for videos: Dario Feal, Cecilia Szalkowicz  
Program design: Santiago Badillo, Alejo Varisto, Isol  
Production: Corina Cruciani  
Director: Rafael Spregelburd

**Première in German on January 21, 2010 in the Insel Theatre at the Badisches Staatstheater in Karlsruhe, Germany**

Cast:  
Nelly / Diana  
Belén / Dai Chi and Narrator (II) / Celina  
Client and Narrator (I) / Fano / Ramiro  
Omar / The visitor and Voice of the visitor (III)  
Guillermo / Del Mónico / Doctor Carpio

Anne-Kathrin Bartholomäus  
Barbara Behrendt  
Olaf Becker  
Thomas Birnstiel  
André Wagner

German Translation: Sonja and Patrick Wengenroth (Suhkamp Verlag)  
Music: Zypec  
Lights and Space: Steven Koop  
Costumes: Ursina Zürcher  
Video: Steven Koop, Gunter Essig, Johannes Kulz  
Sound: Johannes Kulz  
Dramaturg: Bettina Weiler  
Assistant Director: Marlene Holenda  
Assistant Sets: Bärbel Kober  
Assistant Costumes: Mara Fiek  
Video photos and art: Steven Koop  
Prompter: Stefanie Rademacher  
Photography: Jochen Klenk  
Program illustration: Isol  
Director: Rafael Spregelburd

**Première in Catalan December 10, 2010 at the Theatre La Planeta, Girona, during the Festival de Tardor de Catalunya (Temporada Alta).**

With the support of the Quim Masó Prize, Institut de les Indústries Culturals, Teatre Principal de Palma, Institut Ramon Llull, Premi Projectes Escènics de L'Ajuntament de Palma de Mallorca, Casal Català de Buenos Aires and Ajuntament de Girona

Cast:  
Belén / Dai Chi and Narrator (II) / Celina  
Nelly / Diana  
Guillermo / Del Mónico / Doctor Carpio  
Client and Narrator (I) / Fano / Ramiro  
Omar / The visitor and Voice of the visitor (III)

Meritxell Yanes Font  
Cristina Cervià  
David Planas  
Albert Prat  
Toni Gomila

Catalán translation: Marc Rosich  
Music: Zypec  
Video: Alejo Varisto, Juan Schnitman, Agustín Mendilaharsu  
Video postproduction: Alejo Varisto  
Lights: August Viladomat  
Scenery: Ricard Prat  
Costumes: Judith Torres  
Assistant director: Francisco Baglietto  
Video photography: Dario Feal, Cecilia Szalkowicz  
Production: El Canal (Centre d'Arts Escèniques Salt/Girona), Mentidera Teatre and Ferro Productions  
Direction: Rafael Spregelburd

<sup>1</sup> Second season, from March 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Replacing Pablo Seijo from April to June 2011.

## **Dramatis Personae:**

(when changed for this version, original names appear in parentheses)

### **Why does every state become a bureaucracy?: Part 1. [BUREAUCRACY]**

Voice of the Narrator  
Nelly  
Isabella (Belén)  
Óscar (Omar)  
Guillermo  
Client

### **Why does every work of art become business?: Part 2. [BUSINESS]**

Voice of another Narrator  
Nelly  
Del Mónico  
Steeler (Fano)  
Dai Chi  
Óscar (Omar)

### **Why does every religion become superstition?: Part 3. [SUPERSTITION]**

Voice of the visitor  
Ramiro  
Diana  
The visitor  
Celina  
Doctor Carpio

The play may be performed with a variety of cast sizes and doubling schemes. The productions to date, which Spregelburd has directed, have used the following setup, for five actors:

Actor 1: Isabella / Dai Chi and Narrator (Act II) / Celina

Actor 2: Nelly / Diana

Actor 3: Guillermo / Del Monico / Doctor Carpio

Actor 4: Client and Narrator (Act I) / Steeler / Ramiro

Actor 5: Óscar / The visitor and Voice of the visitor (Act III)

## Why does every state become a bureaucracy?

### Part 1. [BUREAUCRACY]

*As the onstage situations tell these stories, an unseen Narrator will simultaneously provide another story, which completes, corrects or complicates what we see. In each act the Narrator will have a different relationship to the world on the stage.*

*Part 1: A government office. Almost no scenic elements. This is very important. With the exception of Isabella and Óscar's desks and the stamp on Isabella's desk, none of the objects described appear in reality. The actors hold invisible folders and carry nonexistent cups: think that the props have not yet arrived and the cast has been ordered to go on without them, in a semi-improvised situation. This creates a great deal of confusion around the identities of things, made worse by the fact that the actors have different levels of mime skill (none is extremely good) and different responses to the situation. Guillermo takes the task very seriously and sometimes uses invisible items to challenge and/or punish the other characters; Isabella is annoyed and refuses to handle anything unless she absolutely has to, and Nelly and Óscar muddle by as best they can in their different ways. This meta-theatre story overlaps densely with the literal story.*

*At rise, only Isabella (30s) is onstage. She looks attentively at the rubber stamp attached to the leg of her desk. She tries to stamp something on Óscar's desk, but since the cord attaching the stamp is short, this is impossible. She spends some time at this before giving up.*

**Narrator:** Here's what we're going to do. I'll tell you what I know, you'll see what you see. It's not a big story to tell, barely a fable. But a fable with a moral, like Aesop but no animals. Why does every state become a bureaucracy? Perhaps the offices are staffed with people whose activities are routinized. Boring. And who don't tend to think of their work spaces as being very important or worth keeping up. (*Óscar (60ish) enters*) That's Óscar. This is his office. Óscar enjoys explaining the nature of the job to newer colleagues. Óscar thinks of those Greek gods whose duties are very specific, and very minor. But very necessary.

*Meanwhile, Óscar explains to Isabella how to solve the peculiar problem. Instead of bringing the stamp to the other desk, he brings the paper to the stamp. Isabella is reserving judgment.*

*Nelly (50ish) enters. She goes to Isabella with a document that, in line with the way things seem to be happening, doesn't exist.*

**Nelly:** Is this it?

**Isabella:** No.

*Nelly shows it to Óscar. Óscar can't really tell what it is.*

**Óscar:** So... You have... that's from...?

**Nelly:** Well I had it, but now...

*Nelly leaves, crossing paths with Guillermo (40s), apparently carrying something very heavy.*

**Isabella:** Hey, hey, hey, hey. You're chucking *that* too?

**Guillermo:** I had to get like twenty vaccines.

**Óscar:** But is *that* still useful?

**Guillermo:** *This* is going out on the street. Period.

*Guillermo leaves to dispose of the artifact on the street. Isabella silently shakes her head. She has a number of opinions about that, but decides not to say anything. For now.*

**Narrator:** This office has taken the best years of my life. Óscar thinks that sometimes.

**Isabella:** Óscar, I'm starting to feel like there are no rules around here.

**Óscar:** No... Listen, Isabella, sweetheart: you don't want to do your whole job in one minute.

**Isabella:** Ah. In fact I was about to ask if you knew more or less what exactly is my j...

**Óscar:** No! That's the worst thing you can ask. I know it might seem like the only thing you do is stamp that little stamp. But that little stamp greases the whole conveyor belt. Around here you have to make yourself indispensable.

**Isabella:** How?

**Óscar:** Listen. Sometimes I hide a document. I put it somewhere secret, and I start to gauge the effects. When I see everyone's desperate, I pull the document from its stash, sign it and get the belt running again. I make myself indispensable, you understand?

**Narrator:** He doesn't say this with pride, but like a sort of minor god, a god who's accustomed to having limited gifts.

**Nelly:** *(Entering with a new document, as invisible as everything else.)* Is this it...?

**Isabella:** Aiiiiiaaaaa, you aren't looking for it, it's obvious! In your attitude!

**Nelly:** I am looking for it. It's just there are so many things...

**Isabella:** I just gave it to you yesterday. So go. Look for it. And find it!

**Nelly:** And *find it*, she says! This isn't my responsibility, darling. I'm doing the best I can.

**Narrator:** Óscar wouldn't compare himself to Kronos or Poseidon, the masters of Time and the Oceans; he loves to think of himself as one of the deities poets tend to ignore. His favorites are almost always domestic goddesses—say Juno's washerwoman or Apollo's manicurist. Óscar enjoys playing in the minor leagues of the cosmogonical order. In his dreams, he imagines himself doing delicate, feminine jobs; sometimes like timid Heritrode, poorly attired in foam, bringer of the rapturous inspirations of youth. Or the unrenowned Apedias, smelling

*(Exits.)*

**Isabella:** “The best you can” would have been to not lose it. Did she call me “darling”? This is very surprising. What’s the point of asking people for things if they don’t take the responsibility to do them?

of absinthe, a minor servant in the temple of Hera, in charge of the hygiene of childbirth.

*Guillermo comes back in from the street.*

**Guillermo:** Done, I got rid of it.

**Isabella:** How’d that go?

**Guillermo:** Lean out the window and take a look. Take a look.

**Isabella:** *(Wants to go to the window. She picks up the stamp, but the cord prevents her from moving more than a meter from her desk.)* I can’t right now. What if [Óscar came and]... *(She indicates the stamp her life depends on.)*

**Guillermo:** It’s like a party out there.

Like five or six kids.

You throw something out, someone’s gonna pick it up.

I’mna go sort out those filing cabinets in the hall.

*Guillermo exits.*

**Narrator:** On his best days, Óscar is Hermes Trismegistus, Mercury: the messenger of the gods, the keeper of the stamp and the wax to conceal what should be illegible to curious eyes. Because, Óscar thinks, certain things should work without being seen. When some things are too visible, they make understanding blind.

**Nelly:** *(Entering. About Guillermo.)* He’s taking out an insane pile of things. I don’t know if it’s going to be as useful to those folks as he thinks. Lot of enthusiasm, that guy. *(To Isabella, breezily.)* Here it is, Vicki had it with the things she was bringing to Deposits. *(Isabella declines it, offended. To Óscar.)* I already told him he should slow down. And say “excuse me” to people, they’re looking at him like he’s stealing useful stuff...

*Nelly’s gesture has left her hands in a position that seems to indicate she’s holding something.*

**Óscar:** *(About Nelly’s purported item.)* And is this useful?

**Nelly:** Oh, um... I don’t think so. *(“It” dissolves.)*

**Óscar:** So OK.

**Nelly:** I'm going to go back and help him find things to throw out. Take it, grab it, Isabella, or you're going to lose it a second time.

**Isabella:** That's not it.

**Nelly:** It's identical.

**Isabella:** But it's not it. And you're putting me in a pretty unfrangible situation.

**Nelly:** OK well I wouldn't go that far. Vicky already knows you lost it. So fine. Poor Guillermo, his hand looks terrible.

**Óscar:** Well... Something bit him.

**Isabella:** Back in there?

**Nelly:** It could have happened to anyone.

**Óscar:** Was it a....

**Isabella:** Something.

**Nelly:** It had to be a... terrible thing.

*Guillermo comes back through, carrying something filthy, a pile of papers or old zip code directories.*

**Guillermo:** I'm throwing this out, it's practically ashes.

**Óscar:** You found that back... there?

**Isabella:** Back... where you...

**Guillermo:** The heck d'you think?

*Guillermo goes out to the street to throw them out. Isabella, Nelly and Óscar watch him in silence.*

**Nelly:** I have to say he took it pretty well.

**Isabella:** It must be horrible, you're working, not expecting a thing, and suddenly *bam!*

**Narrator:** Yesterday, something bit Guillermo.

**Isabella:** Something... bit him...

**Narrator:** Óscar doesn't understand.

**Óscar:** I don't understand. I think about it and think about it but I do not understand.

**Isabella:** He got bitten. Think about it all you want. But he got bitten.

**Nelly:** By what?

**Isabella:** Something.

**Óscar:** It was a... it's a nightmare.

*Guillermo enters holding the hand of a little friend and introduces him to everybody. The friend is invisible. The other actors are outraged. Invisible objects are one thing, but people?*

**Guillermo:** These are the people I work with. Say hi! Nelly, Óscar.

**Nelly:** Hi there!

**Guillermo:** Come here, I'll get you something to drink.

*The boy tries to touch the sacrosanct rubber stamp.*

**Guillermo:** Don't touch that. This is Isabella.

**Isabella:** Don't touch that, take this. *(Gets object X from the desk and offers it to him.)* Take it.

**Guillermo:** Did he take it?

**Isabella:** Take it.

*An uncomfortable silence. Guillermo leaves, holding the boy's hand.*

*More silence.*

**Isabella:** He brought in... a kid... from the street?

**Óscar:** Matías!

**Nelly:** That's not Mateo.

**Óscar:** What's Matías' name?

**Isabella:** Guillermo.

**Nelly:** He'll answer to either.

*Guillermo comes back in.*

**Óscar:** Matías, you just left to throw something out and when you came back, you brought a street kid?

**Guillermo:** I was throwing stuff out and I told him, "come here, give me a hand." Why?

**Isabella:** He's so little, very very little.

**Óscar:** Don't do it again. It's been a heck of a day.

**Guillermo:** Think so? Yesterday was more of a heck of a day, wasn't it? *(General silence.)* Wasn't it?

**Narrator:** (*As Óscar solemnly rises to his feet to give a short speech*) Now it's up to Óscar, and this is when his favorite miserable gods always arrive bearing inspiration. They dictate to him with great cleverness, they perform dramatic gestures for him; the wheat sprouts forth, the flies are decimated.

**Óscar:** Don't go back there alone, Matías. (*And he sits back down.*)

**Guillermo:** I'm *doing it* all alone. (*To Isabella.*) Alone. (*To everyone.*) Not one guy here, not a single random person, thought this through. Look. This is the Registrar's office, right? The government. Sixty or seventy people come here a day, and those people leave stuff. Flat things, and because they're flat it doesn't seem like it, but those things pile up. After six hours you have a stack. Now it's not flat anymore, now it has volume. Nobody ever calculated how long before all those square meters—cubic!—were gonna overflow? When do records expire?

**Nelly:** Every four...

**Óscar:** Three...

**Isabella:** Ten...

**Guillermo:** Five years? Nobody ever figured out a system for throwing out the stuff that's more than five years old?

**Óscar:** (*Guessing where he's going with this.*) Oh please not the urinals!

**Guillermo:** It's true, Óscar!

**Isabella:** What about the urinals?

**Guillermo:** This is a building, right? Therefore somebody designed it, right? Reflect: an architect, or some functionary, got told: put a bathroom on every floor for the people who work here. Right? Somebody had the time, got the request, and felt the dedication to think about that for at least five minutes.

**Isabella:** So?

**Guillermo:** So, what. What would you say is the average number of urinals on each floor?

**Isabella:** I dunno.

**Guillermo:** Say a number.

**Isabella:** Two.

**Guillermo:** *Seven.*

**Narrator:** This is Guillermo.

**Guillermo:** Seven urinals per floor.

**Narrator:** And the urinals issue is complicated.

**Guillermo:** In case you hadn't noticed, almost all the staff here is female. Want to explain to me why on every floor we have a bathroom with *seven* urinals? A building created so that 70 men can piss at the same time, an insane space designed for an absurdity, and off to the side an entire hallway packed with cabinets bursting at the seams because there is not enough physical space to accumulate so many things, where when you stick your hand in you can't be sure you'll pull it back out in one piece. What asshole engineer calculated that this is the way it had to be?

**Nelly:** *(Brief pause.)* What happened yesterday, Chris?

**Guillermo:** Now you want to talk to me? After you all sent me to that shitty hospital alone, now you want to talk to me about yesterday?

**Nelly:** Well, we were scared.

**Guillermo:** I was more scared. And more alone.

**Óscar:** You went alone?

**Guillermo:** Of course, nobody here believed me! I had to bring back a certificate from the hospital before they'd say "Ew, it's true, he got bit!"

**Óscar:** They gave you a certificate?

**Guillermo:** Look. *(He pulls an imaginary paper from his pocket and gives it to him. Óscar doesn't know how to take it, holds it backwards, Guillermo turns it over.)*

**Óscar:** I didn't know they gave these things out. And yes... it says right here he... he got bitten... Did you ask for this, or did they just give it to you?

**Guillermo:** And they treated me so *fast* my head was spinning.

**Nelly:** There wasn't anyone there before you?

**Guillermo:** How do I know! I arrived and went right in. I didn't even have to wait. Can you believe it?

**Óscar:** Bad service?

**Guillermo:** *Fast* service.

**All** [disapproving]: Ahhhhh.

**Óscar:** What a shame.

**Isabella:** Totally, and now if it weren't for that paper you'd feel like you hadn't even been there.

**Nelly:** Did you tell them something bit you?

**Guillermo:** Yeah I told them, but I didn't need to, they knew as soon as they looked at my hand. They're doctors, Nelly, not short-order cooks.

**Óscar:** Did they give you something?

**Guillermo:** Like twenty vaccines. OK, enough. You wanted to talk? They gave me like twenty vaccines. You want to keep talking? OK: they got to give me twenty more vaccines, every single one on a schedule. On top of that, it's all preventative, they don't cure anything. And I've got no witnesses to it because I went alone.

**Óscar:** Look, Matías...

**Guillermo:** Guillermo.

**Óscar:** I'm sorry. Guillermo. I mix you up with...

**Guillermo:** Yes I know.

**Óscar:** Have you thought about what you're going to do? Because—whatever you decide—we will support you one hundred percent.

*Everyone stands up in a ritual gesture of solidarity. Guillermo is moved.*

**Guillermo:** No. I haven't thought about what I'm going to do. Still haven't thought about it. The wound is still fresh, Óscar. I need to clear my head a little.

**Nelly:** What do you have to do going forward?

**Guillermo:** More vaccinations! That don't cure you! If I'm already infected, great, screwed, a thousand needles in the ass for nothing!

**Nelly:** Do you need to take time off? Did you show Vicki your certificate? Are you going to keep throwing things out?

**Guillermo:** If I don't, who will? Do I have to wait for someone else to get bitten before I get a tiny bit of support? Those people don't even look at me. Their eyes are glued to their monitors. I'm going to keep throwing stuff out until we can see each other's faces. White walls. Clear hallways. That's all I ask. And we'll see if I keep working or if I take some time off. Vicki can suck an egg.

**Nelly:** No, no, no, I meant about your hand...

**Guillermo:** Ah. No, not one day. They told me not to get myself bitten again.

**Óscar:** Incompetents.

**Guillermo:** Not to *get myself bitten* again. I'm going to go throw more stuff away.

*Exits up to find things to toss.*

**Nelly:** Óscar, you're going to have to draw a thick line around this situation:

*Guillermo comes back through carrying something very heavy. He brings it towards the street.*

**Nelly:** ...if he wants to throw things out go ahead, but it's not appropriate to bring street kids into the office. Poor things.

**Narrator:** Nelly doesn't trust Óscar. At one point they were in a kind of relationship. Pfff, relationship. Nelly had just gotten a divorce, and her first goal was for her ex-husband Ricardo to believe that her social life, and why not her sex life, had remained active notwithstanding the breakup. So Nelly would find any excuse to invite Óscar to her house.

*A client appears (40s). A citizen who has to take care of some kind of paperwork. Later we'll find out this is Ramiro, but for now it doesn't matter. He waits to be noticed.*

**Nelly:** Óscar...

*The client shows them a form. Nelly indicates that he should see Isabella.*

**Isabella:** *(To Nelly, re Guillermo)* OK, but eventually it's gonna get out of hand, and before you know it it's like Lydia. *(To the Client.)* I'll be with you in just a sec.

**Nelly:** What happened to Lydia?

**Isabella:** Apparently there was a fire in Lydia's office.

**Nelly:** Lydia's office? That's terrible.

**Isabella:** It all burned.

**Nelly:** Again?

**Isabella:** Apparently the office is a total loss, they have to relocate her. *(Off the paper the client gave her.)* You see? They're already starting to send people here for Lydia's stuff. *[i.e. her tasks]*

**Nelly:** And... But over here, that...

**Óscar:** I don't know... Over here that color isn't...

**Nelly:** You should check with Santorino on four.

*Extended minimalist procedure in which the paper passes from one person to the next and returns to Isabella, who delivers it to the Client and explains to him to check on another floor. Guillermo returns from throwing out more stuff, and offers to show him how to get to the supposed fourth floor. Isabella, Guillermo and the Client exit.*

**Narrator:** So Nelly often invited Óscar to her house, trusting that her 15-year-old son Enzo would take it upon himself to tell his father about these visits. Almost nothing ever happened during these visits, they usually talked about work, watched some movie, or had coffee and graham crackers. One

afternoon, Nelly went into Enzo's room and Óscar was there. Óscar had shown up a bit early for the date and Nelly had gone to pick up sandwiches. Enzo was showing Óscar an Excel spreadsheet and explaining how to import it from Office 2000. Enzo wasn't wearing a shirt. Óscar was looking at the screen and had one hand on Enzo's naked shoulder. Nelly took it very badly. She never talked about it with Enzo. Not with Óscar either.

**Isabella:** (*Entering.*) I sent him to four. But it's Lydia's thing.

**Narrator:** Bit by bit, she started to find excuses to not invite him to her house.

**Nelly:** She'd better not come here.

**Narrator:** She was receiving fewer and fewer male visitors, and keeping a close eye on Enzo.

**Óscar:** It's not the first time. It's happened to her two or three times.

**Nelly:** That's why she'd better not come here.

**Isabella:** But what bad luck.

**Narrator:** Enzo's relationship with his parents had not been very smooth since their divorce.

**Isabella:** 'Cause she's got nothing to do with it, but there's always some idiot jumping to conclusions.

**Óscar:** It's the fourth time it's happened. There were fires at Reconquista, Virrey Cevallos, Alsina...

**Nelly:** (*to Óscar*) And that's why I'm telling you, because you're the only one who can tell Lydia no. They need to relocate her somewhere else.

**Óscar:** How am I going to tell her that? "Sorry Lydia, the thing is, you're bad luck".

**Nelly:** You see? Everyone's terrified of that fatso.

**Óscar:** Not terrified, it's just something you can't say, not officially. Maybe if someone more junior said it to her... (*Isabella doesn't seem to get it.*) But if you say it to her in an official capacity you're toast 'til the cows come home.

**Nelly:** She'd better not come here.

**Narrator:** Enzo didn't talk very much.

**Óscar:** How's Enzo doing?

**Nelly:** (*Brief pause.*) Fine. Totally fine.

**Óscar:** Did he find a solution for the...? The thing he...?

**Nelly:** Yes, it's all fine.

**Narrator:** Óscar didn't come over any more, but Nelly was starting to notice someone was leaving silent messages on her answering machine.

**Nelly:** His father knows a police commissioner, they renewed all his documents, he didn't even have to wait in line.

**Óscar:** Oh, great.

**Narrator:** Nelly erased the silent messages. She never asked Enzo if he knew who it could be.

**Óscar:** I'd promised him I'd try to track down that guy from... what's his name?... the guy from...

**Nelly:** Yes but it's taken care of. *(To Isabella).* OK, this is yours, I'm giving it to you, don't lose it. *(Exits.)*

**Isabella:** I'll tell you the truth. I'm having a hard time believing this. I'm having a hard time. I'm having an extremely tough time.

**Óscar:** What's up?

**Isabella:** Nothing, she gave me something very similar. But not the thing.

**Narrator:** Let's see about all this.

**Óscar:** But it's similar?

**Isabella:** But it's not it.

**Óscar:** It's similar? If I were you I'd just grab it. I'm sure that thing's lost somewhere on Vicki's desk.

**Isabella:** I'm—and this is the truth—I do not know what she does.

**Óscar:** Who?

**Isabella:** Nelly.

**Narrator:** Isabella is new here and occupies a much lower position on the hierarchy than Nelly. But this isn't immediately visible, because Isabella is always sitting, while Nelly seems to run from one end of the building to the other. This privileged position of Isabella's—seated, expectantly, passive for the great majority of the time—allows her to think a lot of things.

**Isabella:** I don't know what Nelly does, I don't know what Vicki does. It's like they're here to screw things up without any rhyme or reason. And you know what's gonna happen? The time is going to come when I'm going to have to bring this down to two, and it's all going to be on me.

**Óscar:** You think on two they're going to notice the difference?

**Isabella:** It's not my job to think about that. I don't want to even think about that possibility.

**Narrator:** Isabella quarrels with Nelly. She knows Nelly is scandalized by her ideas, which is maybe why she mostly discusses them with her.

*Nelly returns.*

**Isabella:** Nelly!

**Nelly:** He's taking away records I don't think we're supposed to touch. Is he going to keep throwing out everything he sees?

*Óscar shrugs.*

**Isabella:** You gave me something very similar, but it's not it. Please go look for it, Nelly. *(She returns the thing she'd been given.)*

**Nelly:** But it's similar? Then let's try this. *(Flips the document over and tries to give it back.)*

**Isabella:** I don't understand. I'm having a hard time understanding this.

**Óscar:** *(To Isabella.)* Take it, they're going to accept it fine.

**Isabella:** They're not going to accept it. I don't want to go through this again tomorrow.

**Nelly:** You're not going to go through this again tomorrow because I already gave it to you.

**Isabella:** What if they ask me for it?

**Nelly:** They're not going to ask you for it because I've already given it to you.

**Isabella:** But it's not it!

**Nelly:** Yeeeessss iiit iiiiiissss.

**Isabella:** Óscar, do you happen to have a second?

**Óscar:** Yep.

**Isabella:** Listen, she gave me something very similar, but it's not mine.

**Óscar:** Just puut your haaands oontoo iiit. If it's similar, it'll get by.

**Isabella:** Great. Delightful. *(She crosses her arms, offended.)*

**Óscar:** Wow, I have to say... some luck Lydia's got! Why do all her offices catch fire?

**Nelly:** Well... everything's flammable. Paper, folders, toner for the photocopier...

**Óscar:** Toner is flammable?

**Nelly:** Totally, it's a petroleum derivative, it's carcinogenic.

*Guillermo enters with a pedestal, a column, something large whose identity we can't discern.*

**Belen:** You're going to throw that out?

**Guillermo:** Is it yours?

**Isabella:** No.

**Guillermo:** Is it anybody's? No. I'm throwing it out.

**Nelly:** (*Scandalized*) It's always been there, it belongs here. It doesn't get thrown out.

**Isabella:** It's been there longer than we have. It's very iconic.

**Guillermo:** Oh, it's "very iconic"? You want to explain to me what it's been there *for*, all this time?

**Nelly:** Don't you dare throw that out.

**Óscar:** Look, Matías: that's been there since before this office was occupied by humans. It's absurd to get angry about it, nobody put it there.

**Guillermo:** Do you guys seriously think this was literally put here by NOBODY?

**Narrator:** Matías' real name is Guillermo.

**Guillermo:** *Nobody* put it here?

**Narrator:** But Óscar calls him Matías, because the guy who used to occupy Guillermo's position was named Matías...

**Óscar:** It was there from before, it doesn't have a purpose...

**Narrator:** ...but Óscar—at the time—never quite learned Matías' name correctly.

**Óscar:** It's an object that has no purpose, so leave it there.

**Guillermo:** Let's all do something. (*With effort he moves the object to the center of the office.*)

**Narrator:** He always called him Mateo, and then immediately corrected himself and said Matías. So now Óscar can't stop calling the new guy Matías, even though his name is Guillermo.

**Guillermo:** I'm going to leave this here, smack in the middle.

**Narrator:** He'd learned it wrong, and too late. Guillermo doesn't care either way. What does it matter?

**Guillermo:** And when you're all fucking tired enough of banging into it, you're going to beg me to throw it away. (*He exits.*) "Matías, Matías, please throw it away, pleeeeeease!"

**Nelly:** No, you're not putting that there. Guillermo! (*Exits after him.*)

**Óscar:** Matías!

**Guillermo:** (*Peeks back in.*) Anyone want a coffee? The coffee people are here. Frappolatte?

**Isabella and Óscar** (*Because Guillermo will want to borrow money*): No.

**Narrator:** Something absurd is happening to Matías / Guillermo.

**Guillermo:** OK. (*He stays there, looking from one to the other, as if he were going to say something else.*)

**Narrator:** Since the day Isabella arrived, he's been trying to impress her. And Isabella often comes on to him fairly explicitly, but then she always backs off, almost always leaving him in the uncomfortable position of having said something vulgar.

**Isabella:** You're seriously going to leave that poking up like that?

**Guillermo:** Yeah. They're gonna have to suck my bone if they want me to get rid of that piece of shit.

**Narrator:** That's Guillermo: both shy and vulgar. Whenever he wants to slip in a funny comment, he always winds up saying something rude.

**Isabella:** As far as I'm concerned it can stay.

**Guillermo:** Here it stays. Coffee? Anyone want a coffee? (*They shake their heads "no".*)

*Nelly enters, followed by the Client, who remains standing off to one side of Isabella's desk while Nelly checks something with Óscar in a low voice.*

**Narrator:** Guillermo doesn't really know why, but he heard that Isabella thinks he's Jewish. He isn't. Why would she think he was Jewish? It bothers him a lot. He has nothing against Jewish people, who have always seemed very cultured to him. But he has nothing to do with those traditions, nor that food. He's never managed to explicitly correct the misapprehension. (*Nelly finally gives some new instruction to the Client, sending him to another floor.*) There's no scenario in which he can face her and say: "why do you think I'm Jewish when I'm not?" He heard it through the grapevine, and he doesn't want to seem to be paying too much attention to her, which would be bad for his plan. His plan is to have outrageous sex with Isabella and then never call her again. It's the same plan he used on Isabella's predecessor, a very cute but very unstable girl named Judith.

**Óscar:** Nelly... What I was trying to tell you before...

**Nelly:** What?

**Óscar:** The thing about Enzo's papers...

**Nelly:** It's done, I told you it's done. His father has a friend who's a POLICE COMMISSIONER.

**Óscar:** I know. But tell him again I can get them for him. I talk with the security guys here, and listen... Listen to me, in two days they can get me everything... Passport... ID...

**Isabella:** Driver's license?

**Óscar:** Well... no, not that.

**Guillermo:** Why not? You got one for Judith...

**Óscar:** Yeah. Uch, I dunno, huh? You never know... They did slip it to Judith...!

**Isabella:** Who's Judith?

**Guillermo:** (*Sharp.*) Nobody.

**Óscar:** Nobody... she used to work here...

**Narrator:** The previous week was Rosh Hashanah, and before she left Isabella wished him a happy new year.

**Isabella:** I'd love to have a B1 license.

**Narrator:** It was his opportunity to explain to her that he wasn't Jewish...

**Nelly:** But do you drive?

**Isabella:** No.

**Narrator:** ...That his mom was Catholic...

**Isabella:** That's why I want to find out if I can get one.

**Óscar:** No, you're crazy. With Judith it was different. She knew how to drive, she used to have a license, but then I don't know what happened... some health problem...

**Narrator:** ... and that they didn't know much about his father because he'd left them when he was two, and that his mother's new husband did come from a Jewish family, but that they weren't practicing.

**Óscar:** What was it that happened to her?

**Guillermo:** How the fuck should I know?

**Narrator:** "Nobody's practicing", Isabella replied.

**Óscar:** Some nervous thing, you know how you have to copy a bunch of little drawings to pass the mental health part?

**Óscar:** I don't know exactly what she drew, but it was weird enough that they didn't want to renew it...

**Narrator:** Guillermo knew she was still confused. Still thought he was Jewish, from a Jewish family.

**Guillermo:** OK, I'm going to keep looking for stuff to throw out. (*Exits.*)

**Narrator:** Sometimes he'd quote the acts of some Catholic saint.

**Óscar:** And she couldn't renew it. And the Security guys here took care of the whole thing.

**Isabella:** This was Judith?

**Narrator:** But at almost all of these moments Isabella wasn't paying attention.

**Guillermo:** (*Entering.*) Do you know how Saint Genevieve died? No? Google it. Google it. (*Exits.*)

**Óscar:** Poor girl. But she'd already had a license. It's a different case.

**Isabella:** No, it's fine. I don't want one.

**Óscar:** Or in Enzo's case. The kid drives... Does sports...

**Nelly:** Less and less.

**Óscar:** But he does them! He's got quite a little body!... You can tell he does them.

**Nelly:** Yes, with his dad. They're very close now.

**Óscar:** You see? So beautiful.

**Nelly:** What is?

**Óscar:** Father and son, planning things together, going fishing, trusting each other, sharing things.

**Nelly:** Oh yes. They share things. Enzo tells him everything, you understand?

**Óscar:** Yeah, and I was a bad sport... I told him I'd call him to see about going to a movie some time...

**Nelly:** You called him?

**Óscar:** No... I let him down, I couldn't.

**Nelly:** I can't tell him anything I don't want his father to find out. Enzo goes and tells him everything. Everything. It's dangerous.

**Óscar:** Well... that's OK. But it's beautiful...

**Nelly:** Who is?

**Óscar:** *That* is, between a kid who's so... young, and sweet... and his dad.

**Narrator:** Until one day, after a few glasses of cider at a party, Óscar told Guillermo that Isabella had asked him with real curiosity whether Matías was circumcised.

*Guillermo returns, with something else to throw out: this time it seems to be a pipe or a heavy rolled-up carpet.*

**Guillermo:** Watch out, watch out.

**Nelly:** OK but... for a couple of weeks you should stop throwing things out and going back there. At least 'til you see how your hand is doing... *(It's useless, because he's gone out to the street. Nelly exits after him.)*

**Narrator:** It never became clear to Guillermo whether Isabella was actually referring to him or to his predecessor, Mateo— Matías, who he had never even met. But since then it seemed to him that the only way to clarify his origin was to show Óscar that he was not at all and never had been circumcised, so Óscar could clarify the situation to Isabella for once and for all. It was a perfect plan, and it only required making sure that Óscar saw his penis.

*Nelly returns.*

**Nelly:** I'm feeling anxious. This morning I was just fine and now I'm feeling anxious. On top of it all, he owes me a hundred and fifty pesos...

**Guillermo:** *(Coming in from the street.)* What?

**Nelly:** You should have that hand looked at.

**Guillermo:** Again with that?

**Narrator:** Guillermo would try to find his way to the office urinals at the same time as Óscar, and to urinate standing as far as possible from the wall, so that Óscar might catch an innocent glance.

**Óscar:** I'm going to the bathroom.

**Guillermo:** Oh, me too. Cool.

**Narrator:** These urinary exercises almost always produced disgusting results. Guillermo would wet his shoes and Óscar would be repulsed. Óscar now avoids going to the bathroom whenever Matías is there.

**Óscar:** Oh, no, I need to find out if they've sent me the thing for that guy yet, he should be back any second and we don't have the um... the um... *(He pretends to look for something on his computer, but his mime is terrible, he's just scratching at the surface of the desk.)*

**Narrator:** Óscar had no problem, on the other hand, bumping into other young colleagues in the bathroom...

**Guillermo:** OK, I'll hold out too. *(To Isabella.)* I'll tie a knot in it.

**Narrator:** Mostly the newest hires, who he always treated very paternalistically, offering to acquaint them with the different aspects of the job.

*The Client reappears. Isabella looks at what he shows her, nods. Refers him to Guillermo. Who guides him to Óscar's desk, avoiding a collision with the imaginary pedestal, which has remained there, although its location seems less and less clear to the actors. The Client is given a seat and the three simultaneously express contradictory thoughts about the correct destination for his paperwork. Nelly, on the other hand, remains off to one side, thinking about her adventure in the urinals.*

**Narrator:** Since Óscar had an important position, everybody thought of this as absolutely normal. Except for Nelly, who had never quite approved of these gatherings of junior employees which—according to reports—took place in the men's restroom on the third floor, which was not the closest restroom to Óscar, but it was the one—as Nelly was once furtively able to ascertain—that lacked dividers between the urinals, which denied gentlemen some minimum of privacy, (*the Client stands up, confused*) but definitely saved a certain amount of that vital space that was steadily being reclaimed by the files and folders that idly accumulated in whatever little territory remained free in that architecture.

*The Client leaves.*

**Guillermo:** Done. We gonna go take a piss?

**Narrator:** Nelly had, in fact, counted seven urinals.

**Óscar:** You go, I'll catch up with you.

**Narrator:** And then discreetly slipped out of the bathroom without having been seen.

**Guillermo:** I'll wait for you, that way on the way back you can help me move the waddayacallit.

**Nelly:** Stop throwing things out, you're going to hurt your hand worse!

**Guillermo:** Do you guys think there's zero, I mean zero relationship between my hand and the fact that I'm throwing things out? Did it never occur to you this is for everyone's good?

**Isabella:** For my *good*? You're throwing things out for fun...

**Guillermo:** What fun?

**Isabella:** It's obvious.

**Guillermo:** There are things that are obvious to you that might not be the way you think they are...

**Isabella:** Everyone likes throwing things out. All cultures.

**Guillermo:** What cultures?

**Isabella:** The city dweller, the isolated tribe in the desert...

**Nelly:** (*quite interested*) You throw things out?

**Isabella:** Sure. Clothes, Tupperware, pots.

**Nelly:** (*disappointed, ironic*) How fabulous of you. Stuff you don't need anymore.

**Isabella:** Clothes, lots of clothes. I keep them moving. First they go in the closet with the clothes I wear, then I pull them out and put them on the other side of the rack. Then I take them down and put them in a plastic bag I have, I stack them in that... and put them up high. They go one section to the next. Then I take them down and put them under the bed, so I don't have to look at them. Then, when under the bed is full, I move them to the top of the closet and that's where they spend the longest time. Then later, maybe some long weekend I open the bag, if there's something I like it goes back into circulation, but most of it I put in a bag next to the door to the street, and out it goes.

**Óscar:** Like a conveyor belt.

**Isabella:** Oh, did you see the coat I wore today?

**Nelly:** It's beautiful.

**Isabella:** Do you guys know I bought that coat in the eighties? I bought that coat for three hundred dollars, which at the time was the same as three hundred pesos.

**Óscar:** No, if it was in the eighties it would have been Australes...

**Isabella:** No, the end of the eighties.

**Nelly:** What did we have in the eighties? Australes? Argentine pesos? Law pesos?

**Óscar:** No, we stopped using the law peso in...

**Narrator:** Nobody, including myself, could remember what currency was in use at that time. It doesn't matter.

**Óscar:** Just let me think... they were the little brown ones...

**Isabella:** It doesn't matter. It was when it was "one on one".

**Óscar:** "One to one."

**Isabella:** Right. A peso was worth a dollar. And vice versa. OK, so I bought it for three hundred dollars...

**Óscar:** ...then.

**Isabella:** And since then, the coat did that whole circuit— pile, closet, bed, up, down—but when I was going to throw it out, instead I sold it in a street fair in Pompeya, for twenty pesos.

**Nelly:** Nothing.

**Óscar:** Five dollars, more or less. Today.

**Nelly:** (*Upset, doing the math wrong.*) That's like ten times less than what you bought it for!

**Guillermo:** (*Under his breath*) Two hundred times less...

**Isabella:** Doesn't matter. The thing is that a long time after, one day walking in Palermo, I go into a new store, vintage, you know, beautiful things restored, and I see it! The same coat, same pattern, nothing deconstructed, nothing reinvented, there it is, boom: four hundred pesos.

**Óscar:** Today pesos.

**Isabella:** Of course, in Palermo. I go back to look at it, gorgeous! I fall in love with it all over and I buy it again.

**Óscar:** You bought it again?

**Isabella:** Yup, for four hundred pesos.

**Óscar:** Today pesos.

**Isabella:** Palermo pesos. But anyway, that's taste.

**Óscar:** Wait, wait, that's— in accounting terms— that's a mess.

**Isabella:** No, it doesn't matter. Don't kill yourself calculating it because the important thing is I wanted it cause I liked it.

**Óscar:** Well depending how you look at it, maybe you came out on top.

**Isabella:** How did I come out on top?

**Óscar:** Because before it was three hundred dollar-pesos and now you're buying it cheaper.

**Nelly:** Four hundred is cheaper than three hundred?

**Óscar:** Well sure but... how weird... Because, from another side, you lost out.

**Nelly:** How did she lose out?

**Óscar:** Because before she paid three hundred pesos and now she paid four hundred. She lost a hundred.

**Isabella:** You think that, because it's the same coat, but if it was a different coat you wouldn't think so.

**Nelly:** It's really nice. The one you wore today?

**Isabella:** Yeah, wait a sec, I'll get it. (*Exits.*)

**Nelly:** It's gorgeous. I don't know why she sold it, the stupid cow. The way it's cut you can't find anymore, English draping. Put together like a brick shithouse.

*Isabella brings in the imaginary coat and shows it off.*

**Isabella:** So? What do you think? Was it worth it or not?

**Nelly:** It's spectacular. (*She tries to feel the miraculous fabric.*)

**Isabella:** Yeah. But I think now I'm gonna throw it out, the color... it's like it doesn't say anything.

**Nelly:** You're gonna throw it out?! It's gorgeous!

**Isabella:** Yeah, it just came down from the high shelf, it's about to go to the street.

**Nelly:** But it's so nice.

**Isabella:** OK, I'll bring it back for them to sell in the fair.

**Óscar:** They're going to give you twenty pesos again.

**Isabella:** Oh well...

**Nelly:** OK, I'll buy it from you.

**Isabella:** No, no, I'm going to sell it at the fair, find out how much they give me for it at the fair.

**Óscar:** But why not to her? If she likes it...

**Nelly:** You're cutting out the middleman.

**Isabella:** But I don't know how much to sell it for. I like middlemen. They're the salt of the earth. I don't know how much you're going to offer me.

**Nelly:** Wait. If you want we can go to the fair together and I'll pay you whatever they offer. And if you want a little bit more.

**Isabella:** But you know it's worth more than that. You're screwing me. You know it's worth more, I paid for that in dollars!

**Nelly:** Fine, if they offer you thirty I'll pay fifty. Better to sell it to me than give it to some stranger.

**Isabella:** Really? So I can show up at the office and you're here wearing it?

**Nelly:** If you want we can agree I won't wear it to the office, that way you won't be tempted. Who knows, you might want to buy it back from me for another fortune...

**Isabella:** But I paid four hundred pesos for this, and you want to offer me fifty. It's sort of like I don't understand you, Nelly.

**Guillermo:** It's better to get screwed by someone you know than someone you don't.

**Óscar:** That's kind of true, because if you wanted to go buy it you'd have to pay four hundred. It's like this: the purchase price is always four hundred, but the selling price is twenty. It's crazy. There's this gap between the two things and say what you will, it gives me goose bumps.

**Isabella:** And for her the purchase price would be twenty. You see? I can't sell it to you.

**Nelly:** No, no, wait. We're doing the math wrong.

**Isabella:** Look, Nelly, I like you and everything but if you don't have the four hundred pesos this is worth, you can't buy it, period.

**Óscar:** Obviously.

**Nelly:** I'm not paying four hundred pesos for something that used.

**Óscar:** Fine then, she's not asking you to buy it!

**Nelly:** But you were going to throw it out!

**Isabella:** Anyway now I don't know if I want to get rid of it. If you think it's worth that much, it must be true.

**Nelly:** Ohhh you are a total bitch! She's going to throw it out, I say, "don't throw it out, I like it", she takes that and tarantalizes me!

**Óscar:** But you... you're... you want to buy it for less than it's worth.

**Guillermo:** Yeah, Nelly: You never want to admit when you've got the upper hand. You stir up the water, swipe the fisherman's profits and then play innocent. It's worth four hundred.

**Nelly:** It's not worth four hundred!

**Óscar:** This is why I don't like to get involved in women's questions.

**Nelly:** The fact you're not interested in women's questions has become obvious. And you can stick your coat up your ass. So *shallow*.

**Isabella:** Oh thanks for the tip, Nelly. And now *I'm* shallow? Who kicked up the whole stink over a shitty coat?

**Nelly:** It's not shitty! I like it. (*Bursts into tears.*) I like it a lot.

*The Client reenters. He sees that the situation is delicate, and remains at a prudent distance. So prudent, in fact, that he remains there for some time, doing nothing but watching everyone. Finally he decides to seize the stamp himself and stamps all the papers he's brought. He exits.*

**Nelly:** You come here and pretend you're some big I don't know what, "oh, look at my values", "look what I do", and in fact you're just shallow, the stuff you throw away is totally worthless. That's easy, anybody can do that. (*to Guillermo*) Same as you, obviously, of course, with the perfect excuse that you got bitten, with your fucking alibi, now you're dicking around in accumulated capital and other peoples' work. And in case you forgot: you've owed me a hundred and fifty pesos for two months now, if it's not too much trouble I'd like them back please.

**Guillermo:** What do the two things have to do with each other?

**Isabella:** They have NOTHING to do with each other.

**Guillermo:** And I'm going to pay you back. You know when? When I'm finished paying for vaccines and the swelling in my fucking ass goes down.

**Nelly:** Great. You know what? Why don't you throw away everything you want, but give me back the hundred and fifty pesos I loaned you. Because I have to buy myself a coat.

**Isabella:** It's not for sale.

**Nelly:** A hundred and fifty pesos!

**Isabella:** It's not for sale. And certainly not for a hundred and fifty pesos. What is that? What is that price? Where did it come from? Did it come from the labor value of the coat? Did it come from the supply-demand curve? No, came out of the blue. It's witchcraft. It came out of some debt between you guys, what does that have to do with me?

**Nelly:** You're seriously going to throw it out?

**Isabella:** Now it seems I basically have no choice.

**Nelly:** But why? You're throwing out something that has no value to you! If you think you're so fabulous, throw out money.

**Isabella:** That's not the same.

**Óscar:** No, it's not the same.

**Nelly:** It is the same. Get together four hundred pesos and throw 'em away. See how it makes you feel.

**Isabella:** Throwing away money isn't throwing away stuff. Think! I toss money, some street kid picks it up and buys skim milk. See? I threw away dough but the kid picked up milk. Not the same case. Money transforms things, it's a magic wand. I want to throw away this thing that completed its cycle. You want it? Go get it when I've thrown it out. Like the street kid who'd pick up that four hundred pesos, which I think I'm not going to throw out, because I don't have 'em.

**Nelly:** I'm not going to humiliate myself. What, you want me to follow you around to see where you're going to throw out the coat?

**Isabella:** Not at all. I'll tell you where I'm going to throw it out.

**Nelly:** I'm not gonna get sucked into your sick dialectic. *(Brief pause.)* Where?

**Isabella:** *(Thinks of a random place.)* Sáenz Avenue at Beazley.

**Nelly:** But that's in Pompeya! It won't last a second there, some homeless family will pick it up. On top of everything else you want me to fight a bunch of homeless people for a coat you don't like anymore? You want to let me know what I ever did to you? Since you got here.

**Isabella:** What? What are we talking about? Are you trying to tell me where I can and can't throw out my old clothes? I'm having a hard time understanding what you're saying. You're moving your lips but I'm not understanding, I see movement but that's all. And I still don't have my form you gave to Vicki, I think I asked you for it politely.

**Óscar:** Alright, alright. If you're going to fight like this... I'm leaving.

**Nelly:** You're not going anywhere. We're gonna go through point by point what's happening here. She throws out *worthless* things and comes here talking about "creating space", about "renewal", about "innovation", she says "she sees movement"! She should throw out money, which *is* worth something.

**Óscar:** You can't throw out money, Nelly. It's not possible. It's self-contradictory. She already explained it to you.

**Nelly:** Fine. Let her burn it!

**Isabella:** You want me to burn money to demonstrate what exactly?

**Nelly:** That it doesn't matter to you. You see? Don't throw it out, burn it so nobody can turn it into rice or milk.

**Isabella:** OK. Fine.

**Nelly:** Burn money.

**Isabella:** I'd do it but I don't have any money.

**Nelly:** Here, fifty pesos. Take 'em, burn 'em. Cut the fucking conveyor belt of this fifty pesos, if you're so free. Go on, show us. If you can burn fifty pesos I'll believe that coat actually means something to you. If you don't burn the fifty pesos I'll think you're a bitch who's got style, and that's all.

**Isabella:** So I'm not burning fifty pesos, I'm buying your trust.

**Nelly:** No no no no no.

**Isabella:** OK, you want me to prove it?

**Narrator:** This is horror itself. Even the minor gods who inspire Óscar are watching in stunned silence. It's the beginning of the end.

**Isabella:** Fine, I'm going to burn the fifty pesos.

**Guillermo and Óscar:** No, no!

**Isabella:** You want to let me do this so you can prove to yourself I'm not selfish? Just *look* who's selfish!

*Isabella burns the bill.*

**Narrator:** Apedias faints and the Olympian winds dissolve her like sand, Heritrode bursts into tears and becomes water. You can't see the fire, because the fire marshal won't allow it, but the bill is burning.

**Nelly:** You're crazy!

**Isabella:** Oh... Now I'm crazy, when you begged me to do it.

**Óscar:** I didn't beg you to do anything.

**Isabella:** You're a voyeur.

**Nelly:** Are you aware of what it is you're burning, you dickhead?

**Óscar:** OK, don't call her that. You were egging her on.

**Nelly:** All because of a shitty coat.

**Óscar:** It's not a coat, it's trust! You said it yourself! People tell you things and you refuse to understand them until they start making sacrifices. Here! Burn this. *(He takes money out of his wallet.)*

**Isabella:** *(Loving this.)* You burn it.

**Óscar:** No, I don't think I could.

**Isabella:** A hundred pesos. Burn 'em, go ahead.

**Óscar:** No, no. Not in a million years.

**Isabella:** OK, give him a smaller bill, maybe he can do it with something smaller.

**Guillermo:** Yeah, we have to make space. Burn a two peso bill and see how it goes.

**Óscar:** I don't have two pesos.

**Guillermo:** Ok, ok, Nelly, can you lend me ten pesos in small bills?

**Nelly:** I'm telling you you owe me a hundred and fifty and you want me to lend you ten more to give to him so he can burn them!

**Guillermo:** Exactly.

**Nelly:** This is crazy. This is evil. This will be punished.

**Guillermo:** Not at all. You just burned fifty pesos. So now I only owe you a hundred. Burn another hundred and I won't owe you anything.

**Nelly:** You want me to burn my money so you won't owe it to me? You want me to be out twice as much? I'm not burning any money.

**Guillermo:** Fine, give it to her.

**Isabella:** I loved doing it.

**Nelly:** Because the money isn't yours!

**Isabella:** It's mine. You gave it to me and I burned it.

**Nelly:** It's not yours! Where'd money come from, huh? Who owns it?

*(She meant to say "Where'd the money..." Her misspoken question hangs in the air for a moment.)*

**Óscar:** *(Scrambling a bit)* Well... you gave it to her, it's hers. She didn't have to burn it, she could have kept it and bought a blouse or something.

**Nelly:** We're mixing everything up here. Trust with money, dignity with reason... You still owe me a hundred and fifty, what business is it of yours what I do with the money you owe me. I can give it to her to burn if I want to.

**Isabella:** Now I'm the black hole, huh?

**Guillermo:** *(To Isabella)* Wait, don't burn that hundred pesos. Just a sec. Give them back to him. *(Isabella gives them to Óscar.)* Óscar, will you lend me a hundred pesos? I give them to Nelly, now I only owe you fifty, and you give them to Isabella to burn. Done.

**Isabella:** Here it goes!

*They all watch, moved, as the bill burns.*

**Guillermo:** That's amazing. Do you have any more?

**Óscar:** Well yes, but I don't think...

**Isabella:** Burn it, burn one yourself, Óscar.

**Óscar:** But I only have hundreds...

**Guillermo:** Give me one and I'll get change from the coffee guy. You guys want coffee?

**Óscar:** Yeah, I'd have one now.

**Isabella:** I'll have an espresso.

**Guillermo:** I'll be right back and we'll burn all the change. *(Exits to change the bill.)*

**Nelly:** You people are crazy.

**Óscar:** That could be.

*Guillermo enters with a government document hidden under his sweater.*

**Guillermo:** Hey! How much does it cost to get a form stamped? Three thousand pesos? (*Burns the document.*) I burned it!

**Óscar:** What did you do?

**Guillermo:** I burned it!

**Óscar:** Where did you get that?

*Guillermo gestures outside.*

**Óscar:** And what was it?

**Guillermo:** Beats me! Paperwork, bureaucracy.

*Óscar experiences a profound, sudden anguish. He's having trouble forming words.*

**Óscar:** No. No. You don't understand.

**Guillermo:** It's like burning three thousand pesos.

**Óscar:** No! It's not like that. You wanted to burn money? You could have asked. That was a form. *Somebody's* form.

**Guillermo:** It's the same thing, Óscar.

**Isabella:** Now the dude's going to show up asking for his form and it's not gonna be here.

**Óscar:** A hundred-peso bill is the same as any other hundred peso bill. But that form isn't the same as the money it's worth. We have to have a minimum of bureaucracy, are you idiots? Without bureaucracy the conveyor doesn't run. Without bureaucracy we'd all be living in caves. Without a minimum of all this you can only manage bearskins and mammoth tusks. I don't like your looks, I hit you with a stick, I break into your cave to attack your family, anybody can get away with anything because nothing's on the books anywhere.

**Isabella:** OK, you don't have to go crazy about it either.

**Óscar:** The thing is there's been a case like this. In the past. Apparently, a guy'd gotten fired. I'd just started here. They were reducing staff; the guy was pissed off and opened some files and took out a random folder. Oh god, when we found out! I still dream about it... I dream I'm perfectly calm, and a client comes in. He brings me the file number. 56055/89. This was in 1989. And it's not there. It's

not there anymore. I wake up, I go to the office, and everyone who comes up to the counter has the face of the guy in the dream.

*The Client enters, transfigured. As if he were Óscar's vision.*

**Óscar:** I know sooner or later he's going to come, he's going to look me in the eyes and ask for number 56055/89.

*Pause. Óscar and the Client look at each other in silence. The Client looks at his file. He could very well be a ghost.*

**Isabella:** I may not have been working here very long, but I want to thank you guys because even with our ups and downs and all that, I still think you guys are good people, and the truth is this is a job like any other job, and you have to live on something, and it's a good atmosphere, and honestly, I have nothing to complain about. *(Pause.)* I want to tell everybody: I'm going to report you guys.

*The Client, or the ghost, smiles semi-contentedly and leaves.*

**Óscar:** What?

**Isabella:** I'm going to report you. You burned government property, the property of the people, unrecoverable property.

**Nelly:** And who are you going to report us to?

**Isabella:** *(Very aggressive, re: the stamp she ceaselessly guards.)* You know what this is, don't you? You know what this is?

**Guillermo:** Stop, stop, Isabella. How're you going to report us for a trivial thing like that?

**Isabella:** Trivial?

**Guillermo:** We were all together...

**Isabella:** Don't include me.

**Nelly:** And me neither.

**Óscar:** He's not well, Isabella. He got bitten!

**Isabella:** I'm going to report him.

**Óscar:** If you have to report someone, report me.

**Isabella:** OK, both of you, I'm going to report both of you. I don't discriminate based on religion.

**Guillermo:** I am not J/...!

**Óscar:** Wait, Isabella sweetheart, why are you going to report me?

**Isabella:** You didn't stop him.

**Óscar:** Neither did you.

**Isabella:** That's not my job.

*Silence.*

**Óscar:** And what is your job?

*Silence. Perhaps nobody knows.*

**Óscar:** What is it?

*Pause.*

**Isabella:** Hah, you guys believed me? I wasn't going to report you!

**Guillermo:** Oh my god you're a bitch. I shit a brick sideways.

**Isabella:** Anyway how can I report you guys, the reports all go to Lydia!

**Óscar:** Lydia... Ha ha. Oh, that was a scare.

**Isabella:** All righty. You want to go get a drink, Nelly? Or we gonna keep burning money?

**Nelly:** Let's go to happy hour, that pub on Mayo Avenue.

**Guillermo:** No, wait, let's burn a little more money. I'm gonna go get the coffees.

*Isabella and Guillermo exit.*

**Óscar:** Nelly, you think in the end your brother might have been right? That thing he said about Lydia?

**Nelly:** My brother?

**Óscar:** Yeah, you remember? That weird Christmas we spent at your house...

**Nelly:** Oh yeah, he brought that... Korean girl...

**Óscar:** Exactly, you remember? The... Korean girl! What was it he was saying about Lydia, and the offices, and how one day I'd... how one day I'd get to the office and... and...

*(He looks around the office with sudden terror; we don't know why. He shakes his head and exits after Nelly.)*

*Blackout.*

*Scene change.*

## Why does every work of art become business?

### Part 2. [BUSINESS]

*It's the previous Christmas Eve. At Nelly's house. Her son Enzo is shut in his room, absorbed in the computer. Nelly is taking care of finishing touches. Del Monico is dealing with some item in the kitchen, offstage. During the scene change, we see projected the chatroom conversation between Enzo and a virtual friend:*

NZvrtl10 fkdup. my old man dates grlz

GhostRider so?

NZvrtl10 no way im doing xms w/him

GhostRider was it his trn???

NZvrtl10 yup. alredy told mom im not going

GhostRider were was it gonna b?

NZvrtl10 friends ranch. escobar. evrbdy crzy old like 40. folk music. evrbdy shtfcd. falling drunk in the pool n we have to pull em out. drinkn naked til there clothes dry

GhostRider rofl

NZvrtl10 i wish. ones a psycoanalyst. always the same blsht. bald like a lightblb. puts a bottle on his head and dances some kindo calypso. ya wanna throw up. thinks hes mr suaveee. stinkin drunk

GhostRider whats calypso?

NZvrtl10 music

GhostRider 4 old people?

NZvrtl10 ya. srsly cheezy

GhostRider don't go

NZvrtl10 not on yr life. staying home

GhostRider cool. we cn chat

NZvrtl10 there all comin here

GhostRider old man 2?

NZvrtl10 yup

GhostRider gross

**Narrator:** It's Christmas eve of last year. We're going to spend it at Nelly's house. This is not a good idea. But holidays are like that, they pervert things. Also, Nelly insisted. Because Nelly has a plan to solve some of her fundamental problems. Most of Nelly's fundamental problems involve her ex-husband, Robert.

**Nelly:** Robert, can I not ask you for a simple favor?

**Del Monico:** (*From the kitchen.*) You're leaving me alone with the electric knife? Like I know how to use this. Enzo!

**Nelly:** I don't know which end is the handle and which is the blade, it has teeth on both ends. Here. (*Exits into the kitchen.*)

**Narrator:** Her ex-husband is a philosophy professor. His name is Robert Del Monico, and we'll see him come out of that door in a few moments. He once wrote a short book and managed to get it published: a reading of Hegel, a teaching text more than a critical one, which wound up being adopted by a fair number of high school teachers. It seems that Hegel is complicated.

*Nelly and Del Monico are arguing in the kitchen.*

**Nelly:** Everything is complicated for you!

*Nelly comes back in with plates of food.*

**Narrator:** But the little book "Hegel at the Schoolhouse" is more accessible. Since then, Robert has called himself by his surname, "Del Monico", instead of his first name, as if he were expecting people to recognize him as the author of that little book, a sensation in the 80's, and say "how great, how great".

**Del Monico:** (*Appears. Struggling with the knife.*) I may be a man but that doesn't mean this is a tool. It's a kitchen utensil, it's designed for a woman's hands. Enzo! Can you help out your poor suffering father?

**Narrator:** He now teaches philosophy in a girls' prep school. It's unusual for Catholic girls to be taught philosophy. When it happens, the subject matter is deceptive. They're given a kind of tempered theology.

**Del Monico:** Enzo! Can you unhook yourself from the computer for a second and help set the table?

**Narrator:** The extent to which this hidden catechesis can be tempered depends on the ability of the teacher.

*From his room, Enzo replies something we don't hear.*

**Del Monico:** “A dick”? Are you kidding me? What do you mean “this isn’t my house”? Look out or you’re gonna get a smack. *(He starts to page through the instruction manual of the electric knife.)*

**Narrator:** He has his girls read Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*, pretending it’s a very wrong and fallacious book...

**Del Monico:** *(about the instruction manual.)* This is the worst ever...

**Narrator:** ...but they read it from A to Z...

**Del Monico:** I’ve read the entire thing.

**Narrator:** ...making sure that *his* Catholic high school girls have the personal tools to refute any mystical explanation of our origin.

**Nelly:** But did you stick the pokey thing in the...?

**Del Monico:** Yes, Nelly, I stuck it in.

**Narrator:** And he secretly introduces his schoolgirls to Marxist concepts via his famous little book on Hegel, smack there in the place where Marx is a forbidden word.

**Del Monico:** These things should be banned.

**Nelly:** It’s super practical. I won it saving up points at the supermarket.

**Del Monico:** If it’s so practical, come carve the turkey yourself.

**Nelly:** I told you, I’m scared of it.

**Del Monico:** Oh great, if somebody’s going to hack off a member it better be me? *(Exits to the kitchen.)*

**Narrator:** The fact is, his students are neither Catholics nor atheists; they’re girls in a state of hormonal explosion, ready to fly into a tizzy over any strong-voiced professor who wears a pair of pants rather than the habit.

*As we listen to Del Monico cut the turkey, Nelly tries to turn on the Christmas tree lights. The plug doesn’t seem to be working.*

**Del Monico:** *(Returns and watches Nelly’s futile efforts.)* You still haven’t gotten that plug fixed? One of these days you’re all going to get electrocuted! Like French fries. I’m gonna find out from the headlines in the Sun.

**Narrator:** The thing is that for three years now Robert has been having relations with some of his pupils.

**Del Monico:** We’re going to fly through the air. *(He sits idly, comfortably on the couch, thinking his thoughts.)*

**Narrator:** Robert can never resist the temptation of these brazen creatures, connected to their magical iPods, who challenge him with their feline, virginal gaze every time he introduces them to Kant's categories. For the first time in his life, in this insignificant prep school, when he was least expecting it, Del Monico has found his place in the world. "It's just for now," he tells himself. In any case, philosophy is a senior class, so the girls are exiting into the real world and there's very little danger his amorous adventures will be found out. After classes are finished, they continue for barely a few weeks.

**Nelly:** Robert... Are you... are you still seeing... um...?

**Del Monico:** Yes.

**Narrator:** And then those pre-university girls forget him. They forget "Hegel at the Schoolhouse." Sooner or later they all forget him: Christina Diaz Caprone, María Luisa Mendizabal, Sophie Vanini. Sophie! And now, like every December, now that the school year is over Robert doesn't know what to do to hold on to these warm, elusive girls, so nervous and so bold. How to hold onto them at least until autumn, when classes begin again and a new set of anxious eyes appears behind scandalous bangs. Seeing him and Nelly together, it's impossible to imagine these two people having anything in common.

**Del Monico and Nelly:** Enzo!

**Narrator:** OK: Enzo.

*From his room Enzo replies something we don't hear.*

**Nelly:** Enzo, listen to your father and put on something nice OK, your uncle's coming.

**Narrator:** Nelly and Robert have a son in common, Enzo, barely younger than the creatures with whom Robert abandons himself to pleasure in his studio apartment.

**Del Monico:** Is he doing OK?

**Nelly:** Beats me. Go find out.

**Del Monico:** Why don't you go deal with him.

**Narrator:** Robert deeply loves his son Enzo. However the system that allows him to only see Enzo on the occasional weekend is ideal for Robert to dedicate himself to his true middle-aged passion: *(Robert's cellphone rings)* Christina, Maria Luisa, and Sophie... especially Sophie.

**Del Monico:** *(answers his cell)* Sophie! *(Lowers his voice and continues talking with her.)*

**Narrator:** Robert has been more and more absent, and by the time he noticed it, Enzo had become a kind of cyberpunk emo-boi, lashed to the keyboard, unknown to anyone in the world except his virtual friends on the network. Robert thinks his son's... a bit of an asshole, but what can he do about it? He

makes efforts to feel less guilty. For example, he'd insisted that he and Enzo spend Christmas together at the ranch of some friends in Escobar.

**Del Monico:** (*We've been hearing quiet fragments of his chat with Sophie.*) At home, silly. Where do you think I'm spending Christmas?

**Narrator:** Enzo can't stand his father's friends.

**Del Monico:** (*On the phone.*) I'm stuck here rereading the Greek classics. (*They laugh.*)

**Narrator:** Enzo told Nelly they were a bunch of self-proclaimed intellectuals who got messily drunk within five minutes.

**Nelly:** Did you chop up the turkey?

**Del Monico:** (*To Nelly.*) As best I could. (*Phone.*) My ex. (...) Yes. I'm spending Christmas with my son. (...) Yeah, your age.

*Nelly becomes visibly upset.*

**Narrator:** So Enzo said no: he told Nelly who told Del Monico. Since Sophie wasn't going to be available on such a family-friendly day, Robert insisted on spending Christmas with Enzo anyway. Nelly decided they'd all spend it together.

**Nelly:** If you prefer to spend it with friends, go on, it's fine. I'll tell Enzo you had plans.

*Del Monico signals for her to stop bugging him.*

*Nelly wanders around the house not really knowing how to stay busy.*

**Narrator:** When Del Monico moved out, Nelly completely fell apart. She started to take anti-anxiety medication, and to channel her grief into her work.

*Nelly looks at Robert, checks to see if there are any messages on her phone, unplugs the tree, plugs it in again. Turns on the radio, which explodes at an earsplitting volume, immediately turns it off. Walks around. Does nothing of use.*

**Narrator:** But the truth is that Nelly's work is routine and doesn't reward change. Nelly constantly tells herself she's ready to get her life up and going again. That's how she says it: "get her life up and going again". But every time she sees him, she realizes she still loves him.

**Del Monico:** (*Phone*) Me too.

**Narrator:** Or maybe she loves the life she'd had with him. So now Nelly is trying to focus on the Óscar thing. (*Nelly looks impatiently towards Enzo's room.*) Óscar is a co-worker, and even though nothing has really happened between them, Nelly enjoys indirectly letting Del Monico know she's "getting her life up and going again". (*Nelly pretends to relax, posing "naturally" on the sofa.*) In order to disguise the true

purpose of the evening, which is to display Óscar and her looking natural together, Nelly also invited her brother Steeler.

*Bell.*

**Nelly:** Uch, Steeler!

*She goes to open the door.*

**Narrator:** Steeler lives far away, he's a visual artist of some renown, and his private life is a bit of a mystery. He makes conceptual art, it's been years since Nelly saw a single painting of his. Steeler does not paint paintings.

*Steeler and Dai Chi enter. Steeler is carrying a present from the Duty Free. Steeler and Nelly hug affectionately.*

**Narrator:** They hug affectionately. But it's clear there isn't much intimacy between them. Nelly thinks he's an eccentric.

**Nelly:** What did you bring me? A present?

**Narrator:** But it happens to be Christmas and Steeler is in Buenos Aires. Nelly thought that by inviting more people, her project—of showing herself and Óscar off to Del Monico—would seem more natural. I don't know them very well, but I'm already realizing this decision is going to have catastrophic results. Let's hope for the best.

*Nelly opens the gift: a box of pasta.*

**Nelly:** Noodles.

**Steeler:** Yeah, I didn't know what you were going to make.

**Nelly:** So you... There's turkey, holiday food. What am I supposed to do with this?

**Steeler:** Whatever you want. Free country. Peronist but democratic. This is my new girl: Dai Chi.

**Narrator:** And Dai Chi is me.

**Nelly:** She's much younger than you.

**Steeler:** You noticed? I've got twelve years on her. But we're the same sign in the Chinese horoscope, right?

**Nelly:** Really? What sign?

**Steeler:** How do I know, Nelly. It's a figure of speech. *(Sees Del Monico, who is still talking to Sophie.)* Del Monico, my friend!

*Del Monico makes a frugal gesture as he finishes his conversation. He takes refuge in the kitchen.*

**Nelly:** Well because this is the year of the Buffalo.

*Steeler makes some strange signs to Dai Chi. He imitates an animal.*

**Nelly:** What are you doing? Is she deaf-mute?

**Steeler:** I don't think so. But I don't speak Korean. And she doesn't speak Spanish.

*Dai Chi smiles, nods several times, puts her hands together as if praying, and then murmurs some syllables in her native tongue.*

**Dai Chi:** Taw-kee orra-saymee.

*Dai Chi wrinkles her snout and acts as though she were nibbling a nut. She emits indecipherable syllabic sounds.*

**Nelly:** What's she saying?

**Steeler:** Mm.

**Nelly:** But you guys can understand each other?

**Steeler:** Squirrel. No.

**Dai Chi:** Lat. Rittle LAT.

**Steeler:** Rat, she's saying. She's a rat.

**Nelly:** Ah, the most intelligent sign. The rat was the first animal to reach Buddha.

**Dai Chi** *Says something in Korean that sounds dangerously close to:* Sheet a shelf raffing!

**Nelly:** Robert, hang up and come say hi to my brother!

**Steeler:** *(Low.)* Did you invite him or did he just show up?

**Nelly:** Enzo insisted on spending Christmas with his father, what do you want me to do.

**Steeler:** You could have warned me.

**Nelly:** Is this the books?

*Del Monico enters from the kitchen.*

**Del Monico:** *(A tense wave.)* So? How's it going?

*Pause.*

**Steeler:** Fine.

**Del Monico:** Merry Christmas.

*Pause.*

**Steeler:** Yes.

**Del Monico:** *(Crosses to Dai Chi, offers his hand.)* Del Monico, pleased to meet you.

*Dai Chi is startled by this large hand so close, covers her chest in alarm, retreats and performs some Asian reverence. It's all unfortunate. Murmurs something in purported Korean, something that sounds like:*

**Dai Chi:** No-poka tee-tee! Mudda fukka!

**Steeler:** That's my girlfriend. She's Korean. She has other customs. Don't get too close, she might think...

**Del Monico:** *(Doesn't believe one word of it— which is logical since Dai Chi doesn't look remotely Asian— but opts to play along with the game in a civilized way.)* Korean?

**Dai Chi:** Fo-rean.

**Steeler:** Her name is Dai Chi.

**Dai Chi:** Dai Chi.

**Del Monico:** Oh how nice. How do you say Merry Christmas in Korean?

**Dai Chi:** Tu ply-cee.

**Steeler:** No idea.

**Del Monico:** OK, Merry Christmas.

**Nelly:** They don't celebrate Christmas there.

**Dai Chi:** Tuuu ply-cee.

**Nelly:** Enzo! I'm not telling you again!

*Óscar emerges from Enzo's room. They all look at him in surprise. They hadn't known Óscar was with Enzo.*

**Steeler:** You grew up a lot since I last saw you.

**Óscar:** Hi. No! *(Introducing himself.)* Óscar. Óscar Castrilli.

**Steeler:** Castrilli? This is him? Your new boyfriend? *(Makes a vulgar gesture. Óscar is startled.)*

**Nelly:** Oh please, no, he's a friend.

**Steeler:** Oh wow sorry, pleased to meet you, I'm Steeler. I'm Nelly's brother. The baby.

**Óscar:** Nice to meet you. Merry Christmas.

**Del Monico:** *(Introducing himself very formally.)* Del Monico.

*Pause.*

**Steeler:** Don't tell him your last name... It's creepy, Robert...

*All at once.*

**Nelly:** He uses his last name... He wrote this book that...

**Del Monico:** A book on Hegel, it's not a big deal...

**Nelly:** Of course, on philosophy, he goes by his last name, he's Enzo's dad....

**Steeler:** A book on... on...

**Del Monico:** *(To Óscar.)* I'm Enzo's dad. Hegel. *(“Hegel” was to Steeler.)*

**Óscar:** Yes of course. The dad.

**Del Monico:** Yeah, Enzo's grown now, he understands these situations, no need for awkwardness.

**Óscar:** What?

**Del Monico:** Well, now that Enzo's... how old is Enzo, Nelly?

**Nelly:** How bout keep track of it yourself. *(To Óscar.)* What do you have there?

**Óscar:** Well you see...

**Narrator:** Óscar is so solid as to be boring...

**Óscar:** The truth is I did everything a bit wrong...

**Narrator:** Rather taciturn.

**Óscar:** I wanted to bring a Christmas present, but I'm terrible at figuring kids' ages, and well...

**Narrator:** Sensitive, but slightly ridiculous.

**Nelly:** What?

**Óscar:** Well I bought him a book, but then I saw he's much more... mature, and I didn't have the heart to give it to him, I'll return it.

**Steeler:** He's not that mature. What is it?

**Del Monico:** “The Snake who was Opaque”.

**Nelly:** But that's a children's' book...

**Óscar:** OK, yes, but it's a sweet idea... It's about this snake, who's opaque, and so you can't see through her. *(Pause.)* And for example she lies in front of a stick, the snake... And along comes a doggy... And wants to pick up the stick but can't see it...

**Dai Chi:** Beech-y sake-y pake-y.

**Óscar:** No, the snake isn't a bad person, it's just that since she's opaque...

**Nelly:** Ah. OK, don't worry, you can return it.

**Óscar:** Yeah, I'll buy him something more... I don't know... Something by Hermann Hesse.

**Nelly:** Do we want to sit down? What's Enzo doing in there?

**Óscar:** ...dialoguing?

**Del Monico:** You mean "messaging"?

**Óscar:** Mm... He and his friends are typing things.

**Nelly:** They're not friends. They don't even know each other.

**Óscar:** Wow. They're dialoguing like they know each other.

**Steeler:** They are friends. Friendly little voices of binary code, half-words that have transcended the pestiferous flesh. I wish I had a million linked-in friends. I'm going to open an account, pass myself off as a tortured teenager with an ecological conscience, see if I catch anything good. *(He introduces Óscar to Dai Chi).* This is Dai Chi, my flesh and blood girlfriend. *(Heads into Enzo's room.)* Enzo, can you open an account for your uncle the snob?

**Óscar:** Hello, pleasure to meet you.

*Dai Chi performs some obeisance and laughs hysterically for a longish while, which disconcerts everybody. She says things in Korean that seem to be other things, for example:*

**Dai Chi:** Udda mudda fukka no poka!

**Nelly:** She's Korean.

**Óscar:** Ah. *(He doesn't understand if this is a joke or what.)*

**Nelly:** Guys, Steeler says she's Korean, she doesn't speak a word of Spanish.

**Dai Chi:** Data sow-ryke boor-sheep.

**Óscar:** Ah.

*Suddenly Dai Chi hands out little cards to everyone. They seem to be some kind of Pokémon.*

**Narrator:** Maybe this is a good time to clarify the animosity between Steeler and Del Monico. I'll tell you what I was told, but I might not have all the information. Robert never much liked Steeler. He is pretentious and arrogant, but the worst thing was the books. In 1989, Steeler presented a work in the "Youth for Democracy" Biennial.

*Dai Chi offers them cards that seem to bear characters, selecting one for each person. Nobody understands if it's a game or what. She gives Óscar, Nelly and Robert names like: "Ka-Tok", "Brokka Finga-nel", "Ho-Chi-Min" respectively.*

**Óscar:** Oh, look, how nice.

**Nelly:** It must be her business card.

**Óscar:** All these little drawings.

**Narrator:** Everybody was young once. And so was Argentina's democracy.

**Nelly:** Oh look, mine is different. They're so pretty, how original.

**Óscar:** Wait, I'll give you my card.

*Óscar looks in his wallet and gets out a business card.*

*Gives it to her.*

*Dai Chi doesn't understand what she's been offered. Bows in thanks.*

*She raises Óscar's card to her mouth.*

**Narrator:** The Berlin wall had just come down, everywhere you looked there was an indefinable effervescence. In the end, his piece was very commented upon. Hostile reviews appeared in newspapers. It was a performance in which Steeler himself, seated on a stool, read fragments of philosophical texts and then threw them in the fire.

**Nelly:** What's she doing?

*Dai Chi licks the card and discovers it's not for licking. Smiles in embarrassment. Indicates the cards she gave them.*

**Narrator:** A pile of two hundred philosophy books. Steeler would open one randomly, select a fragment, read it to the auditorium, and then tear out the page and throw it into a bin in which he'd started a fire with lighter fluid and charcoal.

**Dai Chi:** Rick! Rick! Handy-mowf! Suh-kit beech!

**Óscar:** Oh, they must be sweets.

**Nelly:** How original!

*They lick them. Long pause. Nelly and Óscar try to eat the cards. Dai Chi makes signs that the cards aren't edible: she mimes licking the card and putting it on the back of her hand, thus transferring the image, then looking with delight*

*at the image on the back of her hand. We may understand the meaning of this sequence of gestures, but Óscar, Nelly, and Del Monico do not.*

**Narrator:** The performance lasted all day, from 10 to 6. Steeler only took one five minute break to eat a hot dog (the hot dog was much discussed), and then around four in the afternoon, instead of single pages Steeler started throwing entire volumes into the fire. He'd read the title and toss the book to the flames.

**Dai Chi:** Foto?

*Dai Chi takes photos of them licking the cards.*

**Narrator:** The polemics and insults Steeler received were great for his career, and suddenly he became part of certain neoconceptualist art circles. That's when he definitively stopped painting. Nelly never understood why.

**Del Monico:** This is paper.

**Nelly:** Of course, they must make it with rice paper, squid paper, they're like treats.

**Narrator:** Cultural institutions the world over began to commission works. Steeler received scholarships and traveled widely. He ended up living in Zurich. Or Basel.

**Óscar:** It's kind of... mentholated, is it?

**Narrator:** The point is that most of these books belonged to Del Monico. One day, Steeler had come to Nelly and Robert's house and asked to borrow some books from the library. Or he just took them. He didn't mention he was going to burn them. When Del Monico found out, he was very angry.

*Dai Chi wants to take a photo of Del Monico, but he declines.*

**Del Monico:** It's ink. *(He takes the card out of his mouth and throws it in the garbage.)*

**Narrator:** Some of the books had been signed by friends, by ex-girlfriends, by some university professor, he said. They were irreplaceable.

**Nelly:** OK, that's enough. Very tasty, you.

*Dai Chi bows her head. Then she sits to look at the photos in her little Asian camera.*

**Narrator:** Included were the complete works of Heidegger in hardcover with burgundy cloth lining. Steeler never apologized. Del Monico asked him several times to give back his books. Steeler always replied evasively and then left the country. But now it was Christmas, and Steeler had come home. As had Del Monico. Everyone had come home.

*Steeler enters carrying the sleeve of a shirt, apparently violently torn off. He also has a bit of blood on his nose.*

**Steeler:** Let's see if this can be sewn back on.

**Nelly:** That's Enzo's new shirt.

**Steeler:** You don't know what we got into. He'll tell you.

**Nelly:** What were you doing?

**Steeler:** Nothing. Just dicking around. Is dinner ready?

**Del Monico:** You want to eat? Why don't you put those noodles on the fire?

**Nelly:** Drop it, we're not eating the noodles.

**Steeler:** Course not, if there's other good stuff. But—seriously—eat them some other time if you want, I'm not bringing them back.

**Del Monico:** (*With heavy irony.*) No, no, take the Ronzoni back if you want. You're happy to eat Nelly's green bean casserole and turkey, right?

**Steeler:** Right. Did you bring anything for dinner?

**Del Monico:** Doesn't matter. Now that you mention it, will you be in Buenos Aires for long?

**Steeler:** Maybe. Between Buenos Aires and Montevideo. I have a little project there.

**Del Monico:** Oh, Montevideo, how lovely. Could I ask you something else, could you please give me back Volume I of the Complete Works of Heidegger that you took in 1989?

**Steeler:** Course. I'll give it to Nelly.

**Del Monico:** You'll give it to her? You know the one I'm talking about, right? The hardcover with the nice burgundy cloth lining?

**Nelly:** Please let's not start up with the book routine. You both know the books got burned.

**Del Monico:** They "got burned"?

**Nelly:** Can we try to make peace. Or go outside and fight a duel. But this is my house.

**Del Monico:** Your house? This is *your* house?

**Nelly:** (*Confronting him.*) As far as I'm able to understand, *now* this is my house. Yes. And I'll invite whoever I like. (*To Óscar.*) Óscar, have a seat. And thanks for talking to that friend of yours about getting Enzo a new passport.

*During all this, Dai Chi has taken a yogurt out of her bag and is eating it with her fingers.*

**Del Monico:** A new passport?

**Nelly:** I've been telling you for two months they don't want to renew it because he tore his ID card, you told me you'd take care of it. Well fine, Óscar's taking care of it now.

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**Óscar:** Sure. It's not hard for me, some of the guys in security...

**Del Monico:** Why does Enzo need a passport? Is he leaving the country?

**Nelly:** You know what, Robert? If you only came to make trouble, you shouldn't have come.

**Del Monico:** I came for Enzo, and now it would seem he's about to leave the country and I don't even know where to.

**Steeler:** I told him if he wanted he could come see me...

**Del Monico:** Oh fine then, if it's to visit his uncle in Zurich...

**Steeler:** Basel.

**Del Monico:** ... his uncle the pyromaniac, no problem!

**Steeler:** Mm. I wouldn't go that far. Burning things is as old as mankind. Entire civilizations have had to burn so we could be here eating turkey and being what we are.

*Dai Chi throws the yogurt container on the floor. Nobody dares say anything.*

**Steeler:** And you, Óscar? Don't you burn things? You've never tried burning anything?

**Óscar:** Noo, I've always had too much respect for fire. Oh, Nelly, did you hear what happened to Lydia?

**Nelly:** To Lydia? No, what?

**Óscar:** Oof, you don't know. *(To Steeler.)* A colleague. *(To Nelly.)* You know how they transferred her to Alsina because the Virrey Cevallos office burned down?

**Nelly:** Yeah.

**Óscar:** Can you believe, yesterday Alsina burned down.

**Nelly:** No! The poor thing! Twice in a row!

**Óscar:** Well... kind of three times, because she'd come from Reconquista, remember?, where it seems there was some kind of short in the electrical system...

**Steeler:** It's her. She burns the offices.

**Óscar:** Pardon?

**Steeler:** Nothing. Just offering the most logical explanation. Why don't I shut up and we can whack into that turkey.

**Óscar:** The thing is, fire is uncontrollable. It has this destructive power that...

**Steeler:** Depends in whose hands. It can be a greatly constructive force, if we dive into its contradictory capacities. You know, Óscar, I once did a piece where...

**Del Monico:** Did you really?

**Steeler:** ...yes... where basically fragments of some of the “great ideas” were publicly read, pulled from some... volumes... of philosophy, and after reading them, the pages were burned before everyone’s eyes.

**Óscar:** ...and?

**Steeler:** The philosophical idea lasted—in this country—no longer than it took to be read.

**Del Monico:** False, the idea lived on, printed in other copies of the same books.

**Steeler:** It was a representation. Like a painting. A landscape, but of morality. The represented object in a painting stays frozen— it doesn’t matter whether the actual landscape continues to exist as a mirror image of the painting, or whether now it’s raining on that flowery meadow.

**Del Monico:** How lovely. So the flowery meadow mirroring your fabulous piece would be, oh, Heidegger and Kant... now all rained upon of course.

*Nelly offers Dai Chi some cheese cubes skewered with toothpicks in a cheese hedgehog. Dai Chi lets out a shriek of terror (it may resemble a Pokémon villain that has been haunting her dreams). When she realizes it’s unthreatening she seizes a huge number of toothpicks.*

**Nelly:** Now that you say landscape... Why did you stop painting after that?

**Steeler:** I have an enormous capacity for surpassing myself. I stopped painting. Now I’ve stopped representing altogether.

**Del Monico:** Aha. You don’t paint, you don’t write...

**Steeler:** Words? No!

**Del Monico:** You don’t represent...

**Steeler:** I try not to.

**Del Monico:** So what do you sell to these biennials?

**Dai Chi:** *(Says something in Korean that seems to sound like) Bour-sheep. (And begins to fix the cheese cubes to the branches of the Christmas tree as if they were snow.)*

**Steeler:** Well... It gets harder and harder. I mean, to extricate oneself from the fetishism of the commodity ...

**Del Monico:** ...and still figure out how to sell it.

**Steeler:** Mm. I'm a survivor. You have to live on something.

**Del Monico:** Fine, on grants. Subsidies.

**Steeler:** Subsidies? Please! A cheap toll! A few coins cultures toss artists so we can show them what road to follow.

**Del Monico:** A cheap toll? Wow. I'd have been delighted if some ministry had given me a grant to continue my work on Hegel.

**Steeler:** We all would have been delighted.

**Del Monico:** What's that supposed to mean?

**Nelly:** Nothing. Basta.

**Del Monico:** No, "basta" with the bullshit. Check it out, Óscar my friend: Culture is a joke. Here you have one guy who burns books, and one guy who writes them. Tries to write them. Who do you think gets welcomed into the warm embrace of Culture?

**Steeler:** Alright, it's not that big a deal, I only burned books the once, it's not like I made a career of it.

**Del Monico:** Only once? Wow, that's great. And I only wrote one book, just the one time.

**Nelly:** And you did great, they read it in all the schools, "Hegel with the Schoolgirls"!

*Steeler can't avoid letting out a cackle at the freudian slip, spitting and/or spilling his drink on Óscar's pants. He may ad-lib something like "That's the second edition!"*

**Nelly:** Agh, what an animal!

**Del Monico:** Wait, I'll get you some paper towels. *(Exits to the kitchen, really so as to avoid punching Steeler.)*

**Steeler:** I'm sorry.

**Nelly:** You're an animal. Please, I'm asking you: don't start up again with the books.

**Steeler:** I didn't start it.

**Nelly:** Then end it. Buy a handful of random books somewhere and give them to him.

**Steeler:** But doesn't he understand that the books no longer exist, that they were burned in all their glory? Can he be that—I mean, *that* naïve?

**Nelly:** You're a moron.

**Óscar:** What books?

**Nelly:** Nothing, my ex lent him some books and he burned them as a work of art.

**Steeler:** Stop, Nelly, seriously. When you say it like that I sound like a monster.

**Nelly:** Well if you want to say it another way, go for it. But that's what happened.

**Steeler:** Yeah but if that's what happened, Robert must be waiting for me to apologize. *(dawning)* I never apologized, did I?

*Steeler sees Dai Chi decorating the tree with the cheese and indicates to her that the cheese is for eating. She begins to eat it off the tree. He indicates that no, it should be eaten from the hedgehog. Dai Chi begins to carefully transfer the cheese back from the tree to the hedgehog. In her mouth.*

**Nelly:** I don't want any more drama. Come here, Óscar, let's see if we can get Enzo to lend you some pants, we'll get you out of these, I'll dry them with the iron.

**Óscar:** It's fine, we don't need to.

**Nelly:** You're not spending Christmas in my house with pissy pants.

**Óscar:** It's only a little water.

**Nelly:** Enzo! See if you can lend Óscar some pants! *(And pushes Óscar into Enzo's room.)* And you, listen here, look in my eyes. We're gonna wrap up the joke and be adults for once. How the hell is that girl Korean? You think we were born yesterday?

**Steeler:** Dai Chi? She's Korean.

**Nelly:** Please, Steeler. Koreans are from Asia.

*Dai Chi seems to understand that they're talking about her, or maybe understands the supposed joke has gone far enough. She gets up in an extremely Western manner, as if she were ending the scene, and fed up, picks up her purse and leaves for the kitchen shouting indecipherably.*

**Steeler:** *(Trying to calm her down, maybe in German or a made-up language.)* Wait, darling. *(To Nelly.)* See what you did?

**Nelly:** Fine, keep it up. Adults.

**Steeler:** She's Korean. *(Pause.)* She was adopted. By a Korean family. They found her abandoned. A Korean husband and wife were on vacation, they found her as a baby on the beach. They asked around there on the beach, she didn't belong to anybody. They adopted her. She grew up Korean. It was after a tsunami. Her biological parents probably died.

**Nelly:** Seriously?

*Long pause.*

**Steeler:** Hand to god.

**Nelly:** Tourist parents?

*Steeler shrugs. Silence. If it were true, and it could be, it would be nothing to laugh about.*

**Óscar:** *(Emerges from Enzo's room, wearing his own shoes and socks with a pair of shorts from some soccer team, which fit him quite snugly.)* Great, he loaned me some lil shorts.

**Nelly:** You're not wearing those? Enzo!

**Óscar:** The long pants were all too small.

**Nelly:** So are those.

**Óscar:** I tried on everything.

**Nelly:** You're not going to spend Christmas Eve in those. Enzo! *(Exits to find another pair of pants.)*

*Del Monico enters with a roll of paper towels. Sees Óscar. Is about to ask him something. Thinks better of it.*

**Steeler:** Robert, I'd like to apologize to you.

**Del Monico:** My goodness, OK. That's interesting.

**Steeler:** About the books.

**Del Monico:** Yes?

**Steeler:** I... well, that. I apologize.

**Del Monico:** And that's it? I mean... let's say for me... I don't know... that's not good enough, and I don't accept your apology... then I'm a son of a bitch on Christmas. Is that why you're here?

**Steeler:** No, I don't think so. What happened is, the way my sister put it just now, it made it sound like I burned your books like some totally run-of-the-mill insensitive guy.

**Del Monico:** That is what happened.

**Steeler:** Mm. It was a piece of art.

**Del Monico:** To whom? To Culture? To Biennials?

**Steeler:** You loved those books that much?

**Del Monico:** I adored them.

**Steeler:** You shouldn't have lent them to me. *(The next lines overlap.)*

**Del Monico:** I didn't lend them to you! You see? There he goes again.

**Steeler:** You lent them to me. *(To Óscar.)* He lent them to me!

**Del Monico:** I didn't lend them to you! You didn't even tell me what you were going to do with them.

**Steeler:** Obviously. I didn't know what I was going to do with them. I asked you for them, I read them—OK, I flipped through them—and then I made them immortal. Óscar my friend, those were years when people could still be scandalized by legible actions. (*To Del Monico.*) Seen from another perspective, which because of your personal affective situation you obviously can't occupy, you could feel thankful to me.

**Del Monico:** This is over. I don't want to fight.

**Steeler:** Because you don't want to lose. I apologized to you, which obviously... I don't know... is a little hard for me. You could say thanks, couldn't you?

**Del Monico:** Am I the only person who can see the potential for this to become really disagreeable?

**Steeler:** (*to Óscar*) Disagreeable? What a word! Don't be afraid, since when do we all have to agree? Not everything in the world can be agreeable. The world is *filled* with contradictions. For that matter the world isn't even the world, it's an ideological construction of *a* world. And by the way, that construction is governed by the logic of capital. Of money.

**Del Monico:** Not all worlds are.

**Steeler:** But this one, where you and I are having this conversation, is. The fact that money is constantly tightening the threads of this construction we call the world is why no everyday action, (*as Nelly is drying the pants on a fan, condoms and a lollipop fall out of the pockets*), no contemplation, no bean casserole, no quest for beauty, can opt itself out of the cruel symptom of ideology.

**Óscar:** How is that?

**Steeler:** I... see you in those shorts and contemplate the possibility of not explaining anything to you.

**Del Monico:** No, no, no, please. Go ahead, enlighten us. (*to Óscar.*) I didn't know this one could defend an argument in addition to being a pyromaniac.

**Steeler:** Defend! That's a piece of cake. The hard thing is the attack. And anyway, it's not my argument. It's pure postmarxism. Look: all around, postmarxism oozing out of everything.

**Del Monico:** Congratulations. Obviously you read those books carefully before you burned them.

**Steeler:** Obviously. Turn on the tap and what comes out?

**Óscar:** Water?

**Nelly:** Postmarxism, Óscar.

**Steeler:** Postmarxism. (*Gestures all around. Dai Chi comes back from the kitchen.*) This is a sphere of ideology, gentlemen. There are ideas here. Ideas are inevitable. They come and go. But they're all false.

**Óscar:** All of them?

**Steeler:** All of them. They all have a blind spot spiked into their souls, a fatal flaw in their categorical definitions.

**Nelly:** It's going to be midnight and we won't even have started the potato salad.

**Steeler:** Exactly! That's what I'm saying. Give me a value, an example, a universal value. A strong idea. Whatever you want.

**Dai Chi:** (*Sings, plugged into her Asian i-pod.*) That's amor-ee.

**Steeler:** What?

**Dai Chi:** Amore.

**Steeler:** What?

**Dai Chi:** Amore.

**Steeler:** Love! Of course. Love is a universal idea. And it's good, right? Love is something very good, isn't it?

**Óscar:** Most beautiful word in the world.

**Steeler:** Beautiful! We all say it: love is great! Filial love. Erotic love. Sexual love. What a rogues' gallery! (*Indicates Del Monico.*) Love for friends, (*kisses Nelly*) for family. (*The tree:*) Love for art. Love for little girls. (*Nelly looks at Del Monico.*) For handsome youths. (*Óscar chokes.*) Self-love. (*Steeler indicates himself.*) It's a disaster: it's all gonna add up to love being a piece of crap, or at least to "love" occasionally designating its opposite.

**Óscar:** But "self-love"... That's not love...

**Steeler:** What is it?

**Óscar:** Well... it's narcissism.

**Steeler:** (*Feigning defeat.*) Oof, yes. And what's that? How would you define it?

**Óscar:** An excessive... love... for oneself.

**Steeler:** Oh, love. It is love.

**Óscar:** OK I used the word but...

**Steeler:** Of course you used the word! We all use words and we forget that every word is actually an enormous set that includes among its subsets concepts that signify the contrary. Same thing with any other universal value. Whatever you like. Justice. What's just, what's unjust. Beauty. What's beautiful, what's horrible...

**Del Monico:** Freedom.

**Steeler:** Freed... (*Pauses.*) Ooh, you nailed me, huh? Perfect. Freedom. (*Hesitates.*) No, I'm not saying anything. Freedom is good. Isn't it?

**Óscar:** Yes.

**Steeler:** Global idea. Universal. And it's very good. We say: "Oh boy freedom is really good". "Ugh, those poor people who don't have their freedom".

**Óscar:** Yes. Look at Iraq.<sup>3</sup> Or Cuba, right? I've never been there, but they have it tough.

**Steeler:** But it's false, you dimwit, it's false. This universal idea of freedom— which is so good— contains more *specific* ideas, concrete examples of freedom: freedom of the press, freedom of expression...

**Del Monico:** Freedom to burn someone else's books in a biennial...

**Steeler:** Absolutely!, freedom of commerce (which is also known as usury), freedom of religion (as long as you don't want to wear a turban on an airplane), whatever you like. And at the same time, as you can see, it includes at least one aspect, even if it's just one concrete aspect ("turban") of this global freedom ("religion"), that refutes the universal concept ("freedom") itself.

**Óscar:** So the real thing goes against the idea it's supposed to be an example of? How does that work?

**Steeler:** For example: the idea that a laborer has "freedom", that he's "free" to sell his own work on the market that suits him best. That fantastic idea, whose actual name is "exploitation", gets sold to you in a pretty box labeled "freedom". This ugly thing hides there in the pretty box, mixed in with the very opposite concept: freedom. The box, by the way, is called "the idea." What do they sell you in the "love" box? (*re: Del Monico*) Fidelity, (*re Nelly*) family, (*putting his hand on Óscar's thigh*) sexual repression... Every single idea works like that. (*To Del Monico.*) All your ideas work like that. (*To Óscar.*) And all words are ideas. OK, Óscar. How many hours a day do you work?

**Del Monico:** How many do you?

**Steeler:** None. I've opted out. But let's check this with our laborer friend.

*Óscar doesn't at all like being referred to as a "laborer".*

**Óscar:** Listen: I *am* free to sell my own work on whatever market suits me best. For example, if I decide to walk out of my office...

**Steeler:** Where do you go?

**Óscar:** To another division.

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<sup>3</sup> Or, at the time of this translation, perhaps Syria. Update as needed.  
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**Steeler:** Oh, you *are* free!

**Óscar:** Yes, “Legal and technical” have asked for me more than once... Haven’t they, Nelly?

**Steeler:** At this point I’m not sure if it’s the shorts or you, but something here is definitely not OK. *(Pause.)* The very work you sell on your free market is the enslavement of the laborer to capital.

**Óscar:** Fine, if you guys don’t want I won’t say anything.

**Del Monico:** And you, do you even know what a laborer looks like?

**Steeler:** *(Laughs.)* No, but I always pictured him more or less *(describes Óscar)* this height, balding, wearing hot pants...

**Óscar:** I thought we were allowed to have an opinion.

**Steeler:** Mh. “Freedom of opinion”. Of course you’re allowed. Let’s opine! But first let’s accept that we’re all united by this primal trauma.

**Dai Chi:** *(Says something that sounds like)* Ne-rry, tutu menny peenie heeah.

**Steeler:** We use words, we believe they’re universal, but we apply the particulars however they suit us best, basically words are our alibi! And we justify this sneaky and reprehensible move via the abstract universal idea—“freedom.” We gnaw like rodents.

**Dai Chi:** Lat! Rittle Lat!

**Steeler:** We gnaw our words.

**Del Monico:** Some gnaw harder than others.

**Steeler:** Well no, some have more success than others. But everybody gnaws. He does, she does, everyone does. The brilliant winners and the born losers. *(Switching referents quickly to avoid getting punched.)* Who live off of Swiss government subsidies.

**Óscar:** What I think is, maybe we should find another word for the so-called “freedom” of the laborer.

**Steeler:** No. Error. The exact opposite. It’s terrific that all those freedoms have the same name; in fact *that’s* the basis of the concept of “freedom,” *not* thing we usually think of as freedom, which the cheapest dictionary in the world can define.

**Óscar:** So the dictionary lies.

**Steeler:** Hoo-ha!

**Óscar:** We’re really gonna have to find another word.

**Steeler:** Look out, you’re starting to get excited...

**Óscar:** Why shouldn't I?

**Steeler:** Hey don't get me wrong, it's fabulous. This is what I do for a living! I'm just afraid if we keep going like this, one of these days you're going to show up at your office and light everything on fire. Or this dimwit's going to thank me for burning those fucking books he loaned me.

**Del Monico:** I didn't loan them to you. And you burned them because you were a long-haired, dope-smoking post-hippy douchebag. Or are you gonna tell me that eyebrow piercing had opted out of the symptom of ideology?

**Steeler:** (*unfazed*) No. I burned them because, exactly like you— like our new friend Óscar in his hotpants— I'm trying to look for that word. That word that isn't in the dictionary.

**Del Monico:** Ah, you're an artist! Of course. How wonderful, get paid to not give a fuck about anything.

**Steeler:** There are a couple things I give a fuck about.

**Del Monico:** Not words.

**Steeler:** Well that might be true.

**Del Monico:** And not my philosophy books.

**Steeler:** I didn't know how much they meant to you. Period. And anyway, the more they meant to you, the more sense my piece should have made to you. You didn't even come see me at the biennial. You didn't see me eat that hot dog.

**Del Monico:** I wasn't invited.

**Steeler:** Ah. Oh. Well um, I'm... I don't know. That could be... That may be the case. Well, I apologize again.

**Del Monico:** I wouldn't have gone in any case.

**Steeler:** Fantastic. Nelly, are we going to eat? Nelly, are you OK?

**Nelly:** No. I can't take another second of this. (*To Del Monico.*) I invited you for Enzo. But as you can see, I'm getting my life going again, so now Óscar's here, and the truth is I'm going to have to ask you to go spend Christmas alone, or with one of your schoolgirls, I don't give the slightest fuck, you can explain it to your son when he's old enough to understand why you abandoned us.

**Del Monico:** What?

**Óscar:** What?

**Nelly:** I don't know what exact type of freedom you're exercising with your little girlfriends. But my brother is right.

**Steeler:** Nelly... No...

**Nelly:** He's right about one thing. Freedom sucks. (*Exits, very upset.*)

*Pause.*

**Narrator:** Nobody has much more to say. This sort of thing happens at Christmas.

**Del Monico:** Perfect. This is the thing. I love a girl. Her name is Sophie. Maybe I'm a lot older than she is. But I love her. Right now, while I'm thinking about whatever else, (*to Steeler*) for example punching you in the face, I'm also thinking about her. It's not just a crush. It's not just any love, some universal idea. It is particular, and concrete, and instead of wasting my time here while my ass-hat son tweets and looks at porn, I'm gonna cross this fucking city, I'm gonna seek her out in her house, I'm gonna drag her from the family table and I'm gonna get the hell out of here. With Sophie. To the Bird Sanctuary.

**Steeler:** (*Wants to respond to Del Monico, but his telephone rings.*) Excuse me. It's the guy from the Montevideo Biennial.

*Dai Chi explodes into tiny hysterical applause, and goes to sit at his side.*

**Narrator:** The next day things always return to square one.

**Steeler:** (*Gesturing to Del Monico that he'll be with him in one sec.*) Hello! Yes, how are you. Merry Christmas!

*Dai Chi searches among various absurd objects in her purse and finally passes him a daybook bearing some notes and calculations. Steeler speaks on the telephone but maintains a strange relation of signs and gestures with her.*

**Narrator:** But not yet. This magical hour is still in effect, the system's terrible blind spot where words slowly, painfully die.

**Steeler:** Right. I've been calculating how much it would cost to do the piece and...

**Narrator:** Words are all contradictory, and say what they're supposed to say but also contain their opposite.

**Steeler:** It's not good business.

**Narrator:** Because words aren't sound.

**Steeler:** No. I don't think you're going to be able to afford it.

**Narrator:** They aren't noise.

**Steeler:** I think you should call someone else.

**Narrator:** They aren't useful.

**Steeler:** No.

**Narrator:** They aren't beautiful.

**Steeler:** You're not gonna be able to.

**Narrator:** They have no purpose.

**Steeler:** No, the piece itself isn't complicated. But you aren't going to be able to afford it.

**Narrator:** Words are at best our way of existing in the world.

*Del Monico sees that the grand exit he'd announced has no spectators, and leaves slowly and in silence. He gets his coat, thinks about saying goodbye to Enzo, but changes his mind and leaves.*

**Steeler:** OK, if you want I'll explain it. You have a sec? We're going to have two or three people, at first they'll talk a bit ... I can send you some sketches for the script. That part's cheap. The interesting thing is that at a certain point in the discussion, they start to burn money.

*Óscar, who was about to slip quietly into Enzo's room, stops, a little surprised by this déjà vu. Then he goes into the room.*

**Steeler:** Yes, real banknotes.

*Dai Chi undergoes strange contortions of faux-Asiatic laughter. She's a Tasmanian devil.*

**Steeler:** That's the problem. (...) No, it has to be real money. (...) Wait wait wait wait. If an artist asks you for oils and you offer him tempera, what does that make you? (...) No. Why? My piece will cost you exactly the amount of money you're prepared to burn in public. (...) Well... no, it doesn't make sense to do it with that little. I won't put my name on it. It doesn't make sense.

**Dai Chi:** To-don-to!

**Steeler:** I can do it in Toronto, they want to burn three times that. (...) How much? *(He makes a sign to Dai Chi. She declines.)* No, I don't know. It doesn't speak to me. I don't know about you guys. (...) What laws of supply and demand? Please, don't come to me with that, it's complete witchcraft! My piece is not a product. (...) I don't know why Toronto offered triple! And I don't care! I'm talking about the *real* value of this piece. Not a pair of Cartesian axes, go argue about that with your bookkeeper. Listen, I mean, I don't know what kind of piece you want: the work of an artist, or an accountant. (...) OK, well we're negotiating, right?

*Blackout.*

*Scene change.*

## Why does every religion become superstition?

### Part 3. [SUPERSTITION]

*The dining room in Celina and Ramiro's house. A feverish baby in the adjoining bedroom. A door to the street, another to the baby's room.*

*The first thing we hear is an intense, persistent rain. Then the Narrator.*

**Voice of the Visitor** (*off*): Many more than two thousand years ago—as we are told in Exodus—the Pharaoh of Egypt, Tutmosis III, was holding the Chosen People captive. The Jews implored him to let them return to the promised land. But the Pharaoh refused.

The god of that people then rose into a patient rage. An organized wrath.

And lashed the Egyptians with ten terrible plagues. He was a god, and his preoccupations didn't go so far as the subtle distinctions between tyrannies and democracies, so to simplify things and make a great story of it, he not only punished the stubborn Pharaoh, but also the entire Jewish people. At least with the first three plagues. With the other seven he protected his people and only punished the Egyptians.

But how did he recognize his people?

How does one recognize a people?

*Ramiro and Diana enter, dying of laughter, soaked to the skin. The Visitor enters with them, a very silent man who will never wind up becoming completely part of the scene, but who has a place in it. As if he'd been invited in, and then forgotten. He is often about to speak and thinks better of it. Ramiro is completely and comfortably aware of his presence, Celina not yet.*

**Ramiro:** But who the heck was she? Did you know her?

**Diana:** No, no. I must have met her at some point, but she's crazy.

**Ramiro:** I cannot believe that happened.

**Diana:** Oh please, she was just messing with you!

**Ramiro:** Messing? No, no, no. I swear (*with a hand puppet gesture*) she totally believed...

**Diana:** What a son of a bitch. She liked your book, and you mock her like a psychopath...

*Celina appears from the baby's room. Very preoccupied.*

**Diana:** Ah, Celina, your husband's a jerk.

**Ramiro:** Not news to you, my darling. (*Crosses to give her a kiss, eventually kisses her on the forehead.*)

**Celina:** You guys are soaked.

**Voice of the visitor** (*off*): Like a sigh.

**Diana:** It's raining like it's the last time it'll ever rain.

**Voice of the visitor** (*off*): It could be the last one. This storm. They say the first plague was released by Aaron: he struck the waters of the Nile with his rod, and all the great river ran blood. But the Pharaoh refused to give the Jews their freedom.

*Ramiro brings cocktails to Diana and the visitor.*

**Celina:** How was it?

**Diana:** The book event? Very good...

**Ramiro:** Total bore.

**Celina:** Did you sign a lot of books?

**Diana:** Of "The Snake who was Opaque"? A shit-ton.

**Ramiro:** I was only signing the old book, as usual, and it was going fine, I guess, until I got ambushed by a muppet.

*They laugh like crazy. Celina wants to laugh but doesn't know what's so funny.*

**Voice of the visitor** (*off*): With the second plague, Aaron extended his hands over the waters, and all Egypt was visited with a plague of disgusting frogs, with slimy skin and piercing eyes.

*Celina signals to them to lower the volume, gesturing towards the baby's bedroom.*

**Ramiro:** Is he asleep? Sorry, you don't know what I've been through. So I'm signing the book, everything's lovely, I'm talking my head off about "The Snake who was Opaque", a very curious non-transparent snake, she goes here, she goes there, but if she stops in front of something you can't see it because she's opaque, anyway a ton of people are in line for me to sign it, full of kids looking at me like I'm some kind of god, poor kids!, the god who feeds the snake, when this crazy woman shows up, a kind of Shari Lewis with a hand puppet...

**Diana:** This disgusting frog...

**Ramiro:** ...this imbecilic, this horrifying thing...

**Diana:** And this crazy bitch starts talking to him and... (*She's laughing too hard to continue.*)

**Ramiro:** And she's making the frog talk to me!...

**Celina:** Like a ventriloquist?

**Ramiro:** No. No. Like a giant talking turd! She was moving her lips kind of off to the side, “Hello, I’m froggy whatever-my-name-is, and I want to tell you that Ferchu and I loved your snake that was opaque ...”

**Diana:** And this asshole thanks it, very seriously, putting on his best business voice: “Well thank you very much, Ferchu”...

**Ramiro:** (*As the frog.*) “Would you sign our copy?”

**Diana:** And the woman isn’t talking to him, won’t look him in the face...

**Ramiro:** That fucking bitch forced me to have a conversation with a sock frog!

**Diana:** No, a toad!

**Ramiro:** In front of everybody!

**Celina:** Can’t win for losing, huh?

**Diana:** All the kids looking at him, he’s stiff as a board, oh god I should have taken a picture for you!

**Celina:** Was Ferchu the frog’s name? Or the woman’s?

**Ramiro:** Huh? Beats me! She’s going “Ferchu”, “Ferchu”. Celina, I almost passed out.

**Celina:** OK, well I hope you were nice at least.

**Ramiro:** Nice? Me?

**Diana:** He was almost choking, poor darling. I’m thinking: “Ciao, we’re sunk. Illustrious children’s author punches astonished puppeteer in the middle of the Children’s Book Fair.”

**Ramiro:** Yeah, that’d be a big problem for you. The goose that lays the golden egg self-destructs in front of your eyes!

*Doctor Carpio emerges from the baby’s room. He’s an emergency house-call doctor.*

**Carpio:** Evening...

**Ramiro:** What happened?

**Celina:** Nothing.

**Ramiro:** Did something happen to the baby?

**Carpio:** No. No, he’s fine.

**Celina:** He was very squirmy and I called the doctor.

**Ramiro:** Why?

**Voice of the visitor** (off): With the third plague, all the sands of Egypt became lice.

**Celina:** He was very squirmy.

**Voice of the visitor** (off): But the Pharaoh still refused.

**Celina:** He had a fever. But by the time the doctor came he was already better.

**Carpio:** Yes, he's fine. The lil tyke was probly a bit hot with the blanket.

**Celina:** I was scared.

**Carpio:** It was good to call. But there's nothing to be worried about. Can I just getcher John Henry here?

**Ramiro:** Of course, of course.

**Celina:** I couldn't find the insurance emergency number.

**Ramiro:** I left it in the drawer with the bills.

**Celina:** Yes, yes, I know, but I don't know what happened to me, you weren't here, you weren't answering your cell...

**Voice of the visitor** (off): With the fourth plague came the flies. All kinds of filthy flies.

**Ramiro:** It was packed. I had to turn it off, it was packed with people... I was signing books.

**Celina:** Yeah I figured. But I also called you in the morning and...

**Ramiro:** I was doing an errand all morning.

**Celina:** And I tried to... What errand?

**Ramiro:** It doesn't matter what errand, Celina.

**Celina:** Yes it matters!

*Ramiro is quiet. He goes to his briefcase and pulls out the invisible paper from Act I and places it on the table with contained violence.*

**Ramiro:** Here it is. I spent the entire morning bouncing from one office to the next. They had a great time denying me that magical stamp. You know what I did in the end?

**Celina:** Ah. Well I called you to find out the number of the insurance...

**Ramiro:** No, no, the thing is you didn't call me. *(Pause.)* He's not in our network?

**Carpio:** I don't know. Which company?

**Celina:** I just looked in the yellow pages.

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**Ramiro:** Ah. There are doctors in the yellow pages?

**Celina:** There's everything in the yellow pages.

**Ramiro:** Ah.

**Celina:** I called the closest guy.

**Carpio:** Yes, well I'm not that close. The office address is, but by then I was cozy at home.

**Celina:** Ugh, I made him come all the way from... where do you live?

**Carpio:** Me? Belgrano.

**Celina:** *(on the verge of tears)* Ugh, what a long trip for nothing, in all this rain.

**Carpio:** Don't worry about it, it was good to call, and if your lil guy still has a fever tomorrow you can check with your pediatrician. So you just cheer up, little lady.

**Celina:** Yes, yes.

**Ramiro:** Thanks.

**Carpio:** OK.

*Pause.*

**Ramiro:** How much do we owe you?

**Carpio:** Seven hundred pesos.

*Silence. Nobody wants to say anything about the astronomical figure.*

**Carpio:** Make sure he doesn't get too hot, and take his tempie again in a couple hours.

**Ramiro:** Yes. Um... just a sec.

*Checks in his pants pockets, in his soaked suit jacket.*

**Voice of the visitor** *(off)*: With the fifth, the livestock died. The horses, the mules...

**Celina:** I don't have it.

**Voice of the visitor** *(off)*: The camels.

**Diana:** Well how much are you short?

**Voice of the visitor** *(off)*: The cows, the sheep.

**Ramiro:** No, wait, I'll go get some cattle.

**Diana:** Some what?

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**Ramiro:** Some cash. At an ATM.

**Diana:** In this rain? You're crazy.

**Ramiro:** Alright, well I'll pay you back later.

**Diana:** How much do you need?

**Ramiro:** Mm... I have a hundred and thirty.

**Diana:** I have five hundred pesos here. They gave me an advance on the distribution at the book fair, so in any case this week we'd have to pay you out...

**Ramiro:** Ah. Well it's mine then. Were you ever going to tell me? How's this supposed to work? *(They laugh. To the doctor.)* I'm seventy short.

*Doctor Carpio is unmoved.*

**Voice of the visitor (off):** For the sixth, Moses took ashes from an oven, threw them into the sky, and God sent them back to earth as itching boils, ulcers and death.

*In rhythm with the previous speech, the visitor takes seventy pesos out of his pocket and puts them on the table.*

**Ramiro:** Oh great. Here you go, doctor.

**Carpio:** Oh, thanks for the change. I'll need it for the taxi.

**Ramiro:** Right, the taxi. You're not going to be able to hail one in this rain. Can I call one for you?

**Carpio:** If you'd be so kind.

**Ramiro:** Yes of course. Just a sec. *(Moves to the side to call a taxi.)*

**Voice of the visitor (off):** With the seventh, the heavens were brought low: rain, hail. Lightning and fire. The sky rained fire mixed with ice. And yet the Pharaoh refused to believe.

**Celina:** Did you eat?

**Diana:** No, some teeny sandwiches at the fair, they were disgusting. You know those hors d'oeuvres.

**Voice of the visitor (off):** With the eighth came the locusts.

**Diana:** Thirty sausages on toothpicks...

**Voice of the visitor (off):** The locusts devoured everything in their path.

**Diana:** They last about a second.

**Voice of the visitor (off):** The Pharaoh saw famine looming over his subjects. But still he refused.

**Celina:** We can heat something up.

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**Diana:** No, it's fine, don't worry about it. I have to go, I'll be eating something at home in no time.

**Celina:** How are you going to go, in this rain?

**Diana:** I'll call another taxi. Ramiro, ask them for another one.

**Ramiro:** *(Still on the phone.)* Oh, sorry, can you make it two? (...) Yeah, same address. How long will that be? (...) *How long?* (...) No, no, send them anyway. *(Hangs up.)* It'll be like half an hour.

*Nobody says anything. The atmosphere is unbearable.*

**Celina:** OK, I'll heat up the lamb a bit.

*Nobody says anything.*

*Celina puts a pot on the stove. Then goes into the baby's room. We can hear her weeping. Doctor Carpio lowers his head.*

**Voice of the visitor** *(off):* With the ninth, God—by now fed up—sent darkness. For three consecutive days the sun refused to shine on Egypt. The darkness was so thick you could touch it with your hands. But the Pharaoh claimed to be stronger than God. And refused to free the Jewish people.

*The visitor catches Ramiro's eye, as if he were asking permission, and then exits to the baby's room where Celina is.*

**Ramiro:** Sit down, Doctor, please. It's going to be a while. Can I get you something to snack on, or...?

**Diana:** No.

**Carpio:** Sure. Thank you.

**Ramiro:** *(Goes for some snacks.)* What a night.

**Diana:** You can't see a thing...

**Ramiro:** Yeah, it's freezing.

**Carpio:** You guys should dry yourselves off right away.

**Ramiro:** Yeah, yeah. I was just about to... get a towel... *(We hear Celina weeping through the baby monitor on the table.)* She's a little bit like that, about the baby... It's all so new. He came without instructions.

**Carpio:** It's OK. What's his name?

**Ramiro:** The baby? Of course. She didn't tell you his name?

**Carpio:** No.

*Ramiro shakes his head silently.*

**Diana:** (*Joking*) Because he's so ugly.

**Ramiro:** (*Laughing*) What did you say!?

**Carpio:** Oh yes. He's homely.

*They look at him in silence.*

**Carpio:** Well, all babies are kind of ugly.

**Ramiro:** Are you a GP or a pediatrician?

**Carpio:** (*miserable*) Pediatrician. Pediatrician.

**Ramiro:** Ah.

**Voice of the visitor** (*off*): So God was getting tired. And sent the tenth plague.

God whispered the plan to his oppressed people. (*Through the baby monitor we hear Celina sing a lullaby.*) "Around midnight shall I finally descend into Egypt", he told them, "in the form of a sigh. And all the firstborn shall die. But do not be afraid, because my breath will not touch our own people." In return for this magnanimous gesture, God asked of his people a single, strictly practical, act of faith: "You shall mark the doors of your houses with the blood of a lamb. And my mortal breath shall pass over the houses which bear that mark". During the day, the patient Jewish people went to find lambs and sacrificed them in His honor, and before night fell, full of terror, they did what their God had asked. And marked the doors of their houses. Then they embraced their children, and all waited, in silence, as the sun set.

*The visitor re-enters and sits again in his chair. We hear Celina weeping.*

**Ramiro:** I'm sorry. (*Exits to the bedroom.*)

**Diana:** Did the baby have a high fever?

**Carpio:** Nope.

**Diana:** Mm.

**Voice of the visitor** (*off*): The story—like all good stories—is full of contradictions. (*Over the baby monitor we hear Celina and Ramiro arguing.*) How is it possible, for example, that the plague of frogs was borne from the waters of the Nile, when it would seem the Nile was still running with blood? Or where did the Jewish people get the lambs to sacrifice, when the fifth plague had killed all the lambs? How did the Jewish people wait for nightfall if the ninth plague had brought darkness, so it was always night? Exodus doesn't explain how all this could have happened in so little time. Nobody explains. If one asks about these discrepancies, they tell you the story is constructed entirely of symbols, as if that freed it from responsibility to the truth. Sometimes it's hard to believe in symbols.

*Celina and Ramiro come out of the bedroom. They've been arguing.*

**Celina:** Alright, Doctor. I have to ask you a question. If you have a new car, and you hear that the basilica in Luján performs a mass of healing to bless cars, and you don't believe in anything like that, what is the problem in going to Luján anyway and buying an oilcan of holy water to use for windshield wiper fluid?

**Carpio:** None.

**Celina:** You see?

**Ramiro:** What? What do you want now? You want to go to Luján with the doctor to buy a plastic jug of holy water?

**Celina:** No. I want to go with you.

**Ramiro:** Why? I don't believe in any of that.

**Celina:** Me neither.

**Ramiro:** Agh!

**Celina:** The doctor doesn't either.

**Ramiro:** Agh!

**Celina:** But we go anyway, you see? That's the difference between you and me. I go anyway. What part don't you understand?

**Ramiro:** None of it.

**Celina:** I don't get your problem with blessing the car.

**Ramiro:** Is it going to protect me from an accident? Is it like insurance?

**Celina:** How do I know? But it's free. It doesn't cost anything.

**Ramiro:** No! It costs your *belief*.

**Celina:** No.

**Carpio:** No.

**Celina:** It's a tradition, it's free.

**Ramiro:** I don't like that kind of thing.

**Celina:** Why is what you *like* so important to you?

**Ramiro:** I know my tastes are of no importance to anybody here, but they might be the only thing I've got left.

**Diana:** That's an impoverished life, if the only thing you've got is your own point of view on everything.

**Ramiro:** Oh, please, Diana, soo open-minded! I wanna see what you'd do if some imbecile talked to you with a frog.

**Diana:** *(They both laugh.)* I don't think it'd bother me that much.

*They all abruptly look towards the baby's room as if he'd somehow shot himself. We didn't hear anything.*

**Ramiro:** It was outside. It wasn't there. It was next door.

*Celina sits down. She's very upset. For the first time she seems to notice the visitor. She looks at him oddly. Then at the doctor.*

**Celina:** Your taxi's on its way, doctor.

**Carpio:** Thanks.

**Ramiro:** Look at these bread sticks, Diana. Want to know what they say? "Kosher".

**Diana:** They're addictive.

**Ramiro:** No, no, they're "kosher". So they package this homegrown imitation of a German delicacy and slap a stamp on it that says "kosher." But is that true? Kosher means "suitable." Suitable for what? As far as I can tell, Kosher foods follow hygiene rules that are older than the Torah, most of which no longer make sense. So conservative Jews don't eat pork for fear of infections that may have been common then but *don't happen now*. But the precautions get taken all the same. Just because. Because of tradition. So a shit-ton of people see this package says "kosher" and buy it, not because they taste good but because they say "kosher". Tradition!

**Celina:** We buy them because they taste good. What do I care they say "*kosher*".

**Carpio:** It's actually pronounced "kahsher".

**Ramiro:** No.

**Diana:** No.

**Carpio:** Yes. Well, it's the same.

**Ramiro:** So? Are they healthier?

**Carpio:** Healthy, healthy... nowadays nothing is. Everything's genetically modified.

**Ramiro:** There you have it. When the word “*kosher*” was invented this genetically modified barley didn’t exist, so it wasn’t prohibited by *kosher*. I mean so it can be *kosher*, comply with all the rules, and be a carcinogenic chemical.

**Carpio:** Well, it’s never been proved that genetically modified food is bad for you.

**Ramiro:** That’s my point. Nothing’s proved. It’s also not proved that an oilcan of holy water will protect a Ford Fiesta in a head-on collision. But we go and do it all the same. Out of tradition. Because it’s free. Because it doesn’t do any harm.

**Carpio:** What harm does it do?

**Ramiro:** What harm? (*Starts to reply, doesn’t.*)

*Suddenly Celina stands up from the table, goes towards the pot where the lamb is heating up, puts her hand in it, burns herself, takes out her hand, covered in sauce, goes to the door and draws an X on it. She curls up on the floor.*

**Celina:** Ow, I burned myself.

*Pause.*

**Ramiro:** Excuse me, could you leave us alone please?

**Diana:** Yes of course. We’ll wait for the taxi in the lobby.

*Carpio and Diana solemnly pull together their things. Celina sobs on the floor. The visitor looks at her. Before Carpio can leave, Ramiro flies into a rage at him.*

**Ramiro:** What harm does it cause, doctor? You want to know what harm? My wife lives in terror.

**Celina:** That’s not true!

**Ramiro:** Terror! Three months ago we had a son she’s afraid to call by name, for fear he’s going to die. “What’ll I do if he dies?”, she says. “What’ll I do if I’ve spoken his name and then he dies? Huh? What?” (*He starts to cry.*) She’s terrified. I don’t understand the relationship between a plastic oilcan and her terror, between Luján and death, but don’t ask me what harm it does. Seven hundred pesos! That’s the harm it does!

**Carpio:** Good night. (*Exits.*)

*Diana hesitates a moment more in the doorway. Goes to Celina and tries to console her.*

**Diana:** Don’t pay any attention, it’s not you. He’s angry a moron at the fair made him look ridiculous.

**Ramiro:** She didn’t make me look ridiculous! I *am* ridiculous! I’m the biggest joke I know!

*Diana turns off the burner where the dinner is boiling. Goes to the door and cleans off the dripping sauce stain. Leaves the rag there. Makes a small gesture of goodbye. Exits.*

*The visitor stands, making the chair available for Celina. Celina sits.*

*Ramiro and Celina, alone with the visitor.*

**Celina:** I'm sorry. I was afraid.

**Ramiro:** I know.

**Celina:** What's going on with you? Is it his fever?

**Ramiro:** It's everything. It's everything.

**Celina:** He'll be better tomorrow.

**Ramiro:** Who will?

*Celina can't answer.*

**Ramiro:** Who, Celina?

*Celina can't answer.*

**Ramiro:** Who will be better?

**Voice of the visitor** (*off*): And god came down to earth in the form of a sigh.

*The visitor arranges things, gets the glasses together, cleans the table. Then he stays very still.*

**Voice of the visitor** (*off*): The darkness was thick, and an icy breeze entered through every crack, filtered through windows, slid below doors. And as had been written, all the firstborn perished. They lay still in their cribs, in their beds. They sighed no more. They all died. Except for the sons of the chosen people. The Pharaoh was forced to submit to the evidence. And the Jews left in freedom. There began the *pessaj*. The passage to the promised land. Let's go back home. Now we can all go home.

**Celina:** My son's name is... (*Celina whispers the name of her son.*)

**Ramiro:** At last.

**Voice of the visitor** (*off*): Let's go home.

*The visitor slowly moves to the child's bedroom.*

**Celina:** I'm afraid he's going to die.

**Ramiro:** That isn't going to happen.

**Celina:** How do you know?

**Ramiro:** I don't know. But I'm not afraid.

**Celina:** Do you think everything we're doing is... OK? *(Pause.)* I don't want to be afraid.

**Ramiro:** It's alright.

**Celina:** What's it like to not be afraid? *(Pause.)* How is it done? To not be afraid?

*Ramiro thinks for a moment. He can prove nothing. He has nothing to offer. He looks around. There's the visitor. Ramiro breaks. He stands with difficulty. Puts his hand in the lamb. Is burned. Crosses to the door, makes the mark. Smiles at Celina.*

*Before going into the child's room, the visitor sees the X and changes direction. Celina follows this movement as if watching a ghost.*

*The visitor exits through the main door.*

*Ramiro and Celina look at each other.*

*Celina smiles for the first time. And with infinite care takes her husband's hand.*

*Blackout.*

**Rafael Spregelburd**

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Trans. Samuel Buggeln/Ariel Gurevitch

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