

# The Mercurian



*A Theatrical Translation Review*  
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Editor: Adam Versényi  
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*The Mercurian* is named for Mercury who, if he had known it, was/is the patron god of theatrical translators, those intrepid souls possessed of eloquence, feats of skill, messengers not between the gods but between cultures, traders in images, nimble and dexterous linguistic thieves. Like the metal mercury, theatrical translators are capable of absorbing other metals, forming amalgams. As in ancient chemistry, the mercurian is one of the five elementary “principles” of which all material substances are compounded, otherwise known as “spirit.” The theatrical translator is sprightly, lively, potentially volatile, sometimes inconstant, witty, an ideal guide or conductor on the road.

*The Mercurian* publishes translations of plays and performance pieces from any language into English. *The Mercurian* also welcomes theoretical pieces about theatrical translation, rants, manifestos, and position papers pertaining to translation for the theatre, as well as production histories of theatrical translations. Submissions should be sent to: Adam Versényi at [anversen@email.unc.edu](mailto:anversen@email.unc.edu) or by snail mail:

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## Editor's Note

Welcome to the Spring 2023 issue of *The Mercurian*!

We open the issue with Ieva Lākute's translation of Latvian playwright Justīne Kļava's play *Ladies*. With humor and pathos *Ladies* depicts the lives of three generations of women in the same family as they try to make sense of their lives in a decrepit district of Riga.

*Ladies* is followed by Linda Howe's translation of Cuban playwright Virgilio Piñera's play *The Serfs*. Long time readers of *The Mercurian* will recall that we last published translations of Piñera's work in Vol. 2, No. 4 (Fall 2009) with Kate Eaton's translations of Piñera's three one-act plays: *You Always Forget Something* (1963), *False Alarm* (1948), and *The Thin Man and The Fat Man* (1959). Piñera first published *The Serfs* in the Cuban journal *Ciclón* in 1955. A biting satirical attack on hierarchical abuses of power, the play, written in response to Stalin's totalitarian Russia, became suspect in Cuba after Fidel Castro's conversion to Communism in 1961. Reading the tea leaves, Piñera excluded *The Serfs* from his published *Complete Works* (1960-1961). After the 1959 Revolution, the play was not staged until 1999 and not published again until 2002 in Cuba. It was anathema to the early Cuban Revolution's own Stalinist stance.

After *The Serfs* comes Sandra Kingery's translation of Spanish playwright Pablo Remón's play *The Treatment*. *The Treatment* premiered in Spain in 2018. This funny, touching play depicts a screenwriter whose film about his grandfather's experiences during the Spanish Civil War becomes something much different from what he intended. Remón won Spain's National Prize for Dramatic Literature in 2021.

Following *The Treatment* is Phyllis Zatlin's translation of another play from Spain, Gracia Morales' *Unidentified NN 12*. Zatlin's translation work last appeared in *The Mercurian* with her translation of Amaranta Osorio and Itziar Pascual's *Little Girl My Little Girl* in Vol. 8, No. 3 (Spring 2021). Her translations of both French and Spanish playwrights can also be found in the Vol. 1, No. 1 (Spring 2007), Vol. 2, No. 3 (Spring 2009), and Vol. 5, No. 3 (Spring 2015) editions of the journal. *Unidentified NN 12* is a powerful play that, as Zatlin describes in her introduction, deals with Spain's own history of violence and civil war but could just as easily resonate with the histories of multiple countries from Argentina to Rwanda to the Ukraine where war or authoritarian regimes have caused people to become "disappeared".

The issue concludes with a collaborative review by Lindsay Webster and Jane Barnette of Jacqueline Goldfinger and Allison Horsley's collaboratively written book *Writing Adaptations and Translations for the Stage*. Horsley's article on "Translation for Performance: Another Chekhov Play?", as well as her work on Libby Appel's translation of three of Chekhov's major plays can be found in Vol. 3, No. 1 (Spring 2009), Vol. 3, No. 2 (Fall 2010), Vol. 3, No. 3 (Spring 2011), and Vol. 3, No. 4 (Fall 2011).

Back issues of *The Mercurian* can be found at under the "Archives" tab on our website: <https://the-mercurian.com/>. As the theatre is nothing without its audience, *The Mercurian* welcomes your comments, questions, complaints, and critiques. Deadline for submissions for consideration for Volume 9, No. 4 (Fall 2023) will be September 15, 2023.

—Adam Versényi

## **Advisory Board**

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## Ladies

By Justīne Kļava

Translated from Latvian by Ieva Lākute

**Translator's Preface:** Rooted in Justīne's personal experiences, the one-act family drama *Dāmas* (*Ladies*) was first staged in April 2016 by *Teātris TT*. After a sold-out season, it went on to receive five nominations at the Latvian National Theatre Awards, including winning best original dramaturgy of the year. Translated into Estonian by Contra (Margus Konnula), the play was later staged by *Endla Teater*.

Filled with tragicomic moments, *Ladies* explores the affectionate and strained relationship between three generations of women who try to assert their independence while sharing a small flat in a decrepit district of Riga. Despite their best intentions, the grandmother Mary (born during World War II), the daughter Slava (born during the Soviet occupation), and the granddaughter Kitty (born the year the Iron Curtain fell) are in constant conflict with each other. It escalates when Kitty returns home late one night, and a gun falls out of her back pocket.

Since I know the playwright on a personal level and I had her full trust, it was somewhat easier for me to identify with the voice of the characters and translate them into English without losing playfulness in the dialogue and the translation process itself. However, I still encountered certain challenges. For example, how do you translate the punchy, dark humour and get the comic timing just right in English? And how do you find an equivalent word for such Latvian cultural staples as *kotletes* (a type of meatball), which were ironically central to the action of the play?

These questions led me to apply for the Theatre Translator Mentorship with the London-based theatre company *Foreign Affairs*. From the first reading of the play with the other mentees to a full reading with professional actors and the final showcase rehearsals, I heard and saw my translation come alive. I considered, on a much deeper level, how seemingly unimportant words may give away a character's social status. I also learned the concepts of "foreignization" and "domestication" that helped me to make more conscious choices about which Latvian words and expressions to translate directly, and which to adapt. I was pleasantly surprised to hear other mentees say that the play "felt relatable and foreign at the same time" during some of our feedback sessions. And, of course, to hear their laughter—in places where I had intended it.

**Justīne Kļava** is one of Latvia's most celebrated contemporary playwrights and dramaturgs. Since 2014, she has been writing plays for Latvia's leading state and experimental theatres, mostly focused on psychologically realistic representations of generational clashes and the impact of history on the everyday lives of eastern Europeans. Loved by audiences and critics alike, her plays have received numerous awards, including the Latvian prize for the play of the year in 2016 and 2017. In 2020, she was appointed as the head dramaturg of the largest professional theatre in the Baltic states: *Dailes teātris* in Riga, where she worked for two years. She has since written an original gothic comedy for the *JRT* (*New Riga Theatre*) and finished a modern adaptation of what she believes to be one of the best novels ever written: *Becis* (*The Devils*) by Fyodor Dostoevsky.

**Ieva Lākute** has worked freelance as a writer and literary translator since graduating from Bath Spa

University with an MA in Creative Writing. Her short stories and literary translations have received several awards, including the longlist of the 2020 John Dryden Translation Competition. Her love for theatre and cross-cultural collaboration led her to complete the 2020 Theatre Translators Mentorship with the London-based theatre company *Foreign Affairs*. She has since completed the Emerging Translator Mentorship with the UK's National Centre for Writing. Her portfolio of translations includes several other plays by Justīne Kļava, Lauris Gundars, as well as the bestselling Latvian novels *Mans Nabaga Pirāts (My Poor Pirate)* by Jurgis Liepnieks and *Sestā Sieva (The Sixth Wife)* by Inga Grenčberga. She has also translated for NATO and the Latvian National Opera. Her dream is to see more plays from the Baltics staged by anglophone theatres.

## Ladies

By Justīne Kļava

Translated from Latvian by Ieva Lākute

### CHARACTERS:

MARY (66)

STANISLAVA OR SLAVA (42) – Mary’s daughter

KATHRYN OR KITTY (17) – Stanislava’s daughter

*A large pre-war apartment in Riga, Latvia. Midnight. MARY (66) is stood by a gas stove, wearing a dressing gown. Her hair is done up with rollers. Her eyes dart between the stove-top kettle, the clock on the wall, and the kitchen door.*

*Before the kettle starts to whistle, Mary turns off the gas and pours the boiling water in to a coffee mug. She takes the mug and tiptoes towards the kitchen unit, bashing into a stool. The stool hits a bucket. Several plastic tubs spill from it, making a loud noise. Mary tries to push the stool aside, but her leg kicks the bucket again. The noise is even louder this time.*

*Listening out for someone coming, Mary tries to open the door of the kitchen unit quietly. She takes out a pack of cigarettes and matches and tiptoes towards the window. But just before she reaches the window, she steps inside the cat’s bowl. An even louder noise echoes throughout the kitchen.*

*Loud, hurried footsteps are approaching.*

*Mary manages to stuff the cigarettes and matches inside her dressing gown pocket just as SLAVA (42) enters. She stands in the kitchen doorway, wearing a similar dressing gown and rollers in her hair.*

SLAVA. Don’t even *think* about smoking inside.

MARY. Oh, I just can’t take it anymore. It’s gone midnight. Where is she?

*Slava walks towards the stove and lifts the kettle. It’s almost empty, so she walks over to the sink to fill it back up. Instinctively, Mary rushes over to help her. While Mary talks, she tries to yank the kettle out of Slava’s hands. Slava doesn’t let her.*

MARY. Don’t stay up for her, darling. If you don’t get enough sleep, you’ll have another headache tomorrow. And all because that airhead won’t come home at a godly hour. Oh, my sweet angel, if you can’t get to sleep, I’ve got some sleeping pills. Shall I fetch them for you? Just a quarter of a dose.

*Slava doesn’t reply. Mary is still trying to yank the kettle out of Slava’s hands.*

MARY. What tea would you like Mummy to make you?

*Slava tries to fill the kettle with water from the tap, but Mary doesn't let go.*

MARY. Now, now... It's ok, everything's fine... Here, let me... I'll help you, my angel.

SLAVA. I can do it myself!

MARY. I said, I'll do it for you! Go and sit down.

*They fight over the kettle. Slava finally gains the upper hand.*

SLAVA. I said – I can do it myself!

MARY. Oh, for God's sake... the times we live in... My own daughter won't let her mummy treat her to a nice cup of tea... All that pride won't do you any good. You should let people do nice things for you from time to time.

SLAVA. Mum, go to bed.

MARY. Would you like a pastry? Oh, they're so nice. With raspberry filling, made fresh this morning. I bought them from that bakery on the corner.

SLAVA. Go to bed!

MARY. You know very well that I won't be able to get to sleep until Kitty has got a decent meal in her. That poor child walks around hungry for days on end. Skin and bones, she is. Oh, I made these yummy meatballs earlier. Would you like a bite?

SLAVA. Don't start coming at me with your meatballs again.

MARY. I made them from this lovely, juicy pork belly. Would you like some fried potatoes too?

SLAVA. Mum, I have a gastric ulcer! How many times do I have to tell you that I can't have anything fatty or fried?

MARY. Don't worry, darling. I wasn't going to use much oil. Just a teensy-tiny bit, enough to heat it up. They'll just melt in your mouth, you'll see!

SLAVA. I'm not going to have meatballs at half past one in the morning! Do you really want me to die?

MARY. There's no need to raise your voice. I was just offering, that's all. And you're the one who said you went out to the *Lido* restaurant last week and had meatballs for lunch. Can't have been as good as mine, that's for sure.

*Slava pours herself some tea. She takes the mug and goes to her room, but Mary rushes over to help.*

MARY. Here, I'll carry that for you, sweetheart.

*Slava doesn't give her the mug. Mary continues to pull it towards her until the mug falls on the floor. The scorching water catches Slava's hands.*



SLAVA. Why do you always have to rip things from my hands? I can't even touch a saucepan without getting your permission first.

MARY. That's what happens when you try to do things for yourself. It's always better to let your mother take care of you. Come, darling, let's run some cold water over your hands.

*Mary takes Slava by the hand and leads her to the sink, but Slava breaks free.*

SLAVA. Can't you see it hurts?

MARY. Shh, Mummy will make everything right again. Oh, my sweet angel, how did this happen? Let me make you another cup of tea.

*The front door slams. KITTY (17) walks into the kitchen, dressed in nothing but bra and joggers, holding an open bottle of lager in her hand. She takes off her trainers, ready to go to her room.*

KITTY. Hey! Got any grub?

SLAVA. Kathryn, come here right now.

*Kitty steps back, but Slava grabs her by the hand and pulls her into the kitchen.*

SLAVA. Where's your top?

KITTY. Haven't got one.

SLAVA. What do you mean: you haven't got one?

KITTY. It split.

MARY. *(Sighs in mock exasperation.)* Give it to me, I'll mend it.

KITTY. Haven't got it. I chucked it.

MARY. You threw away that nice T-shirt I gave you? It wasn't some cheap rag, you know. I bought it from a brand store.

SLAVA. Mum, stay out of it.

KITTY. Yeah, chill, Nan. I've got other tops I can wear.

MARY. Where exactly did you chuck it? I'll go and find it.

SLAVA. *(To Mary.)* Calm down.

KITTY. Er...Dunno.

MARY. I buy her a nice, pretty T-shirt from *my pension*, and she goes off and 'chucks it' at the first opportunity! So she can prance around half-naked like some hooker! At this rate, I'm surprised you've still got trousers on, my dear.

SLAVA. *(To Kitty.)* What's that in your hand?

KITTY. Lager. Obviously.

SLAVA. Give me that.

KITTY. No way! Go to the petrol station and get your own.

MARY. Darling, I have half-a-bottle of cognac in my room, if you need something to help you get to sleep.

SLAVA. No, I don't want any alcohol.

KITTY. Well, I do.

MARY. *You* don't deserve my expensive cognac. Carry on drinking that shit. Did you know they only sell moonshine in the shops these days? Aidis Tomsons was talking about it on Channel 1 just the other day. That's right. I might be old, but I like to keep my finger on the pulse.

SLAVA. *(To Kitty.)* Where were you?

KITTY. Stuck in my own arse. *(Burps loudly.)*

MARY. *(To Kitty.)* Right. You should eat something first. What would you like, darling – I've got meatballs with some fried potatoes, and a nice raspberry pastry to go with it...

KITTY. Meatballs with pastry.

*Mary starts fussing around the gas stove energetically.*

SLAVA. *(To Kitty.)* Why did you switch off your phone? I was worried sick.

KITTY. So you'd leave me alone? Thank fuck Nan doesn't have a smartphone. I'd literally kill myself if she did.

MARY. Don't you have any pity for your poor mother? She can't get to sleep while you're out.

KITTY. She can't get to sleep because you're up all night, keeping a watch.

MARY. Someone has to while you're getting up to God-knows-what.

SLAVA. Stop shouting, Mum. It's the middle of the night, for Christ's sake.

MARY. Well, I'm only saying the truth.

KITTY. How many times do I have to say that I'm totally fine?

MARY. And how are we supposed to know that?

KITTY. You just have to know, that's it.

MARY. Oh, you just wait until you have your own children. Then you'll see.

KITTY. I'm not going to have any.

MARY. Because you're selfish. Just like your father.

SLAVA. (*To Mary.*) Don't start harping on about it...

MARY. We had nothing back then, not even a shower. I had to carry water up the staircase to our flat. And I asked him...

KITTY. Nan, stop stirring.

MARY. ... to help me – and he keeps saying *I will in a minute* but he sits by his books all day, doing nothing. Just like you. Your mother tells you to come home at a godly hour, and you keep saying *I will in a minute*. Next thing you know, it's one in the morning. Well, I guess you don't love your mother. Just like your father never did.

SLAVA. Mum, go and fry your meatballs, and stop talking rubbish.

KITTY. Just because I love her doesn't mean I have to do every stupid thing she tells me.

SLAVA. If you're not prepared to do "every stupid thing I tell you" then go and live with your father.

KITTY. Argh. You're such a demagogue!

MARY. What's a demagogue?

SLAVA. Mum, I told you to stay out of it.

MARY. How can I, when we share the same roof? We should be able to discuss everything together. And in case you've forgotten it, I'm the grandmother around here; you're my flesh and blood.

KITTY. You know I can't just go and move in with Dad.

MARY. That's right. Because he doesn't give a flying fuck about you.

SLAVA. Mum, can you even hear yourself? Of course, he does. Victor is a very busy person, that's all.

MARY. He's an arsehole, if you ask me.

KITTY. Nan, how many times do I have to tell you to stop saying stuff like that about my dad? It drives me mental!

MARY. Can't believe you still call that man a dad... If he were a decent father to you, he would have taken you to Brussels by now. He lives all by himself in a four-bedroom flat. And he has the nerve to stroll in here once a year, beaming with pride and a box of Belgian chocolates as big as my fucking wardrobe, then gobble up half of it himself. Who does he think we are – some charity case? That we can't afford to buy chocolates for ourselves?

KITTY. You're not the only one around here who's allowed to stuff people to death with food.

SLAVA. Not this drama again... Have you both forgotten that tomorrow is a working day, and I need to be up early?

KITTY. Then why are you still here? Go to bed and let me eat my dinner.

SLAVA. I'm not going to sleep until you tell me exactly where you've been.

KITTY. What do you mean? I was out.

MARY. She was out drinking.

SLAVA. Do you really want to get arrested again?

KITTY. I don't give a shit.

SLAVA. You don't 'give a shit'? Fine. In that case, from now on, I won't be 'giving a shit' either. I'll just leave you in your cell to rot.

KITTY. Perfect. Can't be any worse than home.

MARY. If I spoke to my mother like that, she would have beaten me with a wooden pole.

SLAVA. I guess you don't 'give a shit' about Nan either. A frail, elderly woman who's been sitting by that window for the last two hours, worrying about you.

KITTY. Then don't wait up for me! I don't have the energy for all this drama again. Are the meatballs ready yet?

SLAVA. Well, I'm not going to bed early, just to be woken up in the middle of the night by a call from the police telling us to come and fetch you from the station. I couldn't go through that shame a second time, and pay all that money to get you out... What's wrong with you, why don't you get it?!

KITTY. No, you don't get it. LET ME LIVE MY LIFE!

MARY. I just finished watching this heavy drama. The awful things some people do to young women... If Kitty's out late, all these dark thoughts start swirling around in my head...

SLAVA. *(To Mary.)* Mum, you're frightening her. She'll have nightmares again.

MARY. Well, if she does, it will be from drinking. Her entire organism is drenched in spirits. Women become alcoholics much sooner than men, you know.

KITTY. Can you just give me the meatballs and leave me the fuck alone? What's the big deal?

MARY. *(To Slava.)* People didn't drink so much, back in my day.

SLAVA. Yeah, right.

MARY. It's true. Shops would only sell alcohol after 2pm. And people didn't go round partying in the streets like they do now. Because there was always a cop from 'militsiya' sat at the end of the street. If he saw anyone wandering round, he'd catch them and take them straight to a drunk tank to get their stomach pumped. Right, that's it. Kitty, you'll get a sore throat from drinking a cold beer.

*Mary reaches to take the bottle from Kitty. She takes a step back and threatens to down the drink if Mary comes any closer.*

MARY. Haven't you had enough? (*Smells Kitty's hair.*) And you've been smoking too. Come, let me get you a glass of compote instead. (*To Slava.*) You better pay attention to this – your daughter will turn into an alcoholic, just like my mother. Give me that shit!

SLAVA. Mum, it's pointless. She'll just go out and buy another one.

*With Kitty still drinking, Mary tries to wrench the bottle from her hands. Despite Kitty's best efforts, Mary manages to seize the bottle. While they fight, a gun falls out of Kitty's joggers.*

MARY. Sweet mother of Jesus!

*Mary tries to pick up the gun, but Kitty's reaction is quicker. She stands up, holding the gun in her hands.*

SLAVA. Is that a real weapon?

KITTY. No. It's a fucking pencil.

SLAVA. Where did you get it from?!

MARY. I bet she bought it with your money. I told you that you're spoiling her with all that pocket money, but you never listen, do you? And now look – look at what's happened!

SLAVA. (*To Kitty.*) I am talking to you. Where did you get this weapon from?

KITTY. From Christian. The pigs got him.

MARY. Thank God for that!

SLAVA. What did he do?

KITTY. He shot some guy.

SLAVA. He... he *shot* someone?

MARY. What's so shocking about that? The boy is a scumbag. It was clear from the start, when I saw him walking around with those trousers, with half his ass hanging out. What good can possibly come from someone who wants to look like they've shat themselves?

SLAVA. What happened to them?

KITTY. I don't think I've ever said anything negative about *your* friends, Nan. Even though Velta wears a nappy.

MARY. Velta had a stroke. Do you want me to slice some tomatoes for you?

KITTY. Please. With sour cream.

MARY. And a pinch of salt.

SLAVA. Kitty, what happened to them?

KITTY. Nothing. He called the pigs.

SLAVA. Did you call the ambulance?

KITTY. Relax. It's just an airgun. (*Swings the gun around.*) If you wanted to stuff real bullets in here, you'd have to cut a bigger hole.

SLAVA. I'm not even going to ask you where you got that information from.

MARY. Nowadays, you can find everything on the 'intranet'.

KITTY. Look, pepper balls are totally harmless. Just stings like a bitch when you're hit. But at least he won't be bothering you again.

SLAVA. Who?

KITTY. Oh, you know... That creep who was harassing you. Our neighbour.

SLAVA. Who are you talking about?

MARY. Surely, you don't mean Maigurs? From flat five. Late Zigrid's son.

KITTY. Yeah, that's him. But we call him Marshmallow. Because his name sounds like that marshmallow brand *Maigums*. Like, Maigurs – *Maigums* – Marshmallow...

SLAVA. Your 'gang' shot him, because you thought he was harassing me?

MARY. Oh, big deal. You're turning this into an inquisition while the food is getting cold. *Bon appetit!*

*Mary puts a plate of meatballs on the table.*

SLAVA. No one is going to eat right now.

MARY. Wha... What do you mean?

SLAVA. Kathryn, go to your room. We're going to have a serious chat about what happened.

MARY. But you don't even know when she had her last meal!

SLAVA. Kathryn. Go to your room!

KITTY. Oh, get off my case, Mum. Seriously, what's your problem?

MARY. Let her eat; you can have your 'serious chat' afterwards.

*Slava picks up the plate with meatballs and smashes it against the wall.*

KITTY. Have you lost your fucking mind?

*Mary bends down to pick up the meatballs, but Slava stomps on them.*

MARY. (*To Kitty.*) I was breastfeeding her for a whole year. And look at how she repays me!

*Slava looks around her, grabs the glass of compote and smashes it against the wall.*

MARY. So much love went into making it. *(Starts to cry.)* They always say that it's best to live with strangers than your own flesh and blood. When I was making beetroot soup for Velta — with soured cream — after she had a stroke, she was full of thanks... So kind and grateful. Meanwhile, my own carnal daughter stomps all over my food.

KITTY. Granny, it's ok. Come on. Stop crying.

*Holding onto the airgun with one hand, Kitty tries to soothe Mary. She embraces her.*

MARY. No one needs me around here.

SLAVA. I'm so sorry, Mum.

KITTY. We do, Granny. We need you a lot.

MARY. No. You'd all rather have me dead.

KITTY. Nan, what are you talking about? Stop crying, ok?

SLAVA. I didn't mean it, Mum.

MARY. I can't speak my mind anymore without you smashing up my plates. Oh, all my little ceramic vases... all smashed to pieces. We won't have any plates left, at this rate.

SLAVA. I'll buy you a brand-new set of tableware, Mum.

MARY. *(To Kitty.)* Come. Let's eat in my room. I'll heat up some fresh meatballs for you. And then we'll have a nice, soothing fag out of my window.

*Kitty and Mary walk towards Mary's room.*

SLAVA. Kitty, stay.

MARY. *(To Slava.)* You haven't the faintest idea what poverty is. That's why you feel like you can just play with your food like that.

KITTY. Granny, stop it. Everything's ok, init?

SLAVA. Kathryn, we haven't finished our chat.

KITTY. Fuck off! You're an idiot. Look at what you've done. You've made Nan cry.

SLAVA. I'm your mother, you little shit, and you will *not* speak to me like that!

*Slava grabs Kitty by the arm and pulls the girl towards her.*

KITTY. Let go of me, Mum!

MARY. Let the child go!

*Mary grabs Kitty by the other arm (which is still holding onto the airgun) and drags her towards her room.*

SLAVA. Everyone else has nice, normal kids. Why can't you be like them? I *hate* both of you! I can't stand the sight of you!

MARY. Let go of Kitty, you witch!

SLAVA. She's my daughter and she'll do as I say!

MARY. Don't forget that she's also my granddaughter!

KITTY. Mum, let go! (*They fight.*) It hurts!

*Slava grabs Kitty by the hair and pulls her towards her room. Kitty screams.*

MARY. Oh, you, little cunt...

*Mary is preparing to hit Slava when Kitty fires the airgun. A loud gunshot echoes throughout the kitchen, filling the room with pungent smoke. The airgun falls on the floor. Coughing, they crawl around the floor, with tears stinging their eyes.*

SLAVA. Everyone alive?

MARY. Oh, my lovely girls... why are we always acting like this? There's no harmony in this house! We used to get on so well, when dear Antons was still alive — God rest his soul. Oh, what happened to us?

SLAVA. It's because he always did as you said.

MARY. Well, we did have the *occasional* argument, of course...

*Mary is the first one to crawl to the sink. She opens the tap and rinses her eyes.*

SLAVA. It's because you're incapable of keeping your mouth shut.

MARY. Well, yes. I do feel the need to voice my opinions. So what? And don't we always have a good laugh afterwards? Come here, girls, I'll help you rinse your eyes.

*Kitty and Slava crawl towards the sink.*

MARY. Right. I'll get everything sorted. Then we'll put on some *Nivea* creme and have a few pastries. (*To Slava.*) Darling, would you like one? With a nice, soothing cup of tea?

SLAVA. No, thank you.

MARY. Oh, go on — one little pastry won't hurt.

SLAVA. No. Thank you.

MARY. As they like to say these days — no means no! Oh, Kitty, you poor child, you didn't get to eat your dinner. Just hold on a minute, I'll get it sorted. (*About the floor.*) Argh, I'm going to have to clean up this mess too. (*To Slava.*) You're never the one cleaning up. That's why you feel like you can just go around, smashing all my ceramics.



SLAVA. I'll clean it up.

MARY. Oh, it's fine. I'll do it, darling. Don't you worry.

SLAVA. I said I'll do it.

MARY. Sit down!

*Slava sits down. Mary starts cleaning the kitchen.*

SLAVA. *(To Kitty.)* Are you ok?

KITTY. At least I've never pulled *you* by the hair.

SLAVA. I'm so sorry.

MARY. *(Picks up the gun from the floor.)* Right. We'll just put this over here... *(Puts the gun in the kitchen cupboard.)* Away from sin.

KITTY. *(To Slava.)* Why do you get so worked up every time I stay out late?

SLAVA. Kathryn, do you really want to end up in prison?

MARY. The food has gone completely cold, I'll have to heat it up again.

KITTY. I'm not going to end up in prison.

SLAVA. That's what everyone says. It always starts with petty crimes, vandalism... And now this *(points towards the gun)*. What's next, Kathryn?

MARY. Next time, your dad can come and get you from the police station. Let him try and raise you for once.

KITTY. *(To Slava.)* It's not fair. You're the one who said Maigurs was harassing you, and now you're having a go at me?

SLAVA. When did I say that?

KITTY. Well, not to me exactly. But you said it to Nan.

MARY. Yes. You did.

KITTY. We noticed you've been coming home late. And yesterday, Nan told me you had a chat about it.

MARY. *(To Slava.)* And then I said, *is there a man in your life?* and you said – *Yes. Maigurs.* Oh, don't give me that look. How was I supposed to know that she'd go off to shoot him? *(To Kitty.)* In fact, Kitty, that's not very nice of you. I tell you something in private, and now everyone is mad at me. As usual.

KITTY. Come on, Mum... Don't be like that. Everything's ok.

MARY. Oh, darling, he didn't deserve you anyway, so there's really no need to get upset over it.

SLAVA. According to your standards, the Pope himself wouldn't deserve me.

MARY. It's just that... Maigurs... how should I put this... He's always been a bit... strange.

SLAVA (*sarcastically*). Of course he has...

MARY. Would I lie to you, my own flesh and blood? Dagnija – you know, the girl from the pharmacy? She told me that Maigurs stores his urine in glass jars! And each jar even has its own label. I swear to God.

KITTY. Do you really want to be seeing a guy who drinks his own piss?

MARY. God only knows who your mother would be seeing by now if I didn't intervene.

SLAVA. Probably no one, because you'd send my daughter off to shoot them.

KITTY. I didn't mean to. I just wanted to scare him a bit, so he'd stop harassing you.

*Mary puts the dinner on the table.*

MARY. Right – *bon appetit!*

*Kitty sits down at the table and eats.*

KITTY. Thank you.

MARY. (*To Slava.*) Are you sure you don't want anything?

SLAVA. No, thank you.

MARY. We have some yoghurt...

SLAVA. No – thank you!

MARY. Fine. I was only offering.

KITTY. I told Maigurs to leave you alone, because you're still married to my dad. You just happen to live separately, because Dad works at the embassy in Belgium. He made it out like he didn't get what I was saying. And then he said – *how can they still be together if they got divorced ten years ago?*

SLAVA. And I wonder where he got that information from...

MARY. Well, yes, I did talk to his late mother about it... Back when Kitty's father was lurking under our windows, bawling his eyes out for you.

SLAVA. Of course you did.

KITTY. Then Christian hit him, just once. And then he held him down, so I could shoot him. But when the pigs got there, Christian said that he was the one who fired the gun.

SLAVA. So it was you who fired the gun?

KITTY. Chill. It's no big deal. It's just an airgun. I mean, we're ok, init?

MARY. The smoke is scratching my throat a bit.

SLAVA. And what if it hadn't been an airgun?

KITTY. Well... then it wouldn't have been an airgun.

SLAVA. You would have killed someone, Kathryn!

KITTY. But I thought he was harassing you!

*Suddenly, Slava bursts out laughing.*

KITTY. What's wrong with you?

SLAVA. This is so ridiculous. I'm going to have to start taking Corvalol again.

MARY. Oh, darling. Just a minute. I'll put a few drops on a sugar cube for you.

KITTY. She's got a stomach ulcer, Nan. She can't have any sugar.

SLAVA. That ulcer can... fuck off! (*Laughs louder and louder.*)

KITTY. Mum, are you ok?

*Mary puts a few drops of Corvalol on a sugar cube and spoon-feeds it to Slava, who swallows it like a helpless baby.*

KITTY. Why are you laughing? He might be some kind of maniac.

MARY. Oh yes. He definitely looks like one...

KITTY. Did he ever try to drag you into his flat, and put something in your drink?

MARY. Like in the *Streets of Broken Lights*, that Russian TV series? There was an episode just like that.

SLAVA. I've never even spoken to him.

*There's a moment's silence, then Mary starts laughing, too.*

SLAVA. (*To MARY.*) You asked me why I've been coming home so late; if there was a man in my life... What a ridiculous thought! Maigurs was taking his dog out for a walk that day. He was the first thing that came to my mind.

MARY. (*Laughs even louder.*) Oh, dearie me! How funny is that!

*They both laugh like crazy.*

KITTY. (*Looking at both of them, confused.*) But, Mum... Why did you lie?

MARY. And Maigurs, of all people!

SLAVA. I know!

MARY. And I just fell hook, line and sinker. Swallowed your every word.

SLAVA. How did I come up with something so stupid?

MARY. At first I thought – with *Maigurs*? But you're total strangers. Well, neighbours, saying this and that, *hello, goodbye*. Ok, I thought. Maybe you've caught each other's eye? But how would I have missed it?

SLAVA. I know!

MARY. Oh, you clever little fox. You're just like my mum. But come to think of it, he's actually a decent chap.

KITTY. He's a moron.

MARY. Moron or not, at least he's a pianist. He used to teach piano at the Riga Music High School.

SLAVA. Oh my word, how crazy is that...

MARY. I was a bit suspicious; you know. He might actually fancy you. You just don't know.

SLAVA. Mum, stop fantasizing.

MARY. It could well be true. I've never seen him with a woman though. That's a bit odd.

SLAVA. That's because he's gay.

MARY. Is he?! At least he's well-mannered. When I was coming home from the shops the other day, he held the door open for me and said *good morning, how is your daughter doing?*

SLAVA. Mum!

MARY. Ok, maybe he didn't use those exact words, but he left me with a good overall impression. Right. We've had a good laugh, haven't we? And Kitty has finished her dinner – would you like anything else, darling?

KITTY. (*Shakes her head.*) No, thank you.

MARY. Right, then we can all finally go to bed. I'll wash up tomorrow morning. (*To Slava.*) Listen, I bleached your white smock and hung it up in the wardrobe, so you can wear it to work tomorrow.

KITTY. (*To Slava.*) Does that mean you've been coming home late because you're going over to the other flat?

*Slava and Mary look at each other.*

MARY. What other flat?

SLAVA. Kitty, we'll discuss it tomorrow.

KITTY. You said you were going to sell it.

MARY. Are you saying that you want to move out?

SLAVA. Mum, you know perfectly well that I do.

MARY. But you don't have to do anything around here. Laundry is done, dinner made... And Kitty's sorted. Looked after and fed. How did you like those meatballs, darling?

*Kitty nods her head in approval.*

MARY. *(To Slava.)* This is your home. You've both grown up here. Remember how you used to sit outside, under that big chestnut tree with my mum? Oh, or the time she cut her nose? You were both just sitting there, pretty as a picture, when this storm came out of nowhere. She was so scared that you'd get soaked and catch a cold that she rushed you both inside. She tripped over the first step and fell over like a log. I was in hysterics.

KITTY. *(To Slava.)* You promised we wouldn't move.

SLAVA. We're not going to discuss that now. We're all far too tired for this.

MARY. Yes, morning is wiser than the evening.

KITTY. I'm not going to live in that horrible place.

SLAVA. But Kitty... can't you see it with your own two eyes?

MARY. See what?

SLAVA. I've thought about it a lot, and I keep putting it off. But after tonight's events it's crystal-clear. We just can't go on like this.

MARY. Oh, my baby... What are you saying?

SLAVA. Kathryn and I are moving out.

KITTY. I told you I'm not living in those stupid Soviet blockhouses!

SLAVA. It's okay, Kitty. We don't have to move right away.

MARY. What blockhouses?

SLAVA. I've found an amazing two-bedroom flat in Jugla<sup>1</sup>.

MARY. In Jugla?

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<sup>1</sup> Jugla (pronounced *Yoogla*) is a tranquil region of Riga situated next to Jugla lake, some 20-30min drive from the city centre.

KITTY. I'm not going to live there. I'm not.

SLAVA. But you haven't even seen it yet. There's a forest and a lake, literally on our doorstep. It's so lovely and cosy. I know you'll take one look at the place and fall in love with it.

KITTY. I'm not going to live there.

SLAVA. But look at what's happening to us here! The three of us just don't get on. It might be easier, if it's just the two of us.

KITTY. I'm staying here.

SLAVA. It's not far from here. Just a few stops on the bus. We'll come and visit. We'll all go for a nice, long walk in the forest when Nan comes over. Come on, think about it. It will be better for all of us.

MARY. I'm sorry, but I don't think you fully understand what you're saying.

SLAVA. Oh, I'm the one who doesn't understand?

MARY. You want Kitty to live in a Soviet blockhouse? Don't you know how toxic they are? Or is the health of this poor child no longer your concern?

SLAVA. Oh, please! The cigarettes you give her are toxic.

MARY. Do I give them to her? She buys her own fags, with the money you give her, and you know it. Do you think she'll just magically quit smoking once you've moved?

SLAVA. Ok. Whatever. Let her smoke then. There's a balcony.

MARY. (*Sarcastically.*) There's a balcony, how lovely.

SLAVA. Kitty, you can smoke on the balcony.

MARY. And what is she going to do in the winter? Have you even thought about that? Go out in the cold and catch the flu? At least here, she can smoke by the wood burner.

SLAVA. Well, of course, she can smoke by the wood burner here, because no one around here cares about *me*. I've had to breathe your toxic fumes my entire life – yours, Anton's and Nana's. And now that they're dead, you can't wait to get your hands on my child.

MARY. My mother didn't die of smoking; she poisoned herself with carbon monoxide. Those are two completely separate things.

SLAVA. She fell asleep with a cigarette in her hands!

MARY. Of course. She was bladdered. That's why I keep telling you that you shouldn't allow Kitty to have any alcohol.

KITTY. That's none of your business. I'm not going to stop drinking just because you tell me to. And the more you try, the more I'll drink.

MARY. Listen to this! Stubborn as a goat. Just like her father.

SLAVA. Of course, naturally she inherited all her bad qualities from her father. *Your child is sorted; looked after and fed...* While I've been at work, you've put something in Kathryn; something I never wanted her to have.

MARY. Oh, what a terrible granny I am. Forcing you to flee your own home because of my evil ways.

SLAVA. And how are you helping exactly? By forcing cigarettes on everyone and stuffing our faces with your carcinogenic meatballs?

MARY. What did you call them?

SLAVA. At least the saucepan is half-decent, thank God. You used to insist that we change the oil once a year. No wonder Anton's ended up in Riga Forest Cemetery so quickly.

MARY. What are you trying to say?

SLAVA. That you're not leading a particularly healthy lifestyle either...

KITTY. Why does everything always have to be perfect with you?

MARY. Hold on a minute, let me get this straight... You're saying that I killed my own mother, then I killed my husband and now I'm just waiting for the right opportunity to get my greedy hands on you and Kitty? Is that what you're trying to say?

SLAVA. No. I'm just saying that it's not healthy to use the same cooking oil twice when you fry meatballs, because that can cause cancer. But you never listen to me, do you? You just go on and on with the same old rubbish.

KITTY. Everything on this fucking planet can cause cancer. And what should we do about it? Stop breathing?

MARY. (*To Slava.*) How dare you... During the war, my mother would have traded her last pair of knickers for a drop of oil or a blob of butter, and you're saying that it's 'carcinogenic? You should be ashamed of yourself. Going around like that, spreading your disgusting lies. Saying that I've... my husband... my own mother.

SLAVA. You're the one who gave Nana cigarettes in bed.

MARY. I didn't give her the fags.

SLAVA. Oh, come off it, Mum!

MARY. It wasn't me!

SLAVA. I remember exactly what happened.

MARY. Oh, you really deserve to be put in a straitjacket. All you do is go around spreading vicious lies about me. I loved my mother like no one.

SLAVA. Like no one. Exactly.

MARY. Don't put words in my mouth! Maybe I can't express myself as eloquently as you, the educated lot. But I cared for my mother until her dying breath!

SLAVA. Oh, yes. That's all you've ever wanted — to be surrounded by people who are completely incapable of looking after themselves. So that you can smother them in 'your love'.

MARY. Well, I would like to see your manicured fingers changing a dying person's nappy. When she broke her hip, you wouldn't come anywhere near her room. *It stinks in here, it stinks!* Well, of course, it's going to stink, if someone's forced to shit in bed. You try and care for someone who's dying, and then we'll talk about the meaning of love.

SLAVA. And I will, if I have to.

MARY. I won't be holding my breath.

SLAVA. I will.

MARY. You can't even make a sandwich without my help. How are you going to care for anyone?

SLAVA. That's because you never let me. You always know what's best. And I'm so stupid that I can't even...

MARY. Have I ever called you stupid?

KITTY. She is stupid though.

MARY. Don't talk about your mother like that!

KITTY. But if my mother really is stupid, do I have to pretend like she's not? Wouldn't that make me a liar? And I thought you said lying was wrong.

SLAVA. Why are you doing this to me, Kitty? What have I ever done to you?

MARY. Right. That's it. We're going to end this presentation. Let's all go to sleep. Your beds have been made. Come on. *(To Kitty.)* Your mother has to get up early.

KITTY. *(To Slava.)* You're always so prim and proper. It makes me sick to my stomach. I'm not moving in with you. Nothing exciting ever happens in your life.

MARY. Shh, shh. Calm down now.

KITTY. *(To Slava.)* Every day after work, all you do is sit in that chair watching some crap on TV. I don't want to end up like you. I want to live! I want to drink, I want to smoke, I want to party all night long! You seem to think that this street is full of disgusting alcoholics, but this street is my whole life! And, by the way, I was the one who gave fags to grandma Olya.

SLAVA. What?

KITTY. I gave the fags to grandma Olya.



SLAVA. You?

KITTY. Yeah.

SLAVA. But why?

MARY. Just drop it. Kitty was only six, she didn't know any better.

KITTY. She asked me to. She said that no one would give them to her. She said that you didn't love her.

MARY. No point talking about it. She was long gone in her alcoholic delusions by then.

KITTY. She told me where I could find them, so I took the fags and brought them to her.

SLAVA. Oh, yeah, that's so clever: to keep a packet of cigarettes in a place where even a six-year-old child can easily reach them. Ok, I'm done here. Good night.

MARY. Once again, this just goes to show that you'll find any excuse to start an argument with me.

SLAVA. I'm not trying to start an argument. I'm trying to explain that you shouldn't label my flat as 'toxic', because it can't be any more toxic than a life spent with you.

MARY. It's not my fault that you've stopped watching the news, but last night on Channel 1, Aidis Tomsons said...

SLAVA. I don't care what Aidis Tomsons said, because I have a flat in Jugla, and I've almost finished renovating it. I was thinking about fixing it up and selling it... But after tonight, my mind is completely made up. We're moving out. In the next couple of days.

MARY. In the next couple of days?!

SLAVA. Tomorrow.

MARY. Tomorrow?!

KITTY. But you promised me.

SLAVA. In fact, let's get a cab right now. Kathryn, get dressed. Where are your things?

KITTY. I'm not moving out.

MARY. Have you lost your marbles? It's the middle of the night!

SLAVA. I don't care. Where's my black duffle bag?

MARY. It's on the top of your wardrobe. Don't climb up there, it's too heavy for you. You'll hurt your back again.

SLAVA. *(Talking as she walks towards her room.)* I have these white, floral curtains there. And this pretty, floral wallpaper. *(To Mary.)* The type you'd absolutely hate. *(To Kitty.)* We'll have such a wonderful time together.

MARY. It's worth listening to the elderly from time to time, you know. I understand a few things about life at my age.

SLAVA. No, you don't. The flat is mine. Mine. And there's nothing else for you to understand.

*Slava leaves the room. Noises can be heard as she packs her bag in her room.*

MARY. Fine. Leave then. Run away. Abandon me.

KITTY. Nan?

MARY. It's ok, let her leave. I'd like to see it all working out for her.

SLAVA. I am leaving.

MARY. Go on! You'll be stepping on the same rake as me.

*Slava enters the kitchen again, carrying a black duffel bag, stuffed full of clothes.*

SLAVA. Just because you couldn't survive five minutes without your mother by your side, doesn't mean the same will happen to me.

MARY. *(To Kitty.)* I had an apartment on Doe Street. How eerie it was! I couldn't wait to move back to our cosy home. And I had everything there. A bathtub, and even an indoor bog.

*Slava continues to pack.*

MARY. *(To Slava.)* Your father used to visit me there, we'd always have cognac together. But I just couldn't settle in. That place was too creepy. Like there was always someone stood behind the window, watching me.

SLAVA. If you choose to turn your flat into a love nest for yourself and a married man, then there might well be someone watching from behind the window.

MARY. The whole time I was there I was so afraid. Yeah, Kitty, I really was.

SLAVA. You were afraid that my dad might go back to his wife.

MARY. Now, you, with one failed marriage under your belt, are not exactly in a position to lecture me on what kind of men – married or unmarried – I should be seeing.

SLAVA. You gave birth to a child just to keep your man. But he left you anyway.

MARY. What?

SLAVA. You heard me. You've never loved me. You wanted to get an abortion, but you were too far along. Now let me live my life!

KITTY. Mum, you promised you'd never mention it.

MARY. *(To Kitty.)* You told her?

SLAVA. Oh, please. It's always been so obvious anyway.

MARY. (*To Kitty.*) I trust you with my precious secret, and you tell the whole world?

KITTY. Well... I just thought... if she knew where you were coming from, then maybe you wouldn't be fighting all the time, and we'd all be able to live together.

SLAVA. Right. I'm calling the cab.

MARY. Oh God, I can feel my blood pressure going up.

KITTY. What am I going to do there all day by myself? I'll start freaking out.

SLAVA. Not this again. You're not a five-year-old.

MARY. Go on then! Go! Leave your poor mother all alone.

KITTY. Yeah, but when I'm alone, I get this thing... Whenever Nan goes out to the shops, I have to turn on the music 'coz I'm scared. I feel like there's someone breathing down my neck.

SLAVA. Darling, it's because the energy around here is so toxic. It will be completely different in our flat. The furniture is nice and light...

MARY. Of course. My furniture. That's the root of all evil now. You should have seen the queue I had to survive in Soviet times, just to get my hands on this cabinet. And now you're blaming my furniture.

SLAVA. (*To Kitty.*) You can go for a walk in the woods whenever you like.

MARY. Everyone knows those woods are full of maniacs. Aidis Tomsons was saying just the other day...

KITTY. I'm not going anywhere!

SLAVA. Kitty, try to understand... The reason you were so afraid when we lived with Dad in his flat was because we argued all the time.

MARY. No. There was always something eerie about that place. They built it over a swamp. I remember saying to Victor: *it's none of my business, of course...*

SLAVA. And yet you made it your business.

MARY. *...but whatever you do, don't buy a flat in that blockhouse.* And I was absolutely right. Kitty was always getting ill, while we lived there. A child can always sense when something isn't right.

SLAVA. She was getting ill because you put too many layers on her.

KITTY. Whatever you say, I'm staying here. I'll live in late Zigrid's shed if I have to. Or I'll move in with Maigurs, ha.

SLAVA. Stop talking nonsense.

KITTY. I'm not moving to a place that's full of devils.

SLAVA. What devils are you talking about?

MARY. Oh, yes. Remember, how I said you should get a priest. And did anyone listen to me? Of course not.

SLAVA. Mum, don't encourage her.

KITTY. But I saw them. With my own eyes.

MARY. Of course you did. And that's the least of all evils you'll see in those flats. Priest Mitskevich said...

SLAVA. Mitskevich should be locked up for brainwashing people. My own child believes that devils exist. That's his doing.

MARY. That's because you and Victor didn't baptize Kitty. I bought this pretty little gold crucifix; said it was time; but he just laughed in my face and threw it across the table. *I won't let my child believe in superstitions.*

SLAVA. That's why I fell in love with him. Because, as opposed to everyone else around here, he at least has some brains.

MARY. And now he's all by himself in his four-bedroom apartment. Just him and his brains.

SLAVA. Kitty, you have a vivid imagination. That's why you can write poems and fairy-tales, and draw. Living under such stressful conditions, any child would start visualising things that aren't there. Kitty, remember what the doctor said? It's all in your mind, that...

KITTY. But what difference does that make?

SLAVA. ...none of it is real.

KITTY. But if I see devils, then they are real to me. Even if no one else can see them, they are still real to *me*.

SLAVA. Then you need to start taking meds.

KITTY. Why don't you get it? All those flats are like little cardboard boxes. It feels horrible, like I'm being crushed. And these sharp corners you can always see, and it looks like someone is sat there.

MARY. The owners had left a *kopek* in each corner. Or as I used to say, they left their sorrows to us... Of course, I went straight to the church to light a candle for them. But when I lit it...

SLAVA. I'm sick of hearing about your candle.

MARY. ... it flared up, fell on the floor and went out, just like that. *(To Kitty.)* That's why your parents' marriage broke down so quickly.

SLAVA. It broke down because you were always getting in the way!

MARY. I was what?

SLAVA. Victor was trying to finish his dissertation, but you just kept coming at him with your meatballs. Who invited you anyway?

MARY. Well, I'm not just going to sit around and wait for an invitation, if I know my child is being abused.

SLAVA. Oh, God, here we go...

MARY. Only someone as heartless as you can remain quiet when Christian is shouting at Kitty.

SLAVA. It's their relationship. I'm not getting involved.

MARY. If someone raised their voice at my child, I don't care if they had three master's degrees, or if they'd... invaded Mars! I'm not going to stand back and take it. Remember the way he used to walk... so arrogant, with his nose poking the clouds! Like you couldn't even approach him. How could anyone live with him? And you were so unhappy, darling, crying your eyes out for that man...

KITTY. *(To Mary.)* Stop blaming Dad for everything. She was being stupid as well.

MARY. *(To Kitty.)* Oh, you try living with your dad and you'll soon be saying otherwise.

SLAVA. *(To Mary.)* Stop talking about it like it was your marriage.

MARY. But you're my child!

SLAVA. But Victor was not your child, nor your husband. You shouldn't even be talking about him.

MARY. Then why did you divorce him, if he's so perfect? Why didn't you take him back, when he came here, begging on his knees? And was I the one who insisted on you staying at home? No. He did. He was the one who laughed at your idea of getting a job. And that's the truth. That scumbag left you when you were pregnant with Kitty, just so he could finish his studies. I was the one who helped you. I came to all your medical appointments; I took care of everything. Me. Not him.

*Slava starts tearing up.*

MARY. And when you had that depression? All sorts of dark thoughts used to swirl around your mind. It was very serious. But he just laughed it off: *oh, not this female hysteria again.*

*Slava is crying.*

MARY. Oh, darling, come here... *(Embraces Slava.)* How could I just sit back and watch it all happen to you? It broke my heart. We always had such harmony in our house. Such laughs...

SLAVA. I wanted the same for me and Victor. *(Embraces Mary tightly, like a child.)*

MARY. ...on birthdays, on New Year's Eve. It was weird when he was there. He always walked around like a mute.

SLAVA. That one Christmas, when you and Victor were shouting at each other, I thought I was going to jump under a car and end it all.

MARY. Shhh, darling. There, there. It's ok, it's all ok. Don't cry. He just wasn't from our basket. What can you do, eh? Kitty, your dad's not a bad person really. He's just different. He didn't drink, he didn't smoke, but something was definitely wrong with him. *(Slava stops crying.)* Tissue? *(Slava blows her nose.)* Truce?

SLAVA. Truce.

MARY. Truce, Kitty? Oh, come here, with us.

*Kitty comes closer, they all hug for a moment.*

MARY. Shh, shh, come now. It will all be ok...

SLAVA. Okay, the truth is... I haven't even got any beds ordered yet.

MARY. Of course, darling, where would you even sleep?

SLAVA. I'm going to order the beds before we move.

KITTY. But I thought we were staying?

MARY. Of course, you're staying, darling.

KITTY. We just made up!

SLAVA. And for how long?

MARY. Let's live and see, eh?

SLAVA. No, Kitty. I don't know when, but we just have to move out.

KITTY. But that place is so far from here. How will I get home in the evenings? And you'll sit around worrying every night.

SLAVA. We don't have enough money to buy an apartment in the city centre.

KITTY. You're just saying that because you want to live as far away from Nan as possible.

SLAVA. We can call the priest, if you like. He can come around and bless the flat. We won't fight anymore. And it's closer to school.

KITTY. Er... I don't go to school anymore.

MARY. Kitty!

SLAVA. What?

KITTY. I no longer go to school.

MARY. This wasn't the right moment to break the news to your mother. She's stressed as it is.

SLAVA. *(To Mary.)* You knew about this?

MARY. Well, depends how you put it.

SLAVA. Don't play stupid. Did you know – yes or no?

KITTY. She knew.

SLAVA. Since when?

KITTY. Since she was admitted to the hospital.

SLAVA. You mean the mad house.

KITTY. The hospital.

SLAVA. The mad house!

KITTY. The hospital!

MARY. Kitty and I used to call it 'the white house'.

SLAVA. *(To Kitty.)* Were you planning on telling your mother about it?

KITTY. No. Why should I tell you anything? And you never went to see Nan.

SLAVA. Sarkandaugava isn't on my commute. I didn't have enough time to get there after work.

KITTY. As if I did. But I went to see her anyway, every single fucking day. We'd have a fag in the garden...

SLAVA. Of course! It's not a day well spent, unless you two have had a fag somewhere.

KITTY. And we'd read books to each other. It was way more fun than being at my stupid school.

MARY. Dreiser and Galsworthy. Incredible writers.

SLAVA. *(To Kitty.)* You've been lecturing me about your fear of devils for the last half an hour. When the real reason you don't want to move is because you're bunking off school, so you can read your Dreiser and Galsworthy all day.

MARY. But it's really hard for her at school.

SLAVA. It's hard for me at work. What should I do about it – go jump off a bridge?

MARY. You shouldn't pressure her into it. Studying isn't for everyone. I only finished seven grades and managed to get by just fine. And I've read a lot of books in my lifetime.

SLAVA. *(To Kitty.)* And what's your plan?

KITTY. In what sense?

SLAVA. Well, when people make big decisions, they usually have a plan for the future. What's yours?

KITTY. I'll become a writer.

SLAVA. Right. Just as I thought. Anyone who can't be arsed to do any actual work, dreams to become a writer.

MARY. Her writing is really good. As someone who's read a lot of books in her lifetime, I can say that...

SLAVA. Yes, we know that you've read a lot of books in your lifetime; you don't have to repeat it every minute of every day.

MARY... she writes really well.

SLAVA. Oh, does she now? Then there's no reason why she couldn't continue writing well when we move to our new flat.

KITTY. You can move. I'm staying here with Nan.

SLAVA. But you can't stay with Nan because I'm moving out.

KITTY. Why? I'm staying here.

MARY. Would you like another meatball, darling?

Kitty nods.

SLAVA. But, Kitty, you'll just be fighting all the time. And I'll worry the whole time because I won't be able to tell what's going on.

KITTY. You just hate the fact that I like Nan more than you.

MARY. (*To Slava.*) Don't raise your eyebrows at me. You too loved my mother more than you loved me. Obviously until the moment you had to start clearing up her shit...

SLAVA. We're not going to be discussing shit at the dinner table.

KITTY. At least I can talk to Nan. And she always has something interesting to say.

SLAVA. Ha. You can always talk to Nan! And what a cool Nan you've got! While I've been out working like a slave, she's taught you how to smoke, stuffed your face with her carcinogen meatballs and helped you to quit school. What a fantastic granny! You're going straight back to school tomorrow to hand in your documents.

KITTY. But I burned them.

SLAVA. Excuse me?

KITTY. I burned the documents.

MARY. Kathryn!

KITTY. Nan helped me. The cover of my secondary school diploma wasn't burning very well. So we had to pour petrol over it.



SLAVA. Kathryn... Why? Excuse my language, but why the fuck did you do that?!

KITTY. Because I hate school.

SLAVA. Because she hates school... And why, if I may ask, do you hate school so much?

KITTY. Don't act like you don't know. Every time I get a bad grade, they take me to the therapist – *ah, yes, she's from a divorced family, it all makes sense now...* I hate it! I don't want to talk about it. I don't want to spend years studying maths only to say to announce to everyone that the reason I still can't work out the square root in a basic maths equation is because I come from a divorced family.

SLAVA. Kitty, your dad and I will never get back together. You know that, don't you?

KITTY. I'm not saying you should get back together.

SLAVA. Dad has his own life now.

KITTY. I'm not saying that you should get back together, for fuck's sake! Don't you get it?

SLAVA. Your dad has a complex personality. He's very well-educated...

MARY. Basically, they've fucked up their marriage to the point of no return.

SLAVA. You can't just quit school... How could you even come up with the idea? Oh, God...

KITTY. Françoise Sagan left school and wrote her bestseller *Bonjour Tristesse*.

SLAVA. But you're not Françoise Sagan! You're just a spoilt little brat who can't be arsed to study!

KITTY. I do! But I want to study things I like, not some bullshit. It's not fair. Why do I always have to do what others tells me to do?

MARY. You don't have to do what others tell you to do.

SLAVA. *(To Kitty.)* While you're living under my roof, you'll do as I tell you.

KITTY. I'm not going back to school.

SLAVA. We'll see about that.

KITTY. I'm not going back to school!

MARY. *(To Slava.)* You've no idea what it's like for her at school.

SLAVA. I don't care!

KITTY. You never do. I don't want to graduate from a school or a university, just to end up unhappy like you and Dad!

SLAVA. That's it, we're leaving. *(Takes her bag.)* We'll come for the rest later. *(Takes her phone and dials a number.)* Can I order a cab to 70 Chaka Street please?

KITTY. Everyone says that I'm too aggressive and they all feel sorry for me – *oh, it must be so painful when your parents get divorced, let us give you a hug...* Like there was something wrong with me. But I'm totally fine, ok? I'm fine! I'm fine. I'm fine. I'm fine. I'm fine. I'm fine. I'm fine. I'm fine. I'm fine. I'm fine. I'm fine.

MARY. Of course you are, darling. (*Embraces Kitty.*) Don't worry. Everything will be ok. Granny's not going anywhere.

KITTY. I'm fine, Granny. I'm fine.

MARY. Yes, you are, my darling.

KITTY. Never mind that I only get to see Dad twice a year; never mind that I can't work out the square root of...

MARY. It ok if maths isn't your thing. I wouldn't have a clue how to work out a square root either, and look at me now – a retired shopkeeper with thirty years of experience under her belt!

KITTY. The teacher; that stupid maths teacher, she... She took my notebook; she saw I'd been writing poems in there, and she crossed them all out with her fucking red pen!

MARY. There, there, my angel.

KITTY. If I don't want to, I don't have to go to school.

MARY. Of course, darling.

SLAVA. Kathryn, you can cry as much as you like, but we're still leaving.

KITTY. Then leave!

SLAVA. If you're not coming with me, I'm going to have to call the police.

MARY. (*To Slava.*) Calm down! What's wrong with you? Can't you see what state she's in?

SLAVA. You're manipulating with her emotional state just to prove your point.

MARY. I'm the one who's manipulating? You can't just tear her away from her home whenever you please. All her friends are here.

SLAVA. Friends? Oh, you mean those alcoholics, drug addicts and prostitutes she hangs around with?

MARY. Well, take Christian, for instance. All else aside, he did tell the police that he fired the gun at Maigurs. He took the blame for her sake.

KITTY. (*To Slava.*) They may be alcoholics, but at least I have friends. You don't have any!

SLAVA. You're my friend, Kitty.

KITTY. If I was your friend, you wouldn't be leaving Nan all by herself.

SLAVA. But you can come and visit her whenever you like. (*Kitty is silent.*) Fine. Then you go out there, in the real world, and start making your own money. It seems that mine will no longer be of any use to

you.

MARY. *(To Kitty.)* Don't worry, I'll give you some from my pension.

SLAVA. If you can prance around half-naked and play with guns like a big girl, then there's no reason why you couldn't get a job.

KITTY. And I will!

SLAVA. You can get up early, earn your own money and live wherever you like.

MARY. But she's never done a day's work her life.

SLAVA. *(To Mary.)* What about that story you always like to tell, about your mother who tended cattle when she was only five? Kitty is no different to her.

*Slava's phone rings.*

SLAVA. Yes?

VOICE ON THE PHONE. Your taxi is here.

SLAVA. Thank you.

MARY. I have cancer.

KITTY. Nan?

MARY. Yes. I wasn't going to say anything. But it's true. I have cancer.

SLAVA. How dare you?

KITTY. Nan? Nan? Are you being serious?

MARY. Yes.

SLAVA. Oh, yeah?

MARY. Yeah.

SLAVA. What type of cancer is it?

MARY. Same as the one Antons had. From my meatballs.

SLAVA. Stop talking nonsense.

MARY. I'm not.

SLAVA. How can you manipulate with a child in such a pathetic way? Do you really think that this 'revelation' will make her stay?

KITTY. Mum, Nan is ill. We can't just leave her.

SLAVA. She's fine. Well, physically. I'm not talking about her mental state.

KITTY. She's not fine.

SLAVA. *(To Mary.)* Then show me your scan! Have you done an MRI?

MARY. God will make you pay for this. My own flesh and blood...

KITTY. Nan, have you seen an oncologist?

MARY. I have.

SLAVA. Of course she hasn't. Why would she? To offer her meatballs?

MARY. Fear hell, my daughter. Fear hell.

SLAVA. After a lifetime spent with you, dear mother, I'm no longer afraid of hell.

KITTY. *(To Mary.)* What did the oncologist say?

MARY. He said it wasn't looking good.

KITTY. But what did he say exactly?

SLAVA. She's fine. *(To Mary.)* I went to see Dr Kārklīņa yesterday to collect prescriptions for all your tranquilizers and she said – *your mum's in robust health, such rigour, so much energy, it really pleases me to see!*

MARY. I asked her not to disclose it to you. You have enough worries on your mind as it is.

SLAVA. How dare you lie like that, looking straight in the eye?

*The taxi horn beeps outside.*

KITTY. Don't worry, Nan. I'm not leaving you by yourself. I'll take care of you.

MARY. Oh, don't worry about me. I'll get by... somehow. *(To Slava.)* You should be thinking about Kitty. What are you going to eat there? You'll starve to death, is that what you want?

KITTY. Nan, let her go, if she wants to go. I'll stay here with you.

MARY. And who's going to pay for maintaining two apartments? Rates for electricity and firewood are going up by the day. And there's a boiler here.

*Slava's phone rings.*

SLAVA. Okay. Kitty, if you move in with me, you won't have to go to school, seeing as you hate it that much. And the three of us can all go to the cinema – you, me and Christian. If you stay here with Nan, you won't be able to see him.

MARY. And why ever not?

SLAVA. *(To Mary.)* Because you loathe him. *(To Kitty.)* She calls him a 'bum' and a 'shithead' behind your

back.

MARY. Well, yes, I did use those names when referring to him. But that's because he wouldn't have any of my stuffed cabbage rolls. Naturally, I'm going to call him a shithead after that display. *(To Kitty.)* Every now and then, if you want to, Christian can even stay overnight. I'm not against it, since you seem to be on friendly terms.

SLAVA. Jesus... *(To Kitty.)* Kitty, if you really want to, Christian can move in with us.

KITTY. I don't care. I'm staying.

SLAVA. And you expect me to stay here? *(About Mary.)* She doesn't love me. She just wants everyone to love only her.

MARY. I bleached all the collars on your white smocks with my own bare hands! I could have used the washing machine, but I wanted to help you save money on electricity. How can you possibly say that I don't love you?

SLAVA. How can you possibly call it love?

MARY. I'm looking after you!

SLAVA. You're ruining my life!

MARY. I work so hard around the house I don't even have time to sit down sometimes. All for you. And you're saying I'm ruining your life?

SLAVA. I'm forty-two years old, and I don't even know how to boil an egg!

MARY. You're a physiotherapist, not a housewife, darling. Why would you have anything to do with eggs? I... I'm the keeper of the hearth.

SLAVA. But maybe – just every now and then – I actually want to be a housewife? Has that never crossed your mind? I want to cook what I like on my days off.

MARY. All right. *(Points at the gas stove.)* Please, be my guest. I'll even wash up the saucepans when you're done.

SLAVA. Mum, are you even listening to me? This isn't going to work.

*Slava's phone rings again. She picks it up.*

SLAVA. *(On the phone.)* Just a moment, yes, I'm coming. *(To Kitty.)* It just isn't going to work if we stay here.

KITTY. I know. But I'd like to hope that it will. Am I allowed at least that?

SLAVA. You won't be able to live with her. You'll see it for yourself.

KITTY. I don't care. I'm staying.

SLAVA. But I don't have anyone else except you.

KITTY. It's the same for her.

SLAVA. Ok... Fine... Do as you wish. I... I... Kitty, I will put your clothes over here. (*Takes Kitty's clothes out of her bag and leaves them on the table.*) I'll come and get the rest of my stuff some other time. I'll leave the books for you.

KITTY. Stop acting like you're moving to Australia. It's only Jugla. Twenty minutes on the bus. I'll come and visit you.

SLAVA. Yes, yes, okay.

KITTY. Please don't be mad.

SLAVA. I'm not mad at you. I'm just sad.

KITTY. Stop that, too.

SLAVA. Bye. (*Kisses Kitty.*) Bye, Mum. (*Gives Mary a quick peck on the cheek and leaves.*)

*The door slams shut. Moments later, the taxi can be heard driving off. Mary and Kitty sit in silence for a moment, then Mary pulls out a packet of fags from her dressing gown pocket. She gives one to Kitty and takes one for herself. They sit together and smoke.*

KITTY. Why did you say you had cancer?

MARY. Like a blind man asking for directions. You know why I had to.

KITTY. There are people whose kids live abroad.

MARY. I don't care about them.

KITTY. But if we did end up leaving one day, what would you do?

MARY. Stop sprouting nonsense.

KITTY. But, Nan, if it did happen, and we couldn't take you with us, what would you do?

MARY. Let's cross that bridge when we get there, darling.

KITTY. I'm just saying, it doesn't have to be the end of the world. It's not like your life would be over if we left you.

MARY. But, darling, you two *are* my entire life. I've sacrificed everything for you.

KITTY. Did anyone ask you to do it?

MARY. What do you mean – *did anyone ask?*

KITTY. I mean, everyone has a right to live their own life.

MARY. Their own life... You're talking about people with big families. There's just three of us. I was sitting here one day, thinking – if I hadn't gone through with all those abortions, I would have had three

children by now. A big household. But now... The first time you two went on holiday abroad, I was so terribly lonely. I'd walk around the flat in the evenings, looking through photos of you, when you were still little, Kitty. It was so quiet around here, and I realised that time has flown by so fast...

KITTY. Why didn't you invite your girlfriends to come over? Why didn't you go out to the theatre? I remember when you used to go with Velta and Skaidrite.

MARY. Oh, we only went a couple of times.

KITTY. Yeah, but still.

MARY. What girlfriends are you talking about anyway? Velta can't walk since she had a stroke, and Skaidrite has gone blind after her eye surgery. Where do you think we could all go, in their condition? I'm blessed to be alive. At least I can help your mother. I can wash the bedsheets and bring her some lunch.

KITTY. Nan, why do you always do that?

MARY. What?

KITTY. Are you atoning for your sins? With all your helpfulness and self-sacrifice? Is that what it is?

MARY. When your mother was born, I had to go out and work. I was earning money.

KITTY. No one is making you do anything around here.

MARY. I was earning money. I'd come home exhausted every night...

KITTY. Are you even listening to me?

MARY. ...I'd come home exhausted and go straight to bed. But I was so happy that I could afford those pretty import dresses from abroad for your mum. And I bought this beautiful, light dressing gown for my mum. I was proud of myself; that I'd been able to buy something valuable. Then I bought a bed and a Czech crystal vase. You've no idea how amazing it felt to have my own money. Then one day, it was someone's birthday party, I can't remember who it was now, but we were all standing around, taking photos. I hugged Slava for the photo, but she turned around and said – *I want mummy*. She thought that my mother was her mum. It makes sense, of course – my mother was always at home, looking after her. What could I do? Someone had to go out and work.

KITTY. But Nan... can't you see that all this helping and offering is ruining your relationship? You know how much she hates it. But you just keep on offering your help.

MARY. But why can't I offer my advice? Should I swallow my tongue?

KITTY. Ok, I'm going to my room.

MARY. You're not going to have anything else?

KITTY. No.

MARY. Right. Then I'll put all this away in the fridge. Thank God, Jugla isn't too far away. Look at this little box here, just the perfect size for stuffed cabbage rolls! I can take them to her tomorrow. What will

you like to eat tomorrow?

KITTY. I don't care.

MARY. Kitty... help me decide.

KITTY. I don't know. Some sorrel soup?

MARY. But your mother doesn't eat sorrel soup.

KITTY. I'm sure she'll figure something out.

MARY. She has that stomach ulcer. Oh, I do worry about her... how is she going to manage all by herself?

KITTY. She's an adult, Nan.

MARY. But I'm scared it will get worse. After all, it's a serious condition. And I've no idea what she eats when she's alone! What did you eat on your last holiday?

KITTY. Cup-a-soup.

MARY. A-ha!

KITTY. It'll be fine. I'm going to my room.

MARY. You can sleep in your mum's room, if you like. It's much comfier, at least the bed is bigger. Don't even think about moving in though. She'll need a place to stay when she comes crawling back eventually.

KITTY. She won't be coming back, Nan.

MARY. Well, you never know. She might stay over, for birthdays or parties...

KITTY. Good night, Granny.

MARY. Good night, my angel. Thank you for being in my life.

*Mary embraces Kitty. They kiss.*

*Kitty goes to her room.*

*Mary clears the table.*

KITTY. *(Calls from her room.)* Nan?

MARY. Yes, darling?

KITTY. Have you seen my notebook?

MARY. Which notebook?

KITTY. The red one.



MARY. Oh, yes. I have.

*Kitty enters.*

KITTY. Where did you see it last?

MARY. I gave it to Antra.

KITTY. What?

MARY. I gave it to Antra.

KITTY. Who the fuck is Antra?

MARY. She works at the publishing house. She's a professional linguist, so I asked her to take a look, suggest a few edits... Who knows, you might end up with a published book.

KITTY. You gave my notebook to a complete stranger?

MARY. Oh, but she's not a stranger. She used to read lectures at the university when I worked in the canteen.

*Kitty starts to cry.*

KITTY. Why did you do it, Nan?

MARY. Darling, what's the matter? Why are you crying?

KITTY. Why did you give my notebook to her?

MARY. Kitty, how do you expect to get anywhere without connections?

KITTY. But that notebook was *mine*. You weren't supposed to touch it.

MARY. Antra and I are old friends – I used to give her pastries on the sly or dish up potato salad while no one was looking. And now she's returning the favour. That's how life works. What? Did I do something wrong?

KITTY. No, Granny, of course not.

MARY. We can do something nice for each other from time to time, can't we?

KITTY. Yes, yes, we can.

MARY. What are families for, eh?

KITTY. Of course, Granny. Of course.

MARY. In fact, she said you're very talented. Except for all those swearwords you put in. But I said that's normal for your age.

KITTY. You could have asked me first. I would have given you that stupid notebook.

MARY. But you were out, my angel. Probably prancing around topless somewhere. *(Laughs.)*

KITTY. Why did you have to go in my room?

MARY. And who'd dust in there if I didn't?

KITTY. It doesn't have to be sanitised. It's not a surgical ward! It's my room! *Mine.*

MARY. Fine. It's your room. Except I'm always the one who has to clean up the mess.

KITTY. How many times do I have to tell you that it's not messy! Everything I have is in perfect order! On the floor, on the bed... It's all in order! *My* order!

MARY. But if I'm washing the floors anyway, why can't I take the mop and slide it across your floor? Would you rather have it all sticky, as if we were living in a homeless shelter?

KITTY. No, Granny. Thank you for washing my floor, thank you for giving my notebook to... what's her face...

MARY. Anytime, my angel. Oh, you're so sweet! My little sunshine. Granny is always right, isn't she?

KITTY. Yes, Granny.

MARY. Would you like a nice cup of tea with a pastry?

KITTY. Yes, Granny.

MARY. Go to bed, darling, I'll bring it to you.

KITTY. Granny, I love you so much.

MARY. Oh, my angel, I love you too.

KITTY. I love you both so much, but you both drive me absolutely mental!

MARY. There, there. It will be ok. We'll have a nice, fresh pastry. Oh dearie me! Look at the time. I better start making breakfast. Hang on, I'll get it all sorted. I won't be a minute, ok? *(Starts to busy herself with the teapot.)*

KITTY. Nan?

MARY. Yes, my darling?

KITTY. Don't be mad at me, ok?

MARY. Whatever for, darling?

KITTY. Forgive me, ok?

MARY. But my angel, you've done nothing wrong. *(Kitty embraces Mary tightly.)* Oh, what would I do without you? You're my whole life's joy and happiness.

*Kitty kisses Mary and exits. Noises can be heard coming from Kitty's room as she opens and shuts the cupboards.*

MARY. What are you doing in there? Do you need me to help you? Kitty? Don't start playing games now! Where are you planning on going in the middle of the night? Kitty? Kitty, I meant well! Ok, maybe I do too much sometimes, or I say things you don't always like to hear... But... But... I'm sorry that I took your notebook without your permission. I will go and get it back. I shouldn't have done it. Kitty, I'm so sorry. Will you forgive me? Please?

KITTY. *(From the other room.)* Okay.

*Mary takes out the pastry, starts making tea. The outer door slams shut.*

MARY. Kitty? Kitty?

*Mary looks into the hallway, then examines all the rooms. There is no one there. She walks towards the window. Kitty's sobs can be heard outside the window, as she runs across the yard.*

MARY. Kitty! Kitty! Where are you going? I made you some tea! Kitty! With a nice pastry. With a... with... Kitty! It's fresh... the pastry... I bought it this morning... from the bakery on the corner....

*Mary continues to stare out of the window for a long time, then turns towards the kitchen and looks around again, confused. There's a cup of steaming tea on the kitchen table, next to a fresh pastry.*

## The Serfs

By Virgilio Piñera

Translated from Cuban Spanish by Linda S. Howe

**The author and context.** Virgilio Piñera published the text of his play *Los Siervos* [*The Serfs*], a caustic attack on Stalinism and totalitarianism, in the Havana journal *Ciclón* in November 1955. He embraced the bleak irony of Adamov, Beckett, Ionesco, and other contemporary playwrights as well as Greek tragedies, Aristophanes, and the zany humor of Old Comedy. His allegories of corruption and power in totalitarian societies pay homage to international literary traditions.

*The Serfs* targets not only Soviet communism, but any hierarchical use and abuse of power and false utopia. Piñera's themes of exploitation, marginality, the enslavement of the masses, and shady puppet leaders harken back to Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1920-1921). In the 1921 essay "I am Afraid", Zamyatin writes, "True literature can exist only where it is created, not by diligent trustworthy officials, but by madmen, hermits, heretics, dreamers, rebels, and skeptics." Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell's *1984* (1949) owe much to *We*. All these cautionary tales expose how repressive regimes transform utopian ideals into dystopian realities. Piñera's play portrays these realities and the intellectual's struggle in the context of communism.

Disillusionment with corrupt absolute power also echoes the Polish authors Witold Gombrowicz and Czeslaw Milosz. During intermittent exiles in Argentina from 1946-1958, Piñera met Gombrowicz and collaborated with him on literary projects (see Anderson, *Everything in Its Place*. Bucknell U Press, 2006: 47-48), including the Spanish translation of Gombrowicz's first novel *Ferdydurke* (1937; trans. Editorial Argos, 1947), a wild and still shocking diatribe on the puerility that collaborates with Nazis, Stalinists and the Polish communist regime. Piñera and Gombrowicz became lifelong friends, and in the 1950s, when Piñera worked for *Ciclón*, Gombrowicz introduced him to Milosz. Piñera read Milosz, and Milosz published Piñera. Piñera was probably familiar with the French editions of Milosz's *The Captive Mind* (1953; 1954; see Zilinskaite, *Witold Gombrowicz and Virgilio Piñera, the Argentine Experience*. PhD diss., UC San Diego, 2014 & Arenas, *Antes que anochezca*. (*Before Night Falls*; 1992).

After the 1959 Cuban revolution, like so many Cuban intellectuals, Piñera supported Fidel Castro's political agenda and participated in the vibrant cultural scene. At the same time, well-known Cuban literary historian and critic Jose Antonio Portuondo and, later, Jesus Diaz, young editor of *The Bearded Crocodile*, criticized absurd theater as antirevolutionary (Palls, "The Theater of the Absurd in Cuba after 1959," *LALR*, 7 [Fall-Winter, 1975]). Uruguayan critic Ugo Ulive agrees that the absurd is not a good fit with socialist society:

I can see a theater of the absurd in an absurd society, where one wants to show the absurdity of many things, but in a socialist society the logical and rational procedure must be pointed out. The theater of the absurd would be seen as out of place here. I don't mean an author should be forbidden to write about the absurd but he would be writing out of tune with his time. (*Odyssey Review*, 2, no. 4 [1962: 260].)

By 1961, in his famous speech during UNEAC (National Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba) meetings in Havana, Castro declared, "Within the revolution, everything; outside the revolution,

nothing,” echoing Lenin’s slogan “Who is not with us is against us.” The sovietization of Cuba had already begun, and Castro proclaimed himself a Marxist-Leninist, showing his support for the Cuban communist party (PPC). Piñera commented during those meetings that he and others were afraid.

In 1960, he acted on that fear and excluded *The Serfs* from his *Complete Works* (1960-1961). At the same time, coincident with Jean-Paul Sartre’s benedictory visit to Cuba, he published a fictional interview between himself and the French philosopher in which he calls the play an “infantile” gaffe (*Lunes de Revolución*, March 1960) that will become a “disremembered slip-up”. The piece oozes self-deprecation and figurative self-flagellation.

Sartre and his partner, French writer and feminist Simone de Beauvoir, had been quick to pledge solidarity with the Cuban revolution and to praise its leaders, Fidel Castro and the Argentine guerrilla Ernesto Che Guevara, as heroes. They were among the founders of the review *Les Temps Modernes*, which called for intellectuals to assist and prompt social changes and expounded on causes around the world. In a 1947 essay “Qu’est-ce que la littérature?” (“What is Literature?”), Sartre argues for the restoration of politically committed literature to its collective social function. Every writer’s responsibility and obligation were commitment and sacrifice.

After intensive interviews with Fidel Castro and touring the island with Che, Fidel, and other bearded guerillas in 1960, Sartre and de Beauvoir sanctioned Cuba’s revolutionary experiment. However, Sartre also met with the intelligentsia bad-boy Piñera and attended a performance of his successful absurdist play *Electra Garrigó* at the Teatro Promoteo. Sartre loved the play, written before the revolution but intentionally reperformed before powerful luminaries as emblematic of the nation’s transformation (Andujar, “Revolutionizing Greek Tragedy in Cuba: Virgilio Piñera’s *Electra Garrigó*,” In: Boshier, K and Macintosh, F and McConnell, J and Rankine, P, (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Greek Drama in the Americas*. (361-379) Oxford University Press: 2015, 361-79). Sartre made plans to mount it in Paris, and in spite of his apprehensions about *Los Siervos*, Piñera was ecstatic about working with him (Anderson, 97-98).

Sartre’s month-long visit brought together like minds and the marriage of revolutionary thought and action. Many left-wing and liberal intellectuals in Europe and the Americas saw the Cuban revolution as a daring and thrilling adventure; it influenced writers and artists on a global scale. Among Alberto Korda’s many iconic official photographs was one taken in Che’s office at the Ministry of Industry on Carlos III Avenue in Havana. Che, dressed in his military uniform with cap and boots, holds an old lighter to Sartre’s Cuban cigar, producing a bright flash. Here, the enlightened revolutionary energizes the philosophy and ideology of Europe’s postwar intelligentsia. Eventually, Sartre and de Beauvoir’s honeymoon with Cuba fizzled out. On a subsequent visit to Cuba, they discovered the hardening of party rhetoric. Still, Sartre’s admiration for Che did not wane; after Che died in Bolivia in 1967, Sartre expressed his unqualified admiration in the international press: “I believe [Che Guevara] was not only an intellectual but also the most complete human being of our age.” In 1971, when the forced confession and incarceration of writer and poet Alberto Padilla sparked international outrage and scandal, Sartre joined Latin American writers in denouncing the Cuban government.

Piñero’s paranoia had been prescient. According to the renowned Spanish writer Juan Goytisolo, in 1963, when Che discovered Piñera’s *Complete Works* at the Cuban embassy in Algiers, he threw it across the room saying, “Who the fuck reads this faggot here?” (“¿Quién coño lee aquí a ese maricón?”) (Goytisolo, *En los reinos de tajifa* [Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1986]: 174–75). Che’s reaction to Piñera’s theater and gay identity was not mere personal opinion but entrenched mandate, approved by Sartre’s high praise for Che. Piñera panicked; he understood that *The Serfs* would be judged according to its

degree of commitment to the Cuban government's discourse. In other words, it would be a permanent stain on his official dossier. Any theater critic or director would be hard pressed to claim that *The Serfs* meant something else by its critique of Stalinism. Although rumors and conjectures about stagings of one or another iteration of Piñera's play conflict, it was excluded more than once from editions of his complete works, purportedly not staged until 1999, and not published again after *Ciclón* (1955) until 2002. No one can confirm what actually transpired, but by trying to erase *The Serfs*, Piñera busted himself. He drew attention to his mockery of official communist discourse in what was rapidly becoming a pro-Stalinist outpost.

**The play.** *The Serfs* indicts repression and restrictions on free will. The apparatchiks deliver convoluted speeches with empty phrases and conspire incessantly. In this baleful world, to be earnest is naive, laughable, and politically precarious. The leaders build up Nikita, the charismatic party rebel, as a paragon of revolutionary ideals, all the while scornfully plotting his doom. Nikita is prone to bureaucratic and ideological battles but able to dodge the discursive traps set to take him out. He foresees his end and vows to die for his independence and free thinking as a "declared serf" rather than an "undeclared serf", who is unconscious of the exploitative system. The leaders are overcome with hatred, and even though they fear his disappearance will destroy their political system, they feel he must die for exposing the system's master/slave hierarchy. As predicted, more serfs are pronouncing themselves "declared" and poised to take their fallen hero's place. The eternal return of Piñera's disobedient serf, whose sacrifice produces thousands more, upholds a defiance that transcends time. In contrast, a declared serf who beheads his undeclared/undercover counterpart to expose him as declared will become an undercover lord who exploits his undeclared serfs, perpetuating another cycle. Piñera's appropriation of Nietzsche's skepticism undermines romantic revolutionary ideals of progress. The wheels of apparent order grind exceedingly small.

Piñera's absurd doublespeak exposes the contradictory morality of authoritarian regimes. It reminds us that subversive individuals do not often survive decadent systems; Nikita's acts of sacrifice expose the deliberately absurd rhetoric of abuse and the exhausting, laborious measures to destroy him. Party officials revel in their ability to deny what they mean, to use double entendres and contradictory claims to maintain the masses in a perpetual state of passivity and ignorance. Piñera layers linguistic ambiguity on cynical official rhetoric to mock official acts and score sardonic points. The meshing of Cuban and Soviet revolutionary politics blurs the role and meaning of the antihero and begs the question: Which revolution and which revolutionary leaders and thinkers are being skewered?

Note that throughout history, writers and artists have used ambiguity as a precarious cover for criticism of official ideological and political writings in highly charged and perplexing social and cultural milieux. In early sixties communist Poland, for example, productions of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* often portrayed Claudius as a vicious communist, which made the point but preserved deniability. Piñera could not deny his direct criticism of the burgeoning communism of 1960s Cuba in *The Serfs*.

In 1996, Cuban cultural officials changed the fate of *The Serfs* when they rejected the young director Raúl Martín's proposal to stage the play. Martín, who had gained fame for staging other popular absurd Piñera plays, tucked the script away in a drawer for a few years as Cuba continued to change, and irreverent theater became more and more popular. He then edited his version of *The Serfs* and asked for authorized approval again in 1999. Not only was the script revised, but the cultural officials who had rejected the original proposal had left the country or been assigned to other

positions. Their replacements said yes.

Piñera's original 1955 text makes several references to communism, and the characters have Russian names. According to the stage directions, portraits of Lenin and Stalin hang on the walls. Martín substituted "neutral" names for the Russian ones and expunged verbal references to communism and Russian revolutionary iconography from the production. In the program, Martín claims that the play is about a futuristic society but emphasizes the party's abuse of power and its leaders' corruption. Does the erasure of explicit Stalinist content discount Piñera's thesis? An officially ostracized play, scrubbed clean of communist terms and visual references, entertains new generations who most likely already knew what was changed and why. The result is an extrinsic satire on censorship that confirms Piñera's vicious cycle of corrupt power, censorship, and rebellion.

**The translation.** Popular speech, subtle references to Cuban culture and politics, and official political doublespeak are a challenge—popular language is fluid; cultural references can be deep, multilayered, and complex; and political doublespeak is intentionally opaque. As an avid reader of, and participant in, Cuban culture, especially theater, I've been translating works into English for the past 25 years. My translation of the absurdist language, wordplay, and humorous ticks in *The Serfs* began as a project for Cuban director Raul Martín of the Teatro de la Luna, who had staged the play in 1999. Piñera injects humor into a dystopia lexicon that mimics Orwell's *Newspeak* and *doublethink* and officially sanctioned forms of speech in totalitarian systems. The characters plot to oppress individual citizens and crush rebels within their *OneState* system using psychological, political, and cultural instruments.

Before I translated *The Serfs*, I studied Piñera's works and continued studying Cuban theater. Throughout this period, I attended several staged versions of Piñera's plays and regularly met and discussed them with Raul Martín. We often read aloud sections of the original Spanish text and my translation. I concentrated on subtle phrasing, double-entendres, and the tongue twisting humor. We also read aloud poems from Piñera's collection *La isla en peso: Obra poética (The Whole Island: Poetic Works, 1998)* as a study of the nuances and rebellious spirit that permeate all his works.

**Virgilio Piñera** (1912-1976) is a well-known Cuban author and translator. A significant figure in the absurdist literary movement of the 1940s and 1950s, his notable works include the plays *Electra Garrigó* (1942), *La boda (The Wedding)* (1944), and *Dos viejos pánicos (Two Old Panics)* (1968); the short story collection *Cuentos fríos (Cold Tales)* (1956); the novel *La carne de René (Rene's Flesh)* (1952); and his poetry collection *La isla en peso: obra poética (The Whole Island: Poetic Works)* (1998). In the early years of the revolution, he published numerous articles in major Latin American literary journals; theater directors staged his plays, and Cuban presses published his collected works. Later, his personal, often bitter battles with other intellectuals and cultural officials, his flamboyant and witty personality, and his controversial openly gay lifestyle made for a thorny life. In spite of his mounting problems, Piñera continued his literary output until his death in 1976.

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# The Serfs

By Virgilio Piñera

Translated from Cuban Spanish by Linda S. Howe

## CHARACTERS IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE

ORLOFF . . . . . Prime Minister  
FIODOR . . . . . Party Secretary  
KIRIANIN . . . . . Military General  
NIKITA . . . . . Party Philosopher and serf  
STEPACHENKO . . . . . Spy  
ADAMOV . . . . . Undercover lord  
KOLIA . . . . . Worker  
AN OFFICIAL

### First Scene

*Design: An office. Oil painting of Lenin in the background above a work table. Stage left, oil painting of Stalin. Stage right, large map of the world. Stage center, Orloff, Fiodor, and Kirianin are sitting in four red leather armchairs; beside one is a lighted floor lamp.*

### Act One

*Orloff, Fiodor, Kirianin.*

Orloff: Here, just between us, let's admit it, comrades—Nikita is a master. Declaring himself a serf at this stage of the game! Dialectically, such a thing is not possible, and yet. . .

Fiodor: It might be a plot.

Kirianin: Impossible, comrade. Fear makes you paranoid. The land and the people are wholly communized. *(Pause.)* Apparently our comrade forgets the absolute triumph of the world revolution. On *every* level.

Orloff: Comrade Kirianin, let's not waste time talking about what communism has accomplished in a century. We have to discuss what measures to take with our comrade Nikita.

Kirianin: Nikita! Nikita! There's only one small step from Nikita to Nikitism. And, then . . . the debacle!

Fiodor: Right, that's the step Nikita shouldn't make. We'll stop him dead in his tracks.

Kirianin: That's easy to say, but. . . to do? *(Pause.)* Comrade Orloff, I propose the disappearance of our comrade Nikita.

Orloff: No disappearances for now. Martyrs are dangerous. Nikita must continue to exist



unnoticed.

Kirianin: All this about Nikita surprises me. He's the official Party philosopher. There are his books: forty published volumes pounding away about human equality and all that, and now, overnight, he declares himself a serf. *(Pause.)* No doubt about it, something's not right with Nikita.

Orloff: When a man becomes an activist, he can't help but act. If Nikita fought to move up the ladder, now he's fighting to fall off it.

Kirianin: That's what we have to prevent him from doing. If the Party has achieved its highest goal, if from now on there's no higher place, no higher place to go, I see no reason to descend. *(Pause.)* If Nikita wants to descend, let him descend the staircase in his house . . .

Orloff: This moment is too serious for jokes. *(Pause.)* Don't forget that Nikita issued a manifesto praising subservience, declaring himself a serf, and asking to enter the service of a lord.

Kirianin: Lords no longer exist in Russia or anywhere on the planet.

Fiodor: That's what I'd like to know: serf to what master?

Orloff: None of this is important. The main point is that Nikita has declared himself a serf. *(Pause.)* And published that declaration in *Pravda*. What nerve!

Fiodor: How did the masses react?

Orloff: Well, to tell the truth, they haven't reacted at all. When you've reached the highest point in the best of all possible worlds, it's difficult to react. *(Pause.)* They have read the manifesto without actually reading it.

Kirianin: Well, then, I see no reason for this conference. I've put off the hunt. *(He gets up.)* I believe there's still time. . .

Orloff: *(Making him sit down again.)* Such light heartedness concerns me, Comrade Kirianin. If it's true that the masses, drunk with happiness, read without reading, it's no less certain that Nikita can motivate them to actually read what they are reading.

Fiodor: Amazing! That's how the Party began and that may be how it ends. *(Pause.)* Without a doubt, this is a serious moment.

Kirianin: We could re-educate Nikita.

Orloff: When has it ever been possible to re-educate a communist!

Kirianin: Nikita is a communist. Nikita has declared himself a serf. Nikita re-educates himself; therefore, a communist can re-educate himself.

Fiodor: This is precisely the sticking point. Theoretically, a communist can't be de-communized. I say theoretically when thinking about capitalism's old days. In those days, a half-hearted communized communist could cross over to the capitalist camp. But, comrades, today! Today,

hundreds of millions on this planet Earth are all communists. If there's no capitalism, if there's only communism, to which camp is Nikita crossing over?

Orloff: It's very clear: to the subservient camp. *(Pause.)* Nikita wants to start over.

Kirianin: He's an old revolutionary who's bored by inaction.

Fiodor: He's an old romantic! *(He slams his fist on the arm of his chair.)* He's a blithering fool! He's a blithering fool!

Orloff: Calm down, calm down! We can't solve anything by screaming and gesturing. *(Pause.)* Here's the problem: find a solution to Nikita's case.

Kirianin: What is your solution?

Orloff: At the moment, I don't have one.

Fiodor: I propose a discreet disappearance.

Orloff: No disappearances. As long as Nikita is visible to everyone, no one will see him, but if he becomes invisible, everyone will be dying to see him.

Kirianin: But if Nikita were to die a "natural death" . . .

Orloff: When the people find out about Nikita's natural death, they'll begin to actually read the manifesto while reading it. Next thing you know, they'll erect a tomb for him alongside the tomb of the great Anti-Serf.

Kirianin: Ugh! That would be serious: enslaved masses marching in silence past Nikita's tomb, the Tomb of the Great Slave.

Orloff: You laugh, but that's the gist of the situation. *(Pause.)* No, no disappearances whatsoever.

Fiodor: So, we'll let time run its course. Time takes care of everything. We've come to rule the world over time.

Orloff: But Nikita will also have time.

Kirianin: Nikita is a time bomb.

Orloff: You're so right: a time bomb. *(Pause; he stands up.)* The Party has never been in a situation like this. We're powerless.

Kirianin: Let's mobilize ourselves! *(Walks, taking goose steps.)*

Fiodor: Let's mobilize ourselves! *(Walks, taking goose steps.)*

Orloff: *(Collapsing into his armchair.)* Let's immobilize ourselves! *(Pause.)* We should assure, at all cost, that Nikita continues to move imperceptibly among the masses.

Fiodor: How do we accomplish that? Comrade Orloff, you don't approve of a "natural death," and you're against any public proceeding . . .

Orloff: No, that's out of the question. It would be a catastrophe.

Fiodor: Okay, no public proceeding, no secret proceeding, no public or private execution. And meanwhile, Nikita threatening . . .

Kirianin: Comrade Orloff says that Nikita's subservience poses no danger as long as he lives unperceived among the masses. *(To Orloff)* Did I get that right?

Orloff: Yes, and what else?

Kirianin: Okay: we should start by becoming invisible ourselves.

Orloff: That's not a bad idea. *(Thinking.)* Although there's a *glitch*: Nikita knows that we know. . .

Kirianin: Let's pretend we don't know. We'll play along. That way we gain more time.

Fiodor: Nikita will also play along and gain time. *(Pause.)* I'm all for swift action.

Orloff: If only there were still a few thousand capitalists in the world . . .

Kirianin: *(Stupefied.)* Capitalists?

Orloff: You heard me: capitalists! If there were still some capitalist stronghold, Nikita's subservience would be wiped out.

Fiodor: I don't understand.

Orloff: Very simple—we'd say this: Nikita is a traitor; Nikita has gone over to the camp of the capitalist dogs. In no time at all, no one would care about Nikita.

Kirianin: Those were the days! The Golden Era! Back then, you could shout, Down with capitalism! But today, there's not even one enemy out there.

Orloff: Nikita is an enemy.

Kirianin: An enemy we can't attack. We can't shout protests against him, write against him, or riddle his body with bullets.

Orloff: That's the problem. Our clichéd slogans and worn-out techniques are useless against an enemy like Nikita. *(Pause.)* It's a question of starting over.

Fiodor: We'll play his game.

Kirianin: We'll totally embrace Nikitism.

Orloff: The joke's on us: Nikita has a game plan, and we have nothing. We're communists and nothing more; he's a communist and also a Nikitist.

Fiodor: What do we know about Nikitism? Absolutely nothing.

Kirianin: Okay, we know that Nikita has declared himself a serf.

Orloff: And what does that mean? *(Pause.)* Comrade, I'll bet you'll have a hard time finding a communist manual that deals with Nikitism. How do we deal with this?

Kirianin: We're losing time with intellectual minutiae. Less talk and more action.

Fiodor: Ha, ha! More action. *(Pause.)* Who's going to sell that plan? Nikita!

Orloff: That's the sad truth! Nikita's holding all the cards.

Fiodor: We haven't moved forward an inch. In a few minutes, Nikita will be in this office, and we still don't have a clear plan of action.

Kirianin: Let's pretend we're not the least bit interested in subservience. *(Pause.)* At least not *declared* subservience because as far as the other kind goes . . . Ha, ha, ha!

Orloff: What are you insinuating, comrade?

Kirianin: I'm speaking clearly: we're undercover nobles, but nobles after all.

Fiodor: We can't deny it.

Orloff: But of course we'll deny it as long as we can't crush Nikita.

Kirianin: We'll question him undercover.

Fiodor: Even so, it will be an interrogation, and Nikita will know that we're interrogating him.

Kirianin: Under what pretext are we bringing him in?

Orloff: To discuss simple formal procedures. For example, that discourse about the happiness of the greatest number is an excellent pretext.

Kirianin: Oh, then he can tell us that since the happiness of the greatest number is a done deal, his desire to be the first unhappy one on the road to the unhappiness of the greatest number . . . *(Pause.)* No, let's not wake the beast.

Orloff: Rest assured. Nikita is an old fox. I doubt very much he'll show his cards during this interview.

Kirianin: What a euphemism!

Orloff: Okay, this interrogation. *(Pause.)* Should we call him in?

Kirianin: Let's roll up our sleeves!

Fiodor: Lots of discretion. We'll act as if we're Nikita's equals. Let's not reveal our nobility.

Orloff: Clearly, we have to tread carefully with him. *(Pause.)* Now, let's chat with Nikita. *(Rings the bell.)* Treading carefully. *(He slowly turns toward the table and picks up some papers.)* Treading carefully. . .

CURTAIN

**First Act:** same decor

## Scene Two

Orloff, Fiodor, and Kirianin. Nikita enters.

Nikita: Greetings, comrades!

Orloff, Fiodor, Kirianin: *(In unison)* Greetings!

Nikita: Anything new, comrades? Yesterday, I arrived from the Caucasus, and I haven't had time to read the venerable *Pravda*.

Orloff: *(Moving to Nikita's side.)* Nothing new, comrade. Everything is going perfectly. *(Pause.)* Have a seat? *(Orloff sits down.)*

Nikita: Thanks, I prefer to stand for a while. I've been sitting for two hours in my office.

Orloff: *(Leafing through papers.)* We've called you in to discuss some formal issues . . .

Nikita: About what?

Orloff: About the happiness of the greatest number.

Nikita: Let's see.

Orloff: *(Reading.)* "Having happily achieved the happiness of the greatest number, there is no need to achieve any greater happiness than the happiness achieved by the greatest number." *(Pause.)* Do you find any formal problem in this paragraph?

Nikita: The form is perfect, unobjectionable.

Orloff: And what about the crux of the matter?

Nikita: Having reached the happiness of the greatest number—a bottom-line issue that no longer requires discussion, knowing that we've achieved the happiness of the greatest number—all that remains for us is to deliberate pure matters of form with regard to achieving the happiness of the greatest number.

Fiodor: *(To Kirianin)* The old fox won't fall in our trap. *(To Nikita)* Bravo, Nikita! Dialectically irrefutable! *(Pause.)* It occurs to me: given that the Party has overcome all arguments regarding the crux of the matter, the moment has come to exhaustively improve on all matters of form . . .

Nikita: I'll take care of it, Comrade Fiodor.

Fiodor: Well, okay, it's important, from this time on, that Comrade Nikita dedicates himself to drafting the hundreds of thousands of matters of form resulting from hundreds of thousands of questions regarding their complexity.

Nikita: In other words, the Party, having surpassed the active phase, has now come to the contemplative phase.

Orloff: The Party repeats the creator's miracle. It's the only Party to achieve a similar *tour de force*. (*He sprawls out in the armchair and rubs his hands together.*) And so, Nikita, after recreating the world in our image and likeness, we've dedicated ourselves to contemplating it.

Nikita: And like the creator, we'll sleep with one eye open . . . and a rifle on our shoulder. At the slightest hint of rebellion, pin, pan, bang!

Orloff: In the best of worlds, the possibility of rebellion is minimal.

Kirianin: (*Staring at Nikita.*) Rebel? Who would take up arms against happiness?

Orloff: I'm having difficulty following your thought, Nikita. You speak of rebellion. The Party has done things so well that there's no need to keep either eye open; we can sleep soundly. (*Pause.*) It strikes me as awfully strange that Comrade Nikita, communist through and through, proposes the possibility of armed rebellion.

Nikita: It strikes me as awfully strange that Comrade Orloff interprets my words so literally and takes himself back in time to the heroics of the barricades. I've been summoned here, if I'm not mistaken, to chat about matters of pure form. One that occurred to me as a matter of pure form, was the formal matter of one open eye while sleeping as a precaution . . . Because, there's no greater sweetness, and I quote Dante—than to recall a happy time when miserable. Equally, there's no greater sweetness than to recall our times of wretchedness in joy . . . And this, of course, inspires intensive development of matters of pure form.

Orloff: I want to make sure Comrade Nikita understands that when one speaks of intensive development of matters of the purest form, it's only within the perspective of the present happiness and not the Party's troubled past.

Kirianin: The Party's past is dead and buried.

Nikita: I don't disagree, but since we're speaking here of the intensive development of pure formal matters, I want to add my two cents worth. Well, I propose that Comrade Kirianin's brilliant phrase—"the Party's past is dead and buried"—be changed to "The Party of the past is dead and buried."

Orloff: Would you be willing to sign this proposition?

Nikita: Comrade Orloff knows all too well that publications in our world republic are anonymous; still, I agree to sign at the end of my formal proposition on one condition.

Orloff, Kirianin, Fiodor: (*In chorus.*) What?

Nikita: That it clearly states that I signed the proposition to cooperate, with the greatest efficiency, in the intensive development of matters of pure form, and, as such, my signature is a pure and innocent matter of form.

Orloff, Kirianin, Fiodor: (*In chorus.*) Traitor!

Nikita: (*Unflappable.*) Agreed. I'm a traitor but . . . a formal one. Even if I wanted to be a traitor, I couldn't be a real one. There's no other state to which I could reveal state secrets, and anyway, the secrets would deal strictly with matters of pure form.

Orloff: (*Gloomy.*) Let's put aside matters of pure form and get to the point . . .

Nikita: (*Interrupting him.*) You mean, the formal point . . .

Orloff: (*He goes up to Nikita puts his finger on his forehead.*) That point, filthy point, infectious point, preposterous point—is you, Nikita. (*Pause.*) You've declared yourself a serf!

Nikita: (*In a gesture of profound reverence, kisses Orloff's hand, and falls to his knees.*) Serf, I am. (*Moves across the floor on his knees and kisses the feet of Kirianin and Fiodor.*)

Orloff: Stand up, Nikita, your pantomime disgusts us.

Nikita: (*Makes an effort to get up, but falls back down to his knees.*) I can't, lord, I can't stand up. I can only bow before you. (*Continues on his knees with his face on the floor.*)

Kirianin: (*To Orloff*) Some good we did. Now we'll have to put an end to this charade.

Fiodor: (*Takes out his pistol.*) I'm going to kill this mangy dog.

Orloff: (*Grabs the pistol.*) You're crazy! That would be just the spark! Tomorrow, we'd have thousands of kneeling serfs in Red Square. Let's zero in on the pestilence.

Kirianin: Exactly: we'll zero in on the pestilence. We'll quarantine the stinking victim.

Orloff: (*To Nikita*) Listen, Nikita—

Nikita: (*Grabs hold of Orloff's boot and places his head under it.*) I'm listening, my master.

Orloff: I suppose you've declared yourself a serf as a purely formal matter. (*Anxiously looks at Kirianin and Fiodor.*)

Nikita: (*Getting up.*) Nothing to do with formal matters, lord. I only know that I'm a serf, a very humble servant of any master.

Kirianin: Aren't you content with collective happiness?

Nikita: Your eminent lord, I don't care for collective happiness. I prefer the personal happiness of humbly serving such great lords.

Orloff: You know very well a communist can only be a communist and nothing else. *(Grabs Nikita by the shoulders and sits him down in the armchair.)* A communist never kneels before anyone. That's why we abolished God.

Nikita: *(He slides out of the armchair and falls again to his knees.)* I can't, lord, I can't do anything but get down on my knees. *(Pause.)* Besides, lord, I'm not a communist. I'm a servilist. *(Again, he bows his head to the floor.)*

Orloff: *(To Kirianin.)* He's got serf in his system.

Kirianin: Let's torture him!

Fiodor: Nikita would plead for it on his knees. There's nothing better for a serf than to be tortured by his lord.

Kirianin: Damn! There's no way to beat this guy at his game!

Orloff: You mean this serf. His subservience dominates us.

Kirianin: A wonderful idea just occurred to me. Let's force him to be a lord.

Orloff: Magnificent idea! It's the only appropriate torture. *(Pause.)* Let's get to work!

Fiodor: I'm not sure I understand.

Orloff: You'll fall to your knees, while I, pistol in hand, demand that Nikita give you a kick in the butt. *(Pause.)* This will be a practice session. From tomorrow on, we'll turn our butts up to receive his kicks communistically until he is completely detoxified. *(Pause.)* Fall to your knees.

*Kirianin and Orloff fall to their knees.*

Orloff: *(To Nikita.)* Comrade Nikita.

*Nikita doesn't move.*

Orloff: Serf, Nikita.

Nikita: *(Standing up.)* What do you want, my lord?

Orloff: *(Pointing the pistol at him.)* I order you to be lord of these two serfs. Give them a goodly number of scornful kicks to the butt.

Nikita: *(Standing up.)* Oh master, what joy! Now I have supporters. *(He kneels alongside Kirianin and Fiodor.)* Now we're three serfs. Let's ask this magnificent master to give us a goodly number of kicks in the butt.

Orloff: *(Violent.)* Nikita, stand up!

Nikita *(Crying.)* Oh lord, I can't do anything but kneel.



Orloff: *(He points the pistol at him again.)* I'm going to kill you like a dog! Get up!

*Nikita gets up.*

Orloff: *(He places the barrel of the gun against Nikita's forehead.)* Insult them?

Nikita *(Babbling.)* Lord . . .

Orloff: You're the lord, understand? Get on with it!

Nikita: *(With great effort.)* Nasty serfs . . . *(Pause.)* Oh, I can't, lord, no, I can't! I'm a nasty serf, too.

Orloff: I said get on with it.

Nikita: Filthy serfs . . . *(Pause.)* I can't, my lord. I can't play the role of your lordship. I would rather die.

Orloff: *(Gives him a big push.)* Go on! Give your serfs some kicks. *(To Fiodor and Kirianin)* Show Nikita your butts!

*Fiodor and Kirianin offer their butts.*

Nikita: I couldn't possibly kick a lord in the butt, and these serfs are lords in disguise. It would be a crime against the society of butts. The tsar executed thousands of serfs for lesser crimes.

Orloff: These serfs are the saints of our religion. They died so there would be no more serfs on Earth.

Nikita: And I'm going to die so that serfs do exist on this Earth! It's my destiny. I'm completely convinced that I'll find a master, even if he sends me to the gallows. He's out there somewhere—I already see him, hear him, can almost touch him. He's my executioner, but I adore him because my butt can't be a serf without a kick. *(Pause.)* Master, go ahead and kill me, but I won't kick those butts. It would be a betrayal of the butt society.

Orloff: *(Changing his tone.)* Fiodor, Kirianin, what are you doing with your butts in the air? We're here with comrade Nikita to discuss matters of pure form, and frankly, I don't see our butts as a purely formal matter.

*Fiodor and Kirianin stand up.*

Orloff: *(Putting away the pistol.)* Comrade Nikita, so, the phrase "happiness of the greatest number, having been happily achieved and guaranteeing that no other happiness, other than the happiness achieved by the greatest number, exists" isn't guilty of any formal vice?

Nikita: The form is perfect, irrefutable.

Orloff: Magnificent! So, we'll go on to the next sentences.

Nikita: Let's go, comrade, to the next sentence.

Orloff: "If religion is the opium of the people, and there's no religion, then there's no opium, thanks to the happiness reached by the greatest number . . ."

CURTAIN

## Second Act

*Décor: A small room in Nikita's house. In the center, a big high-back chair covered in tapestry with a smaller pine chair in front of it. There are two doors, one stage right and one in the back. The doorbell rings, and Nikita enters through the back door, walks between the two chairs, glances at them, and goes to open the door to the right.*

### First Scene

Nikita: Stepachenko.

Stepachenko: *(Wearing a hat and with a notebook under his arm.)* Does Nikita Smirnov live here?

Nikita: I'm Nikita Smirnov. Come in, comrade. *(Stepachenko enters, and Nikita closes the door.)* Whom do I have the honor of receiving in my home?

Stepachenko: *(He opens his notebook.)* My name is Sergio Stepachenko. *(Pause.)* It says here in *Pravda* that comrade Nikita declares himself a serf.

Nikita: That's right, I've declared myself a serf.

Stepachenko: The manifesto also says that comrade Nikita is looking for a master.

Nikita: That's right, I'm looking for a master. *(Pause.)* Perhaps it would be better to sit down. Please excuse my humble abode, but it's well suited to my new condition. Take a seat.

*Stepachenko looks at the two chairs. Without hesitation, he sits in the big armchair with his hat still on.*

Nikita: *(Aside.)* Good start. Looks as if he knows his rights. *(Pause.)* Have you come to propose some kind of a deal?

Stepachenko: *(Settling back in the chair.)* I believe, and I say this without any personal vanity, that I'm the only comrade who actually read your manifesto while reading it. *(Pause.)* You know why? I was about to declare myself a master when it fell into my hands. I said to myself, Well, if someone is looking for a master, who better than I?

Nikita: Well, let's not get ahead of ourselves. *(Pause.)* I'm demanding.

Stepachenko: I'm also demanding. It won't be easy being a serf to this lord.

Nikita: I say the same: it won't be easy being a lord to this serf.

Stepachenko: Perfect. *(Pause.)* Can you tell me your demands?

Nikita: In the first place, I won't accept being a serf to a White Russian who's been dyed red. Is that

what you are?

Stepachenko: (*Slamming his fist and breaking into laughter.*) Fantastic! That's also my first condition: I won't accept being a master to a White Russian who's been dyed red. Is that what you are?

Nikita: Looks like neither of us is guilty of being dyed red, and that's a good start. It would be a betrayal of our revolutionary creed if we were to associate ourselves with the likes of a White Russian dyed red. They would write us off as reactionaries and, in my mind, with good reason. (*Pause.*) The second condition is that you should give me kicks in the butt.

Stepachenko: (*Slamming his fist on the chair and roaring with laughter.*) For the love of Lenin's beard! You're reading my mind. If you want me to be your master, you have to let me kick your butt.

Nikita: Let's get to the third and last one. If I reveal that you're a declared master, it will be purely a matter of form. If you are really a master, your response is inbred.

Stepachenko: I'm listening.

Nikita: You must turn me over to the executioner if I rebel.

Stepachenko: (*Serious.*) Mangy dog! Of course I'll turn you over to the executioner if you rebel. (*Pause.*) But why would you? Haven't you yourself chosen subservience?

Nikita: Yes, but I could grow tired of kicks in the butt. Besides, a declared serf could be a dangerous thing. We have to prevent this.

Stepachenko: One swallow does not make a summer, and one serf does not make a rebellion. On the other hand, it makes sense to denounce you as a declared serf if it serves my interests with regard to the State.

Nikita: Yes, they would cut off only my head because even when you declare yourself a lord, lords always end up coming to some understanding.

Stepachenko: The worst thing that could happen to me is I go undercover again. But that wouldn't be reason enough to stop being a lord. (*Pause.*) If you had a lord's brain, you'd understand this.

Nikita: There comes a time when the lord might think his serf has a brain.

Stepachenko: When is that?

Nikita: When there's a serf rebellion. At that moment, the master realizes the serf has a brain, but since there can't be two heads in a lord's household, the lord calls for the executioner to cut off the serf's.

Stepachenko: Listen, Nikita, that's all fine and good, but if we come to an agreement, I prefer less dialectics and more subservience.

Nikita: You have to understand that if I use lots of arguments to defend my cause, it's because a good serf should assure himself that he's picked a perfectly cruel master.

Stepachenko: As far as that goes, rest assured. I guarantee that my commands and my kicks are brutal.

Nikita: I don't remember where I read that a great lord gave his serf such an incredible kick that he sent him flying a couple of meters. There's potent proof of human contempt. *(Pause.)* But let me ask you something out of curiosity.

Stepachenko: You're asking many things and saying many others, Nikita. That's not a good thing in a serf.

Nikita: You're not yet my lord, and I'm not yet your serf. I haven't yet fallen before your feet. I have to be sure that you're worthy to be lord of this serf.

Stepachenko: *(Nervous.)* Are we going to reach an agreement or not? It would be a pity if we don't. You're a serf personified.

Nikita: You're too impatient. You're champing at the bit for authority. Why don't you admit you're dying to kick me? Of course, a kick in the butt. But, tell me, what motivated you to declare yourself a master?

Stepachenko: I want to kick you, to send you to hell. Besides, I want to run the show.

Nikita: Rule over just one?

Stepachenko: At the moment. Later, many more.

Nikita: Even so, you're risking too much. You can cut off a serf's head, but lots of serfs will end up cutting off yours. Historians call this the rebellion of the serfs.

Stepachenko: Now, we're in the declaration-of-the-serfs phase.

Nikita: After the declaration comes the rebellion.

Stepachenko: Just a moment ago, you were saying the third condition for entering my service was that if you rebel, I hand you over to the executioner.

Nikita: *A sine qua non.*

Stepachenko: Ok, turn the tables and have the master ask to have his head cut off at the least hint of submission to his serf.

Nikita: If I say that the serf asks for death at the first hint of rebellion, I do it to make clear the profound subservience of the serf, but never forget that the serf who rebels is no longer a serf. His act of rebellion automatically transforms him into a rebel.

Stepachenko: A contradiction surfaces: in our contract, you establish a categorical clause: "my head will be cut off at the least hint of rebellion." *(Pause.)* Nevertheless, you contradict yourself when you affirm that your act of rebellion automatically transforms you into a rebel.

Nikita: An apparent contradiction easily remedied. In theory, the serf-in-waiting says one thing, but, in practice, the fiery serf says another.

Stepachenko: In that case, I won't be able to cut off your head. On the contrary, a fiery serf will try to cut off mine.

Nikita: Listen; I can't rush the course of history. The serf-in-waiting is submissive to his master, servile with his master, and he asks, at this moment, that at the first hint of rebellion, the executioner cut off the fiery serf's head. No one should jeopardize the serf's great subservience.

Stepachenko: So . . .

Nikita: But if someone jeopardizes the serf's good subservience, if something turns a serf-in-waiting into a fiery one, that clause won't be worth the paper it's written on. *(Pause.)* Do you remember those extinct Catholic priests? Some of them swore and later abjured.

Stepachenko: *(Laughing.)* Anyway, you could die in the gallows.

Nikita: That won't render me irrelevant. A mighty flame follows a tiny spark, and you will burn at the stake when the time comes.

Stepachenko: Don't rush the course of history. . . Let's enjoy the new situation. *(Pause.)* What do you say I give you the first kick in the butt?

Nikita: Before you do, let me shine your boots. Subservience has its procedures. *(Takes out a flannel cloth.)*

Stepachenko: I want to know when I can begin my role as master. You're not the one to give orders. Am I or am I not your master?

Nikita: *(Bowing)* You're the boss, my lord. Your wish is my command.

Stepachenko: Bring me a glass of wine.

Nikita: *(He gets up, trembles.)* There's no wine in the house, lord.

Stepachenko: What! You dirty dog. You drank all the wine. *(He kicks him in the butt.)*

Nikita: Oh, gods of the red pantheon! What luck! My butt thanks you.

Stepachenko: What are you muttering, you despicable worm? Shine my boots.

Nikita: *(Shines Stepachenko's boots.)* Oh, sacrificed serfs of our vast Russia, make my master cruel, tough, tyrannical, and the great kicker of butts!

Stepachenko: *(Angry.)* Are you still muttering? *(Pause.)* Where's my whip? Isn't there a whip in this house?

Nikita: *(Standing up.)* No, Stepachenko. The red lord will not pronounce that infamous word, that sad memory of White Russia. The new lord should keep up with the times.

Stepachenko: Then what do you propose? But soon! I'm dying to flog you. As each moment passes, I feel more like a lord.

Nikita: And I more like a serf. *(He's pensive.)* Ah, I know! The whip will be called *Pravda*.

Stepachenko: *Pravda*?

Nikita: *Pravda* is a red word. It turns butts red.

Stepachenko: Right this minute, I'm going out to buy a *Pravda* with seven thongs. *(Pause.)* And you already know, you mangy dog, that I want wine tonight. And you'll watch over me while I sleep.

Nikita: *(Bowing again.)* Your wish is my command, lord. *(Pause.)* Can I tell you something of great importance?

Stepachenko: I'm listening, but it better be of great importance.

Nikita: I'm being watched. They must already know I have my master. For my part, I'm willing to be sacrificed. I won't renounce my condition as a serf even in the face of death!

Stepachenko: I know very well that you're being watched. You'll end up in the gallows, but while you're alive, I'll give you some good kicks in the butt. *(He kicks him twice.)*

Nikita: So, my master, if it's all right with you, tomorrow I'll begin serving you in your house. *(Intense.)* Only death can separate us. *(Pause.)* Would it be asking too much to have you welcome me with the *Pravda* in hand?

Stepachenko: Done. I'll treat you with a deluge of red lashings.

Nikita: Those lashings will be the first heralds of the serfs' rebellion.

Stepachenko: You dog, how dare you speak to me in such language?

Nikita: My brothers' hands will cut off your grandchildren's heads.

Stepachenko: Have you lost your mind? *(Pause.)* I don't have my *Pravda* here, or I'd give you some serious lashings.

Nikita: You can give me a kick in the butt. It's a magnificent aperitif for your foot and my butt. The degree of difference between the kick and the lash is nothing.

Stepachenko: When we powerful lords number in the thousands, you and your serf brothers will shut your mouths and open your butts. *(He kicks him.)*

Nikita: Your oracle can't fail. This will be the rebellion of butts.

CURTAIN

## Second Act

*Décor: A well-furnished bedroom in Stepachenko's house. White bear skin in the middle. Tapestries on the walls. Chair beside the bed. Stepachenko is lying on the bed, snoring.*

## Second Scene

*Stepachenko, Nikita, Adamov.*

Stepachenko: *(Wakes up, startled.)* Nikita! Nikita!

Nikita: *(Black pants, white cassock with red buttons.)* Did you call, lord?

Stepachenko: *(Putting his hands together.)* Nikita, you know? I dreamed you were cutting off my head. *(Pause.)* It was very funny.

Nikita: After all, lord, it's not that important. One head, more or less. . .

Stepachenko: Of course the head of a miserable serf like you is of little consequence. Besides, what good is a serf's head anyway? As long as he has a butt.

Nikita: It's been proven that dreams don't mean a thing.

Stepachenko: You won't say the same thing when you see your head on the chopping block. *(Pause.)* What time is it?

Nikita: After twelve.

Stepachenko: Damn it! I have to go out. *(Pause.)* Has anyone arrived?

Nikita: Yes, lord. There's a lord waiting in the living room.

Stepachenko: A lord? Are you sure? Am I not the only lord?

Nikita: Apparently that's the not the case because he told me he was willing to pay a good price for my head.

Stepachenko: Do I hear right? He said "for your head"? *(Pause.)* And why would he want your head?

Nikita: I have no idea. Next thing, he kicked me in the butt.

Stepachenko: *(Shocked.)* He kicked you in the butt?

Nikita: And told me there was no doubt about my butt.

Stepachenko: What do you think he meant by that?

Nikita: That I had a serf's butt.

Stepachenko: I won't sell you for all the gold in the world. Your head belongs to me. Tell him to

look for his own head and butt. *(Pause.)* Tell him to go away.

*Nikita exits and re-enters.*

Nikita: Oh lord! I told him that my lordship was unable to receive him, and he gave me a terrible kick in the butt.

Stepachenko: *(Jumps out of bed and kicks Nikita.)* Tell him to go away.

*Nikita exits and re-enters.*

Nikita: He's given me another kick, lord. He says he's as much a lord as you.

Stepachenko: We'll see about that. *(Pause.)* Tell him to come in. *(He lies back down.)*

*Nikita exits.*

Adamov: *(Enters and greets Stepachenko with extreme courtesy.)* Do I have the great honor of meeting the great lord Sergio Stepachenko?

Stepachenko: *(Dry and curt.)* What is your name? What brings you to my house?

Adamov: My name is Basilio Adamov. I live in the Urals. I have many souls under my rule. These souls have read Nikita's manifesto and consequently declared their servitude. I want Nikita's head.

Stepachenko: I won't sell it for all the gold in the world. *(Pause.)* On the other hand, may I suggest something very interesting to you . . .?

Adamov: *(Impatient.)* Bah!

Stepachenko: Cut off all those heads.

Adamov: Eight hundred hands work for me, and I kick four hundred butts. The least I can do for them is spare their heads. It's a way to preserve productivity. *(Pause.)* On the other hand, you have only one serf. I can pay very well for his head.

Stepachenko: Don't ask me for such a thing. I can't do without a serf.

Adamov: Take on a provisional serf. It's the same thing and the same butt. I need Nikita because I have to punish him as an example.

Stepachenko: I can't. Ask the authorities for assistance.

Adamov: The government will cut off my serfs' heads. This advice isn't useful.

Stepachenko: Have your serfs rebelled?

Adamov: They haven't rebelled, but they've declared their servitude.

Stepachenko: What do they mean to do on a practical level?



Adamov: They told me: since the lord kicks us in the butt, we don't want theoretical equality.

Stepachenko: They're right about that.

Adamov: One of these sons of bitches had the nerve to tell me equality should mean equality for all; if the lord can kick my butt, I can kick the lord's butt.

Stepachenko: Just between us, Adamov, that's true camaraderie. Of course, true camaraderie is not possible since it's very satisfying to kick butts and not so pleasant to have one's butt kicked.

Adamov: In the days of the tsars, things were more clearly defined. Everyone knew his role with each part clearly spelled out.

Stepachenko: At least, a serf could call himself a serf. It was his only right.

Adamov: And a lord called himself a lord. We can't call ourselves lords, either.

Stepachenko: It's of little consequence now that we're the oppressors.

Adamov: Agreed. You can still be a lord even though you have to be under cover. That doesn't bother anyone. But it bothers a serf if the lord pretends the serf is a comrade with all his rights when in reality he's a serf with no rights.

Stepachenko: Equality with conditions is a bitter pill to swallow.

Adamov: Somehow or another, they were swallowing it, but that swine Nikita has ruined it. Give me his head.

Stepachenko: It's not in my power to give you Nikita's head.

Adamov: Aren't you your own boss and solely responsible for your actions?

Stepachenko: If I were to give you Nikita's head that would mean I'm a declared lord, and then the Party would want my head on a platter. Don't forget, we can't be anything but undercover lords. *(Pause.)* Ask the Party for advice.

Adamov: The Party's recent policy is that we should exploit underhandedly . . . Why would you want the Party to allow four hundred comrades to declare their subservience?

Stepachenko: Of course I would not. The Party can't betray its ideals.

Adamov: Aha! On the surface, because in reality . . .

Stepachenko: And how, Adamov! One has to keep up appearances.

Adamov: Agreed. A wolf in sheep's clothing and all . . . to hide the real truth, we have to create a ruse of pure form.

Stepachenko: But you can see that our real comrades insist on exposing our ruse by giving up their heads.

Adamov: The joke's on us. *(Pause.)* That's why I'm telling you: a head cut off at just the right moment instills terror.

Stepachenko: Not only can I not turn over Nikita's head to you without seriously jeopardizing my own, I also believe that it's counterproductive to decapitate him in the presence of four hundred serfs.

Adamov: Why?

Stepachenko: The declared serfs, until now submissive, will become ferocious lions.

Adamov: Damn, damn! *(Pause.)* Tell me, this Nikita, isn't he the regime's philosopher?

Stepachenko: The regime's official philosopher, and at this late stage, with all its contradictions resolved, ahem! The philosopher's role is a role of pure form. Even so, Nikita, in a master stroke, made it weighty.

Adamov: Well, a philosopher is always and before all else a serf.

Stepachenko: Yes, a philosopher has to be dissatisfied. A *sine qua non* of philosophy.

Adamov: I'd say, hoping this won't throw a wrench into the profundity of the matter, that Nikita is a revolutionary.

Stepachenko: Through and through! He's not going to be satisfied with his declared servitude. He'll go beyond that.

Adamov: One thing I don't understand, my dear Stepachenko. How did you come to be Nikita's master?

Stepachenko: *(Smiling sarcastically.)* All philosophers should be watched very closely.

Adamov: I understand.

Stepachenko: Listen, my dear Adamov, do you really want to see Nikita's head roll?

Adamov: I would give my entire fortune.

Stepachenko: Well, then, heed my advice. *(Pause.)* I'll call him in and tell him everything that you've proposed.

Adamov: Are you going to tell him that I want his head? Don't forget that for a philosopher, the head is the most valuable part.

Stepachenko: I won't pronounce that word. Instead, I'll tell Nikita that you want to take him to your serfs, so they learn to present their butts with dignity to their lord. In short, Nikita will raise your serfs' consciousness of their butts.

Adamov: I don't understand a thing about this. *(Pause.)* Nikita will never make this trip.

Stepachenko: Nikita will accept wholeheartedly. Nikita will sign a document in front of us declaring the purpose of his trip. From that moment, Nikita will be doomed.

Adamov: Do you mean he will be decapitated?

Stepachenko: Beheaded! *(Pause. Yells.)* Nikita! Nikita!

Nikita: *(Enters and falls on his knees.)* Here, lord.

Stepachenko: Listen, Nikita, the magnificent Basilio Adamov has come from the Ural Mountains to beg you. . .

Adamov: Yes, to beg you . . .

Stepachenko: . . . to beg you to accompany him to a distant place.

Adamov: You'll travel like a prince.

Nikita: I'll travel like a serf.

Stepachenko: Ok, Nikita, here's the object of the trip: the magnificent lord Basilio Adamov rules four hundred undeclared serfs. *(Aside, to Adamov.)* If he knew they were declared serfs and firmly declared . . . *(To Nikita.)* Adamov is confident that if you demonstrate how you use your butt to show subservience, those four hundred comrades will declare their subservience. *(Pause.)* Do you accept?

Nikita: All for the triumph of those servile butts, I accept.

Stepachenko: *(Places a piece of paper under Nikita's nose.)* Sign this declaration.

Nikita: *(Signing.)* Even though they should already be declared, there are four hundred butts . . . I, teacher of four hundred butts. *(He turns and kisses Adamov's hands.)*

Adamov: Nikita, you're an obedient serf. Ask for whatever you wish!

Nikita: *(Looking at Stepachenko.)* I don't dare, lord, it's too much happiness.

Stepachenko: Go ahead, Nikita! The lord, as an initial gesture, is granting you anything you desire. Go on! Ask for whatever you want.

Nikita: *(Offering his butt to Adamov.)* Lord, please give me the immense pleasure of one of your kicks on this filthy butt of mine.

*Adamov kicks him in the butt.*

Nikita: Butts, kicks, butts!

CURTAIN

## Act Three

The same décor as the Scene Two, Act Two.

### Scene One

*Nikita. Stepachenko. Kolia.*

Stepachenko: *(Entering.)* Nikita, my shoes, my suit!

Nikita: *(Enters with Stepachenko's shoes and suit.)* Here they are, lord.

Stepachenko: What did you think of Adamov?

Nikita: He's cut out to be a master, lord. He gave me a superb kick.

Stepachenko: He'll come for you at twelve.

Nikita: I'm prepared, lord.

Stepachenko: I'm going to take a walk. I'll return at twelve. *(Pause.)* You like declaring the serfs, don't you?

Nikita: I like declaring the serfs, lord.

Stepachenko: Do you really believe in all this serf business?

Nikita: I believe in what I see, lord, and all I see are millions of serfs.

Stepachenko: Who are they to be declaring anything, and who are you to be declaring subservience for them? The State has already trained them.

Nikita: Forgive me, lord, but it was the lord who ordered me to declare the subservience of the magnificent Lord Basilio Adamov's serfs.

Stepachenko: Do you figure many people think like you?

Nikita: I believe what I believe, and what I believe is written. It might happen that many people accept my writings.

Stepachenko: It also might happen that they reject your writings.

Nikita: Very possible, lord.

Stepachenko: Also might happen that the State rejects your writings.

Nikita: The State also.

Stepachenko: In that case. . .

Nikita: Your dream will come true, lord. My head will roll.

Stepachenko: Do you believe there are exploiters and exploited?

Nikita: I believe there are undercover exploiters and exploited.

Stepachenko: And why do you insist on making public the undercover condition of both?

Nikita: It's a manner of protesting.

Stepachenko: The servants and the philosophers always go around protesting.

Nikita: We want the State to grant us status.

Stepachenko: What status?

Nikita: That of serfs. We're willing to serve like serfs as long as they acknowledge that we're serfs. If it's historic destiny that lords and serfs exist, at least we'll know what we should be doing.

Stepachenko: But you've already seen that no undercover lord feels the need to declare himself.

Nikita: They'll end up doing so.

Stepachenko: When?

Nikita: When the serfs define themselves, the lords won't have any choice but to remove their masks.

Stepachenko: I don't understand you.

Nikita: A declared serf implicitly declares his lord. The lord can't deny his condition as lord. *(Pause.)* The oppressor above and the oppressed below. That way, everything works like a well-oiled machine . . .

Stepachenko: Don't the serfs, well, rebel?

Nikita: The declared serf can move on to the second phase.

Stepachenko: Which is?

Nikita: The rebellious serf.

Stepachenko: There is another phase.

Nikita: *(With sarcasm.)* Which is, lord?

Stepachenko: The decapitated serf.

Nikita: There is a fourth phase, lord.

Stepachenko: Which is, Nikita?

Nikita: The decapitated lord.

Stepachenko: Do you mean to say that the serf will triumph?

Nikita: The serf can transform himself into lord and the lord into serf.

Stepachenko: That's very funny.

Nikita: Yes, lord, it's very funny. The eternal return.

Stepachenko: *(He puts on his hat.)* You get lost in big sentences, Nikita. Be careful that the big sentences don't cause you to lose your poor head. *(Exits.)*

Nikita: *(He pats his head.)* You haven't much time, head. *(He pats his butt.)* You haven't much time, butt.

*A whistle at the back door. Nikita opens it. Twenty-year-old Kolia enters.*

Nikita: Hello, Kolia, what's happening?

Kolia: *(Afraid.)* Stepachenko is a spy.

Nikita: Dear Kolia, you came to tell me that? I know that better than you.

Kolia: You have to save yourself.

Nikita: Kolia, you know the slogan: everyone plays his part. Just play yours.

Kolia: We'll end up without a leader, comrade serf.

Nikita: I've thought of everything, comrade serf. I have a successor, and this successor has another successor . . .

Kolia: I can kill that filthy spy Stepachenko. He's standing on the corner.

Nikita: Limit yourself to your role. You're not the executioner. *(Pause.)* Anything new?

Kolia: At the Taiga Iron and Steel Club, they have discreetly removed the copies of *Pravda* that contain your manifesto.

Nikita: Things are moving along. *(Pause.)* Listen: tomorrow I'll be summarily judged and decapitated or something of that nature. You have to hit back hard and fast. *(Reflecting.)* We're counting on the comrades of Taiga Iron and Steel along with those from the underground railway stations. . .

Kolia: The bakers are good people.

Nikita: They still haven't firmly committed; many remain indecisive. *(Pause.)* So, we can count on Steel and Iron, the underground railway stations, and the shoemakers . . . *(Pause.)* Tomorrow, at two

in the afternoon, at the hour I expect my case to be quickly determined, we have to make sure those twenty-five thousand serf comrades declare themselves.

Kolia: How will they let us know?

Nikita: They'll call a sit-down strike until they receive the right to have their subservience declared.

Kolia: That might just save you from death.

Nikita: On the contrary, it's going to bring it on sooner, but the real coup is that my judges will realize there are twenty-five thousand comrades who actually read while reading.

Kolia: They can also chop off twenty-five thousand heads.

Nikita: Even better. Double the heads, triple the heads—declare subservience faster than you can say chop, chop! There's no better example than a bloody one. *(Pause.)* Now, go.

Kolia: You're our savior, Nikita.

Nikita: No, Kolia, I'm not your savior; I'm your declarer. I won't save myself, and I won't save the serfs. I only declare subservience.

Kolia: But once we're declared serfs, we can rebel and triumph.

Nikita: Then we'll be lords, and another Nikita will take his turn as the declarer. There is no other truth. *(Pause.)* Go.

*Kolia exits through the back door.*

Stepachenko: *(Entering.)* Tell me, Nikita, what does a master do when he loses his serf?

Nikita: Takes another. There are large reserves.

Stepachenko: Declared or undercover?

Nikita: That depends on the serfs, lord.

Stepachenko: Or on the lords. I estimate that undercover subservience delivers a better margin of exploitation.

Nikita: I keep telling you, lord, everything definitely depends on those serfs. The serfs will choose subservience in spite of their lords.

Stepachenko: They're coming for you at twelve. It looks as if I'm without a declared serf. *(Pause.)* I'll be better off if I look for a new serf but an undercover one. *(Pause.)* Will you look for a new lord?

Nikita: A serf is not a serf without a lord.

Stepachenko: Perhaps the executioner will be your new lord? Remember my dream.

Nikita: Certainly, lord. I don't believe in dreams but in destiny.

CURTAIN

### Third Act

*Décor: same as Act One, Scene I*

### Scene Two

*Orloff, Fiodor, Kirianin, Stepachenko. An official.*

Orloff: (*Reading a pamphlet.*) "Comrades! In light of the fact that social equality is not as equal as it seems, in light of the fact that communism is made up of unequal parts of lords and serfs—the greatest number servile, the smallest number lordly—and in light of the fact that the servile ones and the lordly ones are obligated by the logic of the State not to reveal their true condition, in light of all that, we, the undercover serfs, declare ourselves servile serfs and swear to defend subservience to the death." (*Places a sheet of paper on the table.*) What do you think of this pamphlet?

Kirianin: Looks like equality is about to croon a swan song.

Fiodor: The bad joke is that it's not about matters of pure form. These serfs bring up a real problem.

Orloff: Good luck convincing them that contradiction is the crux of all acts. Equality assumes inequality. A communist is equal to another communist even though one is a lord and the other a serf.

Kirianin: (*Ironic.*) No one better than the lords themselves to understand the contradictions of the true nature of man. They have the lion's power . . .

Fiodor: We'll create a State made up of nothing but lords.

Orloff: Is that possible, dear Fiodor?

Fiodor: Very possible—we make lords out of the serfs.

Orloff: The lordly State presupposes a good amount of serfs, but converted into lords, those serfs will look for serfs. The new *status* will automatically be subverted.

Kirianin: Then we'll create a State of serfs.

Orloff: Once the republic of serfs is established, in the true spirit of emulation, they'll try to turn into lords. (*Pause.*) No, none of this benefits us in the least. The only truth is the one we have: a communist State with absolute social balance but also serfs and lords, understood as undeclared, with the purpose of *redeeming* any contradiction. This is real equality.

Fiodor: Our equality.



Kirianin: Our equality.

Orloff: Our equality. *(Pause.)* There's no other. All who refuse to accept the inequality of our equality will be executed.

Kirianin: And the equality of our inequality . . . *(Gets excited)*. Because the equal and equality, all of the equals and their equals, the equalization and equalizing embrace in equality and the unequal equality and the equal inequality have their purpose . . . Because . . .

Orloff: Very well put, Comrade Kirianin. A brilliant speech. *(Pause)*. With such equal discourses, the egalitarian State is secure. *(Pause.)* Now, let's call in our unequal serf. *(Rings the bell.)*

*Enter Nikita and Stepachenko, accompanied by an official.*

Orloff: *(To Nikita.)* Nikita Smirnov, you're accused of rising up against the State. *(Pause.)* Why do you rise?

Nikita: To fall.

Orloff: Why do you want to fall?

Nikita: To rise up.

Orloff: Why do you want to rise up?

Nikita: To fall.

Orloff: You're accused of having written a manifesto against State Security. *(Pause.)* Why did you write it?

Nikita: To express myself.

Orloff: Why do you express yourself?

Nikita: To fall.

Orloff: Why do you want to fall?

Nikita: To rise up.

Orloff: Why do you want to rise up?

Nikita: To fall.

Orloff: You're accused of doubting the unequal equality of the classes. Why do you doubt?

Nikita: To classify myself.

Orloff: Why do you want to classify yourself?

Nikita: To fall.

Orloff: Why do you fall?

Nikita: To rise.

Orloff: Why do you rise?

Nikita: To fall.

Kirianin: *(A Stepachenko.)* State your deposition, comrade Stepachenko.

Stepachenko: When I read the manifesto . . .

Orloff: Did you read the manifesto, reading it?

Stepachenko: *(Pale.)* How else would I find out that this mangy dog was asking for a lord?

Orloff: You should have found out by reading the manifesto, without actually reading it, that the mangy dog asked for a lord in his manifesto.

Stepachenko: I confess that I actually read it, reading it.

Orloff: In order to detoxify yourself, you will reread that manifest without actually reading it. *(Pause.)* Continue.

Stepachenko: When I actually read, ahem, ahem, while reading Nikita Smirnov's manifesto, I turned all kinds of livid. I'm an undercover lord who, of course, knows he's an undercover lord without having to confess it, and I couldn't allow a swine of an undercover serf to protest by declaring himself a declared serf. *(Pause.)* I decided to shorten his leash. I knocked on his door and offered myself as a declared lord for a declared serf. I gave him a few declared kicks in the butt . . .

Orloff: . . . declared?

Stepachenko: I confess they were declared.

Orloff: If you declared them, you'd better decontaminate that hoof. Give Nikita an equal-to-equal kick.

Stepachenko: Isn't it the same kick?

Orloff: No, it's an undercover kick. Continue.

Stepachenko: *(He turns toward Nikita and gives him a kick and squeezes his hand.)* Greetings!

Orloff: Good, continue.

Stepachenko: I was no longer satisfied with kicking Nikita Smirnov's declared butt. I wanted his head. That's when undercover Lord Basilio Adamov came to my house to ask me for Nikita's head. I didn't give it to him, but Nikita signed a piece of paper *(shows it)* committing himself to teaching all

the declared serfs under the powerful Lord Basilio Adamov to declare and present their butts.

Orloff: Those worthless declared serfs don't know how to present their butts?

Stepachenko: Not yet.

Orloff: What joy! They can go undercover again. *(Pause.)* Continue.

Stepachenko: Delighted, Nikita accepted. Delighted, he signed, and delighted, he'll lose his head.

Orloff: Nikita, do you admit that this is your signature?

Nikita: Yes, it's mine.

Orloff: Why did you sign?

Nikita: To fall, delighted.

Orloff: Why fall, delighted?

Nikita: To rise up, delighted.

Orloff: Why rise up delighted?

Nikita: To fall, delighted.

Orloff: Nikita, declare yourself an undercover serf.

Nikita: I can't. I've declared myself a declared serf.

Orloff: Would you rather lose your head?

Nikita: I'd rather lose my head, delighted. And what is more, lose my butt, delighted.

Orloff: *(In a familiar tone.)* You say that, for a serf, the butt is the most valuable thing?

Nikita: Yes, when he can show it off. An undercover butt is shameful. An undercover butt is like a beggar wearing an emperor's clothes.

Orloff: That's a philosophy in touch with the butt.

Fiodor: Our time bomb just exploded. *(To Nikita.)* Nikitism? What's that?

Nikita: A political-philosophical system based on the existing relations between the declared lord's kick and the declared serf's butt.

Orloff: It's difficult for me to comprehend such a philosophy. The philosophic system called Nikitism may be valid even though the lord, the serf, the kick, and the butt remain undercover.

Nikita: The system can only be called Nikitism if lord, serf, kick and butt have declared lordship and

subservience.

Orloff: But . . . if lord, serf, kick, and butt persist in their undercover roles, can't the system still be called Nikitism?

Nikita: In that case, it would be called communism.

Orloff: Listen, which system ends up prevailing?

Nikita: Communism.

Orloff: *(Jubilant.)* Wow! Then, you retract?

Nikita: No retractions. *(Pause.)* After a bloody struggle, the Nikitists or "declared ones" become communists or "undercover ones".

Orloff: You, too?

Nikita: If they don't cut off my head. *(Pause.)* The final outcome is undercover communism, always put in check by declared Nikitism.

Orloff: I suppose there will be a real end to all of this.

Nikita: There is never an end. It's the eternal return.

Orloff: You're old-fashioned. You don't believe in progress.

Nikita: I believe in the progress of kicks and the progress of butts.

Orloff: In that case, we'll cut off your head. *(Pause.)* Yours will be the only head.

Nikita: And the heads of the serfs under the powerful Lord Basilio Adamov?

Orloff: When they see yours in a waste basket, they'll safely lock away their own in a big iron basket and surreptitiously offer up their butts.

Nikita: *(Looks at his watch.)* Two in the afternoon.

Orloff: A few more minutes and you won't have a head.

Nikita: At this moment, twenty-five thousand comrades have declared their servitude. *(Pause.)* You can cut off their heads.

*(The phone rings.)*

Orloff: *(Nervous, picks up the phone and hang ups.)* Twenty-five thousand serfs! *(To the official.)* Take Nikita away. Bring me his head. Take Stepachenko away.

Official: Stepachenko's head, too?

Orloff: No, have Stepachenko's filthy kick decontaminated.

*The official exits with Stepachenko and Nikita.*

Orloff: *(To Fiodor and Kirianin)* The wheels of Nikitism are turning.

Fiodor, Kirianin: *(In chorus.)* But why do they have to turn? Let's stop them right in their tracks.

Orloff: The wheels are turning. *(Pause.)* Let's have lunch, after that, dinner . . . then let's have lunch and later dinner . . . It's the eternal return.

CURTAIN

## The Treatment

By Pablo Remón

Translated from Castilian Spanish by Sandra Kingery

I recently had the immense pleasure of seeing my translation of Pablo Remón's *The Treatment* performed by the Theatre Department at Lycoming College. Dr. Biliana Stoytcheva-Horissian directed the 8 students who played 25 characters: <https://www.lycoming.edu/news/stories/2022/04/the-treatment.aspx>. (The play can be performed with as few as 5 actors.) My regular attendance at rehearsals and production design meetings greatly increased my understanding of the creative vision and the decision-making processes that go into bringing a play to life on the stage.

This play, by Pablo Remón, who won Spain's National Prize for Dramatic Literature last year (2021), was a smash hit in Spain when it debuted in 2018. The protagonist, Martín, wants to write a movie that captures his grandfather's experiences during the Spanish Civil War, but Martín's interactions with various members of the film industry lead to a very different movie than originally intended. This laugh-out-loud romp through Spanish history is also deeply poignant and nostalgic.

In order to understand why Martín came to the point where he would allow the film industry to corrupt his grandfather's story in order to make his movie more marketable, the play hopscoches through the most impactful moments of Martín's life, beginning at the moment of his conception. In addition to this hyper-focus on the vagaries of Martín's life, the play is also filled with tangential moments that expand the theatrical universe: we see a television ad, view faulty memories, watch snippets of Martín's movie, and hear side stories of other people who enter and exit the play like singular brushstrokes on a pointillist mosaic of life. For example, the narrator offers a brief soliloquy about a Spanish Civil War soldier who died after a grenade exploded on the very spot Martín was sitting, but the narrator quickly dismisses that story as a distraction: "It doesn't matter. There's no place for him [the soldier] in this story." In the end, we see that capturing any one story necessitates the temporary silencing of all the other stories that are swarming about, vying for our attention.

While I have been a Spanish to English translator for 20-some years now, Pablo Remón's "The Treatment" is my first translation of drama. It was so much fun to recreate the dialogue in this play, which is filled with stuttering and stammering and endless repetitions that suggest the characters' inability to communicate. In contrast, there are times when the characters and the narrator are full of devastating existential wisdom about life and death and love and loss. In the end, the play celebrates the life-affirming power of artists who capture and preserve memories from our fleeting lives that last "just a second."

**Pablo Remón** is a playwright, scriptwriter, and director. He has written and directed plays such as "The Treatment," "The Mariachis," and "Doña Rosita, Annotated." He won Spain's National Prize for Dramatic Literature in 2021. He has also received the Lope de Vega Playwrighting Award and the SGAE Jardiel Poncela Theatre Award, among others. His plays have been published by La uña RoTa, in two volumes: *Abducciones* (2018) includes all the plays he completed with the company La\_Abducción until 2018. *Fantasma*s (2020) gathers his later work.

As a scriptwriter, Remón has co-written six full-length movies, including "Casual Day," "No sé decir adiós," and "Intemperie." He received the 2020 Goya Award for Best Adapted Screenplay, the Biznaga de Plata for Best Screenplay at the Málaga Film Festival two times, Best Screenplay from the Círculo de Escritores Cinematográficos (Cinema Writers Circle), and the Premio Julio Alejandro de Guion Iberoamericano.

**Sandra Kingery** is the Logan A. Richmond Professor of Spanish at Lycoming College and has translated around 30 books, including fiction (*Julia* and *Of My Real Life I Know Nothing* by Ana María Moix); poetry (*Lips of Stone* and *Perching* by Xánath Caraza); and political science monographs (*Politics in the Times of Indignation* and *Governance in the New Global Disorder* by Daniel Innerarity). Kingery's translation of Lawrence Schimel's *A Beard Paradox and 99 Other Erotic Micro-Stories* is forthcoming. For rights, contact Sandra Kingery: [kingery@lycoming.edu](mailto:kingery@lycoming.edu)

# **The Treatment**

**By Pablo Remón**

**Translated from Castilian Spanish by Sandra Kingery**

This translation was supported by a Lycoming College Professional Development Grant.

**This play can be performed by 5 actors. Any role can be played by an actor of any gender expression or identity.**

## **CHARACTERS**

Cloe (Martín's ex-girlfriend)

Martín

Charly (a student in Martín's class)

Narrator

Male Student

Female Student

Presenter 1, from a TV ad

Presenter 2, from a TV ad

Psychologist

Marcelo (a movie producer)

Álex Casamor (the director of Martín's movie)

Rosario (Álex's housekeeper)

Adriana Vergara (the producer of Martín's movie)

Cousin (Martín's cousin)

Mercedes (wife of Cousin)

Doctor 1

Doctor 2

Nuria (Cloe's sister)

Antoñito (One of the soldiers in Martín's movie)

Rafael (Another soldier in Martín's movie)

Reporter

Actor (in Martín's movie)

Driver

Lucas (Martín's 13-year-old brother)



World Premiere: Teatro Palacio Valdés (Avilés): March 9, 2018

El Pavón Teatro Kamikaze (Madrid): March 14-April 8, 2018 and June 19-July 15, 2018

Director: Pablo Remón.

Actors: Ana Alonso, Francesco Carril, Aura Garrido, Fran Reyes, Emilio Tomé

United States National College Premiere: Mary L. Welch Theatre, Lycoming College, April 20-23, 2022 (Williamsport PA)

Director: Biliana Stoytcheva-Horissian

In the Madrid production, the role of NARRATOR rotated between actors. The other characters were played by:

Actor 1: MARTÍN

Actor 2: MALE STUDENT, PRESENTER 1, ÁLEX CASAMOR, DOCTOR 1, ANTONITO, DRIVER

Actor 3: CHARLY, MARCELO, COUSIN, DOCTOR 2, RAFAEL, ACTOR, LUCAS

Actor 4: CLOE, ADRIANA VERGARA, MERCEDES

Actor 5: FEMALE STUDENT, PRESENTER 2, PSYCHOLOGIST, ROSARIO, REPORTER, NURIA

The actors also played these minor or non-speaking parts:

Actor 1: MICKEY MOUSE

Actor 2: GIANCARLO, MARTÍN'S DAD, CAPTAIN OF THE TITANIC

Actor 3: MEMORY OF GIANCARLO, BOYFRIEND OF MARTÍN'S MOM, PANHANDLER

Actor 4: MARTÍN'S WIFE

Actor 5: LAURA, MARTÍN'S MOM

## PROLOGUE

### *Darkness.*

*The place where Cloe writes.*

*A light over an open box, with souvenirs and old letters. Cloe sits down at the computer. She opens it. She plays some music.*

*She writes.*

*Enter Laura and Giancarlo, two teenagers. They're in a disco, slow dancing arm in arm.*

CLOE: Laura is a fourteen-year-old Spanish girl, and she's dancing with an Italian boy.

It's evening, and they're in a disco called *Always*, in Ireland.

Laura has come to a summer camp, to learn English.

She hasn't learned any English, but she doesn't care.

*This guy's adorable*, she thinks.

*With those bangs of his and that hair that falls like a waterfall.*

That's what she always says: "That hair that falls like a waterfall."

*OK, maybe that's what I always say, but why's that my fault*, thinks Laura.

*That's how it falls: like a waterfall of smoothness and shininess and blackness.*

Laura is obviously in love.

Her first love.

Giancarlo, that's the Italian boy's name.

Laura's father's name is Juan Carlos, but she won't make that connection until, many years later, the psychologist who she sees for post-partum depression after the birth of her first child tells her.

But that's a long way off.

Right now, Laura's in heaven.

In reality, they didn't dance to this song.

This song didn't even exist back then, but it helps us get the idea.

All of a sudden, without knowing why, she's going to have a revelation.

*This will all come to an end in just a second*, she's going to think.

*Like when I was little and I would go to the doctor's to get a shot. They'd say: "This'll just take a second," to distract me.*

Life just takes a second too, Laura.

That's the revelation. It makes her very sad, and at the same time, it makes her want to grab hold of the Italian, very tight.

She wants to take a mental picture.

*I'm going to hold onto this. No one can take it from me.*

*I'm going to remember everything.*

*In another location, simultaneously:*

*Grown-up Laura at Eurodisney. She takes a photo with Mickey Mouse. They look at it, talk about it, take another one. They leave.*

What's going to happen now:

The song will end. He'll say to her:

*Sono dipendente dei baci tuoi,*

a phrase he heard in a song by Eros Ramazzotti.

They'll kiss in the doorway of the disco, under a light rain coming from the North Sea.

In two days, in the bus that takes them to the airport, they'll exchange addresses, and they'll write each other letters for a year.

Letters that are half in English, half in Italian. Letters full of hearts, peace signs.

Letters with ripped coasters, from bars where they've gone with friends.

Afterwards, they won't see each other again.

They'll only be on the verge of running into each other one time, without knowing it.

It'll be at Eurodisney, many years later.

They're going to pass by the same spot, and they'll take a photo with the same Mickey Mouse.

Just a few minutes will keep them from seeing each other.

*In another location, simultaneously:*

*Grown-up Laura looking at old photos and letters, saved in an open box.*

Years later, while moving, Laura will find Giancarlo's letters, and she'll skim through them.

They'll strike her as strange and distant, as if they were written for another person.

And they are, because Laura is another person.  
She tries to remember that moment, but she can't.  
She recalls separate, unconnected details:  
The floor, sticky with sawdust.  
The smell of his aftershave.  
The jacket he was wearing, with the drawing of a smiley face.  
But the image she has of him is very different.  
He looks like someone else.

*In another location, simultaneously:*

*Giancarlo, in Laura's memory. He's different from the original. But he's doing the same thing: he's dancing in the same disco. He's wearing a t-shirt with a smiley face too.*

It doesn't matter, Laura.  
It's OK.  
That's the way it always goes.  
*It just takes a second.*

*Cloe writing.*

*Giancarlo, dancing alone.*

*Mickey Mouse, motioning for us to take a photo with him.*

*Grown-up Laura reading a letter.*

*The memory of Giancarlo, dancing alone.*

*End of music.*

**Part One**  
**THE FUTURE OF SPANISH CINEMA**

1.

*Martín, a professor in a writing class. A student, Charly, is explaining the plot of his movie. A group of students, listening. Martín pretends to be interested.*

CHARLY:                   OK, it goes like this:

*(pause)*

It's the end of the world, at least this iteration of it. A nuclear explosion has destroyed civilization. North Korea dropped the bomb, Russia dropped the bomb... The radiation has created zombies. Zombies populate the cities, which are theme parks, all of them. Animals wandering freely down the streets. Giraffes... The malls are burning; the ozone layer is like a memory, something people talk about. People live in sewers. They eat rats, fat ones, like this, from the radiation. Sexual intercourse is forbidden, and the entire planet is like a grocery store parking lot... with loudspeakers, trap music... A desolate place, where cruising for sex is all the rage. This post-apocalyptic scenario is where our film takes place. ...

NARRATOR:               *Why?*, thinks Martín.

*Why do I have to listen to this crap?*

Part One: "The Future of Spanish Cinema."

We're in a classroom in a downtown academy.

Outside, children playing. Couples making out. All the bells and whistles of dusk.

Here inside, half a dozen grown-ups. Full-fledged adults.

Why aren't they outside, in a park, where the autumn air is starting to feel crisp?

What makes them close themselves in here, in this poorly ventilated classroom on the third floor?

Oh, that's why.

They want to make movies.

CHARLY:                   ... Our protagonist is a human, an old soldier of fortune, who keeps going until he recovers his freedom and, while he's at it, gets revenge for the death of his wife, who was killed by a group of unscrupulous terrorists. I mean, none of them are scrupulous, but this group is especially bloodthirsty. So then, ...

NARRATOR:               Let's observe Martín, the professor.

He's not doing well.

It's getting harder and harder for him to conceal the boredom his students' movies provoke.

Impossible movies, movies he knows will never get made.

Well, he thinks they'll never get made, because his movies have never gotten made.

Martín's an unsuccessful screenwriter.

Right now, he's thinking:

MARTÍN: *This must be what hell is like.*

*Listening to stories like this one on an endless loop.*

*Zombies, rebels, post-apocalyptic worlds.*

*I should have taken the exams and become a notary, like my mom always said. I could be living in some unassuming city. Signing papers at an oak table, monogrammed shirts.*

*I'd be happy as a notary.*

CHARLY: ... So there's this group of ex-cons, and they're forced to work together to survive and, while they're at it, save all of humanity. ...

NARRATOR: Martín studied film. He wanted to write movies.

But little by little, he starts to settle for whatever comes along.

He works for some years on a series about on-call nurses that's called, well,

*On-call Nurses.*

He writes a hundred and eighty chapters.

He has nightmares about those nurses.

The stress gives him eczema in one eye, and he has to wear an eyepatch.

His son sees him in the hallway one night, pale, with the patch on, talking to himself, improvising the nurses' dialogues, and he starts to cry.

CHARLY: ... That's where the love story begins, an impossible love story, of course, between the protagonist and Emma, the half-human half-zombie girl. They meet, they fall in love. In short, things develop.

MARTÍN: *What is he talking about? Who's Emma?*

*This poor kid has lost it.*

*He must not have any friends. That's why he spends his afternoons here.*

*Just look at him going on and on and on about the zombies.*

*It's too bad, it's really just too bad.*

NARRATOR: That's when Martín leaves the series. They were going to fire him anyway,

because of the audience share.

He decides to write HIS MASTERPIECE.

It's a movie. A real movie, like the ones they used to make.

A story about the Spanish Civil War. A very personal story, which his grandfather used to tell him and his brother, when they were little.

When he was done, his brother would always say: "Again. Tell it again."

He gets to work and writes a treatment, a type of summary of the script.

He sends it to all the production companies. One of them buys it.

He's very excited.

His wife gives him a bottle of champagne, with a little ribbon and a card that says:

*So we can celebrate when we see your movie.*

CHARLY: ... So then what? The group of rebels gets kidnapped, and they're stuck in a giant tower. Which isn't really a tower, no, it's, it's an *artificial intelligence*—more powerful than we can imagine. And then we see that *everything, everything* that's taken place until that moment was being like *projected* by that intelligence.... Which also has feelings, right?

NARRATOR: It's been seven years since that moment. The movie still hasn't been made. They open the bottle one Sunday to celebrate some birthday.

*I'll buy you another one*, his wife says.

But she doesn't. In fact, they get separated.

Now, Martín lives in a studio apartment. He owes two months' rent.

MARTÍN: Sorry, how about we move on to the resolution?

CHARLY: The ending, you mean?

MARTÍN: The ending. The ending would be good. The climax... all that.

CHARLY: The climax is the part I just said.

MALE STUDENT: The climax, that's the part he just said.

MARTÍN: OK, after the climax, then.

CHARLY: After the climax, an explosion, just, enormous.

MARTÍN: Another one?

CHARLY: What do you mean another one?

MARTÍN: There was one already, right? I mean, I think.

CHARLY: Well, yeah, but, a while ago.

MALE STUDENT: Yeah, that one was a while ago.

MARTÍN: So, another explosion?

CHARLY: Another explosion. The ending... I see an open ending.

NARRATOR: On his arm, Martín has a tattoo he got last summer, in Berlin, during his pre-midlife crisis.

It says: *I would prefer not to.*

MARTÍN: OK, well I think one could say that what we have here is one of the... the most immature, impoverished, sterile, ineffective, shameful pieces of writing I've ever heard. I don't know—I can't tell you right now—if perhaps in other classes, other people... have heard something like this. I don't know. We'd have to look into it. We'd have to... maybe some university. In any case, from everything I've seen, this is... it's appalling. It made me want to... not only to hit you, which, obviously, but also to hit myself, OK? Slam my skull, really hard—against that wall right there—to not listen, to to to stop hearing that... *pigswill* of clichés that you made us swallow and that made life during these few moments... How can I even describe it?

NARRATOR: Unlivable.

MARTÍN: *Unlivable.* Any other opinions?

*Pause.*

NARRATOR: He doesn't say that, of course. How's he going to say that?

In reality what he says is:

MARTÍN: OK, well that's quite good. Let's see, there's one thing with the inciting incident...

NARRATOR: That, that's what he does. He fills everything up with technical words, jargon from American textbooks.

MARTÍN: ... Blah blah blah *turning point*. Blah blah blah *fatal flaw*. Blah blah blah *catalyst*.

CHARLY: Everything you're telling me is really interesting. I'm totally listening, but for me, what I want to know is whether I can send it yet.

MARTÍN: Send it?

CHARLY: Send it to the production companies... To make it, so they can make the movie.

MARTÍN: Well... yeah, sure, send it.

CHARLY: So I can send it?



MARTÍN: Absolutely.

CHARLY: I've got nothing to lose.

MARTÍN: That's right... You've got nothing to lose. That's the truth.

MALE STUDENT: Hey, I... there's problems in the second act, right?

CHARLY: No, I... I don't see any problem in the second act. I mean, forgive me, but, the second act... My girlfriend just read it, actually, and we were talking about that, about how well the second act hangs together.

MALE STUDENT: OK, but, I mean, your girlfriend...

CHARLY: What about my girlfriend?

MALE STUDENT: Come on. First off, I don't really think she knows a whole lot about this.

CHARLY: The same as everyone else, because she's here. (*Referring to FEMALE STUDENT*)

MALE STUDENT: Oh, you guys are together?

FEMALE STUDENT: Yes. No, I... I mean. Since we're just starting out, it's just... what am I going to do? I lie to him systematically. I lie to you. I lie to you.

*They argue.*

NARRATOR: What else is there to say about Martín?

Sometimes he thinks about a brother he had, Lucas, who died when he was thirteen. He fell out of a carnival ride.

*The galactic octopus*, that was the name of the ride.

It's stayed with him, that idea of death like an octopus: with tentacles and that rubbery consistency. Since he doesn't earn enough from his classes to make it to the end of the month, he also writes ads for TV.

The last one is about a non-stick pressure cooker.

*It's true, right? It's totally non-stick?*

**2.**

*Two presenters from a TV ad.*

PRESENTER 1: Totally.

PRESENTER 2: Because, there's a lot of times when I go shopping, and then I spend a few days away from home. And when I come back, everything's gone bad.

PRESENTER 1: Exactly. Our lives are so hectic that we never know when we're going to get to stay home, enjoying some homecooked meal, right?

PRESENTER 2: Right. It's hard to stay organized.

PRESENTER 1: And, this is important, we have to talk about the technology, Ion-ward®. It's an active ionizer that neutralizes the bacteria and particles that get into the pressure cooker.

PRESENTER 2: And aren't there times when you feel like this pressure cooker protects you from other things as well?

PRESENTER 1: What other things?

PRESENTER 2: I mean, the passing of time, even our ancestral fear of death, because, when it comes right down to it, we're all going to die, right?

PRESENTER 1: That's true, we're all going to die. There won't be anything left of us, except for scattered atoms. It won't be long until we all return to the void that we came out of, which covers everything.

PRESENTER 2: In other words, you're saying that this non-stick pressure cooker with Ion-ward® technology might even mitigate our existential loneliness?

PRESENTER 1: Exactly.

PRESENTER 2: Are you saying it'll allow us to reach the state that the stoics call ataraxia?

PRESENTER 1: Haha, I wouldn't go that far. But let me tell you one thing: ever since I've been able to program my cooking temperatures, what do I care about death? My vegetables don't lose any nutrients.

NARRATOR: He's so bored with writing these TV ads that he has to slip this kind of stuff into them to make it bearable. Then he erases them.

This one is an exercise his psychologist gave him.

It's called: *What would TV ads look like in my ideal world?*

### 3.

*Martín and his psychologist, in her office.*

MARTÍN: Don't you think these roles we're playing are... obsolete?

PSYCHOLOGIST: What do you mean?

MARTÍN: I mean, there's something so artificial in this... I talk, you listen...

PSYCHOLOGIST: That's the way it works. Plus, I talk too.

MARTÍN: You talk about me.

PSYCHOLOGIST: What do you want to talk about? We're in your session, we talk about you.

MARTÍN: I don't know, I mean... I don't know, I need something more. This relationship, it isn't working for me.

PSYCHOLOGIST: What relationship?

MARTÍN: This one. It isn't working for me.

PSYCHOLOGIST: This isn't a relationship, Martín.

MARTÍN: Something's missing for me. I'm sorry, ok? It's not you. It's that I, what I need... I just need something different. Something more human, I guess. Not so much just talking and talking... I see you, I see me, I see a glass of wine. Dinner, perhaps...

NARRATOR: Martín tries to pick up his therapist every couple of months. She always says no, but he doesn't lose hope. The thing is that there's something about her that really reminds him of his first girlfriend, Cloe. Cloe is important in Martín's life. She'll show up later, in a little bit.

PSYCHOLOGIST: Martín, we've talked about this. I'm not going to go out with you.

MARTÍN: Go out? Who's talking about going out? But this strikes me, truly, as close-mindedness and... What are you always telling me? That I should look at things, think about them...

PSYCHOLOGIST: I've never said that in my life.

MARTÍN: Well, I'm saying it, it doesn't matter. I know you: you need a change, you should admit it.

PSYCHOLOGIST: Me? Look, forgive me, but the person who's in therapy here is you.

MARTÍN: And what does it mean to be in therapy? Aren't we all in therapy?

PSYCHOLOGIST: No, we're not all in therapy. Right now, the person who's in therapy here is you. And I'm your therapist. That's why we can't go out, and because, because... because I don't feel like it, first of all.

MARTÍN: Fine, you're within your rights not to, but I... I don't think I'm going to keep coming here anymore.

PSYCHOLOGIST: So, in other words, if I don't go out with you, you stop coming? Do you really think that's very mature?

MARTÍN: Mature, I don't know, but come on, aren't there vibrations here? Am I crazy or what?

PSYCHOLOGIST: There are no vibrations, Martín. There are no vibrations.

MARTÍN: The fact that you don't realize it, and you're a psychologist, I mean...

PSYCHOLOGIST: What?

MARTÍN: Well, it makes me doubt your abilities in all actuality.

*Pause.*

PSYCHOLOGIST: Martín, you need a change. How long have you been working on that movie of yours?

MARTÍN: I already told you. The producer is sending it around.

PSYCHOLOGIST: Look, it's obvious he doesn't have any intention of making it, right? You need to talk to him.

MARTÍN: That's not actually very easy.

PSYCHOLOGIST: What do you mean it's not easy?

MARTÍN: He doesn't pick up when I call him.

PSYCHOLOGIST: OK, so then you need to go see him.

#### 4.

*Martín stops Marcelo, the producer, on the street.*

MARTÍN: Marcelo!

MARCELO: Hey, what's up? How's things?

MARTÍN: Well... I can't get through to you.

MARCELO: What are you talking about?

MARTÍN: I leave you messages, and you don't... You don't answer.

MARCELO: What do you mean I don't answer?

MARTÍN: You don't call back.

MARCELO: Well that's really strange.

MARTÍN: No, it's not really strange. Listen, I want to tell you: the... the treatment.

MARCELO: Yes. What? What?

MARTÍN: The treatment of my movie.

MARCELO: It's wonderful. That treatment of yours? It's just wonderful. That has to get made.

MARTÍN: That's... how's it going? Because, I mean, time's passing.

MARCELO: Look, you caught me just, but I mean just... when I was going to send it to, to... to Álex.

MARTÍN: Álex Casamor?

MARCELO: He's got to be the one to do it. It seems obvious to me.

MARTÍN: I'd be thrilled, but, send it to him. Because we already talked about sending it to him... I don't know, we talked about it like six months ago.

MARCELO: Yes, yes, yes. Six months?

MARTÍN: At least.

MARCELO: Wow, time flies... So I should send it to him?

MARTÍN: Of course, send it to him.

MARCELO: I'm going to send it to him.

MARTÍN: Of course, yes. Send it. Send it to him now.

MARCELO: No, of course, but here... I'm going to do something: as soon as I get home, the first thing I'm going to do, before I take off my coat, I'm going to send it to him.

MARTÍN: But the thing is, later you forget, you start doing something else... and in the end... you don't send it.

MARCELO: No? I mean... look: I'll write it down, and that way I won't forget.

MARTÍN: Or call him. Why don't you just call him?

MARCELO: Or maybe I should call him.

MARTÍN: But call him now.

MARCELO: Yeah, yeah. I'm going to call him now.

MARTÍN: OK, go ahead, call him, fantastic. Then you're done with it.

MARCELO: Yeah, or I'll call him later, more relaxed, at home.

MARTÍN: No, just... No. Call him now.

MARCELO: OK. Or tomorrow.

MARTÍN: Now.  
MARCELO: No.  
MARTÍN: Yes. Now. Please.  
MARCELO: No.  
MARTÍN: Yes.  
MARCELO: No.  
MARTÍN: Yes.  
MARCELO: No.

*(pause)*

Or, let's do this: you call and remind me

MARTÍN: But you don't answer when I call.

MARCELO: Right, I see, it's a...

*(he makes a circle with his hands).*

A circle. We're back where we started, right?

NARRATOR: In the end, Martín gets the number of the director and sends him the treatment.

Álex Casamor is a commercially successful director, who works in both Hollywood and Spain. His last production was a horror film, with American actors, about a satanic cult in Utah.

## 5.

*Martín with the director, Álex, in a bar.*

ÁLEX: The treatment... The treatment is fantastic.

MARTÍN: Great. Thanks so much.

ÁLEX: No, no. Really good. The professor from the Spanish Republic, the boy... It's like he teaches him stuff, right?

MARTÍN: Yes, values.

ÁLEX: The bird thing...?

MARTÍN: Yes, because, birds migrate, right? They, they leave.

ÁLEX: What is it? A metaphor, is that it?

MARTÍN: It's a way of talking about... about escaping, you know? About escaping from

that region... from the central meseta... from the war... That's why: "Birds on the Meseta."

ÁLEX: Yes, OK, OK. Be careful with that though.

MARTÍN: With...? With what?

ÁLEX: With metaphors like that. Look, there's something about this movie... And forgive me, I probably wouldn't say this to anyone else, but I'm going to tell you. Out of respect.

MARTÍN: OK, right, of course...

ÁLEX: Do you know the story about Polanski?

MARTÍN: Polanski?

ÁLEX: The director. You know he survived the Nazis, right? World War Two, in Poland, in the ghetto... His parents died. They gas them both, but he manages to escape... Then he goes to the US, he marries that beautiful woman...

MARTÍN: Sharon Tate.

ÁLEX: What?

MARTÍN: Sharon... Sharon Tate.

ÁLEX: But they kill her too, right? Some members of this cult show up and they... they stab her. She's pregnant too, with the baby inside her, just imagine. And then he falls into this spiral of drugs and craziness... and he ends up with that girl he rapes, right?

*(pause)*

So then, of course, you, you put yourself... into that man's head... when it comes to writing a script. Whether it's... "Nothing matters to me anymore, OK? I could care less. Because some cult killed my kid..." So for me then...

MARTÍN: Right, right, of course.

ÁLEX: So, here... that's what's missing. We're missing that... *flourish*. Someone reads it, it's really good, but the... "You mean, this guy, the author..."

MARTÍN: Yeah, me.

ÁLEX: "... He didn't escape from the Nazis, no cult came and killed his kid, he's not a child rapist..." There's none of that, not at all.

MARTÍN: Right, right. So it's lacking... vigor, maybe, or...

ÁLEX: Power. It's lacking power.

*He shows him his forearm.*

Look, you see that?

MARTÍN: Yeah. What...?

ÁLEX: The burn.  
MARTÍN: Yeah, oh. That's quite the wound. Did you burn yourself on something?  
ÁLEX: A cigar.  
MARTÍN: Jesus...  
ÁLEX: No, I did it myself.  
MARTÍN: Ah.  
ÁLEX: The first day of the shoot. On every shoot, I do a... a... I do some self-harm. That's the way I understand movies, like self-harm. I don't know, Martín, I'm searching. Look, I... I mean, so we understand each other. I'm going to confess something, something you're going to understand. I *always, always* go to shoots with a pistol.

*Pause.*

MARTÍN: Oh, you carry a...?  
ÁLEX: A pistol. I carry it in my pocket, and I don't take it out or anything, but I... I have it, right? And I'm struck sometimes by this desire to... to... to kill the whole lot of them. Actors, assistant director, soundman, production assistant... All dead, in order of importance. A massacre, right? But of course, I don't do it. I control myself. And out of that, out of that tension, out of the restraint that *I* exhibit, that's where the movie comes from.

*(silence)*

I'm really looking forward to working with you.

MARTÍN: Yeah, me too.  
ÁLEX: We're going to have so much fun.  
MARTÍN: For sure, for sure.  
ÁLEX: Cocaine?  
MARTÍN: What?  
ÁLEX: No, if you use cocaine.  
MARTÍN: Now, you mean?  
ÁLEX: In general. So we get to know each other. You, for example, when you masturbate, what do you think about? No, I'm asking because... I masturbate a lot. And it's a really interesting terrain because it's a space of personal freedom, right? And there are almost no spaces like that anymore.



MARTÍN: No, no, no....

*(silence)*

Films, maybe.

ÁLEX: Huh?

MARTÍN: Films.

ÁLEX: Yeah, look, films. Movies...

*(He's quiet a moment)*

Sorry, I was just... *phenm*. I get lost in my own world.

*Pause.*

MARTÍN: So what's the next step?

ÁLEX: This... material... is it yours?

MARTÍN: Yes, yes. Because there was a producer, but he pulled out so it's... it's mine.

ÁLEX: Well then, I'm going to send it to Adriana.

MARTÍN: To Adriana Vergara?

ÁLEX: Yes, yes. I've got a good relationship with her. I'm going to send it to her, today, with a midget.

MARTÍN: A midget?

ÁLEX: You've got to stand out. Do you know how many scripts that woman receives? I send her things with this messenger midget I work with, and that way she'll remember. The script from the midget. Then we have to make some corrections.

MARTÍN: Of course.

*Pause.*

ÁLEX: Hot damn, you know what would be really great?

MARTÍN: What?

ÁLEX: Changing the entire movie.

*Pause.*

MARTÍN: I mean, there's work that's been done that I wouldn't just throw out.

ÁLEX: Well the treatment is fantastic. I mean it, just the way it is, it's ready to shoot tomorrow. But what I'm asking is: "What if we change it, you know?"

6.

*An after party. Techno music. Martín, the director, and other people. They dance, drink, laugh. From time to time, the director whispers something in Martín's ear, and Martín writes in a little notebook.*

NARRATOR: That's how Martín begins to change his movie.

The director takes him to cocktail bars, karaoke bars. He always works in places like that. It helps him concentrate.

Martín carries a little notebook around with him everywhere he goes, and he writes down everything the director comes up with. Any type of idea.

He looks like the secretary to some African dictator.

But he doesn't care, because he knows he's in the best hands.

He knows this man directed *Possession in Utah* and sold it internationally to more than fourteen countries.

That's why he doesn't care that he calls him at any time, from any place, to tell him any thing:

7.

*The director, biking, at the top of a mountain. On the phone.*

ÁLEX: Martín? What's up? Álex here. Look, I'm at the top of a mountain, on a hike, and I was thinking, that chase scene we've got?, it would be great on a mountain. That would mean getting rid of the whole meseta thing, and switching it to mountaintops, precipices, pinnacles, goats. I think it's an improvement. Right? OK?

8.

*The director, at a pool, meeting with others. On the phone.*

ÁLEX: Martín, I'm in a meeting right now, at the pool, with the Canary Island Film

Commission, and... it would be great to film part of it here, on the Canaries, because there's tax deductions... so, then, some scene where you see the ocean, I don't know, volcanoes, Canary Island things...

## 9.

*The director, at his house. By his side, Rosario, his housekeeper. On the phone.*

ÁLEX: Martín, what's up? Alex. Look, I'm calling because I'm here with Rosario, the girl who cleans my house, she's been here forever, like a part of the family, but of course, I hadn't realized that if we're looking for someone who has a lot of experience with the war, that's her.

*(to Rosario)*

What was it, your town, the thing with...?

ROSARIO: The village. They destroyed our village.

ÁLEX: Imagine that, the soldiers burned down her village. I'm going to put her on, let her tell you, I think we can use it. You, ask her about it and, and... we'll stick some scene in there.

## 10.

*Back at the after party.*

NARRATOR: He says "we," but it's Martín who makes the changes, of course.

Now they're at an after party.

*This is good, he thinks. It's important to relax a bit.*

*But this is also work.*

*To hell with classes. To hell with TV ads.*

*They're like one of Stephen Hawkings' black holes. They suck up all my energy.*

*Now I'm going to tell my story. I'm going to make my movie.*

Yes, Martín. Why not?

In Martín's narrative, everything is starting to fit together.

Weeks later, Adriana Vergara finally responds.

11.

*Martín, with Álex Casamor and Adriana Vergara, in an office at the TV station.*

ADRIANA:           Martín. Martín. Your treatment: we're talking about your treatment, that's true. But first, don't you think this is one of those moments where little by little, and in front of our very eyes, a catastrophe is being unleashed? Melting glaciers, tsunamis, terrorism, gluten. Do you know what's going on with me? No, but deep down, truly truly. Everything makes me sad. Everything. Olive trees, they cut them down, thousands of years old, and they transplant them, do you realize, Martín, they transplant them... and the big multinationals, and Swiss banks, and investment holdings. And especially, especially, Martín, what we're talking about here: the cultural situation of this country. The cinema, if we can still say that—if it still makes sense to talk about cinema—the movies we make in this country. That we're *all* making. Where, right now, where—I'm asking you—this is what I'm asking—where is the future of Spanish cinema? For me... I mean, for me? For me it's about a movie I approved this morning about a dog that talks. It solves mysteries. It's a detective dog. Do I like it, personally? Do I like the dog that talks? I don't like it, Martín, I do not like it. But. What about the distributors? What about the majors? They do like it. They love it. They're pissing themselves over the detective dog. That's what they want. It's what we all want. My kids—I don't have kids, it's a manner of speaking—but if I had kids, where would they go? Do you have kids? Don't answer me, because whether you do or not, you know where they go on weekends, it's raining, it starts raining, and what, what do you do with them?, Martín, what do you do? Do you kill them? Do we kill them? No, we have to take them to things. We have to stimulate them. So, what do we have? The detective dog. Because with the detective dog, what else do we get? Action figures. Action figures of the dog, the police that work with the dog, the girlfriend of the dog..

*(Referring to the director)*

He calls me. And he knows, he knows that I, ever since the movie about Utah, I'm with him to the death. I'd kill for it. I ask him: "What've you got? What've you got?" Because we're junkies, Martín, story junkies. We're waiting for talent, waiting for the future of Spanish cinema, like spiders, on a web, waiting, waiting for *you*. Because *you* are the talent. Is it him or is it not him? *It's him*. He tells me: "We've got a treatment that's gold." That's what he says: "Gold." He gives it to me. The midget brings it to me, which Álex knows is a detail that I eat up. I read it. And I tell you, Martín, darling:

*it's, it's gold.* The treatment is amazing. Just the way it is. I would film it tomorrow. So what's the issue?

The issue is, they're going to ask me: "Where's the detective dog?" And we don't have one. There isn't one. They're going to say: "This, what you brought me is a, a... a flounder *menuière*, cooked to perfection, marvelous, but, what is it that we do here?" That's what my boss is going to say. We don't make flounder *menuière*, no, we don't. We make, I don't know, we make fish sticks. Fish sticks, enjoyable, packaged, with drawings, with a pirate. That's what we do, we all know it, we're hypocrites, Martín, we are hypocrites. I want to tell you that there's an opportunity, we're going to take it to committee, we're going to pitch it, but but what we cannot do, under any circumstances, is to cut off our noses to spite our face. This, it's very artsy, the way it is right now, it's very artsy, we need to expand the film, we need to make some corrections.

*Silence.*

MARTÍN: More?

ADRIANA: What do you mean more?

MARTÍN: Because we've already made corrections. Why do we need to make more?

*Pause. Alex and Adriana look at each other.*

ADRIANA: I'm going to answer that question with another question: why do gorillas pick lice off each other? Huh? The, the... gorillas, in the zoo. Have you seen them? You've seen them pick lice off each another? Why do they do it?

*(pause)*

Because they bite them, Martín. The lice bite them. I don't need to say anything else, right?

*Martín doesn't understand.*

MARTÍN: No, yes, yes you do, because if you think I under...

ÁLEX: *(Interrupting)* Your treatment, OK? It all begins with your treatment.

ADRIANA: Let's focus on the treatment, that's it.

ÁLEX: Civil War, ok?

ADRIANA: No, no. Don't think about the Civil War. He shouldn't think about the Civil

War.

ÁLEX: Think about... what should I tell him to think about?

ADRIANA: Post-apocalypse.

ÁLEX: *Post-apocalypse*. Do you see it, the post-apocalypse?

ADRIANA: Of course he sees it, it's super easy to see.

ÁLEX: Are you interested in the post-apocalypse?

ADRIANA: How's he not going to be interested in it, Álex, when it's amazing?

ÁLEX: Small city on the front line. It's being bombed by the Nationalist army.

ADRIANA: Shooting, *ratatatata*.

ÁLEX: People, fleeing through the streets. Shouting, destruction.

ADRIANA: And a boy running away. Alone? No, with a girl, his cousin.

ÁLEX: A cousin, his same age, she's from the village.

ADRIANA: His little cousin, Martín: innocence, paradise lost...

ÁLEX: What do they want?

ADRIANA: What we all want: an opportunity, a future.

ÁLEX: Look at them. They managed to escape, right?

ADRIANA: "Good thing." The ladies: "Good thing."

ÁLEX: But, what's that?

ADRIANA: What is it? Shots?

ÁLEX: Henkel 51. Light bomber.

ADRIANA: And what's it doing?

ÁLEX: Landing in the middle of this massacre.

ADRIANA: And who's flying it?

ÁLEX: A General. A General from Franco's side. This General from the dictator's army is chasing the boy.

MARTÍN: Like in the treatment.

ÁLEX: Everything's just like the treatment.

ADRIANA: Yeah, well, the treatment's fantastic.

ÁLEX: He gets out of the plane and walks through all this... *destruction*.

ADRIANA: Because the city has been destroyed.

Buildings, ruins, everything flattened.

We'll do it in post-production.

ÁLEX: And he looks at the ground, because he hears a noise.

ADRIANA: A noise?

ÁLEX: A little noise. By his feet.

ADRIANA: *Cree, cree.* Martín: *cree, cree, cree.*

MARTÍN: This...

*(pause)*

This is new.

ÁLEX: This is new, yes, you'll see. The General bends down.

ADRIANA: The camara, Martín. The camara, going down with him.

ÁLEX: And he, very slowly, he grabs onto...

ADRIANA: *Cree, cree.*

ÁLEX: ... a rat.

*Pause.*

ADRIANA: "What is it? Is that a rat?"

ÁLEX: *A. Rat.*

ADRIANA: "Ew, that's gross." The ladies: "Ew, that's gross."

ÁLEX: He grabs onto the rat, by the tail.

ADRIANA: *Cree, cree.* That's what the rat does: *cree, cree.*

ÁLEX: Nightfall—behind him—fuchsia red.

ADRIANA: An antinatural red, we'll do the red in post-production.

ÁLEX: And the General from Franco's army...

ADRIANA: Pay attention here please, Martín.

ÁLEX: He opens his mouth...

ADRIANA: He opens his mouth, Martín. With the rat in his hand.

ÁLEX: And in one gulp... *he eats the rat.*

*Silence.*

ADRIANA: HE EATS THE RAT, MARTÍN. HE ATE THE RAT.

*Silence.*

MARTÍN: But...

ADRIANA: But. That's the word.

ÁLEX: What the fuck?

ADRIANA: The ladies, Martín: "what the fuck?" Because you saw it, you saw how he eats the rat. You're like this. Your eyes, like this.

ÁLEX: Who is this General? Huh?

ADRIANA: Who is this General who eats rats?

ÁLEX: Is he just any old General from Franco's army?

ADRIANA: *No, no, no.*

ÁLEX: Who is it?

ADRIANA: And here, Martín, hold on tight because this is the most radical high-concept concept you're going to hear in your life.

ÁLEX: The General, Martín, he isn't human. He's. An. Alien.

*Silence.*

ADRIANA: And what's up with Franco, you're wondering.

ÁLEX: Franco knows. In order to save Spain, he's determined to join forces with whoever he needs to.

ADRIANA: Nazis. Fascists. *Extraterrestrials.*

ÁLEX: This is the high-concept concept, Martín. This is the power: Spanish Civil War. Aliens.

ADRIANA: Amazing.

*Silence.*

Guys, I'm *very* pleased. I'm going to ask them to bring me a Kir Royal. Martín, are you pleased?

NARRATOR: This is the moment when Martín could get up, and leave.

Run away from here like someone who's seen a ghost.

But what he does is remember a movie he saw when he was little, with his brother. When his brother was still alive.

They rented it from a video store. *Herbie Goes Bananas*, it was called.

That was the last movie his brother ever saw, although they didn't know it at the time.

Since then, Martín makes a list of all the movies he sees.



The only thing he wants is to add a movie of his own to that list.

That's why, instead of running away, he says:

MARTÍN: So, should we sign the contract?

ADRIANA: We can sign whenever you want. Look, I've signed contracts on, on... Where did you and I sign the Utah one?

ÁLEX: On the back of a flyer.

ADRIANA: On the back of a flyer. That's how we do things, Martín.

NARRATOR: They sign a contract to do *another* treatment, with the changes.

In the elevator, Martín runs into the student with the zombies.

## 12.

*Martín, in an elevator, leaving the offices. The doors open and Charly enters.*

CHARLY: Hey, Prof. How's it going?

MARTÍN: *(doesn't recognize him)* Hello...

CHARLY: Charly.

MARTÍN: Charly, how you doing? What a coincidence...

CHARLY: Yeah well, I work here now. I sent them my manuscript, like you told me... and here I am, reading scripts, writing reports...

MARTÍN: Good deal.

CHARLY: Yeah, I'm really happy, the thing is that, for now... it looks like my movie's not going to get made.

MARTÍN: Yeah, well, I mean, maybe it's not what they're looking for.

CHARLY: No, no. They love it. The thing is that it exceeds the budget.

MARTÍN: Goodness.

*Silence. Charly looks at him.*

CHARLY: How'd it go?

MARTÍN: How'd what go?

CHARLY: You had that Civil War thing, right?

MARTÍN: *(surprised that he knows)* Oh, yeah, yeah... Well, really good. We're... rethinking

some things, but good.

CHARLY: And the UFOs?

MARTÍN: Wait, you... Did they tell you that, or...?

CHARLY: Did they tell me...? I was the one who told them. The UFOs? I was the one who told them.

MARTÍN: You were the one who told what to who?

CHARLY: So the thing is... you're not going to believe how it happened. They gave me the treatment... Which is good, right? But it, obviously, in the end it's a little bit of the same old thing: the Civil war, the boy, the good-guy professor who supports the Republic... and kicking it around in my head, just kicking it around... Amazing the way ideas come to us, isn't it? Like you used to say, right? Suddenly. I was playing on the PlayStation with one of my buddies, and he was wearing a Space Invaders sweatshirt, so I'm looking at him, and I say: "Hey, that treatment, if you put some aliens into it, it's the same thing, but better."

*(pause)*

And from that, which I wasn't going to say anything about, because I was embarrassed, but since you encouraged me so much, I go, well I'll just mention it to my boss and see what happens. I tell him and he flips over it. The ball starts rolling, they tell that Adriana chick... and she flips too. And so, you're taking it to committee, right?

NARRATOR: Martín refuses to let any of that info gain access to his brain.

He can't, because he already signed a contract to make another version.

### 13.

*Martín, writing at home, early morning. He goes out onto the balcony and from there he sees an old guy running.*

NARRATOR: He rereads the treatment and tries to make the changes, but he can't do it.

Deep down, the whole UFO thing strikes him as ridiculous.

After spending the whole night trying, in the early morning, he goes out on the balcony to smoke a cigarette.

The sun's coming up, and he can see a park from there.

People running.

Among them, some old man, this guy must be two hundred years old. He's running very slowly, but

he's running.

He looks like one of those turtles that walk through India, all alone, while people move out of the way.

Seeing the old guy, Martín is transformed.

*What a role model, he thinks. If he can do it, so can I.*

What Martín doesn't know is that the old turtle guy is actually an actor, and he's filming an ad for Nike.

The ad is called: *No limits*. It's old people doing impossible things: marathons, bungee jumping.

*No limits, Martín.*

#### 14.

*Martín, at a wedding. His cousin approaches him.*

NARRATOR: Now he's at a wedding, a family commitment, and he's still taking notes, because he agreed to turn in the corrections in a week, on Monday.

It's always on Mondays.

A distant cousin who he hasn't seen in years approaches him.

COUSIN: Are you the scriptwriter?

MARTÍN: No, no...

COUSIN: Yes, you're the scriptwriter. You write scripts?

MARTÍN: Sometimes.

COUSIN: What scripts do you write?

MARTÍN: All kinds.

COUSIN: Any movies?

MARTÍN: I'm working on a movie right now.

COUSIN: Have I seen it?

MARTÍN: No, I'm still writing it.

COUSIN: What actors?

MARTÍN: No, no. I'm writing... Putting the finishing touches on a treatment.

COUSIN: A treatment?

MARTÍN: Yeah, it's something you do before the script.

COUSIN: And you write it?  
MARTÍN: Yeah, exactly. I write it.  
COUSIN: And the actors?  
MARTÍN: What about the actors?  
COUSIN: Then they change it, or...?  
MARTÍN: No, normally they don't change it.  
COUSIN: No?  
MARTÍN: No, no.

*Pause.*

COUSIN: Are you writing now?  
MARTÍN: Taking notes. It's just, I'm a little short on time.  
COUSIN: So I'm bothering you.  
MARTÍN: No, no. Not at all.  
COUSIN: It seems super hard to me. I couldn't do it.  
MARTÍN: It's like everything. I'm sure I couldn't do what you do...

*(pause)*

What do you do?

COUSIN: Me? I'm a service technician. For phones. I go into people's homes... and I make sure they're working.  
MARTÍN: Ah.

*(pause)*

So then, yes. Maybe yes... yes I could. Other jobs, no, but yours...

COUSIN: The person you've got to meet is my wife. She's a real character... If she told you what she's been through... then you'd really have something to write about.

MARTÍN: I'm sure. I've going to head out for a minute, I have to get the... the...

COUSIN: Mercedes!

*Mercedes approaches.*

COUSIN: He's the scriptwriter.  
MERCEDDES: Are you the scriptwriter?  
MARTÍN: Yes, hello. I'm, I'm...

MERCEDES: Good. Well if I told you what I've been through... then you'd really have something to write about.

MARTÍN: Yeah, he told me...

NARRATOR: Martín has heard this exact phrase at every wedding he's gone to. Every one of them. He's sick of it.

MARTÍN: OK, let's hear it, go ahead. I'm sure it'll inspire me. I'm sure. I don't have anything to do, other than listening... What's your story?

MERCEDES: Really? Are you sure?

MARTÍN: Please.

*Pause.*

MERCEDES: OK, the thing is I've been with the National Intelligence Agency for years now, and the truth is I've seen all sort of things. I did my training in Lebanon, right when Hezbollah was getting involved in the Civil War. I'm sure you know that Hezbollah is a Lebanese Shia Islamist organization which is difficult to deal with, and the thing is that it was a miracle, a miracle that I got out of there alive. You have no idea what it was like. ...

NARRATOR: Martín never could have anticipated what's happening here, because the story this cousin is telling him is fascinating.

MERCEDES: ... And I go and tell Hassan Nasrallah—because we had a good relationship—  
—I tell him: "Hassan, sending the militia to the Black Sea, things being the way they are, it's a huge mistake." And him: "No, not at all." He was obsessed with the Black Sea. The situation made him question everything, until he ends up putting an arrest warrant out for me. I go: "An arrest warrant again, really?" ...

NARRATOR: She talks more than forty minutes.

Martín can't believe it.

This woman's life is a thousand times more interesting than his treatment.

COUSIN: What about ETA? Tell him about those terrorists from ETA.

MERCEDES: Well, so, I was infiltrated in the group for seven years, not as one of the hitmen, but as a driver for the upper echelon. I took Mikel Antza and the others from meeting to meeting. I mean, we even ended up planning the escape from the prison in San Sebastián together, I don't know if you remember but it was big news, because we went in as if we were just some

lighting technicians working for Imanol, that singer who was all the rage back then, and we snuck two prisoners out by hiding them in some loudspeakers.

NARRATOR: As he's listening to her, Martín feels like a con man.  
He feels like he doesn't have anything to say.

*This is truly interesting, he thinks. My little movie isn't.*

MERCEDES: So in the end, they discover me, there's a shoot-out in Lasarte, shooting, shooting, people killed, weeks hiding out in the mountains, eating roots, little birds, drinking my own urine, I mean, what're you going to do?

NARRATOR: He decides he's going to take some of the things his cousin is telling him, and he's going to stick them right into the treatment.

He needs to change the whole thing, but he doesn't have time.

*He doesn't have time.*

MERCEDES: And because I had a hunting knife that my dad gave me, it was only because of the knife, I cut out the bullet, because it went into my shoulder, clean, thank god it was clean, I mean that's how I saved my life, because otherwise... But of course, sensitivity in that arm... it's totally gone. Look, touch it, touch it. Hey, what's wrong? Why are you scratching yourself?

NARRATOR: His whole body has started to itch.

## 15.

*Martín, at the doctor's office, with two doctors.*

NARRATOR: He goes to the doctor thinking it's hives, psoriasis, dermatitis.

No: it's the eczema from the nurses, it's returned.

DOCTOR 1: Are you under any stress lately?

MARTÍN: Yes. I mean I'm writing a movie and I have to make some corrections.

DOCTOR 2: How are you doing with eating?

MARTÍN: Bad.

DOCTOR 1: Exercise?

MARTÍN: Bad.

DOCTOR 2: Personal hygiene?

MARTÍN: Also bad.

DOCTOR 1: Bowel movements?  
MARTÍN: Don't ask.  
DOCTOR 2: Tremors?  
MARTÍN: Yes.  
DOCTOR 1: Feelings of anxiety?  
MARTÍN: Yes.  
DOCTOR 2: Sensation of the futility of life and the passing of time?  
MARTÍN: Yes, yes, exactly.

*Pause. The doctors debate amongst themselves.*

DOCTOR 1: It's logical. After all... eczema comes and goes, but what is certain, and we're telling you this as doctors, is that we're all going to die. There won't be anything left of us, except for scattered atoms. It won't be long until we all return to the void that we came out of, which covers everything.

MARTÍN: That phrase... I've heard it somewhere.

NARRATOR: Relax, Martín, you're very tense.

The doctors send him to a spa, to get an urgent treatment for his skin.

## 16.

*Martín, at a spa. Lying on a wooden bench, in a bathrobe, in the steam. In his hand, his notebook.*

NARRATOR: They cover him with mud, they shower him in natural spring water, they douse him in coal tar.

They give him calendula, aloe vera, coconut oil. But it doesn't subside.

*It's psychosomatic*, they tell him.

It is whatever it is, but he has to submit the corrections all the same.

He feels like his head is spinning.

He feels like he's sinking, like a crack has opened up in his outer shell.

And he thinks... about the Titanic.

It's strange, because it's been years since he thought about the Titanic.

But now he does: he's thinking about a ship... a gigantic ship... sinking... very slowly... hopelessly... with a cracking sound.

It's a sound that says: *What am I doing here?*

*What am I doing here?*

He asks himself this question in an existential fashion. Not only here, in this spa, but in general, in the world.

*What made me think I wanted to write movies?*

It's not an easy question to answer.

We'd have to go back to June 15, 1977.



**Part Two**  
**THE SINKING OF THE TITANIC**

**1.**

*Martín's parents are making love on a sofa. A TV news program with the results of the 1977 elections can be heard.*

NARRATOR: Part Two: "The Sinking of the Titanic."

These are Martín's parents.

They met through a friend, at a Julio Iglesias concert.

He works in the Treasury Department.

She owns a clothing store called *Contrasts*.

Right now, they're celebrating the first general election since Spain became a democracy.

They've been going out a couple of years, and they just moved to this neighborhood on the outskirts of the city.

They're surrounded by open fields. They're the only people with dogs.

You can see the city in the distance. It looks like someone painted it.

Shortly, there will be a race. A ferocious race, with pushing and shoving, like the chariot races in the movie *Ben-Hur*.

It's 250 million sperm trying to reach the egg.

They have to cross different barriers: vaginal, cervical, uterine. It's like an expedition to the North Pole.

Out of all of them, only one of them makes it. Martín will come from that one.

The Democratic Center Party wins the elections.

**2.**

*Martín's parents, with baby Martín in a crib. They pick him up, they talk to him, they give him the bottle. The mother leaves and the baby cries.*

NARRATOR: March 4<sup>th</sup>, 1978.

Martín was just born. He weighed 7 ½ pounds.

His father, even though he's really happy right now, will abandon them in a few years for a stewardess he'll meet on a work trip to Stuttgart.

From that point on, Martín will feel an aversion toward stewardesses, and at the same time, he'll feel a very strong erotic attraction toward them.

But he doesn't know any of that right now.

When his mother leaves the room, he cries in terror.

He doesn't know if she's going to return.

*Things leave, Martín. They go away and you can't stop them.*

If he could talk, he would say:

MARTÍN: *Sometimes they give me the bottle after three hours. Other times it's four.*

*How can you live like that?*

*Schopenhauer was right when he said: "Suffering is essential to life."*

*In New Guinea, babies are carried in a hanging pouch like a bag of oranges.*

*They put me in this crib they got from the Corte Inglés department store.*

*Everything is unpredictable. Everything is change.*

*In any case, take it easy.*

*Look. Look at your mamma's face. It's like the sun.*

*If I could, I'd spend my life looking at her.*

### 3.

*Martín, 8 years old, and his mother visit an exhibition about the Titanic.*

*Robots dressed like passengers from that time period, behind a rope.*

*The whistle from the ship is heard.*

NARRATOR: November 12<sup>th</sup>, 1986.

Martín has turned eight, and he's obsessed with the Titanic.

*How could something like that happen?* he wonders.

*If that ship sank, then anything can happen,* he thinks. *We're not safe.*

Now he's visiting an exhibition about the Titanic, with his mother and her new boyfriend, who's a dentist.

The exhibition has a children's zone, and one of the activities is to write a letter to one of the passengers on the Titanic.

Martín writes the captain:

MARTÍN: Dear Captain Edward Smith,  
My name is Martín. I'm only eight years old, almost nine, but I would have liked to be there with you guys.

I have a question for you:

*Why did you abandon so many people?*

The lifeboats could have been filled with kids, because kids, like me, we're usually small.

Sometimes I imagine that all those kids didn't die and I invite them to my birthday party.

There's usually *mediasnoches*, those little sandwiches my aunt makes.

I'd invite you too, Captain, in spite of your terrible, *terrible* handling of the catastrophe.

NARRATOR: He underlines those last words: terrible handling of the catastrophe. Martín already talks like a grown-up sometimes.

When he finds out that fifteen hundred people died, he has an idea:

He decides to write a possible parallel life for each of the victims.

*It's like giving them another chance*, he thinks.

They buy him a notebook in the souvenir shop.

A blue notebook, hard cover, with a closing strap that says: *Passenger of the Titanic*.

He's very excited about the idea.

He writes the parallel life of the first passenger: Benjamin Guggenheim, a Swiss immigrant, owner of some copper mines.

In his new life, written by Martín, Benjamin is a teacher at his school.

He teaches Physical Education. He has a dog named *Cashmere*.

He even makes a drawing of a dog, with a bone in its mouth.

It's the first thing he writes in his life.

He leaves the rest of the notebook blank.

#### 4.

*Martín, a teenager, in his room. A corkboard with a poster of Spanish rock band Héroes del Silencio. He has long hair, a black t-shirt. He's writing in a notebook by the light of a reading lamp. He's listening to music on a Walkman.*

NARRATOR: August 26<sup>th</sup>, 1992.

The Olympics in Barcelona. Everybody's going crazy.

Not Martín. He thinks: *What is this shit?*

*What are all these invented sports? Badminton, synchronized swimming.*

The thing is that his brother Lucas has died now, on the octopus ride, and he feels really bad.

*How do you feel, Martín?*

MARTÍN: I feel like one of those balloons that someone releases during a wedding banquet, and it gets stuck on the ceiling, next to a fluorescent bulb.

NARRATOR: That's how Martín feels.

He's a bit of a poet already. He's fourteen years old.

He's forgotten about the Titanic. Now he's a goth.

He wears black fingernail polish, black everything.

He's become a fan of the rock band *Héroes del Silencio*.

He's in his room, listening to them, and it feels like the lyrics are talking directly to him.

As if they could name something that's his.

Very soon, he'll start a fan club.

He thinks: *This is the most important thing I'll ever do. Being the president of the Héroes del Silencio fan club. I'm never going to forget this.*

Now he's writing a poem, which imitates the group's baroque style.

It's called *The Scent of the Honeysuckle*.

But, do you even know what honeysuckle is, Martín?

MARTÍN: No idea.

NARRATOR: Poor thing. The truth of the matter is that writing makes him feel better.

*How do you feel, Martín?*

MARTÍN: I feel like reality is at one volume, here... and when I write, I turn the volume down, here.

NARRATOR: He doesn't know how to explain it any better. The thing is that, because of that, he keeps on writing.

## 5.

*Martín, in the kitchen of his house, gives a panhandler something to eat. Afterwards, he plays him a song on the guitar. The panhandler listens but doesn't stop eating.*

NARRATOR: March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1996.

Martín is 18 now.

He wants to study film, but he comes to an agreement with his mother: he's going to study Law, and after that, he'll study film.

His mother and her boyfriend, the dentist, are out.

They've gone to Génova Street, to celebrate the election of José María Aznar after fourteen years of Socialist governments.

At this moment, Martín is feeding a panhandler he ran into at an ATM.

He plans on setting up the fold-up bed his brother used to sleep on, so the panhandler can spend the night there.

He thinks they have more than enough space and it's absurd that people have to sleep on the street.

Martín's a very sensitive young man, he does strange things.

He serves the panhandler cereal and milk and shows him some songs he wrote.

MARTÍN: Should I make you...? I don't know, do you want anything else? Something to snack on maybe?

NARRATOR: The panhandler worked in the stock market for years. Then he got addicted to gambling and lost everything.

He has a daughter who's Martín's age, who he never sees.

The panhandler says: *Some memories are like turtles.*

*You flip them over and they just start walking. Alone.*

He also tells him that he comes from the planet Uranus, but the turtle thing sticks with Martín.

They're going to watch the sunrise on the balcony, drinking wine, talking about Rabelais.

Neither of them has read Rabelais, but that doesn't matter. Martín feels like it's a very special moment.

When he wakes up, the man will have stolen some tins of foie-gras, a horrible wall hanging showing different types of boating knots, and his PlayStation.

## 6.

*Martín, in the bathroom, next to Cloe, in pajamas. They're brushing their teeth, talking about something. Cloe's sister, Nuria, walks by.*

NARRATOR: February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2001.

Martín has stopped studying Law. Now he only studies film. He wants to be a screenwriter.

Here's Cloe, finally. They meet in class and start going out.

Right now they're at her house. Her mother has left her on her own, and they spend the weekend here, like a married couple.

They even take care of her little sister.

Classical music filters through the window.

A neighbor who everyone thinks is blind plays it.

In the end, it turns out she isn't, she's a performance artist, famous in Europe: she's spending three months pretending to be blind, that's what the performance consists of.

They gave her a scholarship from Copenhagen, where they clearly have too much money.

They really like the music the blind lady plays, and they imagine she plays it for them.

Martín is enthralled by the routine:

Wake up with Cloe, make breakfast. Ordinary things seem to have a different shine.

When he sees her take her nail polish off with a pink Q-tip, he thinks:

*How do people handle all this?*

It's a thought he's going to have very often in his life.

From time to time, Cloe swears to things that are absurd.

CLOE: I swear I'm never eating in a Chinese restaurant again.

NARRATOR: They write a short film about a couple together.

He writes the part of Him; she does the part of Her.

They love this idea.

They're happy together right now, but they're going to separate in a few months.

In September, the Twin Towers fall.

Martín experiences it like a huge objective correlative, a literary technique he's just learned.

He thinks seriously that if skyscrapers are collapsing in the world, it's because he got separated.

Shortly thereafter, he falls in love with a publicist.

7.

*Martín, in a hospital, in a robe. They bring him a baby, his son, in a bassinet. The baby's crying. He tries to calm him. He gives him the bottle.*

NARRATOR: April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2009.

Martín is now working on the series about the nurses. He's very stressed.

He marries the publicist, and they have a son.

Here they are bringing him the baby in a bassinet.

He thinks: *It looks like they're dropping off an order from the fruit stand.*

But no, no. It's a newborn. And it's very strange, because he looks just like him.

He feels like the baby's a new and improved version of himself.

*How odd*, he thinks.

*I thought that when I saw my son I would learn something. I don't know, something important that I would finally understand.*

And Martín understands it, but he doesn't know what it is. He doesn't know how to put it into words.

And what good is it if you don't know how to put it into words?

While they do the skin-to-skin contact, the baby cries inconsolably, like this: *bwabbbb. Bwabbbb.*

Suddenly, he realizes that his son is like a survivor from the Titanic.

This doesn't make any sense, but for him it does.

He imagines him in a rescue boat, with an orange life vest.

It's as if he had a second chance, like a parallel life.

And, while he gives him his first bottle, he remembers the panhandler, he remembers Cloe, he remembers his dead brother.

And he feels like they're all in this baby, crying.

And he feels like they're crying for the same reason his son is: because everything is strange and alien.

*Bwabbbb. Bwabbbb. Bwabbbb.*

8.

*Back at the spa, where we left Martín.*

*He thinks he sees someone through the steam.*

MARTÍN: Cloe?

*(pause)*

Hi... Is that you?

CLOE: Hi.

MARTÍN: How's it going?

CLOE: How're you?

MARTÍN: What a surprise, right? What...?

CLOE: Yeah, it sure is.

*(pause)*

Sorry, it's just that I feel a little... It's been so long since...

MARTÍN: So long.

CLOE: ... Since we've seen each other. When was...?

MARTÍN: What?

CLOE: No, the...

MARTÍN: That dinner, you mean? Ages. Years.

CLOE: Yeah, god.

MARTÍN: Yeah.

*(pause)*

And how's...? I don't know. How are you?

*Pause.*

CLOE: *(surprised that he asks her that)* How...? How am I?

MARTÍN: Yeah, well no, I mean... What're you up to?

CLOE: Ah. Nothing, good. Very good. And... you? What're you doing here?

MARTÍN: Well, um... as you can see, a treatment I'm getting.

CLOE: A treatment?

MARTÍN: Yeah, for my skin, that... a problem with my skin. But it's nothing, really...

It's not... I mean, from nerves, the stress...

CLOE: You got a lot of stress?

MARTÍN: No, just, normal.

CLOE: Normal.

MARTÍN: It's because I'm working on a film...

CLOE: A film?



MARTÍN: Yeah, a... we're still developing it, but... it looks good.

CLOE: Well, that's good.

MARTÍN: Yeah, it has... It's, it's about the Civil War. One of my grandfather's stories.

CLOE: Your grandfather... the one about the bird you always told me.

MARTÍN: Yeah, exactly. In fact, that's what it's called. "Birds on the Meseta." I'm tweaking it now, because... we've got a pitch and...

CLOE: A what?

MARTÍN: A pitch, where... where, you know, we present the movie. We say what it's about... It's with a director who's worked a lot in the U.S....

CLOE: Oh, good. That's important.

MARTÍN: ... In Hollywood.

CLOE: Where?

MARTÍN: In Hollywood. He made a couple of movies there.

CLOE: I don't know what that is.

MARTÍN: You don't know what that is...?

CLOE: What you said. I don't know.

MARTÍN: Hollywood?

CLOE: No clue.

*Pause. He believes her.*

MARTÍN: How can you not know? Hollywood, California. With the movies.

CLOE: Never heard of it. I'm not sure...

*Pause.*

MARTÍN: You're pulling my leg.

*She smiles.*

What an idiot, I mean, really...

CLOE: And what's his name, the director?

MARTÍN: You wouldn't know him. He made a movie, a commercial one... It was good, you know. But you... you haven't seen it.

*(pause)*

It's called "Possession in Utah."

CLOE: What?

MARTÍN: "Possession in Utah." Your favorite, right?

CLOE: It might be good.

MARTÍN: It's not bad, really.

CLOE: No, that's why I said it.

*(pause)*

That title, though...

MARTÍN: *(laughing)* I know.

CLOE: It's pretty clear-cut, isn't it?

MARTÍN: Yeah, right. There's a possession, and it's in Utah.

*(pause)*

And you? What do you do?

CLOE: Nothing.

MARTÍN: Are you writing anything?

CLOE: No, nothing.

MARTÍN: Nothing? But...

CLOE: I don't write anymore.

MARTÍN: Come on.

CLOE: No, I don't...

MARTÍN: You don't write?

CLOE: No. It's been years.

MARTÍN: Why not?

CLOE: I don't know. I stopped writing.

MARTÍN: But you stopped... just like that?

CLOE: Yeah, I stopped.

MARTÍN: But you were the best writer in the class.

CLOE: I was not.

MARTÍN: You were too. I remember that story you did about a girl...

CLOE: No, what story?

MARTÍN: You don't remember? The one about the girl in the disco?

CLOE: No.

MARTÍN: An exercise you did at school, the first day? A girl... she's in a disco... dancing with some guy. She's very happy and... she realizes... How'd it go? She realizes that the moment is going to come to an end. And she doesn't want it to stop. She wants... to capture it. She tries to take like a mental picture...

*She doesn't remember.*

No? Mickey Mouse was in it.

CLOE: Mickey? No, all right, it sounds familiar, but...

MARTÍN: It was amazing. We all loved it. I must still have it somewhere, because I save everything... You must have it too.

CLOE: No, I threw everything out. I moved a few times and...

MARTÍN: You threw it out?

CLOE: Yeah, I don't know. It's a different time...

MARTÍN: But...

CLOE: That's it. Enough already. I threw it out.

*Pause.*

MARTÍN: And what do you do now? Professionally.

CLOE: I'm a gardener.

MARTÍN: No.

CLOE: Yes, a gardener.

MARTÍN: You're pulling my leg again.

CLOE: No, really. I do gardening.

MARTÍN: What do you mean gardening? You water plants? You prune them...?

CLOE: No, I design gardens.

MARTÍN: No you don't.

CLOE: I do. I just did one around here, in a plaza.

MARTÍN: What's it called?

CLOE: Park of the Two Waters.

MARTÍN: Come on. I don't believe you.

CLOE: Fine.

*Pause.*

MARTÍN: Tell me the names of trees.  
CLOE: What?  
MARTÍN: If you're a gardener. Tell me the names of trees.  
CLOE: I don't feel like it.  
MARTÍN: See?  
CLOE: What is this? An exam?  
MARTÍN: Gardener...

*Pause.*

CLOE: Olive. Cypress. Elm. Poplar. Oak. Maple.  
MARTÍN: Everybody knows those.  
CLOE: Oh, really? OK: Atlas cedar. Red eucalyptus. Black locust. Mimosa. Corsican Pine. Rosewood. Yew. Elder. Chinese Parasol.  
MARTÍN: Chinese Parasol?  
CLOE: Chinese Parasol, what's the problem?  
MARTÍN: You're making them up.  
CLOE: Whatever.

*(pause)*

What's your movie about?

MARTÍN: Well, it's not your typical Civil War flick. It's a type of... of... *dystopia*. We added something... I mean, something different. Like there are... hidden forces... You know that whole thing about Nazis and the occult? Well, going off that a little bit, we came up with the idea of UFOs...

CLOE: UFOs?

MARTÍN: Yeah, UFOs. Aliens... That's what we're working on.

*(pause)*

I have to make some corrections, but I can't do it.

CLOE: Why do you have to?

MARTÍN: Well, it's more the producer's thing, and the director's... you know.

CLOE: And you have to do it.  
MARTÍN: If I want them to make the movie, yes.  
CLOE: So do it and be done with it, right?  
MARTÍN: Just like that?  
CLOE: Just like that.  
MARTÍN: You think it's crap, don't you?  
CLOE: Your movie? No, not at all. I'll have to see it.

*(pause)*

I saw a UFO once.

MARTÍN: What are you talking about?  
CLOE: In Greece. One night, in the middle of the ocean.  
MARTÍN: But that would be... a light, an illusion...  
CLOE: No. It was a UFO.  
MARTÍN: But how's it going to be a UFO?  
CLOE: Were you there? I was there. I saw it. It was a UFO.

*Pause. She continues to look at him.*

MARTÍN: What?  
CLOE: No, it's just that... you used to have a thing in your eyes... that you don't have anymore, right?  
MARTÍN: I don't know.  
CLOE: Your eyes were two different colors, weren't they? Or am I making that up?  
MARTÍN: I have a son.  
CLOE: Yeah, I know. I heard. What's his name?  
MARTÍN: Lucas.  
CLOE: Ah, of course.

*Pause.*

MARTÍN: Do you have kids?  
CLOE: No. I wanted to, you know? But...

MARTÍN: Well, you've got time.

*Pause.*

CLOE: Yes, of course. I've got time.

*Silence.*

MARTÍN: Can I ask you something?

*(pause)*

Do you ever have the feeling—like as if you lost something—something very important, very valuable—like if it was the keys to your house—but it's not the keys to your house—it's not anything in reality—but at the same time—it's everything?

*Pause.*

CLOE: No.

MARTÍN: But do you know what I'm talking about?

CLOE: Yes.

*(pause)*

Things leave, Martín. They go away and you can't stop them.

*Pause. She gets emotional.*

MARTÍN: You OK?

CLOE: Yeah. It's... the air in here, it irritates my eyes...

MARTÍN: Should we go outside?

**9.**

*Martín and Cloe, outside the spa. Nightfall.*

*We hear the music that was playing years earlier, in the bathroom.*

NARRATOR:           They go out onto a glass-enclosed porch, above a lake.  
A lake with hot springs.  
There are some cabins with chipped paint that used to be dressing rooms.  
The spa is very old. It needs to be renovated.  
During the war, at the time Martín's movie takes place, it was a field hospital.  
And here, close to where they are, a young man died when a grenade exploded.  
His name was Fermín Casares. He was nineteen years old. He wanted to be a mechanic.  
It doesn't matter. There's no place for him in this story.  
They don't know anything about that. They've got enough to deal with, just talking, here, after so many years, as if it were no big deal.

Meeting up with someone who was important in your life is like meeting up with a dead person.

*Now I understand the whole thing about the post-apocalypse, the zombies...* thinks Martín.

*We are the zombies.*

*Zombies of ourselves.*

*What does that mean?*

MARTÍN:               I remember he was Italian. The girl, in your story, she was dancing with an Italian guy. I remember because I imagined it was me. You know when you read something and you imagine you're one of the characters? Well I imagined it was me.

*(Pause. He speaks in Italian.)*

*I imagined I spoke fluent Italian. That I was in one of those black and white Italian movies. With you, I don't know. Fantasies. I've always wanted to learn Italian. I signed up for some classes, but I only lasted three days.*

CLOE:                 You can still learn, right?

MARTÍN:               *(in Italian) Now my thing is that my son should learn, but obviously, what good is Italian? Right? What good is it?*

*Pause.*

NARRATOR:           Night is falling. The sun sets in the lake.  
It shines among the cabins like a rusty coin, and it makes them remember something: the opposite moment, a sunrise.

Both of them? Yes. There are less memories than people.

*This is why I started to write, thinks Martín. To remember.*

The moment is this:

The two of them lying at the foot of a statue  
watching a sunrise in Rome  
her head resting on his thigh  
his right hand caressing her gold-tinged hair  
on the steps of a statue in the Gianicolo, the eighth hill of Rome  
watching how the sun rises  
above cupolas raised to honor Emperors and Popes  
with the murky breath of several Perotti beers and stomachs full of balls of fried rice  
after spending the night walking down dimly lit narrow streets  
turning their backs on the equestrian monument erected in bronze to Garibaldi  
the side of the monument painted with slogans supporting the Lazio football club  
him noticing the coldness and hardness of the marble on his back  
her closing her eyes to feel the warmth of the sun on her eyelids  
alone in Piazza Garibaldi except for a group of Japanese tourists  
his left hand resting against the step forming an acute angle  
an ant climbing her bare ankle  
him, his eyes open, watching a flock of birds that zigzag toward the Tiber  
her, a map in her back pocket, its corners faded  
sunlight landing on the marble and warming it  
marble on which you can read ROME OR DEATH and which was covered with fascist symbols  
during the War  
both of them tired, but knowing they'll sleep until noon in the Eur neighborhood apartment that  
they're sharing with a slightly cross-eyed German girl  
they're young, twenty-three, without any worries  
traveling through Italy by Interrail  
young lovers who just got their degrees in film studies  
dreaming about writing  
sharing a cigarette  
sharing a Winston-brand cigarette  
at 7:05 AM on July 20th, 2001.



Martín:

*(Martín looks at the Narrator)*

“It happened. It won’t happen again. Remember it.”

**Part Three**  
**POSTCARDS FROM THE AEGEAN SEA**

1.

*Divided into two locations:*

*Night. Two soldiers on the front lines. Antoñito and Rafael. Rafael is lying on the ground, a life-threatening wound on his leg.*

*In a radio studio, Martín, Adriana, and a newspaper reporter. They listen with their headsets on.*

*Rafael lets out a heartrending scream. The other soldier tries to console him.*

ANTOÑITO: Hang in there! They're going to come get us, Rafael.

RAFAEL: You used to be a better liar, kid.

ANTOÑITO: Who's lying? Our guys have got to be right around the corner.

RAFAEL: Our guys are busy enough just saving their own asses. No, Antoñito, you and I are on our own. This ends here. Give me a cigarette, would you?

*Antoñito lights a cigarette for him.*

Listen to me: you need to leave. Go on, leave, save yourself! Catch a train and cross over into France. I've got friends there who can help you. You've got your whole life ahead of you. You've got to live for the both of us.

ANTOÑITO: Desert? Never.

RAFAEL: We can't win this war.

ANTOÑITO: Don't say that.

RAFAEL: No? They've got lasers, Antoñito. They've got motherships, they can read our minds. Their technology is millions of years more advanced than ours. What've we got?

ANTOÑITO: We've got justice on our side.

RAFAEL: And that justice of yours, will it feed us? Can we touch it? Will it work as ammunition when we run out of bullets? No. There's no point in fooling ourselves: they're going to win the war.

ANTOÑITO: You might be right, but maybe someone, somewhere on the planet, is watching us. Or maybe other people, many years from now.

RAFAEL: Then they won't be able to do anything for us.

ANTOÑITO:           You're wrong: they'll be able to tell our story.

*Sound of an approaching siren.*

## 2.

*In the radio studio.*

REPORTER:            "They'll be able to tell our story"...

ADRIANA:             Amazing. Amazing scene.

REPORTER:            Adriana, Martín... Welcome to you both.

ADRIANA:             Thank you, how's it going?

MARTÍN:              Hello.

REPORTER:            We've been listening to a clip from a film that'll be out in theatres soon. It's about the Civil War, but it's not your typical Civil War movie, is it?

*They laugh.*

MARTÍN:              No, no.

ADRIANA:             Not at all.

REPORTER:            You could say it has a lot of elements we don't often find in movies about the Civil War. In the first place: UFOs. So how did that idea occur to you?

ADRIANA:             Martín, that was Martín, he has an exceptional mind...

MARTÍN:              No, not at all... It kind of came from all of us.

ADRIANA:             I think it was Álex... Wasn't it?

REPORTER:            Álex Casamor, the director, He's entering the studio as we speak, accompanied by one of the actors.

*Álex and an actor enter, without making a sound, as if asking for forgiveness for arriving late. They wave. They put headsets on.*

REPORTER:            As we were saying... the idea of extraterrestrials fighting on Franco's side. Who comes up with something like that, and how is it that it works so well?

ÁLEX: I know, right? Ideas, sometimes...

ADRIANA: They don't come from anything concrete. It's very mysterious.

ACTOR: They float.

ÁLEX: They float, that's it. They're in the air, as people say, right?

ACTOR: Kind of like the radio, isn't it? Radio waves. There's something... like magic.

ADRIANA: Magic, how lovely. What a team we had, amazing, really.

ACTOR: And, I mean... What is an idea? We could spend hours debating, couldn't we?

*They continue talking.*

MARTÍN: *Autumn. A year has gone by.*  
*It seems incredible, but I finally wrote the movie, and they shot it.*  
*The premiere is this week.*  
*It's no longer called "Birds on the Meseta." It's called "Abduction on the Meseta."*  
*The strange thing is that I've made peace with the idea of the UFOs.*  
*It feels like it's totally mine, even though I know other people will have to appear in the credits: my student, my cousin's wife.*  
*Even Cloe. Seeing Cloe helped me make the corrections.*  
*Maybe that's what fiction is: it's like a soup made out of the leftovers you find in the fridge.*  
*Things from here and there. That's how I made this movie.*

REPORTER: We're going to take advantage of having the screenwriter here, which doesn't happen very often: Martín, what's it like to see what they did with your movie? It must be very strange, right? Is it how you imagined it?

*Pause. He doesn't answer. It doesn't seem like he heard.*

REPORTER: Martín?

MARTÍN: It's exactly how I imagined it. Every shot is the way I always dreamt it. Every actor is exactly what I had in mind, and he or she says the dialogues, bit by bit, the way I've always heard them in my head. In fact, the movie is so similar to what I imagined that, when I saw it, it frightened me. No, really.

I thought: "How can it be so, I mean so similar to what I had in my head?"

What is this, a miracle?

*Laughter from everyone while he's talking.*

ADRIANA:               What he means is that making a film is a team effort and that what's important is not the movie one imagines, but the one you find along the way. Right, Martín?

MARTÍN:                Exactly. That's exactly what I mean.

REPORTER: "Abduction on the Meseta." Opening in theatres this Friday. Let's keep listening:

### 3.

*On the front lines, they return to the same position.*

*Rafael sits up and takes him by the lapels.*

RAFAEL:                Come on, leave, you've got to leave, now, before those rat-eating fascists find us!

*Antoñito stands up, crying.*

ANTOÑITO:            *(to himself)* This goddamn war...

RAFAEL:                Don't think about it, son. Run. Run!

*Antoñito is just about to obey him, when the sound of sirens from up above floods everything.*

ANTOÑITO:            They're here, Rafael! Our guys!

NARRATOR:           Both of them look toward the sky. They wave their arms in the air.

But little by little, their faces change: it's not the air force; it's not their guys.

It's a very strong light: above them, imposing, a gigantic spaceship darkens the sky.

They remain frozen, looking up, right into the light.

### 4.

*Martín, in a car the producer provided, with a driver.*

DRIVER: The temperature all right?

MARTÍN: Yes, fine. Thank you.

DRIVER: Music? The radio?

MARTÍN: Yeah, it's good.

NARRATOR: Martín is returning home in a car the producer arranged for him.

When he leaves the interview, he has a missed call from Cloe.

He hasn't talked with her in months.

When he sees the call, it occurs to him that he could invite her to the premiere.

He's struck by the idea that, if she sees the movie, it'll prove something to her.

What it has to prove to her and why, he couldn't say.

But he thinks they might even get back together.

MARTÍN: *(on the phone)* Cloe? (...) Hi, Nuria, what's up? It's been so long.

NARRATOR: It's Nuria, Cloe's sister.

MARTÍN: *(on the phone)* But... What are you...? What are you saying? Are you serious?

NARRATOR: She's telling him that Cloe died.

MARTÍN: Are you serious? Why would you say that?

NARRATOR:: She was sick. She didn't want to tell him.

MARTÍN: This can't be happening.

NARRATOR: This is how people die in the real world, Martín.

Not with explosions or with extraterrestrial shoot-outs.

They die with words. Words that someone says to you.

MARTÍN: *(on the phone)* I'm devastated, I really am. (...) Yes, yes, of course. Well, I don't know... Take care of yourself, Nuria...

*He hangs up. Silence.*

NARRATOR: Martín looks out the window.

He's on a bridge, on the highway that goes into the city.

Beneath him, cars go by with their red taillights on, like brushstrokes of light.

When someone dies, the strangest thing is that nothing around you changes.

*The driver realized that something was going on, and he stopped the car on the shoulder.*

*He looks at Martín in the rearview mirror, in silence.*

DRIVER:                    You all right?

*Pause.*

MARTÍN:                    Yes, no. A...

DRIVER:                    I stopped, in case...

MARTÍN:                    Yes, good, good idea.

*(pause)*

There was a death... a person I knew.

DRIVER:                    Oh my goodness.

*(pause)*

I figured it was something like that.

MARTÍN:                    What?

DRIVER:                    No, just, it seemed like it was something like that. Christ Almighty.

*(pause)*

Everything else has a solution, but this...

*Pause.*

MARTÍN:                    OK, well, let's go... I guess let's go to the funeral parlor.

DRIVER:                    The funeral parlor?

MARTÍN:                    Yes, to the... to the La Paz Funeral Parlor. That's where she is.

DRIVER:                    That's where she is?

MARTÍN:                    Yes, this person... That's where she is.

*Silencio.*

DRIVER:                    I want you to know that, at this moment, I am..., I'm your driver. That's first and foremost. I'm your driver, and I'll take you wherever you tell me to go. If you tell me "La Paz Funeral Parlor," I'll put it into the GPS and we'll be at the La Paz Funeral Parlor momentarily. But, before I was a driver, I was a person, do you understand what I mean? And I want to think that

what's happening here, in this trajectory, is not simply a business transaction. I want to think that there's a relationship between two people, a give-and-take. And that there's a spark, a little spark, which is the basis, the very basis for what makes us human. This little spark is something we have to take care of. And this spark is what makes me tell you: "I'll take you to that funeral parlor if you want, but you're not going to find what you're looking for." Because I've been to funeral parlors, unfortunately. And there's nothing there. It's an amusement park of death. And so if you tell me: "It's because that's where she is. That's where she is," I'll tell you: "No, actually, she's not." Your friend, your lover, whatever she was, she's not there. She's in... in the moments you spent together. In your memory. In the cosmos, even. But in the La Paz Funeral Parlor, let me tell you: she's not there.

*(pause)*

Now, if you want, I'll turn on the GPS, and we'll be at La Paz in just a second.

MARTÍN: ... In just a second...?

DRIVER: Just a second, that's right.

MARTÍN: It all just takes a second, all of this, doesn't it?

*Pause. The driver looks at him.*

DRIVER: Do you want to smoke a joint?

*Pause. Martín looks at him.*

MARTÍN: Well, OK, yeah.

DRIVER: OK, coming right up, your wish is my command. I've got one right here.

*The driver takes a joint out of the glove box. He lights it and hands it to Martín.*

*The two of them smoke in silence. Music plays on the radio. A long silence.*

MARTÍN: I know where I want you to take me.

DRIVER: Where?

MARTÍN: To the Park of the Two Waters. If it exists, which I'm not sure about.



5.

*A park. Martín sits on a bench. Some kids are playing the game of statues. Some older people are playing petanca.*

NARRATOR: It exists. It's on the outskirts, in an area that's just been built.

It's a typical park, with swings and a place for adults to work out.

Martín sits on a bench.

The park strikes him as a little sad and kind of ordinary.

*This is what you left behind*, he thinks.

If he knew anything about parks, he would realize it's not ordinary.

Its layout is based on the gridiron concept of urban agglutination. That means it has a series of plazas, which are meant to be meeting places.

And that's what it is now, a meeting place.

There are some older folks rolling *petanca* balls.

Some kids playing the game of statues in another area, which has a sand pit.

And this little lake?, it's stocked with fish.

The plants we see are conifers: this isn't a coincidence. They attract Eurasian blue tits, the birds we're hearing.

The whole thing looks very similar to the mock-up Cloe made when she designed it.

But Martín doesn't know anything about all that.

He thinks: *This girl wrote a hundred times better than me, and it did her no good.*

And then he thinks: *I don't get any of this: petanca balls, playing statues.*

*Who are these people? What are they doing with their lives?*

He sits on the bench, and night is about to fall.

Right now. Immediately. Everyone has left.

Before long, the streetlamps will come on and neighbors will make their way down to walk their dogs, but first, there's an instant when Martín is completely alone, in what is almost the dark, as if he were a little doll in Cloe's mock-up.

He realizes that, if anyone saw him, they could easily think:

*Who is that? What is he doing with his life?*

6.

*Martín, at home, looking through a box of souvenirs. He pulls out a few objects. Finally, a letter. He reads it.*

NARRATOR:            Later, at home, he opens a box. It's a metallic box, which he bought in Ikea. It's jam-packed with souvenirs. He doesn't find Cloe's writing exercise, but he does find the notebook from the Titanic. And some postcards.

They're postcards she wrote him from the Greek islands, when they were going out.

He's impressed by her curvy handwriting, with a felt-tip pen.

The handwriting of someone who's no longer alive.

7.

*Divided into two locations:*

*Martín at home, reading the letter.*

*A tacky bar on one of the decks of a cruise ship. 1990s. Red light. Background music. You can hear the sea.*

*At one of the tables, two sisters: Cloe, twenty-three, and Nuria, nineteen. Cloe is writing. Nuria watches her, bored.*

CLOE:                    *Martín, I'm writing you from an enormous boat, the Celestyal Olympia, crossing the Aegean Sea.*

*Sorry, it's not the Aegean: it's the Iconic Aegean.*

*That's the name of the cruise.*

*And, listen, it's true that it's iconic. It couldn't be any more iconic.*

*The waiters are all dressed like the ancient Greeks, in togas. Poor people.*

*At this moment, I'm in a disgusting bar, on the Platonic Deck.*

*Every deck is named after someone Greek, someone dead and important, so you don't forget for a single instant that these places we're visiting aren't just any random old ruins. No, they're rich with history.*

*I decided to send you a postcard from every island we visit.*

*That way it'll be like you're doing the trip with me.*

NURIA:                Cloe.

*(pause)*

Cloe. What are you doing?

CLOE: Writing.  
NURIA: Are you writing your boyfriend?  
CLOE: What do you care?

*Pause.*

NURIA: It's a bit ridiculous, isn't it? You're here, on a cruise, in the Greek islands, and you're thinking about your boyfriend.

CLOE: I'm not thinking about my boyfriend.

NURIA: There's something going on with you. I'm telling you because I'm your sister and I see you from the outside. When we're in a place... you're not there. It's like you showed up late. Like when they connect to a reporter, on TV, and there's a delay?

CLOE: Why don't you go to hell?

NURIA: See? It makes you mad because it's true. If it was a lie, it wouldn't make you mad.

*Pause. Cloe thinks. She continues writing.*

CLOE: *I went to the Oracle of Delphi.*

*Did you know that the oracle lets you talk to the dead?*

*There was an older lady there, some type of gypsy. She asked me if I had any dead people I wanted to talk to.*

*I told her no, but then I regretted it.*

*I realized I could have told her I wanted to talk with Lucas.*

*I know you don't like to discuss him, but that's why, I thought, I could talk to him myself.*

*I would have liked to meet him.*

NURIA: Because that's the other thing. The whole thing about lies, I mean. Because that's what you writers spend the whole day doing: lying like drunken sailors. You're all world-class liars.

CLOE: But, why would you say that?

NURIA: Do you know that thing Plato said? That poets should be exiled from the city because everything they say is a lie? Seems totally logical to me.

CLOE: He didn't say that.

NURIA: Oh no?

CLOE: What he said is that people like you who study business are the ones who need to be exiled.

NURIA: *(she smiles)* What an idiot...

*Pause. Cloe thinks. She continues writing.*

CLOE: *From where I'm sitting, I can see the wake we leave behind us in the sea: two lines of white foam, in the shape of a V.*

*I'm at the apex of the V, drinking a Mythos beer (which is terrible), thinking about you.*

*Aren't you lucky.*

*Today is June 24<sup>th</sup>, 2001. I'll see you in Rome in less than a month.*

*What's the thing with time? Sometimes it goes by slowly and sometimes it doesn't go by at all.*

*A seagull is following us around everywhere, as if we owed it money. Could it be you?*

## 8.

*Martín, at home, reading the letter.*

NARRATOR: She writes: "A seagull is following us around everywhere." But there's no seagull following them around. She just imagines it.

## 9.

*Movie theatre. Audience entering to see the movie, at the premiere. People wave at each other. Martín is among them.*

*They sit down, chatting. The lights go down. It gets quiet. The projection begins.*

*Music.*

NARRATOR: [Real date of the performance]

Martín is at the premiere.

He can't believe he's finally going to see his movie on the big screen.

He's accompanied by all of them: the director, the producer, his student, Cloe's sister...

The scenes go by very quickly, like train cars, and he watches them with the curiosity of a child.

The actors' heads, in the foreground, are enormous, like those statues on Easter Island.

He immediately stops caring if the movie is good or bad.

Why should he care?

It's a movie like any other, but it's his.

He feels something he can only describe as relief.

Like someone who releases a burden.

*That was it*, he thinks.

He realizes the movie is like the box he has at home.

A box of souvenirs.

A time capsule.

That's why a thirteen-year-old boy sits by his side:

*A thirteen-year-old boy, Martín's brother, Lucas, sits in an empty seat next to Martín. Lucas watches the screen while he eats popcorn.*

LUCAS:                   What'd I miss?

*Pause. Martín looks at him.*

LUCAS:                   *(referring to the movie)* I wanted to know what I missed.

MARTÍN:                 They just realized that the general who's chasing them is an... an extraterrestrial.

LUCAS:                   Is that guy the general?

MARTÍN:                 Yeah.

LUCAS:                   He ate the rat?

MARTÍN:                 Yeah.

LUCAS:                   That's heavy.

*(pause)*

Who's that girl?

MARTÍN:                 She's the boy's cousin. She's visiting from the village.

LUCAS:                   What're they doing?

MARTÍN:                 They're hiding.

*(pause)*

Now they're going to go down into the sewers.

LUCAS: The sewers?

MARTÍN: Yeah, through the drainpipes, to escape. But the thing is, they don't know the sewers are actually the headquarters for the aliens.

LUCAS: Wow.

MARTÍN: You know, because of the rats.

LUCAS: Oh, of course, because they eat rats.

MARTÍN: Exactly, exactly.

*Pause.*

LUCAS: And that bird?

MARTÍN: They find the bird there. It went in to escape from the bombing. And the bird is what allows them to escape. Because they follow it. They hear it chirping, and they follow it. Because the sewers are like a maze.

LUCAS: Right, right.

*(pause)*

The movie's cool.

MARTÍN: You like it?

LUCAS: It's cool.

MARTÍN: I wrote it.

*Lucas looks at him.*

LUCAS: Nice try, hotshot, but it's the story grandpa used to tell us.

MARTÍN: Yeah, but I wrote it. I made it for you.

LUCAS: For me?

MARTÍN: Yeah, so you could see it.

*(pause)*

I would have liked for you to have seen it. I also would have liked for you to have met your nephew. He's named after you.

*Pause. Lucas looks at him.*

LUCAS:                   So you write movies?

MARTÍN:                 Yeah.

LUCAS:                   But weren't you going to be a notary?

MARTÍN:                 Me? No way.

LUCAS:                   *(he makes a motion, referring to the movie) Shhh.* Quiet, I'm watching.

*Lucas, without taking his eyes off the screen, reaches his hand out to offer him popcorn. Martín takes some.*

*Afterwards, he looks up like everyone else, toward the light that the movie projects.*

## Epilogue

*Divided into two locations:*

*In one part: everyone continues to watch the movie.*

*In the other: Martín, in the place where he writes. The same place where Cloe was writing at the beginning of the play.*

*He sits down at the computer. He opens it. He plays music.*

*He writes. He reads. He thinks, he leans back, he writes.*

MARTÍN:                   The movie will be in theatres a few weeks, then it'll disappear.

The critics will give it three stars.

They still play it on TV sometimes, late at night. After the news, before a crazy old lady who says she can predict the future.

This is the song that plays at the end.

I'm going to forget the movie soon.

I'll keep writing. What else am I going to do?

It's like a rash: you can't stop scratching.

I had an idea to make another movie: it begins with Cloe's story.

It begins with a girl, fourteen years old, dancing in a disco with an Italian guy.

She's very happy, but she realizes the moment will come to an end. And she doesn't want it to be over.

She wants to... capture it.

I don't know what happens next, but I'll know soon.

I write at night, after the garbage truck passes.

If anyone sees me, talking to myself, they'll think I'm possessed, like one of those cannibals from the cartoons with a bone in his hair, dancing around a caldron.

The city is empty and silent.

The traffic lights change colors without anyone crossing the streets.

It's like being at the controls of an enormous ship, crossing the ocean.

Everything has the consistency of a dream, and I write.

*Martín writing.*



*He continues until the end, while the lights start going down.*

*Little by little, until the only light is from the computer screen.*

*And then Martín closes the computer.*

*Darkness.*

**Unidentified: NN 12**

**By Gracia Morales**

**Translated from Castilian Spanish by Phyllis Zatlin**

I met Gracia Morales in the fall of 2018 at the University of Southern Indiana during an international theatre conference organized by A. David Hitchcock. When I had coffee with Gracia in Granada the following spring, she gave me a copy of *NN 12*. I had no intention of translating any more plays, but I changed my mind when I read this one. I was in Florida in 2012 when a forensic anthropologist from the University of South Florida began excavating unmarked graves at a notorious reform school not far from Tallahassee. We no longer had to think of inhumane episodes in other parts of the world to understand how people were executed and families were torn apart by authoritarian regimes that simply discarded bodies like trash. I had read and kept clippings recounting that horror story at the Dozier School. Colson Whitehead did the same; in his case, the beating deaths of Black boys by white staff inspired his great novel *The Nickel Boys*.

In Gracia Morales's play, a forensic scientist confronts the task of identifying the remains of a dozen skeletons found in a mass grave. After explaining the assignment to others in her crew, she begins her examination of NN 12, a woman without a name. (NN comes from the Latin term *Nomen Nescio*.) Her investigation, witnessed by the ghost of the deceased, involves solving a mystery with the help of DNA. The skeleton is soon linked to Esteban, a young man who has been looking for his biological parents. Never returned to his maternal grandparents, he was raised in an orphanage. As the investigation continues, Esteban learns how his mother was assassinated shortly after his birth in prison, where she was repeatedly raped by a military officer whom he eventually confronts. The remains of the mother will finally be given a burial by her son and relatives, also located by the scientist. As the play ends, the anthropologist must begin solving another mystery from the mass grave.

The script has a small cast: two women, both in their 30s; two men, one aged 27 and the other aged 62; an offstage voice of a third woman. In the original cast, Gracia Morales played the forensic scientist. The single set has two playing spaces: a forensic laboratory and the older man's home. Time and place are unspecified. Action takes place over several weeks but could happen in any country where people were taken from their homes, disappeared, and ultimately found in mass graves.

Before COVID-19 prevented in-person meetings, I had the good fortune of belonging to a playwrights' collective that met in Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin. Our part of the state, Door County, has several active theatres and is home to a number of people with extensive theatrical experience. Other members were or hoped to become playwrights, but they kindly accepted me, a translator, into the group. They offered guidance in my previous preparation of *Little Girl, My Little Girl* by Itziar Pascual and Amaranta Osorio, which appeared in the Spring 2021 issue of *The Mercurian*. For the Morales play, they cast the roles and did an unrehearsed reading of my translation in progress, again helping me immensely.

Research is called for in translating the medical and anatomical terminology for *NN 12*. When I thought I had resolved those issues, I sent that section of my translation to a relative who is a nurse for her corrections and suggestions. I also consulted the author. Gracia Morales said she had consulted appropriate colleagues at her university for the same reason. The play title also posed a problem. The author assumed her audience would understand what NN stood for; I was quite sure an American

audience would be bewildered. I consulted a number of friends; most answers were not very helpful. Finally, with the aid of the late Marion Peter Holt, a distinguished play translator, I arrived at the over translation solution of adding “Unidentified” for clarification.

The play makes extensive use of *Lili Marleen*, a German love song that became internationally popular during World War II. It was known most widely in a version by Marlene Dietrich. The military man in the NN play is quite taken by the song and the actor who sang it. Most members of our playwrights’ collective had never heard of it, however. The exception was Bela Sandor, who was born in Hungary and speaks several languages. He not only knew the song but could sing it for our reading. As it happens, I not only know the song but own a copy in a book we used in German class at Rollins College back in the 1950s. Sometimes musical references in plays stump me, but not this time!

Two participants in our collective were so impressed by Gracia Morales’s play that they intended to suggest it to their board in a local theatre, but COVID interfered with that idea, so the translation has not yet been staged in the U.S. A short play of Gracia’s appears in English, translation by A. David Hitchcock, in an anthology I have just edited for ESTRENO Studies, in cooperation with the playwrights’ collective: *Microtheatre: A Door County Debut of Short Plays from Wisconsin and Spain*. Gracia’s *With Background Music* is part of a cluster labeled “The Golden Years Aren’t for Sissies.” David is now general editor of ESTRENO Studies.

**Gracia Morales** (b. Motril, Granada 1973) is a playwright, poet and co-founder of the Remiendo Theatre Company. She is a literature professor at the University of Granada. More than twenty of her plays have been published and staged. Among her theatre prizes are the Marqués de Bradomín, Romero Esteo, the Premio Lorca de Teatro Andaluz, and the SGAE. She was awarded the latter in 2008 by the Sociedad General de Autores y Editores for *NN 12*. Spanish critics and spectators have observed that while the play resonates with Spain’s own history of violence and civil war, it deals with those shocking events in a muted tone.

**Phyllis Zatlin** (b. Green Bay 1938) has translated and edited numerous plays. In Door County, she’s written books about local history and friendships with writers abroad. Inspired by the Rogue and Isadoora Theatres and a playwrights’ group, she writes plays and is editing this anthology of microtheatre by Wisconsin and Spanish authors.

**Unidentified: NN 12**

**By Gracia Morales**

**Translated Castilian Spanish by Phyllis Zatlin**

**CAST:**

Forensic Scientist. Woman in her 30s.

NN. Woman, age 31.

Esteban. Man, age 27.

Older Man. Age 62,

There is also an Offstage Voice of a woman

**SCENE 1**

*A soft light reveals OLDER MAN seated at a desk with his back to the audience. A spotlight illuminates the small area with the man in front of the desk. From time to time we see his profile: he appears to be about 60 and wears glasses. He is leafing through a newspaper. He pauses when an article attracts his attention. He reads slowly then carefully tears out that page and holds it.*

*As he reads that page, a different scene begins in a larger section of the stage. In this second space, still in darkness, someone not yet recognizable, is projecting on a screen photographs from a mass grave. As the projection starts, we hear the voice of the woman showing the images.*

**VOICE OF FORENSIC SCIENTIST**

Following information provided by townspeople, on 19 February we moved to an area we named North Section. We made a series of probes to locate the position. Shoveling dirt from a ditch, we uncovered the sole of a shoe. We found a rectangular grave some 11 meters long, approximately two meters wide, and one meter 20 centimeters deep. We have labeled it Grave 1-North. The remains of 12 bodies of NN were found there. As you can see in the photos, the skeletons are quite complete and articulated. Because of the haphazard distribution of individuals and their positions, we believe they were thrown in from the edge. There are no traces of wood or other materials that would indicate that any of them was buried in a box or coffin. This is, therefore, a clandestine, simultaneous group burial. Next to the skeletons we found some related objects: pieces of clothing, buttons, zippers, buckles, shoes, a watch, a chain, and part of the ammunition that caused their death. We will deliver these materials along with the NN bones to be identified.

At this time, the archeological team has moved to the East and is working on a second area, without, for the moment, making another find. May I have light, please.

*Lights up on this area of the stage: a forensic medical laboratory. The speaker is a woman in her 30s who is wearing a white lab coat. Light on Older Man's area now gradually goes down until no longer visible.*

## FORENSIC SCIENTIST

Any questions?

*The FORENSIC SCIENTIST directs her answers in various directions to points relatively close to each other. She is responding to questions from an audience that we neither see nor hear.*

Yes? *(Pause.)* Yes, some of our informants are seeking family members. We have heard from a total of 15 families, but we have found the remains of only 12 cadavers. That's why we have decided to extend our excavation work in this area. We are preparing ante-mortem records of the disappeared. They will be ready within a few days.

*(In response to another question.)* No. I'm sorry. We don't know that. *(Pause.)*

Yes. All of them by fire arms. The spent ammunition came from revolvers and pistols of 9mm Largo and 7.65 mm Browning.

Any more questions? *(Pause.)*

No, not yet. We're not working in secret. The press was already here when we arrived and they know we are carrying out an investigation, but we prefer to maintain privacy on the results. The important thing is that we have to work calmly, without outside pressure.

Anything else?

Very well. You'll be notified what individual has been assigned to each one of you. Thank you for your attention.

## SCENE 2

*Forensic laboratory. On a long table, the skeleton of a person. On stage, a young woman: NN.*

*NN walks around, observing everything with curiosity. She takes objects and examines them carefully. When she puts them back, she tries to leave everything just as it was.*

*The FORENSIC SCIENTIST enters. She pays no attention to NN. She crosses to the work table. She plays back what she previously recorded while observing the skeleton.*

## RECORDED VOICE OF FORENSIC SCIENTIST

On 9 March I received the box of individual 12. It contains almost the complete skeleton. Study of the osseous characteristics leads to several conclusions which I shall now summarize. Analysis of the pelvis and cranium indicates that these are the remains of a woman of Caucasian-Mediterranean origin. To determine her age, I have considered the sternal end of the fourth rib, uricular surface of

the ileum, pubic symphysis, dental attrition, the degree of synostosis in cranial sutures, radiographic changes, and histomorphometric variation. From these data I conclude that at her death, NN was between 29 and 32 years old.

*NN also approaches the table and looks at the skeleton.*

After measuring the femur and the tibia, I applied the Krogman-Iskan equation, resulting in a height of 1 meter 62cms +/-3 cms. Slight build. *(Pause.)* As for the cause of death, there is evidence in the cranium of injuries caused by a bullet with a posterior-anterior and top to bottom trajectory, marked by entry and exit holes.

*NN shivers slightly and moves away from the bones.*

From the shells found in the grave and the characteristics of the injury, we conclude that the weapon used was 9mm.

*Brief silence. The recording has ended. The FORENSIC SCIENTIST takes out a small notebook from the pocket of her white lab coat and studies it for a moment. She then connects the recorder and speaks.*

13 March. Further study reveals traces of an ischiopubic inflammation. There is every indication that it resulted from recent childbirth. We can therefore deduce that they killed NN 12 some ten to 15 days after giving birth and that she had an infection that was not properly treated. *(Pause.)* There are no noticeable signs of torture.

*She stops the recorder and touches the top of her own head. She then picks up the cranium from the table and examines a hollow, anterior spot. She releases the cranium and returns to the recorder.*

The cranium has a special characteristic. The greater fontanel is not closed.

*She remains silent, with the recorder still running, and touches her own head in the same spot as before.*

NN

*(Looking at the Forensic Scientist for the first time with curiosity)*

You too? That bone / there / you / too?

FORENSIC SCIENTIST *(Bringing the recorder back to her mouth)*

The odontologist team will begin the dental report tomorrow. I am about to get samples to analyze DNA. *(The Forensic Scientist stops the recorder and puts on latex gloves.)*

### SCENE 3

*While the FORENSIC SCIENTIST takes photos of the remains, NN speaks calmly. At times she falters, makes an effort but does not always find the word she seeks and has to go back and try again. This is not uncertainty or lack of resolution; rather her speech has been broken and she has to reconstruct it. These*

*breaks in her speech are indicated by / inserted in the line.*

NN

The earth is / the earth / the earth is filled with voices. Down there, we speak, we speak to one another. We say, we tell each other. Our name. Age. Each one's cities. Why they arrested us. What the look was / that / look of who / that look. Voices. Broken voices in the earth. And we listen to them quietly, with attention.

One man didn't have these. . . (*Showing her hands*) both of them. He always repeated: "Why did they cut them off? Why? What reason did those bastards have?" He always repeated that.

Another, older, spoke about his wife. Her voice, her laugh, the shape of her little / her. . . (*She gestures with her fingers but can't find the word. She continues.*) Remembering her, and remembering her, and thinking about the child they expected. When they took him away, his wife was four / four months. Was it a boy or a girl? Some 40 years later, he continued to ask, Boy or girl? Still asking.

The earth is alive. Filled with / with / with stories. And sobs. Those who died recently, they have the strongest, and for a while they almost don't let us hear. . . Then they get used to that / that darkness / that damp smell, so damp, and they stop crying and learn.

From underground, words / how the words sound / they carry for kilometers, thousands and thousands. That's how they come. Clear. "Nothing hurts anymore," one says. "Here / there are no cold tables or buckets of water, they can no longer hurt me here." Then, a young woman, almost a child, "My father, my poor father, he'll go crazy looking for me, I know, he won't stop until he finds me, my father is so stubborn." Everyone has their own voice. Some are always angry: "That's enough complaining! Who gives a shit about your stories? Even down here we can't enjoy a bit of fuckin' silence, (*She laughs softly. Then stops laughing.*) Someone was singing / someone / a woman / always the same song. (*She hums the beginning of "Lili Marleen": "Vor der Kaserne / Vor dem großen Tor / Stand eine Laterne / Und steht sie noch davor / So woll'n wir da uns wieder seh'n... "*

Words, there, down there. Sometimes in desperation. With / with / fear. With anger too. As if all the dead people with no name joined together, listening to one another pressed together so we would be less alone.

Now they are taking us out. Separating us, they are separating us and leaving us like that, stretched out, clean, carefully placed. But do they want to listen to / to all that / that we bring to tell them?

#### SCENE 4

*The forensic laboratory. The FORENSIC SCIENTIST and a young man, ESTEBAN, are silently looking at the skeleton on the table. NN is watching them.*

*ESTEBAN appears calm, but he isn't. He makes an effort to seem serene but at times during the scene we notice that effort.*

ESTEBAN

How long was it there?

FORENSIC SCIENTIST

If we take into account what the people who pointed out the grave told us, 27 or 28 years. We found this. *(She gives him a medal.)* It's the only object she had with her.

ESTEBAN *(Examining the medal)*

P. L. A.

FORENSIC SCIENTIST

She had it in her hand. *(Closing her fist.)* Like this. In the right hand. We have some facts based on our forensic analysis. Do you want to hear them?

ESTEBAN

Yes.

FORENSIC SCIENTIST

She was about one meter 62 centimeters. Rather slim. Her age between 29 and 32.

*ESTEBAN continues looking at the remains. He places the medal near them.*

She was located with a group of bodies. Eleven other bodies. All men. We are also trying to identify them.

ESTEBAN

I imagine that I had no relationship with any of them. Right?

FORENSIC SCIENTIST

Correct. According to DNA tests, none.

NN *(Beginning to understand)*

No. It can't be.

ESTEBAN *(Pause)*

Anything else?

FORENSIC SCIENTIST

A dental record is in process. We can get quite a bit of information from that. Everyone has unique



dental characteristics. Did you know that?

ESTEBAN

No.

FORENSIC SCIENTIST

She also has a striking trait. In the cranium. Here, look. This hollow. It's called the greater fontanel. Normally it closes by two years, but for some people, very few, it remains open. It's not dangerous but it is striking. It may be a fact that helps us.

ESTEBAN

I don't have it.

FORENSIC SCIENTIST

It's not hereditary.

*NN moves away from them, very disturbed. She talks to herself, in whispers, making gestures of denial, saying words and phrases we do not hear.*

ESTEBAN (*Looking at the cranium*)

Was this a gunshot?

FORENSIC SCIENTIST (*Trying not to be blunt*)

Yes.

ESTEBAN

How did they shoot her?

FORENSIC SCIENTIST

Once. From behind aiming forward.

*ESTEBAN moves away from the body.*

FORENSIC SCIENTIST

There's something else. We think she gave birth shortly before dying. We've found indications of an ischiopubic inflammation. Therefore, you were born just before she died. Do you understand?

*Pause. ESTEBAN's appearance of serenity gradually is shattered. He anxiously moves about the stage.*

ESTEBAN

Do you get a lot of stories like this one?

FORENSIC SCIENTIST

We've been investigating for only a short time. But we think there are thousands of NN bodies down there.

ESTEBAN

NN?

FORENSIC SCIENTIST

We call them *Nomen nescio* "No name" for unidentified remains.

*NN has remained silent, standing still by herself and not looking at them.*

ESTEBAN

Truthfully, when I decided to provide my information and a blood sample, I didn't think... I didn't think that I'd be called so soon.... Will you be able to identify her?

FORENSIC SCIENTIST

We're going to try.

ESTEBAN

But, do you usually succeed?

FORENSIC SCIENTIST

That depends on what information we can count on.

ESTEBAN

How many people that you've found have left here with a name?

FORENSIC SCIENTIST

As I said, we've not been working a long time at this kind of .... Besides, every case is different.

ESTEBAN

Yeah.. . every case is different, and there are thousands of cases, you told me that before, right? So this is like looking for a needle in a haystack, a little tiny needle in an enormous stack of shit...

FORENSIC SCIENTIST

We'll do everything we can...

ESTEBAN (*Gesturing for her to stop*)

I need,.. I need a minute.

FORENSIC SCIENTIST

I'll get you some water. (*Exits*).

*ESTEBAN, seeing that she has left him alone, stops trying to seem calm and falls apart. He leans on the table, as if having a hard time standing.*

*For a moment, NN abandons her isolation and looks at him, from a distance. She doesn't approach him but just observes him.*

*Little by little, ESTEBAN pulls himself together. He is standing when the FORENSIC SCIENTIST returns with a glass of water. NN once again withdraws into herself.)*

FORENSIC SCIENTIST

Feeling better? (*ESTEBAN nods. She hands him the glass.*)

ESTEBAN

Thanks.

FORENSIC SCIENTIST

Look. It is true that until now we had little hope. None of the families that gave us information on the location of the grave have any relationship with it. No one was looking for a woman. And we haven't found any conclusive evidence in the archives of the disappeared in this zone... But when we came upon you, new possibilities opened up.

ESTEBAN

Upon me? But you already know... that I... I know nothing.

FORENSIC SCIENTIST

Your surnames, for example. We don't know if they were those of your parents or if they changed them when they admitted you.

ESTEBAN

My surnames won't do you any good. There were many admitted in that place with those names. The surnames of the founder of that center. When they didn't know for sure where someone came from, that's what they called them.

FORENSIC SCIENTIST

But in that children's home, they must have had an entry register.

ESTEBAN

That's what I thought. And I tried to have them let me see it. But they said everything had been lost.

FORENSIC SCIENTIST

Sometimes, with a court order, lost papers reappear.

ESTEBAN

Reappear? But why would they lie to me?

FORENSIC SCIENTIST

For a long time, today still, there are people interested in covering up everything that happened.

ESTEBAN

What does that have to do with me?

FORENSIC SCIENTIST

Do you want to know the truth?

ESTEBAN

That's why I'm here.

FORENSIC SCIENTIST

Truth isn't found quickly.

ESTEBAN

I've been waiting a long time.

FORENSIC SCIENTIST

And sometimes it isn't what one wants to hear. We can pressure them to let us review the archives. But I need your authorization. Understand?

ESTEBAN

Yes.

FORENSIC SCIENTIST

Will you cooperate with us?

ESTEBAN

Yes.

**SCENE 5**

*The forensic laboratory. On stage, ESTEBAN and NN. NN stands apart, where she was throughout the preceding scene. ESTEBAN is looking at the skeleton lying on the table.*

NN

Not in those bones. Not now. Even though you look and look at them.

ESTEBAN

My name is Esteban.

NN

No.

ESTEBAN

I'm 27... Well, you know that, of course... I work in a carpentry shop. I'm not married, I don't have a girlfriend. I'm... more or less a loner.

NN

This is too much / too much. / Too late now. Too much!

ESTEBAN

I ... don't remember you. Or my father. It would be easier if I could remember something: a smell, an image, your voice... Now I could talk to you... I don't know... in a different way. But I remember nothing. In the orphanage they told me you had abandoned me. There were many cases like mine and that's what they always told us. They went away. They abandoned you. The sons of bitches! I spent my whole childhood ashamed, angry, asking myself why my parents had not wanted to stay with me.

NN (*approaching him*)

They lied to her too, you hear. She / she believed / Because they told her / She believed that you /

ESTEBAN

You know that I wet my bed when I was 11? They punished me for that. Sometimes I still dream that I wet myself in my sleep and I wake up terrified, sweating, expecting a blow with a wooden rod on the palms of my hands.

NN

She didn't know!

ESTEBAN (*Half smiling*)

I must sound crazy... telling these things to a ... a skeleton. But... I have so many words here inside... Plants, I like plants. I have lots of them at home and I take good care of them. I spend a lot of time with them. And reading. Novels about travel, most of all. (*Brief pause.*) If only I could have found you alive, even if it were after so much time. I could talk to you for real. But this, what can I do now with this? Huh? What do I do now? Because I had not given up hope of finding you alive. Shit! What an idiot. Yes, what an idiot! (*Pause.*) And him? Where is he? Did they toss his cadaver around here too? Or is he alive? Do you know? Do you know where my father is?

NN

It should not have / not like this / it should not have / been like this.

## SCENE 6

*Lights up at the same time on the forensic laboratory and the Older Man's space,*

*On the latter, the light is now stronger and covers a larger part of the stage. Besides the desk and chair, we see the whole rug under those pieces of furniture. The OLDER MAN is assembling pieces of a toy castle. He follows instructions placed on the table. Sometimes he hesitates and makes a correction. We see that he is enjoying himself, pleased with how the construction is turning out.*

*This occurs simultaneously with action in the laboratory where the FORENSIC SCIENTIST and NN are. The scientist once again is holding the recorder. We see that she is tired, as if she had not slept well. She plays back something already recorded.*

### RECORDED VOICE OF THE FORENSIC SCIENTIST

20 May. This morning we were finally able to see Esteban's entry registration in the children's home. A photocopy of the file is attached. (*Pause.*) It indicates that the baby was admitted at scarcely two weeks of age. The mother's name appears with two surnames: Luján Alvares.

NN (*Slowly*)

Patricia. Patricia Luján Alvares.

RECORDED VOICE OF THE FORENSIC SCIENTIST

Also given is her age, 29, and the notation “Deceased.” (*Pause.*) There is a footnote: “Under the circumstances, the infant will be given a name by the Cradle House. Other surnames will provide for his better integration into society.”

NN

For his better / his better / !

RECORDED VOICE OF THE FORENSIC SCIENTIST

The corresponding box for his father has the word “Unknown.” Considering the facts we now have and the surnames Luján Alvares, we started a search in the national archive of the disappeared.

*The recording ends. The Forensic Scientist prepares to record a new text but first organizes various folders on the table.*

FORENSIC SCIENTIST (*Recording*)

25 May. Yesterday afternoon we located the police report on the case of NN 12. Her complete name is Patricia Luján Alvares. Her parents made a complaint the day after her arrest. A copy of the dossier is attached. They gave a detailed physical description. One meter 63 cms. Blonde. Brown eyes. Slender. 29 years old. They even mentioned that the greater fontanel was not closed. According to the complaint, she was taken from their home at night. They told her parents that they were only going to question her. (*She becomes quiet and has a hard time continuing.*)

NN (*Trying to remember*)

Waking up: “Patricia, some men are asking for you.” Some / some men. Very nervous. She never says Patricia, but Pati. Some men / four. Getting dressed. Once in the car, realizing that with hurry and fear, my pullover is inside out.

FORENSIC SCIENTIST (*Making an effort, she continues recording*)

They describe the clothing she was wearing when they took her away: blue jeans, a green pullover, tennis shoes. They affirm that she had a chain with the initials. P. L. A. And a wrist watch.

NN

Not anymore.

FORENSIC SCIENTIST (*Recording*)

Her parents are now deceased. She had no siblings. No record of a child. Marital status: single. Taking into account the date of the complaint and Esteban’s age. . . (*She can’t go on and turns off the*

recorder.)

*The FORENSIC SCIENTIST goes to the computer and begins to project some photos. In the first one, NN is alone.*

NN

Patricia. Back then. 29. Slender. Brown eyes. One meter 63 cms.

*The FORENSIC SCIENTIST looks at her for a moment. Gradually, as the photos are shown and she sees NN in them, the scientist, through her posture and look, reveals a feeling of sorrow and tenderness.*

*The OLDER MAN on his side of the stage leaves his activity. He seems to intuit that the images are being projected. He looks at them, from his space, scarcely moving.*

*The scientist changes the photo. Then the next one. NN appears with a woman of about 50.*

NN

There they are. A mother and daughter / two normal women. It's been so long without seeing her. She had even been erased already. *(The photo changes. We see a family gathering. NN is laughing. The scientist reacts with a smile.)* Yes, that photo. A meal. The man with the watermelon. He was a good father. He was / he was / simple and happy. That day he drank too much and did silly things: singing and dancing. The one behind him, with the dark pants, my father's brother. He always came and brought a new book. *(In the next photo, she is in a classroom with children.)* A teacher. Surrounded by children. Five years at that school. Until they made her disappear.

FORENSIC SCIENTIST

I really didn't imagine her as a blonde.

## SCENE 7

*Forensic laboratory. The last photo is still being projected.*

NN

Disappeared. No. Not you / you have not disappeared. Kidnapped. Imprisoned. Yes. Assassinated. Tossed out, that too. Tossed / there / with no sign of a name.

You didn't choose to disappear. No one / no one chooses it. Each one had a little piece of life, constructed little by little. Each one / thus / each one. We don't disappear, because we continue existing there where / we continue existing there far away / one hour and another and another before dying. Alone / so alone / lost / so out of those little pieces of life that were ours. Ours / constructed little by little.



There we had to repeat names often: Patricia Luján Alvares, Enrique Ibar Nogueira, Johan Valdivia Riaza, Ana Murat Roca, each repeated softly. My mother is named Teresita; my father, Adolfo or Héctor or Josué; my brothers and sisters, my wife, Luisa, Tomás, Irene, Malik, Carmen, Aaron, Graciela, Pedro.

Because there they even changed our names / and you / you / had to say the real name over and over so not to forget it. Patricia Luján Alvares, Patricia, not Marlene, Patricia. In order to keep on existing, not disappear / not disappear completely at the end / not disappear completely from yourself.

## SCENE 8

*The laboratory. ESTEBAN, the FORENSIC SCIENTIST, and NN are on stage. ESTEBAN is looking at the documentation: photos, papers from the complaint. NN is near him, observing his reactions.*

ESTEBAN

Patricia. I have to get used to that name... A teacher? Why would they shoot a teacher?

FORENSIC SCIENTIST

She wasn't the only one. (*Showing him a photo.*) Here are your grandparents.

ESTEBAN

Which ones?

FORENSIC SCIENTIST (*Pointing*)

Here he is and here she is...

*All three are looking at the photo.*

FORENSIC SCIENTIST (*Continuing*)

He died first, nine years ago. She died two years later.

NN

You look a lot like him, don't you?

FORENSIC SCIENTIST

We're looking for other family members. Aunts and uncles, cousins. We have to let them know we've found her.

NN

*(Continuing to look at the photo and at Esteban.)*

The same / (*Not finding the word, she touches her eyes.*) and... the shape of / (*She touches her eyebrows.*)

ESTEBAN

Then... you're absolutely sure.

FORENSIC SCIENTIST

Yes.

ESTEBAN (*After a pause*)

And... my father?

*NN slowly backs away.*

FORENSIC SCIENTIST

We don't know that.

ESTEBAN

She wasn't married.

FORENSIC SCIENTIST

True.

ESTEBAN

And it doesn't say anything here that she ... was pregnant when... Did she hide that?

FORENSIC SCIENTIST

No. She wasn't pregnant. Esteban, you're 27 years old. Look at the date on the complaint. Almost two years went by from the time they arrested her and when you were born.

ESTEBAN

But, where was she all that time?

FORENSIC SCIENTIST

We don't know.

ESTEBAN

Then my father was with her there, where she was... He was her companion or something like that, right?

## FORENSIC SCIENTIST

Esteban, you have to be patient. We still don't know all the answers. She became pregnant a year and some months after being arrested. That we do know for sure.

*Pause. ESTEBAN approaches the table and picks up the medal.*

NN

Patricia. Not Marlene. Patricia. Patricia, here. Patricia.

### SCENE 9

*In the laboratory. ESTEBAN and NN are on stage. A photo is projected of NN alone, smiling, with her hair down. It is the first photo viewed in Scene 6.*

*ESTEBAN approaches the image and carefully glides his fingers across it. NN, from her location, reacts at that contact as if he were really touching her. At first her gestures are of negation or fear, but then, little by little, she submits. Then, she closes her eyes and leans her face forward. As Esteban explores her face in the photograph, she bends her head when he caresses her hair, and has the sensation of being tickled when he brushes her abdomen or shoulders. Esteban lays a hand quietly on her chest, over her heart. NN places her hand there too, as if she were squeezing his hand.*

### SCENE 10

*The scene begins with an offstage voice of a woman who is saying the text that follows. We hear her before the action begins on stage.*

*Lights up on the Older Man's area. As in a previous scene, the light is stronger and covers more space. We see him in an armchair not far from the desk. He has fallen asleep while reading a book that now lies in his lap.*

*Lights up on NN and the Forensic Scientist, in the laboratory. The scientist is not wearing her white lab coat but now has on regular clothing. Her "conversation" is superimposed on the offstage voice, as indicated in the text. The Forensic Scientist is speaking to NN's remains, without waiting for an answer.*

### OFFSTAGE VOICE

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Luján Alvares:

My name is Irene Gabriel. You don't know me. But I knew your daughter Patricia. Three years ago I got out of the prison where I was with her. Perhaps I should have written you sooner, but I did not have the strength.

*Lights up on the OLDER MAN's area.*

I'm doing it now because I constantly remember everything I lived through in that place and I think of you, and other families, that have the right to know about your daughter and what happened to her while she was under arrest.

*Lights up on the laboratory, where NN and the FORENSIC SCIENTIST are.*

FORENSIC SCIENTIST

*(Her voice superimposed on that of the offstage voice.)*

Your family members brought us some documents. They said these are important papers that your parents left with them before dying. There are some letters.

*The FORENSIC SCIENTIST begins to read the letters silently. NN crosses to her in order to see them too.*

.OFFSTAGE VOICE

I know that what you're going to read in this letter is going to cause you pain, but I am telling the truth, and I would prefer to know the truth if it were my daughter who had disappeared. Patricia spent almost two years in the same detention center where I was. They called that place "The School" because that's what the building had been used for.

NN

Irene.

OFFSTAGE VOICE

While she was there, she became pregnant and gave birth. To a boy. They told her the baby had been stillborn. At first she didn't believe it and for several days seemed to be going crazy. Then she ended up accepting that it was so, that the boy had died.

But I knew that wasn't true. I knew because I saw how they took him. I don't know where. I didn't dare tell your daughter the truth. I didn't want to hurt her more. But you have a grandson, in some orphanage or adopted by some family. I often saw them take children away because I'm a nurse and sometimes they asked me to help with a delivery.

You have no idea how many letters like this I'm writing now that I live in another country and am learning how to fight my fear. I deeply regret having to relive the grief that you are suffering, but if you want to search for your grandson, you can only do that if you know he exists.

Sincerely,  
Irene Cabriel

NN

So they knew. Both of them / and not / why not?

FORENSIC SCIENTIST

There's another one. Somewhat later.

OFFSTAGE VOICE

My dear Mr. and Mrs. Luján Alvares,

I was very happy to receive your response. I sincerely admire the fortitude it reveals.

FORENSIC SCIENTIST

I was very happy to receive your response. I sincerely admire the fortitude it reveals. Fortitude...

NN

Fortitude...

OFFSTAGE VOICE

Although I know that you must be suffering a great deal. I'll try to answer your questions. I don't know why they don't give children back to their families.

FORENSIC SCIENTIST

*(At the same time as the offstage voice.)*

I don't know why they don't give children back to their families. Holy shit! *(She stops reading for a moment and then goes on.)*

OFFSTAGE VOICE

I heard them say they had to reeducate them, give them the opportunity to grow up in a "healthy environment." I don't know if they used them as spoils of war. It's very difficult to understand despite the passage of time.

NN

No / no / not that / not again /

OFFSTAGE VOICE

As for your other question, in my previous letter I preferred not to talk about the child's father. because I thought it was not going to help you at all to know that fact. But as you say, I'm the only person who can tell you, so I, too, shall dare to be brave.

*While the offstage voice continues, NN draws away. She crosses to the side closest to the Older Man's area. She looks at him and begins to sing "Lili Marleen," in the German lyrics. Her voice reveals fear and anguish. At times she makes a mistake and has to go back to the previous stanza. She seems to be repeating a lesson.*

The child's father was one of the military officers at the center. A lieutenant. His name is Ernesto Navia San Juan. He took a fancy to your daughter. He is the one who got her pregnant.

*The OLDER MAN wakes up and gradually reacts to the song, as if he could hear it. He looks around to see where the voice is coming from.*

I don't know if you are going to use this information against him. I'm very sorry, but I can't help you. I've already done all I feel able to do, writing these letters. You can't imagine how much it hurts me to remember all this. I long for my country but I don't plan to return, at least not now. I am too afraid. Much too afraid. I don't know if some day that feeling will go away.

*The OLDER MAN looks over where NN is and stands up. He approaches the illuminated area. They look at each other, from their separate sides, while NN continues to sing with anger, with fear, and with sorrow.*

Forgive me for everything, for what I am doing to you and for what I don't dare do. None of this should have happened to Patricia, or to me, or to you.

Affectionately,  
Irene.

*NN continues singing until finishing "Lili Marlene." When she reaches the end, there is a moment of silence. NN and the OLDER MAN are face to face. The FORENSIC SCIENTIST still has the letters in her hand. Finally she sets them down on the table.*

NN

*(Slowly looking away from the Older Man and realizing where she is.  
Addressing the Forensic Scientist)*

You're not going to tell him, are you / not Esteban / not him, right? No / don't do it please. He / is like a child / he hopes / to find something else / not this. Don't tell him / Please!

*The FORENSIC SCIENTIST slowly turns until she is looking toward the Older Man.*

## SCENE 11

*Forensic laboratory. On stage, the FORENSIC SCIENTIST, ESTEBAN and NN. Esteban has finished reading the letters. The Scientist is wearing regular clothes, without the white lab coat. At first NN is standing away from them, listening but not wishing to be part of the scene.*

ESTEBAN

Is this true?

FORENSIC SCIENTIST

It's what the woman affirms.

ESTEBAN

Then, my grandparents knew this.

FORENSIC SCIENTIST

Don't judge them harshly. Surely they could do nothing. Or they were afraid. Until recently, nobody talked about this. Nobody dared.

ESTEBAN (*After a pause*)

If this man is still alive, can we do a DNA test?

FORENSIC SCIENTIST

He'd have to give his consent.

*Esteban continues looking at the letters. Silence.*

Do you want to meet him?

NN (*Approaching them as if she could intervene.*)

No.

ESTEBAN

What did you say?

NN

No, no. Please don't.

FORENSIC SCIENTIST (*Handing him a paper*)

Here's his address.

NN

Don't listen to her! No! Go away / get out of here!

ESTEBAN

Have you seen him? Have you gone to see him? (*The Forensic Scientist doesn't answer.*) What did he tell you?

FORENSIC SCIENTIST

I haven't talked to him.

ESTEBAN

I ... don't know if I want ...

FORENSIC SCIENTIST

Ernesto Navia San Juan.

NN

Please! Not him! Not him now.

FORENSIC SCIENTIST

He's married. Has four children. And four grandchildren.

ESTEBAN

That's not my concern.

FORENSIC SCIENTIST

He recently turned 62. He leads a normal life. Perfectly normal.

ESTEBAN

These letters could be a lie!

FORENSIC SCIENTIST

His younger daughter is your age. She's a teacher. Does that strike you as ironic?

ESTEBAN

Why are you telling me this?

NN

Don't you see that / that he doesn't want?

FORENSIC SCIENTIST

Do you think she knows what her father did? Do you think she suspects that she has a half brother out there? Surely you're not the only one. Maybe he did that to more women.



ESTEBAN

Maybe it's not true!

FORENSIC SCIENTIST

They promoted him. To captain. Now he's retired and he spends his time playing with his grandchildren and taking care of his garden. He has a precious garden filled with roses.

ESTEBAN

Be quiet!

NN

You're hurting him.

FORENSIC SCIENTIST

You look a bit like him. But not much.

ESTEBAN

What do you want from me? (*Grabbing her by the shoulders.*) What do you want from me?

FORENSIC SCIENTIST

He's aged well. His only problem is seeing up close.

ESTEBAN

Shut up! Shut the hell up!

*ESTEBAN appears about to attack the scientist. Instead he lets go of her and, as if drunk, crosses to the table where NN's remains are. With a swipe of his hand, he knocks them on the floor. NN falls to the floor, in pain, as if she had been hit.*

*ESTEBAN realizes what he has done and, on seeing the bones scattered and the skeleton in pieces, he feels like throwing up. He moves away, unable to stop the vomiting. The FORENSIC SCIENTIST goes over to him and holds his head while he throws up.*

FORENSIC SCIENTIST

The earth is filled with voices. Nameless voices, that are still talking, many years after dying. Now, little by little, we are bringing them out to the light... But we have to be strong if we want to listen to what they have to tell us.

## SCENE 12

*NN speaks while the FORENSIC SCIENTIST reassembles the skeleton.*

NN

Marlene. From the beginning. Like his favorite actress. Marlene Dietrich. For the color of / of (*Not finding the word, she touches her hair.*) From the beginning he said, "From now on, you're Marlene." They found another name for us there and we were obliged to use it. Patricia was to be called Marlene.

He chose her with that name. The man who named a prisoner made it something belonging to him. He had the right to / right to...

Because he chose you, because he chose you to be Marlene, he could / punish you. For things. Because you looked a certain way. Or because you didn't answer when he asked you something. He liked to lock her in. Several days. Remaining in the dark and losing all sense of time. That, being in the dark, that / that can't be / no /.

But also, sometimes / sometimes / he'd arrive suddenly happy. With presents: a piece of soap, a bow for (*Touching her hair again*), perfume, food. And he gives you back your medal, when he learns they took it from you. Some nights he only talks, tells about his wife, his children / two / two children and another on the way / he remembers things from before / when he was a child. Or he says, "Sing for me, Marlene." Like talking to a lover.

There were times he treated her so well it was / it was /... Because when he behaved like that, she softened, became more vulnerable. At times, he caressed her slowly, like / like with affection. And then / then / It was terrible when, for the person who is torturing, / it's terrible feeling something like compassion or tenderness or gratitude for / for the person / who is...

Later / in winter / after more than a year / she stopped getting her period. Marlene at first didn't want. No. And she tried / she tried to get it out of there / she hit herself / she poured hot oil inside her. But the baby didn't want to die / and it kept / it kept on growing. Gradually you began to feel it inside / alive inside here (*Touching her abdomen*) / the only living / the only thing new that was there / and you said maybe, maybe, even though it's here, maybe / and you stopped hitting yourself and you started eating again and washing yourself carefully and resting. Taking care of yourself, you began to care for the baby.

He stopped coming. When he realized. If he met Marlene in the center, he didn't even look at her. But many nights, she thought she heard / Because you were sure that he'd come back, that he wouldn't leave things like that. / And you were so afraid, so afraid that at times / at times you wanted to see him enter finally, to end the anguish.

One afternoon you start / she / Patricia starts to feel pains / and you note / she / she notes (*Looking down at the floor under her feet*) I'm peeing on myself! Please! (*Clutching her abdomen*) I'm peeing on myself! / And the other women came and you were shouting: / Not yet!

It's too early, not yet! / Then they took you to a very clean room. And it all happens very quickly and you feel / she / she pushes and feels that the baby /

Your baby /

Is coming /

Is out already /

And then she /

Marlene /

Pa / Patricia /

I /

I'm left like / like empty inside and / and in that moment I hear / I hear him cry. A little sob, like that of a small animal. I hear him.

But they left with him very quickly. And afterwards when they came back they told me he was stillborn. I didn't believe them, because I had heard him cry! And I went over to them shouting, begging them, but they repeated over and over / always/ over and over/ It was stillborn! You're no good even as mothers!

They had to lock me up. There, in the darkness, Patricia / I / became quiet and still. And inside I began to tell myself that yes, he was dead / there is no longer / no longer a child anywhere / forget him / You can't / no / can't do anything.

A while later they took us out. In a group. Back behind a truck, blindfolded. They never let us talk to one another, but there / there yes. We introduced ourselves to each other, we said where we were from. Some prayed or cried. Others were silent. They shot us in an area near a woods. Their footsteps sounded on dried leaves. The sun filtered through at times. There was the odor of wet earth.

Down there, in the earth, I remembered / I always remembered Lieutenant Ernesto Navia San Juan. And then I sang. I sang that Dietrich song he made me memorize.

*She hums music of "Lili Marleen."*

### SCENE 13

*The Older Man's space and that of the forensic laboratory, still separated. The laboratory is in shadow; we see NN's silhouette, looking over at the Older Man's area.*

*That area is now obviously more spacious; besides the furniture seen before, there is a chest displaying family photos. On the desk there is a tray with a pitcher of lemonade and some glasses. There is also a recorder, taping the conversation.*

*On stage, the OLDER MAN and ESTEBAN. The former is looking at pictures of NN that Esteban*

*has brought. After a few seconds, the OLDER MAN takes off his glasses and looks at Esteban.*

OLDER MAN

Sorry, I don't remember her. A lot of people passed through there.

ESTEBAN

She was detained there for quite some time. Almost two years.

OLDER MAN

How do you know that?

ESTEBAN

Other people don't have as bad a memory as you.

OLDER MAN

You shouldn't pay attention to everything they tell you.

ESTEBAN

What do you mean?

OLDER MAN

Would you like some lemonade?

ESTEBAN

No thank you.

OLDER MAN *(Serving himself)*

I'd offer you something else, but in this house we only drink lemonade. We have a lemon tree. Did you see it when you came in?

ESTEBAN

I didn't notice.

OLDER MAN *(After taking a drink)*

Look. I'm going to be honest. If you wish, you can use it in your reporting. I know what's going on. I read the newspapers. Now everyone is determined to judge what happened. And they're telling a lot of lies.

ESTEBAN

You shot her. There's no doubt about that.

OLDER MAN

Well, I'm not so sure, it might have been one of her own people who killed her. Yes. Don't look at me like that. Those things also happened.

ESTEBAN

She was just a teacher. She didn't have anything to do with...

OLDER MAN

So she collaborated with them some way. Some civilians did that. They weren't armed and they didn't plant bombs, it's true, but they supported the violence from the outside. Hiding fugitives. Serving as intermediaries... Look, I understand that there are people who want revenge. I understand. The pain of losing someone... how could I not understand that. I, too, suffered the consequences, I, too, lost people dear to me. Friends, companions... But now they begin to make up things and you in the press cover up for them, and that's what I find wrong. A lot of time has passed. Why don't we finally try to overcome it?

ESTEBAN

You mean forget.

OLDER MAN

I mean accept that it wasn't easy for anyone. And what was done was what had to be done. We had a responsibility. As soldiers. Although now you don't understand it. Among other things, because you are too young.

ESTEBAN

I'm 27.

OLDER MAN

You live now in a country at peace, in a safe country where people aren't afraid. And that peace and security came about thanks to what we did.

ESTEBAN

You expect my gratitude.

OLDER MAN

No. Not gratitude. I simply did my duty.

ESTEBAN (*Taking out the letters*)

Of course. I've also brought this. Read them calmly. I'm not in a hurry.

*ESTEBAN walks around the room. He looks at the photos.*

*The OLDER MAN puts on his glasses and begins to read although he looks up from time to time to see what Esteban is doing. He reads both of the letters, carefully, without showing any change in attitude. When he finishes, he takes off his glasses.*

OLDER MAN

You're not a journalist, are you?

ESTEBAN

No.

OLDER MAN

I understand. (*Turning the recorder off.*) Then that's no longer necessary. (*Silence*) Do you really believe what's said here is true?

ESTEBAN

Why shouldn't I believe it?

OLDER MAN

Because there's no proof.

ESTEBAN

It's known that things like that happened.

OLDER MAN

It's known that things like that happened. What an assertion! We had family, wives, children... and we had policies to follow. Why would we do something like... (*Pointing to the letters*)...like that? Look... what's your name?

ESTEBAN

Esteban.

OLDER MAN

Is that your real name?

ESTEBAN

Yes.

OLDER MAN

Esteban, why did you deceive me? There was no need for that. I would have seen you the same. I have nothing to hide.

ESTEBAN

This woman, the nurse, Irene, she's still alive, you know. And she remembers everything.

OLDER MAN

Have you talked to her?

ESTEBAN

Yes.

OLDER MAN

I don't know what you expect to gain now with all this.

ESTEBAN

To know the truth.

OLDER MAN

The truth? But you think you already have the truth. You're not going to believe me. You don't want to. You know why? Because this is a grandiose story. At the level of your expectations. "I am the son of my mother's executioner. I am a victim. Look at me. The son of a monster." Everyone likes to be a martyr. Well, I'm sorry, but no, none of this is correct.

ESTEBAN

With a DNA test you would be free of suspicion.

OLDER MAN

I have nothing more to say. I would appreciate it if you left my house.

ESTEBAN

You don't dare? If you really have nothing to hide...

OLDER MAN

*(Momentarily losing the serenity he has previously maintained.)*

I don't intend to cooperate in this game!

ESTEBAN

If you won't do it voluntarily, there are ways to compel you...

OLDER MAN

You're lying. You're the liar! You came here, taking advantage of my good faith! And now... now you dare to.. Get out of my house.

ESTEBAN

I'm sure there's some lawyer willing to take the case. As you said, society is beginning to judge what happened. Older people are talking and young people are listening. *(Taking a photo from the display on the chest.)* She's almost my age, right?

OLDER MAN

Put that back! *(Grabbing it out of Esteban's hands.)*

ESTEBAN

What would she think about these letters?

OLDER MAN

I'm going to call the police.

ESTEBAN

Don't bother. I'm leaving.

OLDER MAN

And take all this with you. *(Referring to the photos and letters.)*

ESTEBAN

No, you keep them. They're only copies. I have lots more. Maybe if you look at a photo more carefully it will refresh your memory.

OLDER MAN

Don't ever come back here. If I see you get near my house or my family...

ESTEBAN

What will you do to me?



## OLDER MAN

Don't come back. Listen to me. Don't put me to the test.

*For a moment they remain face to face.*

*The OLDER MAN returns to the table while ESTEBAN turns toward the laboratory area where NN is. He looks at her. Both of them place their hands near their hearts like the end of Scene 9.*

## SCENE 14

*NN is holding the scientist's recorder. She pushes play and begins to hear the other woman's voice.*

### RECORDED VOICE OF THE FORENSIC SCIENTIST

It's not easy to make someone disappear. It takes a lot of power and perseverance. Memories and bodies strive to endure beyond death. It takes a lot of discipline, a lot of complicity.

*While the voice is heard, the FORENSIC SCIENTIST crosses to NN. She begins to say the text at the same time it is heard on the recorder.*

### FORENSIC SCIENTIST AND HER RECORDED VOICE

Because the disappeared person has to keep on disappearing every day, every day that they are held without informing the family, every day that they are assassinated and buried without a name, every day that the graves are silenced and dirt and asphalt and fear and oblivion continue to be tossed on them. It takes a lot of consistency and a lot of complicity to make so many thousands of people disappear. How many hands, how many eyes, how many quiet mouths, quiet mouths are needed to continue disappearing those who were taken from their homes and still have not appeared?

*NN (in unison with the other two voices)*

How many... how many... how many... quiet, quiet are needed to continue, to continue disappearing those who were taken from their homes?

## SCENE 15

*The entire stage is illuminated. Now the OLDER MAN'S space is so large that it overlaps the laboratory. There is a middle area where elements of both worlds are superimposed. NN is in this middle space.*

*In the laboratory, the FORENSIC SCIENTIST is transcribing to the computer notes she has recorded throughout her investigation. During the whole scene we see her listening to fragments of texts and copying them in front of the computer screen. Her recorded voice can be heard from time to time at low volume. She is unaware of the presence of NN and the Older Man.*

*Meanwhile in his space the OLDER MAN is looking at the letters and information that Esteban has left.*

*He seems to look at them calmly but, suddenly, in a fit of rage, he grabs them, crumples them and tears them up. Afterwards he tries to calm down. He makes a decision, carefully picks up the pieces, takes out of a drawer the newspaper clipping he had saved, places it with the other items, looks for a cigarette lighter and begins to burn all the papers.*

NN

He doesn't look a lot like you. Maybe in the shape of (*Pointing to her nose and mouth*). Seeing him on the street, you would never have realized who he was. Isn't that so, Lieutenant? Captain, yes, Captain now. I'm not surprised. You were a good military man. (*Pause.*) Why? Why did you tell me there that / that he had died? Why? For what reason / lie to me? And leave him alone in an orphanage. He had grandparents.

OLDER MAN

*(Continuing to burn papers he speaks to her without looking at her.)*

I had nothing to do with that.

NN

He was your son.

OLDER MAN

There were many guards there.

NN

No, Lieutenant. No sir. None of them would have dared. They were afraid of you.

OLDER MAN

They respected me. That's the only way orders are followed, just as I followed mine.

NN

Orders. You were just following / orders? That / that is what you were doing? Following orders?

OLDER MAN (*looking at her for the first time*)

What do you want now, Marlene?

NN

Don't call me that.

OLDER MAN

That's what I've always called you.

NN

My name is Patricia.

OLDER MAN

Patricia ... I still think that Marlene fits you better.

NN

Patricia. Patricia Luján Alvares. That's me. In those photos. Me! Before all that. Age 29. Teacher. One meter 63 centimeters. Blonde.

OLDER MAN

Where is this coming from? So much time has passed. What do you want now? That I apologize? Is that it? I did what I had to do. I don't know what you're looking for.

NN

Everything? Everything that you did / everything / everything was orders? Who ordered you / who / what you did to me / who?

OLDER MAN

I never harmed you.

NN

Fear. Fear is / it turns you into something else / fear / into another person for a while. The sound of the lock, do you remember? That dry sound and me holding still, waiting, not knowing what you were going to do. Still. As if dead, like a doll.

OLDER MAN

No. It wasn't that. It wasn't just fear. I know what that does. It was good for all of you to have someone to protect you. Someone like me. That's why you always obeyed me. That's why you were so compliant with me.

NN

The locks / that noise / the locks were closed from outside, you were the ones who opened and closed the locks. From outside.

OLDER MAN

Where is this coming from? You ought to be grateful! If I had not been there, it would have been worse. Others were gang raped, several men at a time. Understand? But I would never permit something like that. Because you... you were special for me... With you... with you it was so easy, everything so easy... (*Approaching her. As if he were going to caress her.*)

NN *(Standing still, not moving away from him)*

Don't forget, sir. Lieutenant. Inside *(Touching her body)* everything remains here inside. And in you, too. It has to be kept here. *(Touching his head.)* It is never erased. The lock and then the sound of your steps. You looked at me, do you remember? Huddling in a corner like a little animal. Perhaps asleep. You would remain quiet for a moment, looking at me, deciding what game you were going to play today. It was a game for you. Or curiosity. To see how far I could go, to see how she reacts, let's see. Observing me and deciding what you were going to try today. Stand up, you said, stand up, come over toward me, I don't like how you smell, put some of this on, you'd say, a bottle of perfume from your pocket and a red lipstick, and you'd paint me yourself and then slowly take out the pistol, yes, isn't that right? You'd like to use it? come, come, touch it like this, open your ... your... slowly... do you like the taste? And I'd feel the cold inside and I'd begin to tremble, it's loaded, you'd say, don't move so much, it's loaded, and then you entered and the pistol was in your... now move, now don't stay still, damn it, like this, that's good, yes, faster, faster, nobody does this like you. The acid taste of your semen entering my... my... and I had to throw up, and you, be careful so you don't vomit on me, and I repeated to myself, I'm not, I'm not, no, no. This is not mine, all this is no, I am far away in another place, not I, I'm not here! And when you left I wanted to tear myself, tear myself out of me, and there was no water to wash up and I had to put up with your taste and I spit, I spit. But your taste stayed inside. You son of a bitch! Your taste! Son of a bitch!

*Yelling (Son of a bitch! Son of a bitch!) NN hits the Older Man while he defends himself, awkwardly trying to escape from her fists. Gradually NN loses strength and conviction. The OLDER MAN hugs her briefly, holding her up, but she abruptly gets loose and moves away from him.*

No.

*The FORENSIC SCIENTIST, on her side of the stage, has finished writing the report.*

FORENSIC SCIENTIST

That's it.

*NN for a moment looks at the Older Man and then turns toward the laboratory.*

OLDER MAN

Wait! Marlene! I helped you! Marlene!

*NN To the scientist)*

Thank you,

## SCENE 16

*Forensic laboratory. NN and the FORENSIC SCIENTIST are on stage. While SHE speaks, takes a box on the floor and begins to put bones in it. When she gets to the cranium, she carefully touches the gap at the greater fontanel.*

*As the FORENSIC SCIENTIST dismantles the skeleton and stores it, the light on NN gets dimmer as she slowly disappears from our view.*

FORENSIC SCIENTIST

Soon Esteban will come for you. Your family has prepared a funeral. They are going to bury you in a real coffin, in a place where your son can take flowers to you. Are you happy?

NN

I don't know.

FORENSIC SCIENTIST

There will be a plaque with your name. You will never again be NN 12.

NN

Down there, in the earth, there was the sound of a river. Not a big one. It made that noise, the noise of flowing water. While I was there, in the dark, I used to imagine what was happening / what was happening to my / to my (*Not finding the word, she touches her body.*) Imagining how the plant roots were absorbing it little by little, upwards, little by little, and then up to their leaves. There in the leaves it first turned into air and then rain, a rain that slowly fell on the river that was heard so close by. I liked to imagine that the / the / (*She looks again at her body.*) of those like us who had been buried without names blended with that water / water that was always gliding. Always. And it was carrying us all / all of us together, whirling toward the sea.

*Light dims completely on NN.*

*The FORENSIC SCIENTIST has finished putting the remains in the box. She closes it. She seals it, knowing that this gesture is a farewell.*

*Then she moves it away, leaving it somewhere until Esteban comes for it.*

*Moments later she crosses to another place in the laboratory, perhaps a shelf, where she picks up a new box. She prepares to open it.*

LIGHTS OUT

Jacqueline Goldfinger and Allison Horsley. *Writing Adaptations and Translations for the Stage: A Guide and Workbook for New and Experienced Writers*. London: Routledge, 2023.

Reviewed by Lindsay Webster and Jane Barnette

Jacqueline Goldfinger and Allison Horsley's recent guide and workbook is a slim volume of 125 pages that intends to serve as a user-friendly "community toolbox" designed to share insights from contemporary theatre practitioners who specialize in translation and/or adaptation (xi). Fittingly, the structure of the book is meant to resemble "the trajectory of a creative process: brainstorming, writing, producing, and sharing theatrical work" (xv), allowing readers to choose their own pathway into the text, based on where they are in their own processes. Through seven chapters, the authors track these stages diligently, culminating with two case studies (chapters 5 and 6) and a series of reflections on adaptation in "Other Performative Modes." While the authors do not include any kind of scholarly citation in the book, it appears that their use of "performative" for this final chapter is meant to signal "theatrical," rather than its other copious meanings in theatre and performance studies fields (see Aaron Thomas, "Infelicities" *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 35.2 (Spring 2021), pp. 13-25). Unlike the previous six chapters, chapter seven operates more like an appendix, insofar as it is not attributed to either author but instead consists of several quotations from their interviews with the aforementioned professional theatre-makers—it is therefore likely that these excerpts were ones that the authors found useful but could not integrate into the previous chapters, making the final chapter operate as a kind of repository of observations that readers may find relevant to adaptation (less so to translation).

The first chapter (attributed to Goldfinger) details the process from starting with an artistic intention and proceeding to mesh it with existing work, in an effort to serve both the source material and the audience. It guides the reader to consider the dramaturgical "why" – why here, why this piece, why this community, why this medium, why *now*. The ideas of intention and dramaturgical context are at the heart of everything Goldfinger instructs her readers to do, although the lack of references to existing scholarship that intersects with these ideas belies the fact that these insights are well-documented in adaptation dramaturgy elsewhere.

After generating a list of potential adaptation materials, the key moments in each, and what might resonate for modern audiences, Goldfinger moves onto the specifics of writing a first draft for an adaptation. Here the workbook gets less abstract and more technical by discussing characters, setting, and tone, and including some approachable writing exercises so the reader may begin to immediately practice Goldfinger's advice. She takes care to explicitly note why the writing exercise relates to the book's content, as well. These exercises will likely appeal to theatre practitioners of all specialties, including designers, directors, actors, and dramaturgs, as well as playwrights and adapters.

Horsley mirrors Goldfinger's approach as the author of the second chapter, outlining the process for writing the first draft of a translation. As this is the first bit of text dedicated purely to translation, Horsley begins by discussing translation's distinction from adaptation and the need for an unbiased voice that still considers cultural nuances. Again, leading questions are utilized to inspire and motivate the reader.

In chapter three ("Production"), Goldfinger discusses what happens when an adaptation moves from concept to actualization. The incorporation of a creative team frequently leads to revisions and pivots, and the reader is encouraged to shift into a new role as collaborator, while not losing sight of one's

initial intentions for the piece. Although the writer's level of involvement in creating theatre is understandably the chapter's primary focus, the lack of attentiveness to traditional design processes (even with a "Quick Chat" excerpt from designer Thom Weaver) and the difficulty of making changes late in the technical production is palpable, and the absence of reference to producing translated stage works is especially noteworthy.

Chapters five and six consist of case studies, one from each author, with Goldfinger's focusing on a creative adaptation and Horsley's on a more traditional translation. The juxtaposition between these two examples – a piece that entirely reconceptualizes a story for modern TYA (theatre for young audiences) vs. one that seeks to serve and mostly preserve the work of a revered playwright – covers wide ground and makes for page-turning reading. That both of these examples stem from the authors' professional theatre experience ensures that these case study-focused chapters are highly engaging.

Throughout the text, Goldfinger and Horsley break up their exposition with interviews, section titles, summaries, and lists, effectively reengaging and refocusing their audience. Including "major takeaways" before each interview is particularly helpful, as it clearly outlines why the authors chose to include that particular interview. By posing questions to readers about their intentions, strategies, and desires for creating an adaptation, the authors create a concise guide, making frequent use of bullet-point lists. In this way, they facilitate readers' ability to scan back through the book to find previous questions and shifts in thought. The authors' consistent reference to specific, real-world examples demonstrates application of their overarching concepts. Following any digression from the main topic at hand, Goldfinger often uses quick refocusing sentences, brief numbered recaps, and straightforward checklists to remind readers what they have learned so far and what the next logical step in the process should be. Though Horsley has her own voice and specialty, the two writers' styles blend smoothly together, and the switch between them is never jarring or confusing. Goldfinger does write more of the chapters than Horsley, however, and as a result the workbook offers more material related to modern adaptation than linguistic translations. If readers extrapolate Goldfinger's techniques for theatrical adaptation to help enrich Horsley's approach to translations, they may find some of these tactics transferable, but the uneven treatment of these two approaches to creating for the stage remains frustrating.

Overall, Goldfinger and Horsley's organization of the book's content excels at engaging introductory-level readers. Varying between long and short paragraphs, including surprising yet relevant brief tangents, breaking up pages with interviews and lists, the authors' syntax and style will likely appeal most to high school and undergraduate students. Readers of *Writing Adaptations and Translations for the Stage* will find the concepts and suggestions for application to their own work straight-forward and easy to understand. More advanced writers may also find this guide helpful in its simplicity, should they find themselves stuck by a difficult project and need to revisit the basics for inspiration. For those of us working and writing within academic contexts, however, the book's lack of citations and omission of any reference to the scholarly fields with which the book intersects will prove unsatisfying.

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