

# The Mercurian



*A Theatrical Translation Review*  
Volume 10, Number 3 (Spring 2025)  
Special Eurodram Issue

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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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*Volume 10, Number 3 (Spring 2025), Special Eurodram Issue*

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## *Editor's Note*

Welcome to the first ever Special Issue of *The Mercurian*!

This issue begins what we hope will become an ongoing relationship between *The Mercurian* and Eurodram, the European Network for theatre translation. I first became aware of Eurodram in 2016 while attending the Istanbul Theatre Festival with the Fence, a network of people who put the play at the center. Members of Eurodram were in attendance as well and there was a fair amount of crossover between the two groups. As you will see below, Samuel Buggeln, who was a fellow Fence attendee in Istanbul with me, is now in charge of the Eurodram English committee that selects plays in English translation for distribution to Eurodram members. We have published several of Sam's own translations in *The Mercurian* and have often turned to him for peer review of other translation submissions. I am delighted to start this collaboration with Sam and Eurodram and hope that readers will find it beneficial both now and in the future.

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 11, No. 1 Fall 2025 will be September 15, 2025.

—Adam Versényi

## *Introduction*

Welcome to what I hope to be the first biannual Eurodram Special Issue of *The Mercurian*.

I begin with thanks to the invaluable Adam Versényi, *The Mercurian*'s founder and editor-in-chief, for his partnership in this collaboration. In English-language theater new plays in translation are rare, and I'm thrilled with this connection between two institutions committed to bringing them more attention.

For those of you who may not be familiar with Eurodram, the network was founded in Paris in 2001, with the mission to bring plays from Eastern European languages into the French theater. Since then, the network has grown into a vast, volunteer organization of as many as 30 different European language group committees, on a biennial cycle alternately promoting their own works abroad, and considering the works of others at home. In odd years like 2025, playwrights and translators from across Europe submit their works in translation to the appropriate committees. (Plays must have been professionally produced and/or published in their original language.) From among the plays submitted to them, each committee names three Eurodram selections. This year's titles, from all language groups, can be found at [eurodram.org/2025-selections](http://eurodram.org/2025-selections). Though inevitably imperfect, this biannual cycle affords members of the English-Language Committee an interesting overview of new playwriting across Europe.

Since English is a lingua franca for theater translation in Europe, the English-Language Committee typically receives a significant number of plays—63 this year—and assessing them is a big job. (Each play is read and scored by at least two, and as many as five, readers.) My profound thanks go to the generous, thoughtful volunteer readers of this year's committee, listed at the end of this section. If you would be interested in participating as a committee member in 2027, we would love to consider you! Please email [eurodram.english@gmail.com](mailto:eurodram.english@gmail.com), with "Committee" as the subject, and we will provide information.

I also wish to acknowledge the labor of the staff of the Cherry Arts, the small multi-arts company, based in Ithaca, NY, that I co-founded and lead. Though now thoroughly multidisciplinary, with an art gallery and diverse performance calendar, the Cherry was born as a theater company devoted to works that are "radically local and radically global," and in our ten years of existence we've produced English-language premières of over 20 new plays from around the world. We came upon several of these titles via Eurodram, and as part of our commitment to works in translation, the Cherry staff lends significant time every two years to managing the script submissions, readers, and scores of the Eurodram English Committee. It's a significant commitment for a small company, so my thanks to our team is profound.

Over my years of involvement in Eurodram I've noticed nothing so strongly as how differently the same play may be scored by different readers of equal insight. Assessing art is subjective, and one reader's ten may well be another reader's two. While consensus does emerge around the most interesting plays, like all recipients of art prizes from the Nobel on down, the three Eurodram selections have been fortunate to be assigned readers who respond to them. Over the years, looking at the narrow margins between plays' scores, I've often wished we could name a top eight or dozen titles.

So this publication, rather than just publishing the official Eurodram selections, includes six plays, two full-length and four one-act. Beyond those six, we include selected reader responses to eight "Other Titles of Interest," with contact information for those whose curiosity may be piqued to read them.

But first, the titles that appear in this issue! We open with *The Geometry of Wheat*, a full-length play from Spain written in Spanish (or, as Eurodram prefers, Castilian) and some Catalan. One of the three Eurodram selections, this play has been a great recent success of the Spanish stage, a sweeping and deeply felt multigenerational drama.

Following is a second full-length play from Spain. *Flood Zone*, written in Catalan, is a fictionalized docu-play inspired by the true story of a small town that experienced a catastrophic flash flood. In a time of climate emergency, the play's story, sadly, should be resonant in many places.

Next are two short, non-realistic plays from Italy. *Little Beast*, another of the Eurodram selections, is a strange and lovely meditation on how people may change in relationships, and be changed by them, beginning when a man finds his boyfriend has become a mouse. *Focus Group* is a dark, entertaining satire about consumerism and the limits of what may be made into a product.

The issue closes with a pair of one-act plays from Ukraine. *Women in the Dark* and *Men in Daylight* illuminate with tough-minded humor the realities of people living through the ongoing war.

My final thank-you goes to you, the reader, for your interest in this collaboration between Eurodram and *The Mercurian*. I hope it will prove as stimulating to read as it has been to assemble.

—Samuel Buggeln, guest editor  
Chair, English-Language Committee, Eurodram  
Artistic and Executive Director, the Cherry Arts

## Other Titles of Interest

Some of these plays were well-loved by our readers, happening to score a half-tick lower than those included in this volume. Others were interestingly divisive—the kinds of “10 and 2” scorers that pique one's curiosity. Some of these titles' translations are less accomplished—though readers were urged to try to “read past the translation,” that can be a tricky assignment. Other texts may in fact feel less polished than an established play might in the US—many hail from theater ecosystems that reward a looser dramaturgy than our own. If you love one of these titles, but it feels something shy of production-ready, I encourage you to reach out to the writer, who may be accustomed to collaborative relationships with directors. Finally, some represent more adventurous writing than some of the more unanimous choices. As the leader of a theater collective, I love the genius of the hive mind, while remaining aware that group judgments can lop off more extreme gestures. Since my own attraction to international texts partly reflects a lifelong search for adventurous writing, I'm pleased to be able to include these plays, at least in title. Even the scripts who found the least unanimity also found more than one passionate champion among our committee members. I hope some of you may be tempted to investigate further.

***Alaska*** by Elise Wilk

translated from Romanian by Jozefina Komporaly

“One woman's life as a coming of age, and then as a spy for the Romanian government during the cold war. A dream play, but sharp characters, beautiful writing—weird in a good way, but STRONG storytelling.”

contact Jozefina Komporaly | jokom2014@gmail.com

***Forget and Remember*** (*Забывать и Помнить (Zabyt' i Pomnit')*) by Ilya Chlaki

translated from Russian by Alex Fleming

“Historical trauma shades several romances in contemporary suburban Berlin.

Distinctive characters rooted in a time and place. If I lived there, would that be me?”

contact Ilya Chlaki | chlaki@yahoo.de

***Marta Verina*** (*Марта Верина*) by Dragana Lukan Nikoloski

translated from Macedonian by Maja Trajanoska Ivanovska

A 35-year-old archivist grapples with her past relationship with a married man and a new affair with a 20-year-old student. Inspired by the poetry of Aco Shopov.

“The construction is marvelous—using poetry to build a world inhabited with souls from the poems—intricately sorrowful.”

“A good story and well-paced.”

contact Maja Trajanoska | trajanoska.maja0@gmail.com

***My Hell*** (*Моє некло*) by Oksana Savchenko  
translated from Ukrainian by Hanna Leliv

“Everyone has their own personal hell to deal with... An emotional, relatable drama about a Ukrainian mother and daughter who flee to Berlin and are taken in by a German mother and son.”

“A current and urgent piece of work.”

contact Hanna Leliv | hanna.leliv@gmail.com

***The Earth's Core*** (*Jordens Indre*) by Simone Isabel Nørgaard  
translated from Danish by Paul Russell Garrett

“A solid biographical play about Inge Lehmann, focusing on the challenges she faced as a woman in science in Denmark during the first half of the twentieth century.”

“Beautiful writing, beautiful rhythms in the speech. Strong handle on characterisation.”

“The use of the chorus is an invitation for some exciting theatricality.”

Contact Paul Russell Garrett | hej@paulrussellgarrett.com

***The Violin*** (*Скряпка (Skripka)*) by Ilya Chlaki  
translated from Russian by Joseph Hardy

“A fascinating allegorical and absurdist piece that riffs on tropes of the Wandering Jew and a mythic woman-as-nation. ... creates a strange and engaging stage world... it's going to stay with me.”

“A quasi-fantastical drama about the insidiousness of anti-semitism. The main character of Helga is a winner. An insightful and timely piece of work.”

contact Ilya Chlaki | chlaki@yahoo.de

***Year of the Elephant*** (*El año del elefante*) by José Luis de Blas Correa  
translated from Spanish by Kate Eaton

“In a 2005 London mosque, an (ex?) terrorist rehab group goes cosmically awry. Great dialog, structure, characters, themes. Must be seen.”

“Very well-written and holds the attention with character development and gripping story. REALLY interesting insight into the minds of those we may consider to be our enemies.”

contact José Luis de Blas Correa | jldebc@gmail.com || Kate Eaton |  
kteaton364@googlemail.com

***You Are Not Alone*** (*Da ne budeš sama*) by Selma Parisi  
translated from Croatian by Selma Parisi

“Universal story of an adult child caring for elderly parent, with the interesting twist of a caregiving robot.”

“Very well written, timely, and accessible. Deals with issues about aging/elder care, family relationships, generational differences, and particularly the encroachment of technology on human relationships and the loss of meaningful intimate interaction.”  
contact Selma Parisi | selmasokolovic@yahoo.de

**Finally, due to vicissitudes of international communication, we were not able to publish the third, very worthy, Eurodram selection in this volume. It is:**

***Strawberry Fields*** (*Mansikkapaikka*) by Sofi Oksanen

translated from Finnish by Owen F. Witesman

“A fascinating subject matter, directly relevant to events occurring in Russia/Ukraine today.”

“Illuminating, horrifying, and darkly funny.”

“The relationships are real and raw. This is a compelling and important work.”

The playwright is represented by the Salomonsson Agency in Stockholm.

contact Tor Jonasson | tor@salomonssonagency.com

## Eurodram English-Language Committee 2025

**Melanie Armer**, NYC | Director/Dramaturg  
**Jorge Balça**, Lisbon/London | Stage Director, Researcher, Teacher  
**Charles Bales**, NYC | Executive Director, Voyage Theater Company  
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**Laura Caparrotti**, NYC/Rome | Artistic Director, Kairos Italy Theater  
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**Aaron Mack Schloff**, NYC | Playwright  
**Daniel Smith**, Milledgeville, GA | Dramaturg, translator, educator  
**Raluca Urea**, Stuttgart | Performer, Director  
**Lizi Watt**, St Louis | Managing Director, Upstream Theater

# *The Geometry of Wheat (La geometría del trigo)*

by Alberto Conejero

translated from the Spanish by Michael Grundmann and Clara Ministral

☆ 2025 Eurodram English-Language Committee Selection

## Bios

**Alberto Conejero** is a playwright and poet. Born in 1978 in Vilches, in the province of Jaén in Southern Spain, he holds a degree in Stage Direction and Playwriting from Real Escuela Superior de Arte Dramático and a PhD from Universidad Complutense. His plays include *En mitad de tanto fuego*, *El mar: visión de unos niños que no lo han visto nunca*, *La geometría del trigo* (*The Geometry of Wheat*), *Los días de la nieve*, *Todas las noches de un día*, *La piedra oscura* (*The Dark Stone*), *Ushuaia* and *¿Cómo puedo no ser Montgomery Clift?*. He has also written and provided dramaturgy for modern adaptations of several classic works, including *Pineda* (Ballet Flamenco de Andalucía), *Medea* (Teatre Lliure), *Electra* (National Ballet of Spain and Teatro de la Zarzuela), *Fuenteovejuna* (National Classical Theatre Company) and *Troyanas* (Mérida International Classical Theatre Festival).

**Clara Ministral** studied Translation and Comparative Literature in Spain and the UK and has been translating fiction and non-fiction from English to Spanish for 15 years. She divides her time between Madrid and Belfast and currently runs Wheeler Books, a project intended to introduce Northern Irish literary works to Spanish-speaking publishers and audiences. In 2024 she co-founded Entre Bambalíneas, a Madrid-based collective focused on exploring and promoting global theatre in Spanish translation.

**Michael Grundmann** is a qualified teacher with a background in philosophy and politics. He has travelled widely, lived in several Spanish-speaking countries and, aside from translation, works as an international tour guide. He lives in London.

## Introductory note, *The Geometry of Wheat*

The playwright Alberto Conejero is the author of an extensive body of work characterized by strong academic foundations, a firm ethical commitment and an artistic sensibility which have helped cement his status both internationally and as one of Spain's leading contemporary playwrights. His profoundly lyrical plays are noted for their probing explorations of identity, memory, desire and human relationships, as well as their connection to social and historical topics, and their focus on marginal or historically silenced characters.

*The Geometry of Wheat* (2018) is a deeply personal piece which also marked Conejero's debut as a stage director. It met with widespread critical and popular acclaim in Spain and, in 2019, earned him a National Award in Playwriting. The story, with its clear Lorquian overtones, found its initial inspiration in an episode from his mother's youth in their hometown of Vilches (Jaén). It explores family bonds in his native Andalusia and the way the past—historical, familial, political—ripples down through to the present day. It also examines the intersection of the rural and urban, offers a penetrating analysis of the changing nature of society between generations, and considers the complexities of identity in times of transformation and crisis.

From a translation perspective, maintaining the lyrical nature of Conejero's writing was a testing proposition. The language spoken by the characters is sparse yet beautiful; highly economical yet full of meaning. We often compared it to translating poetry, whilst being aware of the need to maintain the unforced qualities of the original so that the dialogue remains as natural as it is in Spanish. Throughout the play, there is a continual thread between scenes—reflective of the ongoing dialogue across different timelines and places—which is skillfully expressed through repetition, echoes and resonances in the original script. Consequently, we had to undertake a thorough analysis of the Spanish text and make extremely precise word choices to ensure this aspect was successfully rendered.

One further challenge was the presence in the original script of two languages, Spanish and Catalan, the latter being sometimes used by the characters of Joan and Laia (with Spanish translations provided by the author as footnotes). In the original text, the playwright includes a note that these characters' lines should partly be performed in Catalan; depending on the location of the performance, the number of lines spoken in Catalan may vary. Due to the significant linguistic similarities between the two languages, it can be considered that a typical Spanish-speaking audience is broadly able to follow these parts of the conversation, though most non-Catalan-speaking audience members would very likely not understand all the details.

The use of one language or another is not only an integral part of these characters' identities—in a play where identity is an overarching theme—but this device also reflects a linguistic reality which is specific to Spain and not necessarily easily translatable to other contexts. Whilst we feel this linguistic difference could be incorporated into any potential English-language production

through the use of a different accent or dialect, we have elected to leave this choice to the discretion and creativity of future actors and directors. Consequently, our translation is fully in English and, in the text that we present here, there are no linguistic indicators that set Laia and Joan's English apart from that which is spoken by the other characters. Instead, the lines in the original script that are in Catalan are written here in bold, offered simply as a starting point from which we would encourage any future theatremakers to create a new linguistic reality within the universe of the play that works in the specific English-speaking context in which any performance might occur.

—Michael Grundmann and Clara Ministral

*The Geometry of Wheat (La geometria del trigo)* was translated into English with support from Fundació SGAE.

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## *The Geometry of Wheat*

When I remember you on my bed, when I think of you through the watches of the night.

—Psalm 63

Si un adéu d'amor fos encara amor.

—Lluís Llach

Tu suffoques, tu blêmis à présent qu'a sonné l'heure

Des adieux à jamais (ouais)

Je suis au regret de te dire que je m'en vais

Je t'aimais, oui, mais.

—Serge Gainsbourg

## Characters

**JOAN**, 35

**LAIA**, around 30

**ANTONIO**, 35

**BEATRIZ**, around 30 / and around 60

**EMILIA**, around 60

**SAMUEL**, around 30 / and around 60

## Notes

Although **BEATRIZ**, **SAMUEL** and **ANTONIO** appear in different times and at different ages, each character is to be played by only one actor. What the audience should experience is a single voice that unfolds in two time streams and not a performer portraying a body at two different stages in life.

The sign (/) in the dialogue indicates that the next line overlaps or that the character does not finish the sentence.

Even though different settings occur throughout the play, these locations will appear on stage as an unbroken, continuous whole. Thus, a room in Barcelona may look out onto a rocky headland in Southern Spain, or a motel room may lead to a headframe above a mine shaft. The characters will move across time and space as they observe, as they dream, as they reflect.

## The letter

*A bedroom in a flat on the outskirts of Barcelona. Through the open window glides the gentle hum of the city on a summer's night; voices ebbing and flowing, the sound of car horns and the nearby sea. JOAN is sitting on the unmade bed, an open suitcase by his feet and a crumpled piece of paper in his hand. From somewhere, BEATRIZ watches him read. JOAN folds up the piece of paper nervously and tucks it away. A few seconds later, he suddenly gets up; opens and closes drawers, puts some clothes in the suitcase, shuts it. He is unaware that LAIA has entered a few seconds earlier.*

LAIA: What are you doing?

JOAN: I decided to go in the end.

LAIA: And when were you planning on telling me this?

JOAN: I changed my mind.

LAIA: You changed your mind. None of this makes any sense.

JOAN: Probably not. (*Short pause.*) I was going to call you.

LAIA: I brought us some dinner. Chinese, thought you'd like that. They'd run out of / Joan, did you manage to get hold of your mother?

JOAN: She hasn't picked up the phone since last night.

LAIA: Did you try going to the house?

JOAN: Her shutters are down. She's not there.

LAIA: Of all the times to leave.

JOAN: Of all the times to leave. Do you think I understand what goes through her head?

(*Pause.*) I can't find my black trousers.

LAIA: You don't have any black trousers. Why don't we just take a moment and think this through calmly?

JOAN: What do I need to think through?

LAIA: We discussed this, Joan. We were going to wait to find out more, for your mother to give you some kind of explanation.

JOAN: They're going to bury my father. I don't have the time to /

LAIA: They're going to bury a man who happens to be your father. (*Extremely short pause.*)

**I'm sorry.**<sup>1</sup>

JOAN: **It's OK.**

LAIA: What I meant was /

JOAN: Really, it's OK.

LAIA: Does this have anything to do with us?

JOAN: Why would it have anything to do with us?

LAIA: Don't you think we should talk about it? You know, a decision like this /

JOAN: It's only a short trip. I didn't want to bother you.

LAIA: Bother me?

JOAN: You've got a lot of work on.

LAIA: You never even met him.

JOAN: You've always got too much work on.

LAIA: I'll make some calls.

JOAN: What?

LAIA: I'll let them know /

JOAN: **But Laia, sweetheart, there's really no need.** You can save yourself the long journey.

LAIA: They owe me a few favours.

JOAN: I can honestly do this by myself.

LAIA: **It'll only be a couple of days, right?**

JOAN: **Yes, but really there's no /**

LAIA: I'm not going to leave you on your own.

JOAN: I've told you there's no need.

LAIA: No, but I'm coming with you.

*LAIA exits. JOAN zips up the suitcase slowly. He sits down on the bed to wait. He takes out the piece of paper again. He reads it. Somehow BEATRIZ is already there. And /*

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<sup>1</sup> Bold lines denote dialogue written in Catalan, rather than Castilian Spanish, in the original (please see Introductory Note for more on this.)

## The bond

BEATRIZ: Return to the place where you've never been, Joan. You will find the address at the end of these words. That place is where I was born, where your father was born, it's where my parents were born, and my parents' parents as well. And that land is where you too should have been born. In which case you would be someone else and I also would be someone else. I don't know how that man found me. But last night he telephoned me to say that your father had died. I recognised the voice. Trembling. His voice was trembling. He begged me to do everything I could to get you to go to the funeral, he said your father had requested this before he died. I think I ended up saying that I would. His voice fell silent. I could hear him breathing at the other end of the line, it sounded like he was crying. I told him he had no right to cry. No right at all. I hung up. That's not important now. You have to go. Maybe there you'll be able to understand why I never told you about him, neither who he was nor why that was the last / Before tonight I couldn't see, I wasn't able to see... I'll be away until this is all over. But you go with your father to his resting place. I wouldn't be able to bear it. You look so much like him, it would be as if I was putting you in the ground. Forgive me, Joan. We've never known how to talk about things. Please, my son, make this journey. But you need to do it without me. I can't go back to that place. I've survived long enough, just long enough, to remember from a distance. Go there. Don't blame him, don't blame me. We didn't know how to do any better.

*BEATRIZ walks. We now see SAMUEL. Maybe he was already there before. Maybe he has heard the last of BEATRIZ's words. He walks as well. They walk back through the years, the hours, the nights. It is SAMUEL who is the first to arrive at /*

## The South

*The living room in an old house in Southern Spain, three decades before the previous scene. The last of the afternoon light slips through the half-open door and the gaps in the windows. There is a knock at the door. Nothing. Another knock. More silence. SAMUEL enters and closes the door behind him. He fumbles around for the switch on the walls and turns the lights on. Now we see he is carrying a large piece of luggage. He approaches a shelf bearing family photographs and mementos. He runs his fingertips over some of them. The door opens again. BEATRIZ enters. She is six months pregnant. She takes off her shoes and casually tosses them to one side. She sits down on a chair and removes, one by one, the hairpins from her bun, letting her hair fall down. She doesn't seem to have noticed SAMUEL.*

BEATRIZ: Mum. *(Very short silence.)* For a moment there I thought I was going to faint. All those people in the square, shouting the whole time. I don't know why the union people keep at it. They should just shut them down and be done with it. *(Very short pause.)* And the heat! It's too hot for this time of day.

SAMUEL: Excuse me.

BEATRIZ: *(Hearing his voice.)* Who's there?

SAMUEL: I didn't mean to frighten you.

BEATRIZ: Who are you?

SAMUEL: The door was open and /

BEATRIZ: And you say you don't want to frighten me?

SAMUEL: It's OK, I'm a friend of Antonio's.

BEATRIZ: Which friend?

SAMUEL: This is his house, isn't it? I'm sorry I just came in like that. *(He indicates the luggage he's carrying.)* I thought there would be someone inside. *(Very short pause.)* Samuel.

BEATRIZ: Sorry?

SAMUEL: My name is Samuel.

BEATRIZ: Samuel?

SAMUEL: Samuel.

BEATRIZ: Is it really you?

SAMUEL: Yes, I think so.

BEATRIZ: No, it can't be. Let me have a look at you. Samuel! I'm Beatriz, Antonio's wife.

*(She gives him a hug.)* When did you arrive?

SAMUEL: Last night.

BEATRIZ: How long since you last saw each other?

SAMUEL: Fifteen years, if I'm not mistaken.

BEATRIZ: Fifteen... Will he recognise you?

SAMUEL: Sorry?

BEATRIZ: Antonio, will he recognise you?

SAMUEL: I hope so.

BEATRIZ: And where are you staying?

SAMUEL: I'll find somewhere. / So where is Antonio?

BEATRIZ: I won't even hear of it. You're staying here.

SAMUEL: How am I going to stay here?

BEATRIZ: Of course you will, we've plenty of room, Antonio spends all day in the mine and

/

SAMUEL: In the mine?

BEATRIZ: You'll see how happy he's going to /

SAMUEL: Antonio works in the mine?

BEATRIZ: Yes, and he doesn't want to quit because that's what he's used to. Habit is a terrible thing, if you think about it.

SAMUEL: Is he there now?

BEATRIZ: Sorry?

SAMUEL: Antonio.

BEATRIZ: There was an accident last week. Two miners in hospital. That's why he's locked in there with the union. I don't know what he thinks he's going to achieve. He doesn't listen to me. He can't see it. I don't understand why he can't see it. The other day he punched the wall to stop himself from hitting / And all for what? They're not going to invest any more money.

They'll squeeze whatever they can out of them and then they'll close them down. And what will he be left with? A joke of a pay-off and a pair of ruined lungs.

*Long silence.*

SAMUEL: Your first one?

BEATRIZ: Yes, first one.

SAMUEL: Have you been married a long time? Sorry, now I'm the one asking questions that /

BEATRIZ: It's fine. Five years. And you?

SAMUEL: What about me?

BEATRIZ: Did you get married over there? Where was it again?

SAMUEL: In France, in /

BEATRIZ: Did you get married? To a French woman?

SAMUEL: No, I haven't found the right person.

*(Pause.)*

BEATRIZ: So how long are you going to stay?

SAMUEL: Actually... I've got this idea for a small business. You know the old olive mill?

BEATRIZ: Yes, of course, the one that's all run-down. The rich people bought it and just recently they've /

SAMUEL: I wouldn't say they bought it. I'd say they stole it from us. I've had to fight tooth and nail to get it back. Paperwork, lawyers, a lot of time spent on it. I'm going to restore it, get it going again. That's why I'm here.

*During the previous speech, EMILIA enters.*

EMILIA: I almost didn't recognise you.

SAMUEL: I'm sorry?

EMILIA: It's been a very long time. But I knew I had seen your face somewhere.

SAMUEL: My face?

EMILIA: In your father.

SAMUEL: I don't understand.

EMILIA: Now, with the beard, you're the spitting image of your father.

SAMUEL: Do you know my family?

BEATRIZ: Mum, this is Samuel, a friend of /

EMILIA: I know who he is... Samuel. When did your family return?

SAMUEL: No, my parents are still in France, I came here by myself.

EMILIA: Are they doing well there?

SAMUEL: Yes, thank you, they are.

EMILIA: I imagine it hasn't been easy for them. So far away from everything. I've often thought about how life would be over there, not speaking the language, starting again from scratch. The sun's unbearable here, that's true, but whenever I see on the TV how much it rains over there... Does it rain as much as they say?

SAMUEL: Not really.

EMILIA: But that's why you've got those forests, proper forests, with proper trees. A real forest, in the middle of the mountains, with lakes and bears and everything. An actual forest!

BEATRIZ: Mum.

EMILIA: And not this endless boredom of endless olive trees and yet more olive trees, always the same whichever way you look. *(Pause.)* So your parents are doing well then?

SAMUEL: Yes.

EMILIA: Where is it that they are again? In France /

SAMUEL: In France, yes, in /

EMILIA: I think they came to visit a few years ago, didn't they?

SAMUEL: No, they've never wanted to come back here.

EMILIA: I was very sorry they had to leave like that. *(Long pause.)* And what about you?

SAMUEL: Me?

EMILIA: How come you're here?

SAMUEL: I bought the old mill.

EMILIA: So that was you? The owners didn't want to say who they'd sold it to.

SAMUEL: Well, mystery solved. It was me. I'm going to fix it up and open a hotel, with a little shop there and /

EMILIA: You'll need a lot of money for that.

BEATRIZ: Mum, please.

SAMUEL: Money's not a problem. For those of us who had to leave, at least that worked out in our favour.

EMILIA: Things just happened as they happened /

SAMUEL: Things?

EMILIA: We all had to accept the hand we were dealt and try to look ahead, each of us as best he could or knew how. I was left on my own with Beatriz very early, far too early. They have been very difficult years for Spain.

BEATRIZ: But it's all over now. Good riddance to bad rubbish. Now it's time to look to the future, open our doors and windows and go out into the street with our voices raised, because we've spent too long quietly whispering. *(Short pause.)* And when did you come up with the idea of opening a hotel here? Because /

SAMUEL: I've been thinking about it for years and now the moment has arrived. My parents don't want me to, they don't get it at all. They think I've gone crazy, that I should invest my money back there, stay there. They want nothing to do with this place. But that's impossible, I tell them. I saw the opportunity here and made up my mind. Why not? It is crazy, isn't it? But I'm going to do it. I'm going to give it a try. At least I've got back the house they took from us.

EMILIA: So you came by yourself?

BEATRIZ: Mum, can we stop with the questions? What are we, the police?

SAMUEL: I'm sorry, I can wait for Antonio somewhere else if /

BEATRIZ: Absolutely not. Would you like a drink? I'm not sure what we have but /

*ANTONIO enters. Silence.*

BEATRIZ: Antonio, look who's here.

*SAMUEL gets up from his chair. He doesn't speak. ANTONIO approaches. He doesn't speak. They hug. A hug for all the years apart. They do not speak. ANTONIO laughs as if crying with laughter. SAMUEL cries as if crying with laughter. Dark.*

## Après l'amour

*A viewpoint in front of a ghostly headland that seems to plunge into the void from the stone scar above. The roar of a barely visible waterfall can be heard as it falls away into the night. JOAN is sitting at one of the wooden picnic tables. A car door slams shut and moments later LAIA appears. She sits by his side and strokes the back of his neck. Silence. LAIA lights a cigarette, gets up and moves towards the edge of the cliff.*

LAIA: *(After a few seconds)* I don't remember the last time we spent this much time by ourselves.

JOAN: No.

LAIA: What?

JOAN: No, I don't remember either.

LAIA: As soon as I can get that loft conversion signed off, I'll ask for a few days' holiday and we'll go away. You and me. Alone. Somewhere. *(Very short pause.)* It wasn't bad, was it?

JOAN: No.

LAIA: How long has it been since we last had sex other than at home? *(Pause.)* What are you thinking about?

JOAN: We shouldn't have driven so far without stopping. *(Pause.)* Can you take over for a bit?

LAIA: Do you like the sound of that?

JOAN: What?

LAIA: Getting away from Barcelona for a few days.

JOAN: Let's talk about that when we get back.

LAIA: You should get some sleep.

JOAN: I want to get there as soon as possible.

LAIA: We should stop at the first hotel we find.

JOAN: It's not that far now.

LAIA: We both need to get some sleep. *(JOAN is checking something on his phone.)* Did you manage to get hold of her?

JOAN: Nothing.

LAIA: Try her again.

JOAN: It's not worth it. We're already here.

LAIA: **Yes, we're here now.** (*Pause.*) So, shall we carry on?

JOAN: You don't mind driving?

LAIA: And you'll tell me what's going on?

JOAN: Not now. (*Extremely short pause.*)

LAIA: What does that letter say?

JOAN: It's about my father.

LAIA: What happened?

JOAN: Can we just keep going?

LAIA: **Whatever you want. Whatever you say.**

JOAN: We're tired. / It's better if we don't talk.

LAIA: I'm not tired. I'm trying to understand some of what's going on. I'm trying to help you. You were going to come without telling me.

JOAN: Let's just get back to the car. And stop doing my head in, will you?

*Silence.*

LAIA: You're not happy with me.

JOAN: Are you happy with me?

LAIA: I asked you /

JOAN: Are you happy with me?

LAIA: I am happy with you. But that's not enough. Not for you. That much is obvious.

JOAN: You didn't want to /

LAIA: I told you it was too soon. That we should think it over.

JOAN: You asked me why.

LAIA: I did.

JOAN: Like there has to be a reason.

LAIA: There's always a reason.

JOAN: That's the problem with you.

LAIA: Right, that's the problem with me?

JOAN: Why are you still with me?

LAIA: All I said was that I wasn't ready to have a child.

JOAN: You don't want one.

LAIA: No, I didn't want one, because I thought that you were looking to fill a hole in your life or /

JOAN: Is that what you think? That I asked you to have a child out of boredom? **I know, I know.**

You don't hold me responsible. It's not my fault. It's just how things are right now. There are no jobs for anyone. This country doesn't need so many architects. This country doesn't need half of the country full stop. That's what it looks like. But don't you worry, I'm keeping my chin up. **"You have to fight, you have to try, something will always turn up, be positive about the future." Isn't that how it goes?** Easy for you to say when every day you have somewhere to go and then somewhere to come back to. And I'm happy for you, Laia. Honestly, I'm happy that you have a job, that at least one of us has some luck.

LAIA: **Have you quite finished?**

JOAN: **I'm sorry. I need some sleep.**

LAIA: **Can't you see it?**

JOAN: **What should I be seeing?**

LAIA: **Forget about it. (She kisses him.) I'm going to give the windscreen a wipe and then we'll head off. There are little spots of blood all over it. I don't know where all these mosquitoes come from.**

JOAN: **Laia, why is this happening to us?**

LAIA: **Why is what happening to us?**

JOAN: **This.**

*Short pause.*

LAIA: What's happening to us is that nothing is happening to us.

JOAN: And you don't think that's bad enough?

*LAIA smiles, gives him a kiss and exits. Suddenly the sky becomes a translucent canvas. Hundreds of swallows wheel across it. JOAN glances at them and takes out the letter*

*once again. The birds seem to cover the entire sky. The car horn blares insistently.  
Dark.*

## Galena

*The surface of the mine shaft. A metal headframe, an engine house and a ramshackle building that serves as both chapel and overspill for the changing room. Inside, only a couple of benches and the blackened carving of a saint; on the floor, lined up in rows, miners' boots cracked by earth and time. Hanging on the walls are clothes and work tools, as well as photographs and small votive offerings.*

SAMUEL: They said I'd find you here.

ANTONIO: Samuel!

SAMUEL: What a place, eh?

ANTONIO: Did we never come here as kids?

SAMUEL: I don't think so, no.

ANTONIO: You're going to end up filthy here, you know that? Hadn't we arranged to meet later on  
in /

SAMUEL: Listen, I've been speaking to the surveyor and /

ANTONIO: Look, the other miner on shift with me is about to arrive. We're behind schedule and /

SAMUEL: I've got the final plans now.

ANTONIO: I have to get back down.

SAMUEL: Look here.

ANTONIO: We have to do a double shift today.

SAMUEL: Look here. This is where the old mill is, you see? And here is where the hotel will be.

ANTONIO: This thing here?

SAMUEL: If we get permission and close the road, we can take people around and show them the  
animals. Do you have any idea how much money that will make us?

ANTONIO: You're crazy.

SAMUEL: Just for taking them on horses through the olive groves. Look, the stables will go here,  
they'll hardly take up any space.

ANTONIO: But how many men will it take to build that?

SAMUEL: I've asked around and there are plenty of people who'd love to work somewhere other than the fields or the factory, you know?

ANTONIO: Do you think people will come here for that? When those of us from here are desperate to /

SAMUEL: Of course they'll come. Think about it. A small country hotel, a few animals, horses, a chicken, some hens. You know. For city types, seeing a goat is like seeing a dinosaur. And then they stay the night here, buy a bottle of olive oil for three times the price. Because we're also going to set up a shop with local products, some chorizo, a few cheeses /

ANTONIO: You're just as crazy as ever.

SAMUEL: Crazy? In a few months we'll be seeing some profit.

ANTONIO: Profit?

SAMUEL: You'll see. And then you'll be able to sell that old wreck you drive around in, or travel a bit if that's what you /

ANTONIO: It's not like I haven't travelled.

SAMUEL: I mean real travel, somewhere foreign.

ANTONIO: Like where?

SAMUEL: Paris!

ANTONIO: What do you mean Paris?

SAMUEL: You could come with your family.

ANTONIO: What am I going to do in Paris if I can't speak French?

SAMUEL: "What am I going to do in Paris if I can't speak French?"

ANTONIO: Right, enough of this Paris nonsense. Off you go, you can show me the / What are you laughing at?

SAMUEL: I'm not laughing.

ANTONIO: Yeah, right, you're crying.

SAMUEL: At you, I'm laughing at you.

ANTONIO: At me?

SAMUEL: At the two of us.

ANTONIO: At the two of us.

SAMUEL: What?

ANTONIO: What?

SAMUEL: It's strange, isn't it?

ANTONIO: What's strange?

SAMUEL: Back here... the two of us.

ANTONIO: The two of us?

SAMUEL: What's happened to us?

ANTONIO: Time is what happened.

SAMUEL: In your case, not very kindly.

ANTONIO: Have I changed that much?

SAMUEL: Well...

ANTONIO: Charming. *(Short pause.)* So things are OK? *(SAMUEL nods his head.)* With your accommodation? Beatriz is still insisting you /

SAMUEL: Really, I'm fine. They charge me a fair rent and it's got everything I need. It'll be another story come winter, but for now it's good enough.

ANTONIO: She keeps saying you'd be better off with us.

SAMUEL: And once again I ask you to pass on my thanks, but it's better that I start finding my own place here.

ANTONIO: Will it work out for us?

SAMUEL: What?

ANTONIO: This.

SAMUEL: I've invested all my savings in this, so yes, it's going to work out well, it's going to work out great... Well, I hope so.

ANTONIO: You hope so?

SAMUEL: Yes.

ANTONIO: I'm going to be a father.

SAMUEL: Do you think I would have told you to get involved in this if I wasn't sure? *(Pause.)* Look at you, I didn't expect to come back and find you like this.

ANTONIO: Like what?

SAMUEL: I was living there in France, and things weren't going badly for me, but it's not enough that things just don't go badly. They have to go well, they have to go well for us, *mon ami*. Here they teach us to live in fear, to stay quiet out of fear, to not do anything out of fear. The time has come for us to be happy, don't you think?

*The siren sounds again.*

SAMUEL: Come on, off you go, the other miner will be waiting.

ANTONIO: Samuel...

SAMUEL: Yes?

ANTONIO: I'm glad you've come back.

*The siren sounds a further time. They do not move.*

BEATRIZ: Maybe love takes this or that form. Maybe one just needs to stop and try to understand.

Without thinking, without writing, without talking. But I couldn't understand it then, I wasn't able to understand it. And I lived my life like a stranger – without him, and yet by his side. I imagine you now on your way there. I only went back once after that. Your grandmother was already very ill. And then never again. Never again that place, never again the South. Too many years with just one question. Since last night I feel the saddest relief. Now that your father is no longer, I finally have the answer.

*Darkness.*

## The wrinkles in the olive trees

*The same house in the South as in the third scene. Bedroom. ANTONIO is getting dressed to go out.*

ANTONIO: How come you're awake?

BEATRIZ: It's the heat.

ANTONIO: Try and sleep a little /

BEATRIZ: Are you going to tell the foreman?

ANTONIO: No, not yet /

BEATRIZ: You told me you would speak with him today.

ANTONIO: Yes, but it's not the right time.

BEATRIZ: I don't want to pick up the phone one day and be told that you're the one who's /

ANTONIO: It's better if you keep out of this, Beatriz. (*Short silence.*) Look, I'm sorry, it's just that /

BEATRIZ: How long do you think the mine's got left?

ANTONIO: The union won't allow them to /

BEATRIZ: They are letting them die out. They're not going to make any improvements, they're not going to do anything. Stop fighting this, Antonio. It's not worth it. It's better they shut them down, mines make for sad men. I don't want you like that. I don't want my son to have a sad father, you know?

ANTONIO: But what am I doing getting involved in this hotel thing?

BEATRIZ: Stop worrying about it. Trust Samuel. He's studied for this, right? We were waiting for an opportunity and suddenly one has dropped right into our lap.

ANTONIO: And what if it doesn't work out?

BEATRIZ: If it doesn't work out, no problem. We'll start again. I've also got a pair of hands, I can pitch in.

ANTONIO: But I want you to keep studying. I want you to go to university. I promised you that, and that's how it's going to be. As soon as I have some time and we can /

BEATRIZ: And what about you? Look at me. Is this the life you deserve? Is this the life you want for yourself and for me?

ANTONIO: We are going to have a child.

BEATRIZ: We are going to have a child. And that's precisely my point. You weren't like this when I met you. Look at your eyes. Too many hours inside the earth. They're fading away. *(She strokes her fingertips across his eyelids.)* What colour do you think they are now?

ANTONIO: Green?

BEATRIZ: No. They were green when I met you.

ANTONIO: I've grown old all of a sudden, haven't I?

BEATRIZ: You have. *(She caresses his hair, then unbuttons her nightdress and places ANTONIO's hands on her breasts).* You are an old man. *(She bites him on the lips.)* A most enchanting old man.

ANTONIO: Knock it off. What sort of a word is 'enchanting'?

BEATRIZ: And my eyes? What colour are they?

ANTONIO: Black. Blue. A little bit of orange.

BEATRIZ: *(She kisses him.)* I miss it.

ANTONIO: Beatriz.

BEATRIZ: Let's lie down.

ANTONIO: I'm late for my shift.

BEATRIZ: How long has it been since the last time?

ANTONIO: Tonight.

BEATRIZ: But you'll be tired then.

ANTONIO: Tonight, I promise. I don't want to keep the other miners waiting.

*He kisses her and exits. BEATRIZ seems to fall asleep. Suddenly, through the open window, dust and dry leaves start to drift in, more and more, ever increasing, followed by ash and clay dust. It rapidly covers everything, the floor, the furniture, etc. At some point ANTONIO has returned. He is close to BEATRIZ. She screams, he doesn't react. The ash gradually covers his thighs, his face, his arms. ANTONIO is almost entirely buried beneath dust. He smiles. She looks like one of those figures from Pompeii, totally embraced by ash. Until abruptly she awakens and...*

BEATRIZ: Your father is sitting in that chair, watching me sleep. He's smiling. The windows are open and the wind pushes the summer night into the room. I see your father as if he were behind my eyelids. He says something to me but I don't understand. I talk to him about us, about the three of us. How we'll tell you tales about the world, my son. We'll tell you where the wrinkles in the olive trees come from; why men and women embrace one another in spite of everything, in spite of everything; we'll tell you about cities that no longer exist and why animals weep as they die. Your father is still there, standing now, but just then something like ash suddenly starts to rain down, and he doesn't move, he doesn't move, and then suddenly /

EMILIA: *(Entering.)* Beatriz.

BEATRIZ: What is it?

EMILIA: You're crying.

BEATRIZ: No. I don't know.

EMILIA: Nightmares again?

BEATRIZ: Where's Antonio?

EMILIA: It's already been two hours since he left for work. What's wrong?

BEATRIZ: Antonio can't make up his mind about leaving the mine...

EMILIA: That's because it's not the right time for him to leave the mine.

BEATRIZ: Mum, I've already explained this. Samuel's idea is a very good one. But Antonio won't take that step.

EMILIA: Samuel shouldn't be /

BEATRIZ: I'm the one who told him to do it. I don't want him spending his days inside the earth, swallowing dust /

EMILIA: Why would tourists want to come here?

BEATRIZ: As soon as the motorway opens /

EMILIA: Why would anyone want to see how olive oil is made?

BEATRIZ: People who aren't from here. Samuel has thought it through. Do you know what he told me? That they're going to buy horses and mules so they can take people out on rides.

EMILIA: Horse rides? What kind of nonsense is that?

BEATRIZ: There's no reason why it shouldn't work.

EMILIA: You two are going to have a child. And I'm not always going to be around to help you.

BEATRIZ: It's our decision.

EMILIA: There are other jobs. In the fields, in the factories. They're selling more cars these days. They need men there, over at the Japanese place. *(Pause.)* If he wants to quit the mine, fine, but at least /

BEATRIZ: What I want is /

EMILIA: It's not about what anyone wants or doesn't want, Beatriz. It's about what we do because we have to. *(Pause.)* I'm just saying that maybe now is not the right time, that it's better to wait a little, and then we'll see if /

BEATRIZ: He's tired.

EMILIA: He's a man. And he's still young.

BEATRIZ: He's spent ten years working in that mine. Come on, Mum, stop being so negative. Why can't you show a little trust?

EMILIA: It's not a question of having trust or not.

BEATRIZ: Why do we always have to expect the worst? I don't want to be like that, I don't want to wake up every day thinking that someone's going to come and ruin my life. And neither do you. I want to see you happy, Mum.

EMILIA: It's easy to turn up and fill people's heads with /

BEATRIZ: No, not that again, Mum.

EMILIA: What does he know about this place?

BEATRIZ: Who?

EMILIA: Samuel. Don't you think that if it was such a good idea, someone from here would already have done it? Things can't just change overnight. Maybe they shouldn't change... and that's fine.

BEATRIZ: Mum, what's wrong?

EMILIA: Nothing. *(Pause.)* I hope I'm mistaken, but something isn't /

BEATRIZ: Mum /

EMILIA: A woman on her own is a very sad thing.

BEATRIZ: You're not on your own.

EMILIA: I'm not talking about me, Beatriz.

*Dark.*

## Pompeii

*A room in a roadside hotel. JOAN lies on the bed. LAIA switches on the battered old TV – a black-and-white film is on, blurred by the foggy screen, playing without sound. She sits on the bed, next to JOAN.*

**LAIA: You should take a shower. I don't know how that smell doesn't bother you. The first time I noticed it – just as we came out of the tunnel, after the mountains – I had to fight the urge to throw up and I closed the car window. I was trying to get my thoughts in order, putting my focus somewhere else, but that smell had found its way into the car and I was finding it hard to breathe. I looked at you, you were concentrating on the road. I stroked the back of your neck. I don't know if you even realised. I wondered why you didn't seem to notice it, considering you've never been here before. This smell of damp earth, of animals and olive oil and all these other things which I haven't yet found a name for. Perhaps something about this land belongs to you, or maybe you really do belong to it in some way. What a lot of nonsense. Now even the smell is familiar to me and I could swear that sometimes, lying next to you after we've made love, I've breathed in something like that in your sweat.**

*Silence. She seems to fall asleep. JOAN gets up from the bed. He presses down hard on the remote control, trying to turn the volume up, but the television remains silent. He shuts the window.*

LAIA: What time is it?

JOAN: We nodded off. You were talking in your sleep.

LAIA: What?

JOAN: The bar will still be open, won't it? We can go down.

LAIA: Joan /

JOAN: We could use a drink.

LAIA: Why don't you tell me now?

JOAN: I don't know what you're talking about.

*Suddenly the sound starts working on the old television: "It's on this spot that they found a hollow space. When the men find hollow ground, they make a number of holes, and through these they pour plaster. The plaster fills out the hollow space left in the ground by the body, which has disintegrated. The shapes of bodies or objects, buried for over two thousand years, are reconstructed this way."*

LAIA: Turn it off.

JOAN: I don't know what's wrong with it. *(He hits the TV a couple of times and the sound disappears again.)*

LAIA: It isn't just about your father.

JOAN: What do you mean?

LAIA: This trip. It isn't just about your father.

JOAN: What's it about then?

LAIA: What's it about then?

JOAN: I think I'm going to go and have that drink.

LAIA: Have you stopped to think about it? The reason why you're driving across the whole country just so /

JOAN: Nobody forced you to come.

LAIA: What does your mother tell you in that letter?

JOAN: They're burying my father tomorrow. After that you'll have plenty of time to tell me how stupid this has all been.

*Pause.*

LAIA: You've grown tired.

JOAN: What?

LAIA: Of me. Just like you grow tired of everything. Is it because I didn't want a child? Because if that's the reason /

JOAN: Why are we still together? Why are we still together? *(Silence.)* Do you still enjoy having sex with me, being with me, sleeping with me? Why do we keep trying? *(Silence.)* You like coming back home and finding me in the exact same place every day, same confused state every day, same wanting to cry every day, without the slightest idea how I'm supposed to change it all. Stop asking me questions, I don't have any answers. I haven't got the faintest idea. I don't know why I asked you to have a child with me in the first place. I don't know who the man they're going to bury tomorrow is. I have no fucking idea who I am. That makes you the strong one, right?

LAIA: Does what make me the strong one?

JOAN: Being with someone more miserable than you are.

LAIA: **Can you hear yourself?**

JOAN: I told you it was best if we didn't talk.

LAIA: Ever since we met I've only tried to make you happy. That's what you're terrified of.

JOAN: When we get back /

LAIA: The idea of being happy terrifies you.

JOAN: Laia, enough.

*Silence.*

**LAIA: Tomorrow, after the funeral, you are taking me to the station.**

**JOAN: What are you talking about?**

**LAIA: There must be a train back to Barcelona.**

**JOAN. Laia, that's not necessary.**

**LAIA: You didn't need all those words to leave me. But I did need you to tell me.**

**JOAN: Tell you what?**

**LAIA: That you don't love me anymore.**

**JOAN: When did you start feeling pity for me?**

**LAIA: Maybe the bar is still open.**

*LAIA exits. For a few seconds, it looks like JOAN is going to follow her. Eventually, he opens the window and takes a deep breath. The image on the screen becomes clear*

*and the sound returns, now clearly audible: “Look, you can begin to see something. What is it? Let’s see. Looks like a leg. Yes. There’s an arm! And there are two more legs. Well! It must be a group. In the House of Menandro they found the remains of nine people. There’s the head. You can see the skull with the plaster clinging to it. And now the skull bones and the teeth, both remarkably well-preserved. Two people, just as they were at the moment they died. A man and a woman. Perhaps husband and wife, who knows? They may have found death like this together. What’s happened to Mrs Joyce?” Dark.*

## The bandage

*The same old house in the South. Through a half-open window arrives the noise of the village fiesta outside. The sounds of music, games and voices intermingle until they become a strange language, dense and opaque, full of whispers and broken sentences. SAMUEL is waiting.*

SAMUEL: Where's Beatriz?

ANTONIO: She's gone in the car.

SAMUEL: Is she there by herself?

ANTONIO: She enjoys all that stuff, the lights, the rides, the prizes. The noise and everything is a bit much for me, but she insists that we go along and then go to the dance. I can't put this on.

SAMUEL: Come here, let me do it. (*Short pause.*) You look good in those trousers.

ANTONIO: Samuel... (*Uncomfortable. SAMUEL has almost finished applying the bandage.*)

OK, I think that's probably /

SAMUEL: You're still as clumsy as ever. You just need to cross it here and then /

*There is a long silence. SAMUEL is holding ANTONIO's hand. It seems as though ANTONIO is moving away yet doesn't. It seems as though SAMUEL is going to come closer yet doesn't. He smiles, however.*

ANTONIO: Well, that's done.

SAMUEL: What's the matter with you?

*Pause.*

ANTONIO: It isn't a good idea.

SAMUEL: What's not a good idea?

ANTONIO: I don't want to go any further. You turn up here and fill my head with all these stories about the future, and I've let myself be dragged along but /

SAMUEL: Dragged along?

ANTONIO: I'm not going to go ahead with it, the hotel and everything. I need to look out for me and my family. Do you know the things I have to do? The things I have to put up with? The number of hours I've spent deep in that mine?

SAMUEL: That's all going to change. You won't have to /

ANTONIO: The hours I've spent pounding away at the seam?

SAMUEL: You'll be able to take it easier now. Opening a business can be tricky at first but when /

ANTONIO: Have you seen my hands?

SAMUEL: You're asking me if I've seen your hands?

ANTONIO: And do you know why I do it? Do you know why I put up with this?

SAMUEL: Yes, I've seen your hands. Is it worth it? This job, this life you have.

ANTONIO: You show up here and fill my head with ideas, with plans for the future, you make me believe that I can /

SAMUEL: It's a good opportunity. For you and for your family. They pay you a pittance in the mine, don't they? You haven't stopped moaning about it since I've come back. That's why I asked you to do this with me.

ANTONIO: You've got no idea. You've got no idea at all what it's like to raise a family, how heavy that weighs.

SAMUEL: I'm sorry, I only made the suggestion that we work together, I don't think /

ANTONIO: I'm not quitting the mine. And I'm not going back to...

SAMUEL: Going back to what?

ANTONIO: Why have you come back? Why have you come back now?

*Short silence.*

SAMUEL: You have a think about it and decide what you want.

ANTONIO: I'm going to be a father. Maybe it's for the best.

SAMUEL: What are you talking about?

ANTONIO: Staying there. Spending my time alone with the earth. Tracing the seam with my fingertips.

SAMUEL: Do what you want, Antonio.

ANTONIO: I like coming back home all tired and her being there, smiling; her lying on top of me in bed, her hair brushing my neck.

SAMUEL: Have I asked you to give any of that up?

ANTONIO: And I like to think about our son, to imagine him in a few years' time, how he'll have a better life than I do, an easier life than mine.

SAMUEL: Fine. Stick with the mine, do what you want with your life, but don't /

ANTONIO: How he'll have parents who will explain this world to him, as best they can. That gives meaning to my life.

SAMUEL: Meaning.

ANTONIO: Yes, a meaning. I'm not quitting the mine.

*EMILIA enters. There is another silence. A little longer. Voices nearby.*

SAMUEL: Well, enjoy yourselves at the fair. I think I'm going to head home. The surveyor will be here early tomorrow and I want to have everything ready. See you around. *(He exits.)*

*Pause.*

ANTONIO: Beatriz is waiting for me, she wants to see the fireworks.

EMILIA: You've done the right thing.

ANTONIO: Excuse me?

EMILIA: The hotel idea. That's not for you.

ANTONIO: I need to go.

EMILIA: The work in the mine is tough, but it's work. You two are going to have a child. Now is not the time to get involved in such affairs.

ANTONIO: I'm not getting involved in anything.

EMILIA: There are certain things that can perhaps be forgiven when you're young. *(ANTONIO stops in his tracks.)*

ANTONIO: I don't know what you're talking about.

EMILIA: I can just about understand how people might feel things that they shouldn't, and really those things should not and must not be felt. And you are going to make a good father.

ANTONIO: What are you talking about? I'm not quitting the mine.

EMILIA: This isn't about the mine.

ANTONIO: That's enough. Beatriz is waiting for me.

EMILIA: We all accept things as they are and we all stay silent. Think about Beatriz. I don't want her to end up on her own, like I did.

ANTONIO: I do nothing but think about her. And about our child. You can't imagine how much.

*Silence. ANTONIO exits. After a few seconds, EMILIA goes to the window and opens it once more. Again the noise of the festivities. She weeps. The music continues to play and reaches /*

## Laia and Beatriz

*LAlA in the bar. She is alone, even though there might just be someone else there. She dances, full of tiredness, with all the words left unsaid and also the ones that were said, along with the crumbling images of the future and of the past. She lights a cigarette. Tosses it aside before taking a single puff because she remembers that she can't now, she mustn't smoke anymore. She keeps dancing. She seems a little dizzy. She leans against the wall for support, and the walls seem to tremble and crack, before sagging and giving way until they turn into the horizon. BEATRIZ has appeared. She places her hand on her belly. LAlA places her hand on her belly. Although they cannot see one another, the two women can't stop looking at each other. Something of the future ripples within BEATRIZ's flesh. Something of the past ripples within LAlA's flesh. BEATRIZ whispers some words that we cannot make out. It seems that LAlA can't hear them either. BEATRIZ is no longer there. The music continues to play, it's a song that LAlA has never heard before but she thinks she remembers it. It's a song that BEATRIZ will try to forget yet will always remember. The music plays on and on, and from that bar by the roadside it seems to move through space and time until it reaches a night on which the sky is full of /*

## Fireworks

*Folding chairs and tables in a clearing amid an olive grove. Visible in the background are the huge chimneys of the mine. The noise of the funfair arrives from the distance – sparkles, flashes, sounds from shooting games as well as music played by a small band.*

*BEATRIZ and ANTONIO can be heard over the music.*

BEATRIZ: We could give it a try.

ANTONIO: What?

BEATRIZ: Dancing.

ANTONIO: Didn't you want to head home?

BEATRIZ: *(She places ANTONIO's arms on her shoulders.)* Slowly does it. I'm tired of feeling this way.

ANTONIO: What do you mean?

BEATRIZ: So useless.

ANTONIO: You need to be patient, you're being silly. We just have to grin and bear it.

BEATRIZ: What do you mean?

ANTONIO: This. *(Pause.)* We should make a decision now.

BEATRIZ: About what?

ANTONIO: Our son's name. I'd like to be able to say it out loud. It will help me.

BEATRIZ: Help you? Help you do what?

ANTONIO: It will help me.

BEATRIZ: What's going on?

ANTONIO: I'm not quitting the mine.

BEATRIZ: What are you going on about now?

ANTONIO: Your mother's right.

BEATRIZ: What?

ANTONIO: I can't quit the mine.

BEATRIZ: Why are you saying this now?

ANTONIO: This whole business with the hotel and the mill... it's just crazy.

BEATRIZ: Have you told Samuel?

ANTONIO: Yes, and /

BEATRIZ: But you told me you were going to quit the mine, so why have you now /

ANTONIO: Because it's what I know how to do. Men are born one way or another and we have to accept things as they are.

BEATRIZ: Accept things as they are?

ANTONIO: Yes, accept things as they are.

BEATRIZ: It's me who doesn't want to carry on like this. I don't just accept things. I don't want to live with a man who is getting sadder by the day, and growing further and further away from me. What's the point of a home if I'm not happy in it?

ANTONIO: And what can I do in this place?

BEATRIZ: Don't start again with /

ANTONIO: Fine. I'm not going back to the mine but the hotel stuff's not for me either. I just don't see it. I don't want to be there. I don't want to be here. Let's get out of here, Beatriz.

BEATRIZ: What?

ANTONIO: You're right. You are, you're absolutely right. I'm not prepared to accept things either. Let's get away from here. I don't want to settle for this. I'm not going to allow myself to. So, if you really want a better life, and you want that with me, let's leave tomorrow.

BEATRIZ: Are you joking?

ANTONIO: You've got family in Barcelona.

BEATRIZ: Antonio.

ANTONIO: What?

BEATRIZ: I have a cousin.

ANTONIO: Ask her if /

BEATRIZ: Are you being serious?

ANTONIO: There are opportunities there, there are jobs. You'll be able to study. There are good universities there, right?

BEATRIZ: Yes. And the sea. There's also the sea.

ANTONIO: I'll find us a place to live. One with a room just for you. So you can study without being disturbed, surrounded by those books and dictionaries of yours. Let's just do it. Tomorrow.

BEATRIZ: Tomorrow?

ANTONIO: Why wait? What do you think?

BEATRIZ: I think you're crazy!

ANTONIO: Yes! *(He hugs her.)* Barcelona?

BEATRIZ: Barcelona.

*An initial flash in the sky, then fireworks. They die out. They embrace.*

ANTONIO: It's not easy.

BEATRIZ: What isn't?

ANTONIO: To imagine being alone.

BEATRIZ: No, it's not easy. We should head home.

ANTONIO: I'm going to walk back. I need some time to think. There's lots to organise. Lots to do.

BEATRIZ: Are you sure?

ANTONIO: Yes. *(They part ways.)* In Barcelona /

BEATRIZ: Go on.

ANTONIO: In the city, do you think we can be happy?

*Dark.*

## The word left unsaid

*The same hotel room as in previous scenes. Somehow BEATRIZ is still there.*

BEATRIZ: I don't know why but I just remembered the fireworks that night as I drove back to the house /

LAIA: *(Entering.)* Are you ready?

BEATRIZ: the night everything started and everything ended.

JOAN: Just give me a moment.

BEATRIZ: I'm ashamed to write the following words.

LAIA: I'll wait for you in the car.

JOAN: Laia.

BEATRIZ: I have never been as happy as I was that night /

LAIA: Yes?

BEATRIZ: and never so despairing as well.

JOAN: This isn't what I wanted.

BEATRIZ: So now you know. *(BEATRIZ is no longer there.)*

LAIA: What do you mean?

JOAN: For it to end like this. This isn't what I came to do, Laia. There's something that won't let me move forward, something I need to understand in order to... I don't know. That's why I'm here.

LAIA: Can we stop talking about this?

JOAN: It's important to me /

LAIA: Not now.

JOAN: that you know that.

LAIA: You can't be late for the funeral.

JOAN: I really didn't want it to happen like this.

LAIA: Who cares how it's happened?

JOAN: No.

LAIA: You wanted it and that's all that matters.

JOAN: Laia, I didn't mean /

LAIA: I can't really blame you, can I? I can't blame you for not loving me. You can't help that. But it pisses me off, it pisses me off that I'm not more annoyed about it. It pisses me off that I haven't slept a wink because you were lying there next to me and I was wondering exactly when we missed our opportunity, at what point we didn't say the word that needed to be said.

JOAN: No, it's not fair that /

LAIA: That's how it seems to me. How there's always a sentence that ruins everything, a sentence that's wrong or left unsaid, it doesn't matter which, but a sentence that is planted there, like a rock left on the train line, and then everything goes to shit, sooner or later.

JOAN: We've been happy.

LAIA: So that's what you have to say. "We've been happy"? **What the hell is happiness anyway? We were together and for me that was enough.**

JOAN: Please, I don't want this to /

LAIA: **What, Joan? What do you want? Because if you yourself don't know, what can I do? What can I possibly do? Tell me. What do you need so that you can be OK? That's what I've been trying to understand ever since I met you, that's what I've tried to take care of, as best I could, as best I knew how. You never met your father and you have a weird mother. I know it's shit, but so what? Who doesn't have a weird family round here? That's no excuse for not trying to find your own way in life. Now you're leaving me, and then what? When are you going to start facing up to things, Joan, you know, you yourself? I really hope this trip will help you with that and then I hope you can finally stop complaining and... Because I fucking love you, and you're so great when you're well and you're smiling, and it does me good when you're happy like that, it really does, I need you like that, I've needed that...**

*She closes her eyes. It seems as though she is going to faint. ANTONIO's voice arrives from somewhere.*

JOAN: Laia!

ANTONIO: You will think it's silly, but when I'm inside the earth /

LAIA: I'm fine. It's just the heat.

ANTONIO: with my eyes fixed on the rock /

LAIA: I'll just have something to drink, it'll pass.

ANTONIO: Pounding it over and over, again and again.

JOAN: You sure?

LAIA: I'll wait for you in the car.

## A buried stone

*The surface of the mine shaft. The metal headframe is barely visible in the blue-black light of dawn. The building that serves as both chapel and overspill for the changing room is lit from the inside. When SAMUEL enters, ANTONIO is already there.*

ANTONIO: / and then suddenly I pull the galena out from the rock, and I place it just so, here in the palm of my hand, and I gently caress its shape, all imperfect and shiny. I'm sure you will think it's silly, but it strikes me then that God has to exist, or at least something similar to God.

SAMUEL: So you're here.

ANTONIO: And if God, or something similar to what we call God, can create something so beautiful and then bury it under the earth, knowing that it may never see the light of day, then there has to be an order that we don't know about and yet gives meaning to everything we are.

*(Pause.)* Don't you think that might be the case?

SAMUEL: No.

ANTONIO: You don't think there could be an answer there?

SAMUEL: Why don't you just speak plainly to me?

ANTONIO: How did you know I was here?

SAMUEL: Please, speak plainly once and for all.

ANTONIO: This is the last time we are going to see each other. *(He hands him the stone he was caressing at the beginning. There is a silence.)* You can't accuse me of anything, you can't blame me for not resigning myself to being alone, for having found a woman and decided to start a family. The sooner you know this, the better. I'm getting out of here. I'm moving to the city with Beatriz.

SAMUEL: What?

ANTONIO: Barcelona, I don't know, maybe Madrid.

SAMUEL: What am I going to do here on my own?

ANTONIO: It's your idea, your money. My life is somewhere else. I'm not accepting things anymore. I wish you the best.

SAMUEL: You wish me the best?

ANTONIO: Yes.

SAMUEL: *You* wish me the best?

ANTONIO: I'm leaving, Samuel.

SAMUEL: Why are you telling me this now? It was you who / You think this doesn't hurt me? You think I came here looking for this? But you drew closer to me and I couldn't... And now I know it was all true. Because it is true, it's here, no matter how many years have passed. It's here, how do you expect me to ignore it? You think I haven't tried? It's here. Truer, stronger with each passing day. Your name, your body, your mouth, everything that you are. All that together, more real than my life, my work, my friends; than that other language I learned and in which you were never meant to exist. But you do. In all things. And now you say you're leaving? And what am I to do? How do I finish this inside me? How do I finish you inside me? All it took was one hug from you for everything that was, I don't know, fantasy, or memory, all that stuff, to become true. You hugged me and I knew. And I've kept silent, I've waited, I've made do with whatever you were prepared to give me. Because I've thought about you, you know? All that time, do you realise that? About you, Antonio. I don't want to keep talking, I don't want all these words, but I don't know what to do with them inside me, I don't know, what do I do with them here inside me?

ANTONIO: The same as these past fifteen years. Life carries on in spite of these things.

SAMUEL: And what about these past weeks? You know perfectly well, because you've felt it yourself, that you and I /

ANTONIO: And what do you want? An apology? Fine. Forgive me. Is that what you want? If I've given you the wrong idea, forgive me. There you go, done. Nothing important has happened. Nothing I have to explain to anyone.

SAMUEL: Forgive you? What does this have to do with forgiveness?

ANTONIO: Leave me alone, Samuel.

SAMUEL: Do you think I would have gone through with all this if you hadn't /

ANTONIO: You bought that mill because you wanted to. Don't blame me. Stop asking for something I don't owe you. Tomorrow I'm leaving with Beatriz. I love her, you know? I'm not lying to you. I'm not lying to myself. And I'm not going to lose her. Not for you, not for anyone. I'm not going to spend my life without her. I don't know what's going on between you and me,

I don't want to know, it's there, I don't know. Whatever it is, I don't know, I don't want to know, I'm not going to go any further. I thought that... I have no idea what I thought, I'm sorry you've come back, I'm sorry I've had you near me again, we were better off apart from each other. Of course it's about forgiveness, Samuel. I just want to go back in time, I want it to be before you came back, when I knew who I was. That's what I want, to go back. My home, my wife, my child. That's what I want. Tomorrow I'll leave this place and it'll all be done with. It's my last night here, in this darkness. That's what I'm thinking about. About Beatriz and the sea. That's all that matters to me.

*Long silence.*

SAMUEL: I'll be the one to go.

ANTONIO: Samuel, what are you talking about?

SAMUEL: You're right. I'll leave. I didn't come here looking for this. I just wanted to return to the place that my parents should never have left and, I don't know, start again in a different way. And of course I was hoping I'd see you. But I thought the two of us could spend time together as if we had never, I don't know / but you drew closer and I / It doesn't matter now. You're right, Antonio. The two of you are going to have a child. I'm the one who has to go. The hotel doesn't matter. It doesn't matter. Money comes and goes. Things come and go, right? But I did not come here to hurt you.

ANTONIO: Samuel.

SAMUEL: Come on, go home.

ANTONIO: And now what?

SAMUEL: I don't know. (*Smiles.*) What a thing life is, eh? (*He goes to leave.*)

ANTONIO: And what happens now?

SAMUEL: Only you can answer that.

*They remain motionless. There is a noise close by. BEATRIZ enters. The earth crunches under her feet. Dry branches, cracked stones, fallen leaves. She too remains silent. Motionless. Darkness.*

## The promise

It is not love that dies,  
but we ourselves.

Luis Cernuda

BEATRIZ: Leave me alone.

EMILIA: You're not seeing it. Right now, you can't see it. Things aren't always just as they seem. Don't do anything you might regret later.

BEATRIZ: Mum, please, go away. I want to be by myself.

EMILIA: He will forget all about this. Give it time.

BEATRIZ: What are you talking about?

EMILIA: Have you looked Antonio in the eye? Do it, he loves you. Do it. He'll regret all this, he'll forget all about it. He's confused.

BEATRIZ: Confused?

EMILIA: Months will pass and months will become years, and your child will grow up and then there'll be another one, because life pushes through to the very end. The important thing now is that nobody finds out about this. People talk too much, people show no mercy.

BEATRIZ: Do you really think what hurts me is whether people find out about this or not? Do you think I could stay with a man who doesn't love me?

EMILIA: How can you say he doesn't love you?

BEATRIZ: Had you noticed?

EMILIA: Sorry?

BEATRIZ: All this, had you realised?

EMILIA: I didn't /

BEATRIZ: Tell me you didn't know about any of this.

EMILIA: What are you going to do when Antonio gets back?

BEATRIZ: I'm leaving.

EMILIA: What?

BEATRIZ: I can't stay here. I don't want to stay here.

EMILIA: Don't be too hasty, think it through.

BEATRIZ: Are you thinking about me? About me, Beatriz, your daughter? Mum, have you ever thought about me? Has anyone ever thought about me? (*She starts to pack her suitcase, practically with the same actions as JOAN in the first scene*). Just go, didn't you hear me?

EMILIA: You think I don't understand because I'm old? You think I don't know how hard it is to resign oneself to certain things?

BEATRIZ: No, not now /

EMILIA: There isn't just one way, Beatriz. We can't know everything. We will never know everything. But we have to stick together, as best we can. Because people cause so much pain to each other and then one day / That's why we have to try. I only ask you to give it some thought. Because if you go away not understanding, if you go away without asking the question that needs to be asked, you'll never be able to /

BEATRIZ: I don't want to hear another word from you.

EMILIA: Darling, I'm only asking you to /

BEATRIZ: Mum, I'm drowning here. Just leave me in peace, I'm begging you.

*BEATRIZ has noticed the arrival of ANTONIO, who has been there for a few seconds.*

*EMILIA exits without saying anything.*

ANTONIO: Beatriz.

*Silence. The longest of them all.*

BEATRIZ: Has it always been this way?

ANTONIO: No, I swear to you all these years I thought /

BEATRIZ: What was it that you thought?

ANTONIO: I don't know. I don't know. Why does there always have to be only one answer? I've been with you because I wanted you. I need you to believe this, Beatriz. The idea of seeing our son grow up, that gives meaning to the world.

BEATRIZ: And what about Samuel? Where does he fit into all this?

ANTONIO: I / We'll leave, we'll go tomorrow. I swear it didn't happen like /

BEATRIZ: Say it. What didn't happen?

ANTONIO: With him. Nothing happened.

BEATRIZ: Nothing?

ANTONIO: Beatriz, I've tried.

BEATRIZ: That's not enough.

ANTONIO: Not enough?

BEATRIZ: How can you expect me to hug you again?

ANTONIO: Because I need you to.

BEATRIZ: Why didn't you tell me?

ANTONIO: How could I tell you? With what words?

BEATRIZ: I want you to tell me the truth. Tell me the truth. Do you love him?

*Silence.*

BEATRIZ: You will never touch me again.

ANTONIO: What about our child?

BEATRIZ: Oh, so now you're concerned about our child?

ANTONIO: I wasn't able to, I couldn't /

BEATRIZ: No, don't come any nearer.

ANTONIO: Please, let me /

BEATRIZ: Don't even think of touching me. You will not be a part of our lives. I won't know who you're living with, who that person is, or if you even remember any of this. Now get out of here, Antonio.

ANTONIO: Look at me.

BEATRIZ: I will not touch you again. I will not touch you again.

ANTONIO: Please.

BEATRIZ: I don't know who you are.

ANTONIO: Don't say that, please, Beatriz.

BEATRIZ: And you don't know who you are either.

ANTONIO: Why is this happening to us?

BEATRIZ: If you've ever really loved me, let me go. (*She moves away.*) I'm going to do it. Yes, I will. I will go to Barcelona. Let me try life without you, that's all I ask. That somehow, I don't know how, I can simply forget this night. Yes, I will go to Barcelona, with my son. When he's born I'll cry and I'll give him a name. A name that has nothing to do with this land nor with us. A name that will make me forget you.

ANTONIO: Beatriz.

BEATRIZ: And you... you must never try to find us. Promise me that. You will never try to find us.

*ANTONIO cannot say anything in response. Suddenly everything seems to fill up with leaves, with mud, with dust. A whirling, changing ochre that rises up and seems to drown everything. Darkness.*

## Return

“The isosceles triangle produced the fourth elementary figure, which is compounded of four such triangles, joining their right angles in a centre, and forming one equilateral quadrangle. Six of these united form eight solid angles, each of which is made by the combination of three plane right angles; the figure of the body thus composed is a cube, having six plane quadrangular equilateral bases.”

Plato, *Timaeus*

EMILIA: People die and all that remains is their name. Love dies and all that remains is its name. That’s why I do nothing more than repeat words, repeat words like others cling to relics. From this place, from this light that never ends because it cannot end. (*Pause.*) Not all of death is painful. Don’t worry about that, Beatriz. It doesn’t hurt, you just feel a weight in the middle of your chest, right here, before you leave life behind. (*Pause.*) You returned a year later. As soon as you learned that I was sick, you came back. That gives me comfort. That continues to sustain me. You were crying. Leaning over me, in that hospital room, you were crying. You were saying “mother”, you were saying /

BEATRIZ: Mum /

EMILIA: you were saying your name, you were saying my name. And then we both became little children once more. You and me, together. As if death somehow returned us to birth. I wanted to push the words up into my mouth, to ask you to stop crying. You thought I could no longer hear you, that your words were not getting past my blank stare, which was... where was it? But I was still by your side. Just as I am by your side now. With you. You told me that you were happy, that you had a healthy and beautiful son, and that his name was...

BEATRIZ: Joan.

EMILIA: Joan. I wish you could know that I’d heard it, that at the sound of my grandson’s name the sky and the earth shook, they took a different form, and everything became filled with trees, very tall trees, and there, up high, thousands of birds were singing, so many birds! (*SAMUEL has arrived, to a different place?*) We were in the middle of that forest. You, Joan

and me. We were happy. And I could also see my parents, and my parents' parents as well. And I saw a man smiling at me from a distance. And my chest filled with the sweetest warmth. Because we were together. And so it remains, Beatriz. Because the bond never disappears. And there is always time for us to protect it.

\*\*\*

*At the gates of the cemetery. It is a grey autumnal afternoon. JOAN has stepped outside. He seems to be finding it hard to breathe.*

SAMUEL: *(Takes out a photograph and hands it to JOAN.)* I really thought you were going to look more alike.

JOAN: How did you find the nerve to come here?

SAMUEL: Wait, don't go.

JOAN: I have nothing to say to you.

SAMUEL: Your father asked me that if I ever saw you /

JOAN: Just tell me what happened to him.

SAMUEL: Sorry?

JOAN: My father, how did he die?

SAMUEL: Cancer. He was able to hang on for two years.

JOAN: And what do you expect from me? That I feel sad? That I comfort you?

SAMUEL: This is for you. Antonio asked me to give it to you. *(JOAN takes the folder SAMUEL is offering him and tosses it to one side.)* What is your name? Please. That's all I ask. What's your name?

JOAN: Joan.

SAMUEL: Joan.

JOAN: *(Picks up the folder, gives it back to SAMUEL, looks like he's going to leave...)* I shouldn't have stopped to talk to you.

SAMUEL: I wish your father had known it.

JOAN: What?

SAMUEL: Your name.

JOAN: Do you not feel any shame? Because I feel it, I felt it when my mother told me about the two of you. But I didn't think you would dare come here, let alone look me in the eye. And you're lucky.

SAMUEL: Joan.

JOAN: You're lucky that I couldn't care less what you are, but how does it feel to deprive someone of a father?

SAMUEL: The last few months your father kept repeating how it would help him, how being able to say your name out loud would help him.

JOAN: Help him do what? Die with a clear conscience?

SAMUEL: He had to do it.

JOAN: So that he could be with you.

SAMUEL: It's not that simple.

JOAN: And he abandoned his pregnant wife.

SAMUEL: It's not that simple.

JOAN: Do you want a round of applause? Do you want me to celebrate your big love story?

SAMUEL: It's not like that.

JOAN: What do I care? What's this got to do with me? How come he never tried to find me?

SAMUEL: He had to keep his promise to your mother. He never wanted to /

JOAN: Don't you ever mention my mother again. What are you trying to do? Give yourself peace of mind?

SAMUEL: I've just buried the person I've loved more than anyone else in the world. How can I be at peace?

*Silence.*

JOAN: All these years... you were together?

SAMUEL: Thirty-two years. *(Pause.)* Please, this is for you. *(JOAN takes the folder.)* There are some photographs and notes inside. You'll find the telephone number for the solicitor as well. Get in touch with him. There are some matters to deal with.

*ANTONIO enters, barefoot, the same age as in the previous scenes. Sometimes he seems to be following what is happening, at other times he seems to be too far away.*

JOAN: Didn't he ever, during all that time, want to track me down? Didn't it occur to him, I don't know, to try and find his son?

SAMUEL: Not a single day went by, ever since that night when he came to my house, when he didn't wonder about what you were like, what colour your eyes were, how your voice sounded, what football team you would support, if you had already fallen in love. And that was when I realised that I would never have him to myself, at least not completely. That actually I was only ever with a part of Antonio. And I felt like a terrible person. I've felt terrible, Joan, if that's what you'd like to hear. It's really tough, you know, to cause pain. To cause such pain without meaning to. Of course I've thought about it. Of course I've felt that regret. All through my life. To think that our love had been born out of pain. That some part of Antonio had remained somewhere else, with you, with your mother. That I had snatched away something that also belonged to him. Something that maybe belonged to him more than anything I could ever offer. Every twelfth of July – that's the date your father estimated for your birthday – he'd leave the house in the morning and wouldn't return until the next day.

JOAN: It was the eighth of July. I was born on the eighth.

SAMUEL: I never asked him where he went or what he did.

JOAN: Do you think he ever came to Barcelona?

SAMUEL: No. He told me he couldn't break the promise he made to your mother, that he wanted to at least keep that. There is a place, here in the village. Go down the street where your mother used to live – you can ask anyone, they'll tell you where it is – and then turn right. You'll see how, all of a sudden, the sky opens up. And then there's nothing there at all. Your father liked to sit there. I don't know why I'm telling you this now. Forgive me. I'm tired and I've got a long journey ahead of me. It's been a very difficult few months. At least I have done what he asked. (*Leaving. But then something makes him pause.*) It's not easy to imagine being alone.

JOAN: Was he happy?

SAMUEL: What?

JOAN: Was my father happy with you?

SAMUEL: Yes, he was. We loved each other. As best we could, as best we knew how. And here I am. By his side. To the very end. That's what it's all about, isn't it? (*Pause.*) The

documents are important. A long time ago I bought an old mill. At the time we thought that it would be a good idea to renovate it and / It doesn't matter. It's there. It's yours now. Your father asked me to leave it to you. It's just a pile of rubble, but who knows, maybe you'll think of something.

JOAN: What about you?

SAMUEL: Me?

JOAN: What will you do now?

SAMUEL: I don't have an answer to that.

JOAN: Wait.

SAMUEL: In the folder is my address and telephone number. I have to go now. Oh, I almost forgot. *(He takes a small stone out of his pocket and gives it to JOAN.)*

JOAN: What's this?

*Pause. JOAN handles the stone just like ANTONIO did.*

SAMUEL: You look too much like your father.

BEATRIZ: You look too much like your father.

*SAMUEL exits.*

BEATRIZ: This letter is for your father, Joan. Please leave it by the earth where he lies. *(JOAN takes the letter, and in a way that only the birds and the wind can comprehend, he is able to leave it in the land where his father rests. This is also how these words find their way to ANTONIO. JOAN exits.)* I have just found the answer. I couldn't understand it then. That night I thought I was going to go crazy if I kept seeing you, hearing your voice, knowing that you were no longer mine. At least not completely. Not all of you. How badly we handled things, Antonio. I should never have demanded such a promise and you should never have kept it. But maybe in our silence we have cared for each other. Maybe at a distance, somehow, we have continued to love one another every day, through and for Joan. That's why you kept your promise. *(Pause.)* And that's why our son is with you.

ANTONIO: Not all of death is painful. It doesn't hurt, but you do feel a weight in your chest, in the middle of your chest, before you leave life behind. When it happened I didn't know what it was. Maybe the weight of all that absence, all piled up there. Your absence, Beatriz. The absence of our son. And I refer to him like that because I couldn't even take his name with me. And I have imagined what it might be. So many nights when I would say names out loud, thinking that something would happen if I spoke his name. A revelation. Manuel, my son. Alberto, my son. Mateo, my son. A revelation...

BEATRIZ: Joan. When he was born, I picked out his name from the sea.

ANTONIO: Joan... All those times I imagined him playing football, engrossed in his books at home, his child's body giving way to another body, perhaps one similar to mine. His body where love had been. His body like a scar of your body and of mine, the two entwined together, from a time when love knew just one way. His body like the last shipwrecked survivor of our nights together, which no longer were, could no longer be, because love is something else, it is not enough to love one another, it is not enough to give one's entire life, it is not enough, it is not enough. (*SAMUEL has returned.*) The time has come... Have I been happy? If only man did not have to be simply one / But, yes, in a manner of speaking, I was happy. When I closed my eyes, with your hand in mine, Samuel, I also felt your hand, Beatriz, and then came the saddest relief. (*JOAN walks the distance which separates him from the station. There, as the wind turns, in the street, he meets EMILIA, BEATRIZ, SAMUEL and also ANTONIO. Because the bond has not disappeared. And it always has something to teach us.*) And I imagined myself with you, Joan, teaching you the names of different minerals, the secrets of the ice ages, about the seams of this world, about the geometry of wheat. The life I invented for you so that I might survive you. Return. Leave. The bond has never disappeared. But already the earth now trembles. Calling out my name. With mercy.

*Now LAIA waits for the train at the station. Lightning breaks the grey sky. A few seconds later JOAN enters.*

LAIA: Are you OK?

JOAN: It's all done.

LAIA: There's a train to Barcelona in a couple of hours. It's fine.

JOAN: Laia.

LAIA: Let's not talk any more, please.

JOAN: I don't want you to go back alone.

LAIA: It doesn't matter.

JOAN: There's something I need to tell you. (*JOAN shows her the photograph.*) This is my father. Antonio. Well, he was my father.

LAIA: (*Very affectionately.*) You don't look anything like him.

*Silence.*

JOAN: Laia, listen, I've been thinking that maybe here I, I don't know, I could spend some time here and maybe that way, with the distance...

LAIA: Here?

JOAN: Far from the city, far away from all the noise. I'm not going to give up, I'm not going to just accept things. I have to start again in a different way, I want to start again in a different way. Now that I finally know where I come from, maybe I can also work out where I want to go.

LAIA: Do you honestly think you'll be happy here by yourself?

JOAN: No, not by myself. Look.

LAIA: What is this?

JOAN: There's this old mill. I'm just asking you to have a quick look and /

LAIA: **Listen, Joan.**

JOAN: We could give it a go. Build something with our own hands. Together, if you want /

LAIA: Let me /

JOAN: Only if you want to, if you still /

LAIA: There's something I need to tell you.

JOAN: It's crazy, I know, but we wouldn't be the first to get out of the city. I need to leave Barcelona, even if it's just for a while, and then /

LAIA: Haven't you thought /

JOAN: You could work from here, you could /

LAIA: You haven't even let me tell you that /

JOAN: I'm only asking you to /

LAIA: Let me speak, Joan. *(Silence.)* There's a decision I haven't made yet. Maybe because it's not only mine to make, because it belongs to us. It belongs to the both of us. I don't know. I can't think, I can't think right now. I need you to tell me whether there's something that comes after us or that existed before us, just waiting for us so that it can come into existence, somewhere, somehow, and whether you and I met each other so that it could be. And if you don't want it, it makes no difference now, it exists, it's here /

JOAN: Laia, I'm not really following what you're /

LAIA: I'm going to do it. With or without you, I am going to do this. That's what I wanted to talk to you about. That's why I'm here. That's why I came with you.

JOAN: What's going on, Laia?

**LAIA: If you want, Joan, you can do it with me, because this also belongs to you, what's going to happen also belongs to you. But if you do that, if you want to be by my side, I need you happy, I need you and me together, even if you and I no longer / I don't know, I can't find any other words right now, I don't want any more words. This is what I ask of you, Joan. Because somehow we'll always be together if /**

JOAN: Laia.

**LAIA: I need an answer.** I need to know if there's something that love delivers and that won't die with us.

JOAN: Laia, are you /

**LAIA: Is there anything that love delivers and that won't die with us?**

*Suddenly a blaze of blue, the unexpected sky. And little birds, hundreds of them (where are they coming from?), feverishly crossing it back and forth. For the first time, and without realising it, they are all together because they all follow the flight of the birds attentively. At the station, JOAN and LAIA wait. They also smile. The light then perfectly embraces them all, releasing them from time and space, until they are all fused together in the same landscape. And everything begins and ends so that everything can be, just at the right moment. When nobody expected it.*

*Final darkness.*

## *Flood Zone (Zona inundable)*

by Marta Barceló

translated from the Catalan by H.J. Gardner

### Bios

**Marta Barceló** is a playwright, artistic producer, and former trapeze artist from Mallorca. Her plays documenting issues in the lives of women have won numerous awards. Aging with Alzheimer's is portrayed movingly in *Abans que arribi l'alemany (Before the German's Here)*; social isolation and adoption in *Tocar mare (Mom®)*; and living with breast cancer in *Anar a Saturn i tornar (To Get to Saturn and Back)*. She began her career studying physical theatre at the Institut del Teatre in Barcelona and The Circus Space in London. She is currently artistic co-director of the C.IN.E Sineu (Sineu Centre for Performing Arts Research) and the Festival Ciclop. Her works are available in Finnish, German, Greek, Italian, Polish, Romanian, and Spanish at: <https://www.catalandrama.cat/en/autor/marta-barcelo-en/>

**H.J. Gardner** translates contemporary Catalan theatre for Sala Beckett/Obrador Internacional de Dramatúrgia in Barcelona. She previously collaborated with Marta Barceló on *Abans que arribi l'alemany (Before the German's Here)*, winner of the 2021 Plays in Translation contest of the American Literary Translators Association and Scoundrel & Scamp Theatre. With Jaume Miró, she translated *Into the Light*, a profile of oral storyteller Rafela Servera Sureda, whose Mallorcan folktale “Na Filet d’Or” inspired new names for an exoplanet and its host star. Her translations of Esteve Soler’s *Trilogy of Indignation and Revolution* have been performed in Europe and New York (for the Prelude Festival in 2010 and Between the Seas Festival in 2014). She recently co-edited a Special Catalan Issue of the literary translation journal [\*Metamorphoses\*](#) (volume 31).

## Introductory Note, *Flood Zone*

*Flood Zone* by Marta Barceló takes place in an imagined space, the fictional representation of a small town on the Balearic Island of Mallorca. Although based on the actual 2018 flash flood affecting Sant Llorenç des Cardassar, in *Flood Zone*, the town is renamed Sant Llis, and the multiple voices of the play explore the two opposing directions a tragedy can take us, either down into profound despair or uplifted in the solidarity of shared experience.

In the staging of the work for its premiere at the Teatre Nacional de Catalunya (TNC) in 2022, the imagined space of the town is portrayed as a wall of archives representing the Municipal Archives building, the place where the main character Magdalena goes to recover a sense of self and community following the disaster. All the events described by the characters in the play are acted out with moving tables or chairs and minimal props before a seemingly gigantic impersonal wall of civic history. But through the course of the play, the archives come to represent the heart of the town where Magdalena learns to face what has been in order to recover her hope to go on.

These days it is easy to imagine a Flood Zone localized in any community. Flooding arrived in mine immediately prior to beginning this translation, and just after completing it, unprecedented flooding devastated North Carolina and the País Valencià. In light of these disasters with colossal losses of human life, it was easy to feel swept away by wondering how a vision of a small flood event from afar could help us confront the new and much more extreme realities of climate chaos. At the same time, I am grateful to have had another opportunity to explore our current climate emergency in translation, since at times the task of translating can feel antithetical to taking necessary action.

This translation was made possible by a grant from the Institut Ramon Llull. In 2024, the British Centre for Literary Translation hosted a Multilingual Theatre workshop led by William Gregory, where I was able to experiment with rendering each character's story in verse, attempting to find new rhythms in the text. Many thanks to my workshop colleagues who read versions of the official and intimate voices in early drafts and commented on how they were interwoven to either advance or derail the narrative.

For the Catalan sayings interspersed throughout *Flood Zone*, I researched sayings from around the world related to rain or water. Eventually, I returned to the idea of rendering each as close to their meaning with some sense of rhythm or rhyme to help the listener hear them as a repeated refrain in the context of their tradition. For the teenage character in the play whose life has run out, and for his lover who runs away on learning he will never be found alive, I wrote, "Water will run, it's what water does." It is a line I thought I could hear the performer in the role deliver to accentuate the theme of the work at that moment in the action, written with a deep respect for

the valued traditions of an island already feeling the pressure of having its autochthonous culture erased by mass tourism and globalization.

—H.J. Gardner

## *Flood Zone (Zona inundable)*

### Characters

(3 men, 3 women)

OLDER WOMAN: 60-65 years old (also plays MAGDALENA)

MAN: 40-55 years old (also plays MANU)

WOMAN: 40-45 years old (also plays OLÍVIA)

YOUNG MAN: 16 years old (also plays TONI)

FEMALE CAST MEMBER: 30-50 years old  
(also plays ANCHORWOMAN, ARCHIVIST, GEOLOGIST)

MALE CAST MEMBER: 30-50 years old  
(also plays ANCHORMAN, PRESIDENT, MAYOR, SEBASTIÀ)

### Setting

This play was inspired by the flash flooding that occurred on October 9, 2018 in the town of Sant Llorenç des Cardassar in Mallorca, and its devastating aftermath. It is set in the fictional town of Sant Llis.

## MAGDALENA

MAGDALENA: I was home when the rain began. At first, I didn't pay much attention to it. Then the downpour came. Before I knew it, brown water was streaming in under my front door. It's going to flood again, I thought. The last big one was in 1985, but it wasn't nearly as bad as this. When I went to open the door to the little courtyard where I keep the cleaning items, the force of the water ripped the bolt and the latch off the hinges. A wave of water rushed in and hurled me against the wall. I wasn't knocked out, but I did get a bit dizzy from the blow. Then I realized the water was knee-deep already, and I went to stand in a corner of my kitchen, near the window. Everything started falling over—the fridge, the big clock, the dishwasher, the sideboard, even the stove. In a matter of seconds, the water was up to my waist and rising. Seemed like it was never going to stop. When my old brazier table floated past, the water was chest-high already, so I got on top, best I could. Like climbing onto a raft. And then...

MALE CAST MEMBER: And then.

MAGDALENA: I read once that words are like the surface layer of deep waters. That's how it feels when I try to explain what happened that night. I've had to tell the story so many times. To my friends, the police, the TV crews, the journalists, my therapist, my doctor... And yet I've never really been able to come close to describing... Exactly what... Just can't, you know? The words always fail me. They always fail me.

RADIO BROADCAST (off): That was the moving testimony shared to us by Magdalena, a resident of Sant Llis who came close to losing her life in the catastrophic flooding that struck the town two months ago today. Now, live from Town Hall Square, we join the memorial gathering for the eleven lives lost in the worst natural disaster to have hit the Islands in recent memory.

*(The radio is switched off.)*

## THE BACKSTORY

FEMALE CAST MEMBER: Sant Llis is a small town of about two thousand residents in the north of Mallorca.

MALE CAST MEMBER: A regular town with the usual facilities: a school, a sports center, a medical clinic...

YOUNG MAN: A Municipal Archives. In the Magistrates' Court.

MAN: For the most part, the town is built along a ravine called Torrent de les Dames, which channels three main tributaries.

WOMAN: All three tributaries run through town. One travels directly down Carrer Major, or Main Street.

MALE CAST MEMBER: Obviously, it's a flood zone.

FEMALE CAST MEMBER: A flood zone. Meaning, flood-able. Prone to inundation, deluge, washout...

WOMAN: Some years ago, because of previous floods, the ravine was widened.

MALE CAST MEMBER: Our work here is done. Residents are safe. Yaw, yaw, yaw.

YOUNG MAN: October 14. Eighteen past three in the afternoon. It begins to drizzle. For the first few hours, there's this low-key, normal rain, nothing unusual. Gradually, it starts raining harder, faster. At nine in the morning, the forecasters at AEMET, the State Meteorological Agency, issue a yellow alert.

FEMALE CAST MEMBER: "Yellow alert." Meaning— Likely no risk, although care may be called for in certain weather-dependent activities. Recommendation: Be aware and stay informed.

WOMAN: Manu and Nick, his assistant, are at work, repairing a wall in Magdalena's courtyard. Manu checks the sky.

MANU: Senyora, that's it for us today. Nothing more we can do in the rain. Nick, you take Fortuna. Park her on the road down by the water.

MAGDALENA: Will you finish tomorrow?

MANU: We'll finish tomorrow. I know I promised the job would take three days, not four, but with the rain...

MAGDALENA: That's how it goes. Nick, have some cake. Freshly made. *Coca dolça*, your favorite

MANU: Don't spoil the boy.

MAGDALENA: You have some, too, then.

MANU: I'm full, thanks. Had a big lunch.

MAGDALENA: Save room tomorrow, then.

MANU: If I know Nick, he'll finish it off first. Got to get going.

MAGDALENA: What about an umbrella? Take mine.

MANU: No need. Just headed down the road to Olívia's for a haircut.

MALE CAST MEMBER: Half past four in the afternoon. The sky has turned steel gray and the first bolts of lightning have begun to flash, but the weather alert stays yellow. The forecasters at AEMET never saw it coming either.

FEMALE CAST MEMBER: Here's Olívia, on the phone with her son Toni.

OLÍVIA: What is it, Toni?

TONI: Are you still at the salon, Olívia?

OLÍVIA: Where else would I be?

TONI: Well, I'm in Manacor with my friend Kike, but it's started to rain.

OLÍVIA: You're where?

TONI: In Manacor.

OLÍVIA: Did you ride your motorbike there?

TONI: Yes. So could you come pick me up?

OLÍVIA: No, Toni, I can not. I'm working.

TONI: I know. I mean when you finish.

OLÍVIA: When I finish work, I'm lying on the sofa, having a beer and maybe some pizza. Not getting in my tin can of a car and driving through the pouring rain to pick up my son. My son, who I never hear from, except when he needs transportation.

TONI: Fine, Olívia. You don't have to nag. I'll figure out something.

OLÍVIA: Stay the night at Kike's, why don't you?

TONI: Can't. I'm meeting a friend tonight in Sant Llis.

OLÍVIA: Which friend?

TONI: It doesn't matter. I'll figure out a way back.

OLÍVIA: But not on your bike. Toni! Do you hear me?

*(Toni hangs up.)*

OLÍVIA: *(Still on the phone.)* Toni! Toni! *(She hangs up.)* To hell with him. *(To her customer.)* Sorry. Just my son asking if I could come pick him up, but I don't like driving in the rain.

MALE CAST MEMBER: Olívia and Toni have always had a stormy relationship.

OLÍVIA: You can't just do nothing! If you don't want to stay in school, then don't. But get a job.

TONI: I can't find one. It's not my fault.

OLÍVIA: Then try looking for one!

TONI: What do you think I've been doing?

OLÍVIA: I think that when I get up at eight to go to work, you're asleep. And when I come home to sleep, you're out. And I have no idea where you go, what you do, or who you're with!

TONI: Because it's none of your business.

OLÍVIA: I'm your mother!

TONI: Since when did that mean anything to you?

OLÍVIA: That's enough, you hear me? You know it hasn't been easy for me raising a kid on my own.

TONI: You shouldn't have had me then.

OLÍVIA: I didn't realize how difficult it was going to be. I can't say I wasn't warned because everyone told me to think it through, think carefully. Everyone. My mother and my friends told me. The friends of my friends told me. The friends of my mother told me. Everyone told me the same thing. How are you going to support a kid if you can't support yourself? No degree, no job, no father in the picture. I knew it wasn't going to be easy, but I thought... I thought I could do it. I thought that if I managed to be the mother I'd always wanted, maybe my life would have purpose. All I had to do was improvise. But it didn't turn out that way. I didn't turn into the mother I always wanted. I just am the mother that I am. To be honest, sometimes I have regretted it, having a kid, but many more times, I've felt like it was the only good choice I've ever made in life. Well, not the *only* good choice. But the best choice, the very best.

A MAN: Quarter past five in the afternoon. The streets have begun to fill with water. Out at sea, the outline of a waterspout.

YOUNG MAN: Magdalena is talking to her daughter, Catalina. Talking to the memory of her daughter in a photograph, more like.

MAGDALENA (*To a photograph*): That new helper of Manu's, who's fixing my wall, he reminds me of you. He adores desserts. My, look at the rain come down. Once, before you were born, it rained like this. Rained and rained till the whole town flooded. Houses got damaged, and cars were swept away, and someone died. Perhaps this time, the floodwaters will come and take me out to sea. Perhaps they'll come take me, Catalina, so I can be with you.

FEMALE CAST MEMBER: Twenty minutes past five. Now just a few people out in the streets. Not walking but at a dead run, getting drenched to the bone. Manu is in a chair in front of a mirror at Olívia's salon.

MANU: It's coming down hard now.

OLÍVIA: Sure is. Excuse me a second, I need to make a call. Toni? Toni! Listen. Dammit. I hate voicemail! (*She pauses.*) Toni, hello, this is your mother calling. It's raining like mad here. So don't ride your bike back, you hear me? I don't care what you do, just don't try to make it home on your bike. I'm finishing up with a customer, and then I'll come get you, all right? Stay put and I'll call when I'm on my way.

MANU: Should I come back tomorrow?

OLÍVIA: No. This'll be quick. Short on the sides and longer here?

MANU: Yes.

OLÍVIA: Ten minutes is all I need.

MANU: I hear your kid has become friendly with mine.

OLÍVIA: I'm sorry, whose kid?

MANU: Well, "mine." I mean the kid helping me out, Nick.

OLDER WOMAN: Nick is the son every mother wishes she had.

YOUNG MAN: Irresistibly appealing.

FEMALE CAST MEMBER: Charismatic, decent, kind, smart. Just eighteen, and his whole life ahead of him.

MALE CAST MEMBER: Everybody likes Nick. He comes from a good family, you can tell.

OLDER WOMAN: He has such a nice smile.

MALE CAST MEMBER: Always willing to lend a hand.

MANU: So listen, Nick. I need a helper. The other guy I hired didn't work out, and I hear you're looking for work. The job is yours, but this is how it's going to be. I've been working since I was fourteen and I've never stopped. I have hands harder than concrete, and I don't put up with nonsense. The job is tough, and sometimes dangerous. So no messing around. On the scaffolds, pay attention, is that clear? And don't make me ask twice for things. If you can do that, we'll get

along. And you should know my van has got to be treated like a princess. It cost me a kidney and half to buy her. She has a name. She's a Ford, so her name's Fortuna, for good luck. Maybe she'll bring us both some luck.

YOUNG MAN: Fortuna is Manu's prize possession. A Ford Transit van, brand new, with a load capacity of almost 900 kilos. Steel rims and ergonomic lines. And a registration plate that reads "4544LGF."

MALE CAST MEMBER: "LGF." Lots of Good Fortune.

OLÍVIA: Who's the kid you have working for you now?

MANU: The boy from Can Tomàs.

OLÍVIA: Oh, you mean Colau?

MANU: I guess. Now he goes by Nick.

OLÍVIA: Of course. Nicolau. We always called him Colau.

MANU: Well, now they call him Nick. Been working with me for about a month. A good kid. Real hard worker. Head on straight. Trustworthy.

OLÍVIA: He and Toni used to play together when they were kids, but he moved away.

MANU: Well, they're good friends now.

OLÍVIA: They are? Toni barely talks to me these days.

TONI: I can't really say it was love at first sight. I'd seen him hundreds of times. But then Nick went off to live in Barcelona, and every summer he'd come back because his dad's family was here, and we'd hang out and play in the ravine or in the park, ride our bicycles together... you know, kid stuff. For some reason, for four or five years Nick's family stopped coming to the island. But then this summer... Nick was back, for good. And when I saw him, I... I can't explain it. Nothing else mattered. Not fighting with my mother, or finishing school, or being on my phone. Nothing mattered except for Nick. I couldn't stop thinking about him. I didn't even know I liked guys. I didn't like guys. I never liked guys before. But I liked Nick.

OLÍVIA: Toni barely talks to me these days. We're like two ships... Before, at least we'd watch movies together. Action films, disaster movies, zombie flicks, the stuff we both like. Now, nothing... Nothing at all.

MANU: How old is he?

OLÍVIA: Sixteen.

MANU: That's a rough age.

OLÍVIA: Are you asking, or telling me? He doesn't even call me mom anymore. He uses my name.

MANU: Probably a phase.

OLÍVIA: You think? Because it's been a year already. At first I played dumb and didn't answer, but he's kept it up... It's always Olívia this, Olívia that.

TONI: Nick, are you driving Fortuna? Come get me in Manacor? Olívia said she couldn't, and I don't want to stay the night here. (...) Well, fuck it then. (...) Is it raining that hard? (...) Yes, it's raining here, nothing special. (...) Fine. I'll find a ride back. Maybe Kike will take me.

OLÍVIA: Hold still. Almost finished.

MANU: I don't like the look of this rain... My wall has to hold.

OLÍVIA: What wall?

MANU: The wall I'm fixing at Senyora Magdalena's place up the street. I told her I'd finish tomorrow, but with the storm... Cement won't dry in the rain.

OLÍVIA: How's she doing?

MANU: We work, and she lets us work. The Senyora doesn't seem to care. Nice for me, you know? Otherwise, they make life impossible. The cement's too dark. The walk's not level. The stones aren't set far enough apart. But Senyora Magdalena keeps to herself. Wish I could copy her. Are you friends?

OLÍVIA: Not really. She comes by three or four times a year to get her hair done. She never talks much. About three years ago, her daughter died, and now she mostly keeps to herself. After

it happened, she had to take a leave from work— you know, she got depressed— and then when her medical leave ran out, she decided to retire.

MANU: Where'd she work?

OLÍVIA: In the municipal archives, I think. As an archivist.

MANU: How old was her daughter?

OLÍVIA: Early thirties maybe.

MAGDALENA: We were going to have lunch together. I was waiting here at home for her. Instead, the phone rang. That was the last call I ever took because after hanging up, I removed the battery in the receiver and never replaced it. The landline's long disconnected. She wanted baked fish, and I'd made her a cake, her favorite. She was supposed to come at two-thirty, but by two, everything was ready, so I took a nap in my chair. Till the phone woke me. The child who loses a parent is called an orphan. The woman who loses her husband is a widow. But the mother who loses her child is so... We don't even have a word for it. What word would you use for the chasm inside that splits in you two from head to toe? When I was baptized, they sealed my fate. Magdalena I was born, and Magdalena I will die. Because it's all I want now, to die. And soon, not eventually, because my life is meaningless to me now.

MALE CAST MEMBER: All right. I'll refer you to a therapist, but keep in mind that it may take a few months to schedule an appointment. In the meantime, I can write you a prescription for antidepressants, and I've made a note in your chart. Start with one pill once a day, in the evenings. Try to distract yourself, get out of the house, eat well, and have a social life. All this will help. Be sure to close the door on the way out.

MANU: I know it's not my place, but a person has to move on. Otherwise, what? To lose a child, all right, it's the hardest grief. But if you don't let it go, you're next. Because the Senyora's house is nothing but photographs of her dead daughter, and she's got a painting of her covering an entire wall.... It's hard to take. You go in, and it's not like entering a home at all. It's more like one of those places for dead people... A mausoleum! And that's a house with nice light, with those big windows facing the wide open street. But she's in there all day with the shutters closed.

OLÍVIA: I've noticed that.

MANU: She's worried the sun will fade her daughter's photographs. I call that a dance with death, don't you think?

OLÍVIA: It's wrong to judge.

MANU: Well, I'm not judging her. It's her life to live. But that's hardly living life, is it?

OLÍVIA: There. Does that look right?

MANU: Nice. Here's my card. Raining like the devil now.

OLÍVIA: Yes. Here you go. (*They wait.*) The connection's not going through.

MANU: Must be the storm. I'll go get you cash. Shouldn't take long.

OLÍVIA: You'll get drenched. Just pay me tomorrow. I need to get going.

MANU: To get your son?

OLÍVIA: Do I have a choice?

FEMALE CAST MEMBER: When the rain began that afternoon, no one had any idea what was coming next. Yes, it's a flood zone. Yes, it's flooded before. But the last time was over thirty years ago.

MALE CAST MEMBER: The ravine was widened, they said. We're ready. Yaw, yaw, yaw.

OLDER WOMAN: Believe it or not... Flood zones are called that because they have a tendency to flood. And every now and then, they do.

YOUNG MAN: The ravines exist for a reason. Water has to be free. It will find a way.

OLDER WOMAN: Maybe we've forgotten, or try not to remember, but there are times when nature is more powerful than we want to accept.

MANU: Maybe wait to go out until the rain quits?

OLÍVIA: If I go home first, I won't want to go back out.

MANU: I'm going to move Fortuna. I sent Nick to park her in her usual spot, but she'll be in the path of the water there.

OLÍVIA: Is it going to flood that much?

MANU: Probably not. But I'll be calmer if I park her up by the church.

OLÍVIA: Good luck. Stay dry, if you can.

MANU: Likewise.

MALE CAST MEMBER: On the island, we have a lot of sayings about water. Our popular sayings record experiences repeatedly observed.

YOUNG MAN: "Don't make your bed near a river bed."

FEMALE CAST MEMBER: "Neighborhoods near ravines or nuns are best avoided."

WOMAN: "Never build a nest where the water won't rest."

OLDER WOMAN: "Floods are nobody's friend. They'll take the best and leave a mess."

MAN: "Rain in October, the ravines run over."

WOMAN: "Water is as water does. The floods will come again."

FEMALE CAST MEMBER: "Nothing for me or you if the water takes it, too."

MALE CAST MEMBER: They are words of wisdom collected over centuries of shared history.

OLDER WOMAN: At what point did we stop listening to the voices from the past?

FEMALE CAST MEMBER: Six fifty-five that evening. The disaster commences.

## THE FLOOD

ANCHORMAN: Good evening. Tonight, flash flooding in Sant Llis. Emergency Services is asking people to stay off the streets.

ANCHORWOMAN: The rain is falling at a colossal rate, 180 liters per square meter, and still coming. The situation is dire. We'll try and go live to Sant Llis momentarily, but first, a reminder that drivers are asked to exercise extreme caution.

TONI: Hey, Nick. I'm still in Manacor. I can't find a way back. What are you doing? (...) Hey, Nick, I can't hear you. I can't hear you! What? Hey... Are you ok? Nick!

MAN: Communication outages are extensive. Connecting with Sant Llis is a challenge.

OLÍVIA: (*On the phone.*) Toni! I'm on my way to get you. Toni? Toni! Toni. I don't like this at all. I don't know if I can control the car.

MALE CAST MEMBER: Eleven minutes past seven. A Level One emergency situation of the Civil Protection System is activated. Almost immediately, the 112 emergency call system is overrun. Two minutes later, the situation is escalated to Level Two, requiring the immediate activation of all intervention teams that serve the autonomous community.

OLDER WOMAN: AEMET issues an orange alert.

FEMALE CAST MEMBER: "Orange alert." Meaning— A significant weather risk. Recommendation: Be vigilant. Take precautions and keep regularly informed.

ANCHORMAN: Good evening. Tonight, a special report. Severe flooding in Sant Llis, and the situation is catastrophic. Emergency Services is asking everyone to please stay away from the area. These floods are life-threatening, with fatalities a real concern. Tonight, on our special report, we'll bring you the latest on the crisis, and hear firsthand from witnesses to the disaster. Our first report...

FEMALE CAST MEMBER: When I looked out my window, I saw cars being carried away in the floods. Here we go again, I thought. But this time, it's so much worse.

WOMAN: Everything was getting caught in the current... Furniture, vehicles, even a tree. I saw a delivery van for the produce shop go by. Two of the cars had people inside.

MAN: I live just outside of town. Around five, I heard this deep roar like an airplane coming from up there on the mountainside.

ANCHORMAN: The Fire Brigade reports that nearly fifty incidents have been recorded due to water accumulation and flooding.

ANCHORWOMAN: Air traffic is also experiencing difficulties. The Islands remain under an orange weather alert for rain and storms through early tomorrow.

TONI: Olívia! Olívia!

WOMAN: The person you are calling is not accepting calls at this time.

TONI: Nick!

WOMAN: The person you are calling is not accepting calls at this time.

FEMALE CAST MEMBER: When the floodwaters start pouring into the streets, Olívia is in her car, driving to pick up her son. Manu is running down the road hoping to save his van. Magdalena is at home, preparing supper. And Toni is stuck in Manacor.

WOMAN: Once, when she was five, Olívia found a bottle of hydrochloric acid left open next to the washing machine and took a sip. At sixteen, driving drunk, she crashed her mother's car into a wall and suffered a concussion. Those were Olívia's only encounters with death. Until today.

MAN: Ten years ago, Manu fell off a scaffold. He spent twenty-four hours in a coma then came to without any repercussions. When asked if he had seen the light at the end of the tunnel, he said no. He had seen himself at work fixing the tunnel, though.

OLDER WOMAN: Magdalena has never had a close call, but she has been in an intimate relationship with death since her daughter passed.

YOUNG MAN: This one time, rock climbing, Toni fell and broke three toes, his shin, and his kneecap.

WOMAN: (*Correcting him.*) We're talking about death.

YOUNG MAN: Oh. Toni doesn't usually think about death. But sometimes, he has these dreams about his grandfather's white face looking up from the coffin.

FEMALE CAST MEMBER: There won't be time for them to remember this in the flood.

MALE CAST MEMBER: There won't be time for anything but survival.

FEMALE CAST MEMBER: Seven twenty-one in the evening.

MALE CAST MEMBER: Experts have observed that in extreme conditions, adrenaline can give a person superhuman strength.

OLÍVIA: The wipers on my little Opel Corsa are going like mad but can't keep up with the rain. My stupid car is fifteen years old, at least, and I'm driving through the middle of town annoyed that I have to pick up my son. I have this nagging feeling he's going to try to make it back home on his motorbike. My intuition is telling me don't be reckless, don't drive in a storm like this, but I ignore my intuition because in the past, paying attention to it has been useful. I'm not thinking I'm going to die. Yes, there was this big flood a long time ago, and yes, a few little ones since. All the old folks talk about how it was, but that doesn't mean it'll happen to me. It's raining. It's pouring. End of story.

FEMALE CAST MEMBER: At what point did we stop listening?

MALE CAST MEMBER: "Rain in October, the ravines run over."

YOUNG MAN: "Don't make your bed near a riverbed."

OLÍVIA: Right at the edge of town, I see the water starting to crest the bridge. I know I'm being stupid, but I just have to stop for a moment and watch. The water is rushing down the ravine with this brutal force, dragging everything with it. It's an awesome sight, right out of a doomsday movie, like the kind I watched with Toni. Like *Infinite Storm* or *Volcano*. It's absolutely mesmerizing to see the full force of nature on display. But these seconds I'm spending on the bridge might be ones I need to avoid getting caught in the current. Because as soon as I come back to reality, I realize I'm in big danger. I decide to head back the way I came, but I see this huge wave headed right for me. There's no time to shout. The wave hits and lifts my car up into the air, at least a couple of meters high, because now I'm eye level with the roofs of the houses. My car hangs up in the air for a moment, just like in the movies, like when they put the most spectacular moments in slow motion. The car is in the air, almost like it's on a platform made of water. But right after giving me this moment in the sky, the water surges forward faster and carries me with it downtown. That's when I start to panic. Because that's when I realize, maybe today I will die.

TONI: Hello? I don't know if this is where to call. Olívia— My mother is in Sant Llis but I can't get hold of her. I can't reach my friend Nick either. (...) No, I'm in Manacor. My mother was driving to come find me. (...) I don't know if she managed to get out. I told you, I can't get through to her. (...) Olívia Fuster. (...) I don't know about Nick. What do I do?

MANU: I'm running down the street, and all I can think about is Fortuna. She's perfection, drives like a dream. Bigger than you'd expect, she'll haul anything I need her to. I love that van. She's a real beauty. The rain is pelting my face, and my feet are getting soaked, and I'm remembering all the walls I had to put up just so I could afford Fortuna. Oh, I held on to my old van as long as I could. I had the rearview mirror stuck in place with duct tape, and the back all banged up from hauling scaffolding. Then one day, she said I'm done, and quit on me. Bank gave me a loan to buy a new vehicle, and I've been living like royalty ever since. I had this idea that the new van would bring me luck, so I named her Fortuna. How dumb was that? Dumber than I realized at the time. Working stiffs like me aren't meant to have luck. Especially not when they forget their keys and decide to go back for them. Because by the time I'm back out on the street, things have gotten worse. The water was knee-deep now. You tell yourself, don't go, don't, but at the same time, you see the invoices piled up and the lifetime of work it took to keep your business going... You start thinking about how hard you had to fight to start your company, how you began as a kid of fourteen, how you haven't stopped working since. And now I'm fifty-two with a back bent from carrying sacks of tile and gravel and cement... So I convince myself that I'm not letting this flood take my Fortuna, or my mother didn't name me Manu... And I run to find her like my life depends on it. But as I do, I realize this isn't just something people say... This time, for me, it's going to come true.

MAGDALENA: From the top of my table, I attempt to maneuver past the furniture and household items floating about. The water is rising, and on my improvised boat, I regret never having learned to swim. Never thought I would need to know. I don't like the water, and I don't go near it. Never bother with the beach or the pool. Just keep clear of places like that. But they say if you don't go to the mountain, the mountain will come to you, and now the water's in my home. Every possession of mine is floating, especially anything that's made of wood. Chairs, stools, the chest of drawers... The chest is where I keep my important documents. The slices of bread that I'd prepared for supper not that long ago pass by. I want to grab the photographs of Catalina from the wall, but when I reach for them, the table almost capsizes, so I don't dare try again. Everything is happening so quickly, I haven't had time to adjust. It's like being in a dream, it all seems so unreal. Perhaps it is a dream. Perhaps a couple of minutes ago when the water burst through my door and overran my home was just a dream. Or, if it's not a dream, if it's really happening, perhaps it's my answer to these past three years I've spent asking for death. Catalina, perhaps finally I am going to see you again.

OLÍVIA: My little Corsa does a complete spin, smashes against a wall and bangs into other cars being carried away. All I can think about is Toni. And also, you can't stay in here. You can't die. I know he wouldn't agree, but Toni needs me still. I'm scared to death with the car being pulled by the floodwaters down the center of town, but I reach inside myself to find some source of strength, a strength I never knew before, a strength from deep down inside, from my gut, from my liver, from my kidneys, from my very core. All I know is that if I stay in my car, the only option is death, so I grab onto the seat as tight as I can and kick till I bust the window open. Then the water rushes in. As best I can, I swim out, fighting the current, and swim in the direction of the houses to try to get out of the water's flow. I grab onto a gutter, I think. It's a downspout, and if I manage to climb it, it looks like I'll be able to reach a small balcony sticking out just above the water. I wrap my hands and feet around the downspout. My leg aches, but I don't care. It's not far. I manage to climb and stretch my hand out so I can just reach the railing on the balcony. I grab onto one of the bars on the railing, and, no idea how, manage to pull myself up onto the balcony and lie there gasping for breath, spent. At that moment, I'm thinking I've cheated death— today's version, at least. My leg is throbbing, and there's blood from a cut that's long but not deep. Must've been the glass. There's nothing to stop the bleeding, so I hold the wound with my hands, putting pressure on it, and sit there watching the disaster unfold below me. The water is above the doorways now and carrying everything away with it— cars, trees, furniture, motorbikes... A big white van goes by, and I wonder if it's Manu's, and if it is, if he's in it. There's no time to see for certain.

MANU: It's raining as if the sky has split open, as if the pipes in the sewers have burst. The water is up to my knees already, and then to my waist, to my chest. I realize I'll never make it to Fortuna's parking spot because I can already see cars spinning by, being swept downstream by the rushing water. I even see a car with people in it. I grab signs on the road and door handles, anything I can get my hands on. This is beyond anything I've ever seen. I start to pray like I did when I was a kid— me, who hasn't set foot in a church since first communion. All I wanted was to save Fortuna. So many walls put up to pay for her. Why the hell are you putting your life at risk for a van, idiot. But what else could I do, I couldn't afford to lose her. It would ruin me. Just then a huge piece of junk, a fridge I think, reams me on my head. It knocks me senseless for a few seconds, long enough for the water to drag me off with it. There's nothing I can do because the force of the water is so strong I get sucked under. Then I can see the cars and dumpsters and trees all floating above me, the cars swirling above my head like beach rafts for tourists. I'm just about out of air, and can't make it to the surface, can't get my head above water. Then I'm slammed into a log, and I grab hold of it and climb on and manage to catch a breath. The log is actually an orange tree and I have no idea where I am. I can barely see, and I'm clinging to the tree like a new branch that's been grafted onto it.

MAGDALENA: The cold and the fear convince me this is not a dream. My house has flooded. I am on a table. The water is rising. If I don't take action, the water will be up to the ceiling soon,

and I will drown. Be careful what you wish for, people say. Be careful what you wish for because one day it might come true.

WOMAN: What is it like to drown?

YOUNG MAN: Does drowning take a long time?

MALE CAST MEMBER: How many seconds do you need to be submerged?

FEMALE CAST MEMBER: Or is it only a matter of minutes?

WOMAN: Is there suffering involved?

MAGDALENA: I'm so lost in thought that when something hits my head, I'm startled and fall off the table. The light fixture, I think, as I go under, and the water enters my nose and mouth, and the panic sets in. I've been caught by surprise. Unawares. If I don't do something now, Catalina, I'll be with you in just a few minutes. A few seconds or a few minutes, I don't know which, but we'll be together again, my dear. My feet touch down. It's the tile floor of my house. I open my eyes and see a ghostly underwater image of my home, filled with brown floodwater, and your picture, Catalina, your picture still hanging on the wall. We look into each other's eyes through the particles of muck suspended in the gloom. We look into each other's eyes, and I think, this is it. Don't do anything and it's over. Time for it to end. But then, I feel an unknown force. Without asking permission, my feet push against the floor. My feet push against the tile floor, and my body is propelled back up toward life. My mouth opens when it reaches the surface, hungry for air, and my lungs force the water out, coughing up what's been clogging them, and my hands cling to the light fixture. My body has made the decision to live. But now this means I have a problem, because in a situation like this, dying is the most likely outcome.

OLÍVIA: From the balcony, I can look out and see how widespread the disaster is. All the houses in the lower part of town are flooded. The water continues to drag cars and trees and mud. I can't stop shivering from the fear and the cold seeping into my bones. I'm soaked, and still the rain comes down. Next to the balcony, there are ledges on the wall that I could use to climb up to the roof of the house across the way, where there's a skylight. I used to climb when I was young, but haven't in a long time, and the years haven't exactly been kind. But I go over to the wall and start to scale it like I'm this version of Spiderman, a Spiderwoman. Hand here, foot there. Don't move a limb unless the position above is secured. As I climb, I think of Toni. Good thing he's still in Manacor. I don't even want to think about what could have happened if he was here.

TONI: Excuse me! Are you going to Sant Llis?

MALE CAST MEMBER: Yes. But the traffic circle is as far as we can go.

TONI: Can I come with you? I can do the last part on foot. I need to find my mother and my friend. They're not answering their phones.

MALE CAST MEMBER: Get in.

TONI: Thanks. I heard somebody died. Maybe more than one person. They say people are missing. Is your family...?

MALE CAST MEMBER: My wife and kid. The baby's eight months old. Haven't gotten through to them.

TONI: Do you live up on the hill or...?

MALE CAST MEMBER: No.

TONI: I'm such a rat for telling Olívia to come get me. If anything happens to her, I'll never forgive myself.

MALE CAST MEMBER: Is Olívia your mother?

TONI: Yes.

MALE CAST MEMBER: Look, the road's impassable. That sinkhole must be twenty meters deep.

TONI: It's like, apocalyptic.

MALE CAST MEMBER: This is as far as we can go. I'm pulling over and parking here. Good luck.

TONI: Same.

MANU: Holding onto the tree takes all my strength. The force of the rushing water strips me of my clothes and leaves me dangling there, exposed. It's getting darker and darker the later it gets, but I can see the water level rising. It's going to cover the orange tree soon. Then soon is now, and I have to let go. The current drags me down again, but this time I manage to grab onto a bed of reeds. This time I'm staying, I think. I wrap my hands and feet around the reedbed. Time passes, I have no idea how much. It's pitch black, I can't see anything at all, only hear the water

roaring past. But then I see headlights on a car and start shouting like a madman. Louder than I've ever shouted at any football match. It looks to be the Civil Guard on patrol. There are two of them, from what I can tell by the outline of the flashlights. They shout something at me, but with the roar of the floodwaters, I can't hear what they're saying. They throw me a rope, but I can't catch it. I can't let go of the reedbed. My hands are stuck there, cemented to it. You're in shock, I tell myself. I can't do anything but hold onto the reeds like I'm a koala, shivering and freezing in the cold. I watch as one of the guys fastens a rope around his waist and jumps into the rushing current. That rope's not long enough. That rope's not long enough. That rope's not long enough. But it is.

MALE CAST MEMBER: Stay calm. Take hold of me.

MANU: I let go of the reeds and grab the man rescuing me. I grab as hard as I can manage. Harder than I've ever grabbed a woman.

MALE CAST MEMBER: Not so tight, friend, or we'll both go under.

MANU: Sorry, man. I close my eyes. Don't watch. A thousand things can still happen crossing the current. Maybe we'll both die, swept away by the water. We'll be hit by a car, or a tree, or a tank of butane. My body aches. Think of something pleasant to distract you. Think of something that makes you forget that you are riding naked on the back of a Civil Guard. Think about Margarita Lloberas, your first girlfriend, when you were ten, no, eleven, you were both eleven years old. She was this smart girl, and you were a clueless kid. She'd have to take your hand and put it around her waist for you. Now is when the butane tank will come and we will both die, me and my Civil Guardsman, poor guy, now that's a dangerous job. Margarita had long dark beautiful straight hair and a freckle on her nose. We're going to die now, but don't think about that. Think about Margarita Lloberas and that little freckle on her nose.

MALE CAST MEMBER: We made it.

MANU: I open my eyes. We're out of the floodwaters, next to the vehicle.

MALE CAST MEMBER: You can let go now. You're safe.

MANU: When I hear the word *safe*, I go limp. The man lets go of me, and I collapse. Curl up in the dirt and start to sob.

MALE CAST MEMBER: There'll be time for that later, friend. Let's get you in the car and to the hospital.

OLÍVIA: Hand here, foot there. The gash on my leg is throbbing, but I don't care. The rain is pelting me in the face, and I have to make an effort not to get distracted by the bolts of lightning. I get to the roof and hobble over to the skylight. I pound desperately on the glass, screaming, please help me, help. A child's face looks up at me in fear from the other side of the pane. She gets scared and runs out of the room. I keep banging on the glass— help me, please help— and a woman appears. When she opens the skylight, it's like the gates of heaven open.

FEMALE CAST MEMBER: "Water will run, it's what water does."

MAGDALENA: That saying echoes in my head. My mother used to say that all the time.

FEMALE CAST MEMBER: "Water will run, it's what water does."

MAGDALENA: The water will not stop rising. I am holding onto the light, and in no time, I'll be submerged. The doors are closed. The wave that opened the door must have closed it, too. I have to get the doors open but can't. The doors and windows are all blocked. Then I remember the window in the bedroom. A little window up high, that opens out to the front. I must hurry. A coffee table comes by, and I grab it and start paddling to the bedroom. The light flashes once or twice, then leaves everything in semi-darkness. I'm so afraid, but I mustn't stop. I must hurry. On the table, I paddle as fast as I can from the dining room to the hall, then to the bedroom. I have to stick my head under to get through the door because the water is up over the frame already. Once I reach the little window, I have to break the glass, but how. I try kicking it, but the water won't let me gather strength. In the half-light, I see a log from the fireplace. I grab the log and begin hitting the glass with an unknown rage, with a massive, disproportionate show of strength, as if instead of hitting fragile glass, I'm pounding iron. The glass shatters. Done. I don't know if the effort is of any use. I paddle over to my very tall wardrobe still in place because when the handymen installed it, they secured it to the wall, oh, bless the handymen. The water is almost to the top, but I manage to climb on top and curl up on one side. The stiff boards make my old bones hurt, and I close my eyes. I don't know if today's the day I'm going to die, but I've tried so hard not to, I must have stopped wanting to.

TONI: I've never been in a war zone, but as I walk along the road in the direction of town, I feel like I'm in one now. It's not raining anymore, but there's still lightning, and when it flashes, I see people clinging to the walls. And there's people stumbling about in the mud. The mud's so thick it's like cement. I try calling my mom again and Nick. Then I hear this whining. I turn on the flashlight on my phone. There's this dog lying on the ground, covered in mud. He's not moving. Just whining, his tongue hanging out of his mouth, like he's given up. I go up to him and see this stick stuck in his chest. Shit. He's hurt. Poor thing. I know what I should do, what I will do, but crap. This is bullshit! I grab a big rock and go up to him, and the dog gives me this look. I look at the dog. Listen, dude, I'm sorry. It's like he knows it, like he's asking for it. Then the tag on his

collar flashes. Probably got his name on it. I don't want to know his name. Fucking hell. Sorry, big guy. I lift up the rock above my head and then... My phone rings. It's from an unknown caller. (*On the phone.*) Hello?

OLÍVIA: Toni!

TONI: Olívia!

OLÍVIA: Are you all right?

TONI: Yes. Are you?

OLÍVIA: I'm fine.

TONI: Where are you?

OLÍVIA: They're taking me to the sports center. Listen, stay in Manacor, okay? I'm perfectly fine.

TONI: Olívia... I'm in Sant Llis.

OLÍVIA: You're what?

TONI: I'll come find you.

OLÍVIA: Toni! (*He's hung up.*) I will murder him!

ANCHORMAN: Joining us by phone is Margalida Planells, a geologist. Ms Planells, was the ravine ready for this?

GEOLOGIST: It would be impossible to prepare any ravine for such a magnitude of water. You can't build infrastructures of these dimensions. They would have to be colossal.

ANCHORMAN: How would you categorize the floods we've seen?

GEOLOGIST: We know flooding is an endemic challenge of the islands. This time of year, it's normal to have such heavy rains. It's not new, not only here in the islands, but throughout the entire Mediterranean basin. If you do a Google search for "flooding in the Levant region," every seven to eight years there are severe floods that sweep cars away. A flood is essentially a conflict of interests between a watercourse— the rightful owner of where the water needs to flow, let's

not forget— and humans, who want to use the land. When the water claims its right of way, because sooner or later it undoubtedly will, that's when problems occur. These days it's getting progressively worse because we are occupying more and more flood zones, and eliminating flood plains, quite recklessly. Perhaps we have forgotten that floods exist for a reason. But the water always remembers.

ANCHORMAN: Do you think climate change plays a role?

GEOLOGIST: I do, and I don't. It's true that higher surface temperatures can worsen the situation, but keep in mind that, if the loss of life and property has worsened, this is primarily due to an increase in human pressures on the land. We plan and measure structures with careful calculations, all the while forgetting that nature has her own rules and a tendency to undo our estimations.

WOMAN: In the first few hours, Emergency Services registers four hundred incidents. The firefighters, Civil Guards, local police, and Civil Protection teams can't handle so many calls. More than two hundred people are saved. As soon as the water begins to recede, rescue workers can finally begin going house to house.

SEBASTIÀ: (*On the walkie-talkie.*) I'm at number nine. About to enter. Water up to my knees at this time. From the marks on the walls, it seems to have risen more than two meters. Senyora Magdalena? No response. It's not looking great. Senyora Magdalena! It's Sebastià, Marita's son. From Civil Protection. Senyora Magdalena!

OLDER WOMAN: Magdalena has been on top of her wardrobe for over three hours now. She lies there motionless, her eyes closed. Maybe she's unconscious. Maybe she's asleep.

SEBASTIÀ: Senyora Magdalena!

OLDER WOMAN: Magdalena opens her eyes. She thinks she hears a voice calling her name. She thinks she might be dreaming. She's not sure she is alive. She tries to respond but can barely manage a whisper.

SEBASTIÀ: Senyora Magdalena!

MAGDALENA: (*Softly.*) Up here!

SEBASTIÀ: Senyora Magdalena!

OLDER WOMAN: Magdalena takes a deep breath. She gathers the last of her strength and makes her final superhuman effort of the day.

SEBASTIÀ: Senyora Magdalena!

MAGDALENA: (*Shouting and pounding.*) I'm up here! Please! Up here!

SEBASTIÀ: (*On the walkie-talkie.*) I hear something.

MAGDALENA: In the bedroom.

SEBASTIÀ: Senyora Magdalena. Don't move. We're going to get help. (*On the walkie-talkie.*) Located. Trapped on top of a wardrobe. Paco, I'm going to need help getting her down. Who's nearby who can assist? Have them come now. (*To MAGDALENA.*) Just stay calm, senyora. Don't try to move. I've got someone coming, and we'll get you out of here.

MAGDALENA: Don't let me die.

YOUNG MAN: One minute past ten at night. AEMET finally activates the maximum state of alarm, a red alert.

FEMALE CAST MEMBER: "Red alert." Meaning— A very high level of risk to the public. Meteorological phenomena of exceptional intensity. Recommendation: Take preventive measures and follow the instructions given by the authorities.

ANCHORMAN: This just in. The City Council has opened the sports center as an emergency shelter. Medical assistance, dry clothes, blankets, cots, and food are all available to those needing assistance.

OLÍVIA: Manu, are you all right?

MANU: They told me I am. I have no idea.

OLÍVIA: Did you see a doctor?

MANU: Yes. They held me for observation for a while, then brought me here. What happened to your leg?

OLÍVIA: They gave me a huge bandage. Really, it's just a scratch. If you had told me this morning at the shop that...

MANU: Yeah.

OLÍVIA: When I was stuck on the roof, I saw this van go by that looked just like yours. I wondered if you were inside it.

MANU: No. I never made it to her.

OLÍVIA: What kind of sandwich did they give you?

MANU: Chorizo. Yours?

OLÍVIA: The same. I don't really like chorizo.

MANU: Same. Although, to be honest, I can't even taste it.

OLÍVIA: I think it's that Revilla brand. Reminds me of the sandwiches my mother used to make for school.

MANU: *(Speaking.) Chorizo Revilla, un sabor que maravilla.* Wasn't that the line?

OLÍVIA: That's right. *(Singing.) Un sabor que maravilla.* ["The flavor of a lifetime."]

*(Both laugh and cry at the same time.)*

MANU: Ask if there is anything else. Maybe they have fuet. Mortadella.

OLÍVIA: It doesn't matter.

MANU: Salami, maybe.

OLÍVIA: Manu, what matters is, we almost died.

MANU: Yeah.

OLÍVIA: Do you think, given the circumstances, we could do away with formalities now?

MANU: I think we should. But Olívia...

OLÍVIA: What?

MANU: There's a young man with a dog there. Isn't he your son?

TONI: Is anyone here a veterinarian?

OLDER WOMAN: At the top of the news hour. A dire and difficult situation in Sant Llis.

ANCHORMAN: We've just learned that the first fatality has been confirmed. An elderly man of seventy-five has been discovered in his home. At this moment, over a hundred members of different agencies are working with the help of family members and friends to locate the missing. Emergency Services and the San Llis Civil Protection squad have opened emergency operation centers.

MAN: In the next hour, four more bodies will be recovered.

OLDER WOMAN: At eleven fifty-eight, a local police officer finds the motorbike of a missing man, Nicolau Riera.

TONI: Nick.

MAN: The motorbike was carried away by the floodwaters and found in a sidestreet.

OLDER WOMAN: But no sign of Nick.

TONI: Olívia... Nick's father and his friends are organizing a search party. And I'm going to go out with them.

OLÍVIA: You are not! Toni, you can't be serious!

TONI: I'm not asking your permission. I'm going out to search for Nick.

OLÍVIA: But it's not safe!

TONI: It's not raining, and the water's gone down. There's just mud on the streets.

OLÍVIA: Toni.

TONI: What?

OLÍVIA: Don't go. Please.

TONI: It's just mud! Nothing's going to happen to me. I promise.

OLÍVIA: But be careful. Please.

MALE CAST MEMBER: At twelve-thirty in the morning, three local police officers, two members of Civil Protection, Nick's father, and Toni slog through a river of mud, searching the length of the flood's course by flashlight, exploring step by step the area where Nick's motorbike was found.

FEMALE CAST MEMBER: Their search will last till five in the morning.

MAN: Nick!

WOMAN: Nick!

TONI: Nick!

OLDER WOMAN: Nick!

FEMALE CAST MEMBER: They won't find him.

MALE CAST MEMBER: At five in the morning, they'll take a break to wait for daylight.

YOUNG MAN: Heartbroken, Toni returns to the sports center. There are no free cots, so he stretches out next to Olívia, who has managed to fall asleep. He closes his eyes. There's no way he'll sleep. But lying beside Olívia as she takes long, slow breaths does him some measure of good.

MALE CAST MEMBER: Eighty-six people have sought shelter in the gym. By five o'clock in the morning, only four or five of them have slept. The rest are simply waiting for the daylight to come so they can determine the extent of the destruction. Eventually, the sun rises.

MAN: Facebook activates the "Mark yourself safe" option.

ANCHORWOMAN: Now, in the tragedy's aftermath, a new day begins. People are beginning to assess the damage. The human toll, for the moment, remains at five confirmed fatalities, but that number could increase, as there are nine people still unaccounted for, as well as the possibility of missing tourists, whose safety has yet to be determined.

OLÍVIA: Good morning. Manu, I brought you some coffee.

MANU: Thanks, Olívia.

OLÍVIA: Did you sleep?

MANU: Not one wink. You?

OLÍVIA: A little. I'm worried about my shop. I need to go see how it's doing.

MANU: And your house?

OLÍVIA: I'm not worried about my house. I live up near the church.

MANU: Lucky you. It won't have flooded, then. My house is down by the water.

OLÍVIA: But that's where... *(She stops herself.)*

MANU: It's a house. It's not even my house. I rent.

OLÍVIA: I'm sorry, Manu.

MANU: What time is it?

OLÍVIA: Seven.

MANU: Where's your son?

OLÍVIA: He just went out again to look for his friend Nick.

MANU: Haven't they found... Anything yet?

*(Olívia shakes her head.)*

MANU: What a fucking mess.

OLÍVIA: They'll find him. Of course they will. He's young. And strong. All you builders are.

MANU: Sure.

OLÍVIA: They'll find him.

MANU: Let's hope for the best.

TONI: Nick! Nick!

OLÍVIA: Toni never told me anything about Nick. Were they really close?

MANU: Very close.

TONI: In my mouth, mixed with the mud, I still have the taste of his tongue. And in my mind, the memory of our first time, my hand on his crotch, his intense gaze, then his hand on mine. And then doing it, without time to take our clothes off, urgently, like we're afraid the other guy will stop, or, I don't know, like we're going to be walked in on. I had done it a couple of times before, but always with a girl. This was different. With Nick that time, and all the ones after that, it was... Special. Like, meaningful. It took me so long to find him. I can't lose him now. Nick! Nick!

ANCHORMAN: Material losses are so extensive, the scene is Dantesque. Our team based in Sant Llis reports that it is a true ground zero. Cars, trees, trucks, furniture, and rocks lie piled in the streets, coated in an avalanche of mud.

WOMAN: Olívia's salon is a total loss.

FEMALE CAST MEMBER: The shampoo stations, the styling chairs, the overhead dryers, the mirrors... all broken.

MAN: Manu's house was swept away.

FEMALE CAST MEMBER: Fortuna's missing, too, and Manu knows she'll be a total loss.

OLDER WOMAN: At Magdalena's house, everything is destroyed. Everything.

FEMALE CAST MEMBER: Even the photographs and the painting of her daughter. No image remains of her in the world other than the picture her mother holds in her mind's eye.

MAGDALENA: First a car accident took her from me, and now a flood. Every photograph and image I had, all of her belongings that they gave back to me have been lost in the mud, and I have no idea where to find her. Oh, I know what people will say. Magdalena, your daughter isn't in the material world, she isn't in the photos, she's in the memories you have inside of you. It's a lie. Inside me all I have is a massive chasm so immensely dark and deep, there's no room for anything else.

FEMALE CAST MEMBER: Town facilities like the stadium, the school, and the Magistrates' Court, where the Municipal Archives are kept, have been decimated.

MALE CAST MEMBER: The Municipal Archives is what holds the memory of the town's past.

YOUNG MAN: And Nick is still nowhere to be found.

FEMALE CAST MEMBER: Nick!

MAN: Nick!

WOMAN: Nick!

## RECOVERY

MALE CAST MEMBER: While a search party for Nick and the others missing is assembled, help begins to arrive in Sant Llis.

ANCHORWOMAN: Good morning. Eighty team members of the Emergency Military Unit have left the port of Valencia to join search and recovery efforts. Additionally, a team of crisis counselors has been dispatched to the area to assist the victims and their families. Hundreds of volunteers have arrived to help.

MALE CAST MEMBER: Anyone volunteering needs to park at the gas station at the traffic circle and continue on foot from there. Head to the meeting point to be assigned a job.

YOUNG MAN: I live thirty kilometers from here, you know? It was crazy because in my town there was almost no rain at all. When I saw the news this morning, I called some friends and we decided to help. Man, it's unbelievable what happened to this town. A total disaster. If we don't lend a hand, these people won't make it.

WOMAN: I don't have relatives or friends in town, but it doesn't matter. It could've just as easily been my village. If you can't count on your neighbors to help, who will? Listen, go that way.

MAN: I'm from Menorca, just across the way. I've been glued to the TV and radio since last night. I sailed here this morning because I couldn't just sit around doing nothing.

FEMALE CAST MEMBER: First there are tens, then hundreds, then suddenly, Sant Llis is flooded with volunteers.

OLDER WOMAN: First thing that morning, heavy equipment operators on the island turn up to begin clearing away the debris. Cranes, excavators, and a parade of construction vehicles appear. Their drivers have abandoned their regular job sites to help here.

ANCHORMAN: This just in. Search teams have confirmed the discovery of five more bodies bringing the number of fatalities to ten. The search continues for Nicolau Riera, known as Nick. Meanwhile, a team of five archivists has volunteered to...

YOUNG MAN: (*Interrupting.*) Archivists? What the hell? We need firefighters, carpenters, builders, electricians...

ANCHORMAN: A team of five archivists has volunteered to try to recover the documents in the Municipal Archives building which was devastated by the raging waters.

ARCHIVIST: When I read that the Municipal Archives building of Sant Llis had been flooded, I reached out to my colleagues, and we contacted the mayor to offer professional assistance. But when we saw the files, our hearts were broken. The documents are caked with mud, inside and out. It's just devastating.

MALE CAST MEMBER: Thirty-two social workers go door to door to assess the needs of those affected.

FEMALE CAST MEMBER: A lunch room is organized for the volunteers.

MAN: The insurance companies receive more than five hundred claims in three days.

OLDER WOMAN: More than 1,500 people are at work on the reconstruction of Sant Llis. Six hundred operatives, nine hundred volunteers, thirteen social workers, sixty-three Nature Institute staff, and five archivists.

ARCHIVIST: All right, everybody. Let's begin. If we want to save the documents, we can't wait.

YOUNG MAN: We have to do a supply run. We have no supplies.

ARCHIVIST: (*To YOUNG MAN.*) Then make a list. Gowns, masks, gloves, boxes, blotting paper...

MALE CAST MEMBER: Listen, everyone! We need cleaning products. Brooms, shovels, mops, wipes, rags...

ARCHIVIST: ...labels, pallets, hair dryers.

MALE CAST MEMBER ... sponges, scourers, basins, dusters, cloths, scrapers, glass cleaner, brushes. Clothing of all sizes. Furniture.

ARCHIVIST: Let's start with the Civil Registry books. Set up some tables and chairs. We need fans and dehumidifiers. Let's also use the courtyard and dry some items in the sunlight.

YOUNG MAN: What do we do first?

ARCHIVIST: Let's get the room organized and the documents off the floor and out of their boxes. It's crucial we prevent mold.

YOUNG MAN: How?

ARCHIVIST: Air, air, and more air. And an alcohol spray. Add that to the list.

YOUNG MAN: (*Taking note.*) Alcohol.

MAN: T-shirts, jackets, coats, pajamas, robes, shoes, sheets, blankets, towels...

WOMAN: The governing party of Sant Llis works in tandem with the opposition, and a location is designated for receiving and organizing donations.

MALE CAST MEMBER: Mounds of clothing are sorted and distributed on demand. No time to inventory what comes in.

OLDER WOMAN: The car rental association offers thirty-five vehicles and two vans for shared use.

MALE CAST MEMBER: Forty-five animals need rehoming. At last count, one hundred and fifty-three pets or livestock died, among them, dogs, chickens, goats, sheep, pigs, and a horse. After a veterinarian operated on him that same evening, the stray that Toni brought in was reunited with his family. The tag said his name was Storm.

WOMAN: The politicians from Madrid arrive.

OLDER WOMAN: The leader of the opposition arrives first.

MAN: You can rest assured that we will move to have the town declared a yaw, yaw, yaw, because you matter. I'm here before the President, aren't I?

OLDER WOMAN: The President.

MALE CAST MEMBER: How the hell did that imbecile upstage me? I have a team of morons, and you're all fired!

YOUNG MAN: Sorry, Mr. President. I have no idea what happened.

PRESIDENT: Now what? That jerk has already played the "disaster zone" card.

YOUNG MAN: Just tell them what you usually do.

PRESIDENT: Goddamn it. Rest assured, friends, your Government is not going to turn its back on you. We are going to invest whatever is needed to promptly facilitate a yaw, yaw, yaw.

OLDER WOMAN: The king and the queen pay a visit.

MALE CAST MEMBER: The solidarity of our people makes us so proud.

WOMAN: So, so proud.

MALE CAST MEMBER: I just said that, dear.

YOUNG MAN: Here's a broom, Your Majesty, if you want to help.

MALE CAST MEMBER: I wish we could, but we have more of the town to visit. Good luck with the clean-up effort.

YOUNG MAN: Keep it. In case you need it to clean house.

MALE CAST MEMBER: Let's get to our plane.

OLDER WOMAN: The vloggers and influencers appear.

YOUNG MAN: (*Videoing himself with his phone.*) Hey, guys. Here I am in Sant Llis. Take a look at the mess the river made of this place...

MAN: Flash flood.

YOUNG MAN: What's that, old man?

MAN: It was a flash flood. There are no rivers in Mallorca.

YOUNG MAN: Oh, yeah, right. (*He deletes his video and starts over.*) Hey, guys. Here I am in Sant Llis. Would you get a look at this. The town has turned out after a flash flood swept away cars, people, and pretty much everything. It's so super-super sad. And right here next to me, there's this old man who was telling me... Hey, hey! Guess he doesn't want to talk about it. Can you blame him, guys?

OLDER WOMAN: The Civil Guard warns of attempted looting at the school and threatens to seize any drones flying over the affected area.

MALE CAST MEMBER: The youth association of Sant Llis decides to sell t-shirts to raise funds. Priced at ten euros each, they collect 48,000 euros.

FEMALE CAST MEMBER: That's incredible!

MALE CAST MEMBER: They don't realize yet that half the money raised will have to be paid back in taxes.

MAN: "Your government at work."

FEMALE CAST MEMBER: A variety of public agencies will approve aid for the victims such as the Government of the Balearic Islands, the Council of Mallorca, the City Council, and the Spanish State. One year after the flood, there will be no sign of any relief funds from the Spanish State.

MALE CAST MEMBER: "Not to worry, the Government will not turn its back on its citizens. We are going to deliver all the necessary resources so that the people's lives can be yaw, yaw, yaw."

FEMALE CAST MEMBER: Around a dozen volunteers spend an entire day shoveling mud out of Olívia's salon. The shop gets cleaned out, but nothing inside it can be saved. In the evening, as the sun is setting, Manu passes by and sees Olívia sitting on the floor.

MANU: Olívia.

OLÍVIA: Manu. Hi.

MANU: Hey. You'll be all right. We'll be all right.

OLÍVIA: No, it's just... It's just that.

MANU: What is it?

OLÍVIA: I mean... Look. There were fourteen of them. I didn't know a single soul. These people just showed up and... Just look. I can't remember the last time anyone helped me out like this.

MANU: Yeah.

OLÍVIA: Have you found Fortuna yet?

MANU: No.

OLÍVIA: How about your house?

MANU: I told you. It's just a house.

OLÍVIA: Nothing could be saved?

MANU: I didn't have anything worth saving.

OLÍVIA: Know what I'm thinking?

MANU: What?

OLÍVIA: That as long as I have to paint, the walls are going to be a different color.

OLDER WOMAN: Volunteers cleaned up Magdalena's home as well. Not a single piece of furniture was salvageable. Now it has nothing in it but a bed donated from a hotel chain, one table and chair, and a battery-operated radio.

RADIO BROADCAST (off): The wave of solidarity continues. A team of archivists is currently at the Magistrates' Court, working against the clock to recover items inside the Municipal Archives. With us now is the lead archivist, Bel Bestard, to tell us about the restoration efforts.

ARCHIVIST: We have to do a dry cleaning of each document, starting with the cover and using small improvised wooden spatulas, cellulose, and brushes. Then, sheet by sheet, we remove the thickest layers of mud, either drying soaked documents in the sun or using dehumidifiers. We have to unstick each page carefully, then add cellulose or blotting paper. It's an extremely slow-going, painstaking process.

OLDER WOMAN: Magdalena turns off the radio, looks over the bare walls of her house, empty of photographs, and into the bare rooms, with no furniture, and knows what to do next.

ARCHIVIST: Hello. Can I help you?

MAGDALENA: Hello. I want to help you.

ARCHIVIST: I'm sorry. This kind of work requires a specialized team of experts.

MAGDALENA: I used to work in the municipal archives in Manacor for a time.

ARCHIVIST: In that case, welcome. Where are you from?

MAGDALENA: This is my town.

ARCHIVIST: You're from here?

MAGDALENA: Yes.

ARCHIVIST: Didn't your house flood, then?

MAGDALENA: Yes. My house was filled with water.

ARCHIVIST: Senyora... I don't know your name?

MAGDALENA: Magdalena.

ARCHIVIST: Magdalena, thank you so much for the offer of assistance. But you must have so much to do at home.

MAGDALENA: I don't. You see... (*She hesitates.*)

ARCHIVIST: Bel.

MAGDALENA: You see, Bel... At home I lost every document that held the memory of the person I loved more than life itself. I couldn't bear to have the same thing happen to my town. Let me help here in the archives. Please. Let me be of assistance.

YOUNG MAN: The clean-up effort continues non-stop.

WOMAN: The owner of a food truck distributes three hundred rotisserie chickens to volunteers and flood victims.

MALE CAST MEMBER: I wanted to help. Six hundred people got fed today. And some even offered to pay, but I told them not to bother. I'm not here to make a profit.

YOUNG MAN: Marina and Elena, who run the town lottery, remove the mud from hundreds of tickets one by one, using a handheld hair dryer.

FEMALE CAST MEMBER: We sold out before we knew it. People are superstitious, I guess. They think after a tragedy, good luck has got to follow.

YOUNG MAN: Sports stars and celebrities show their solidarity with the victims.

MALE CAST MEMBER: They hold benefit concerts...

FEMALE CAST MEMBER: Sporting events...

WOMAN: Public performances...

OLDER WOMAN: All to support Sant Llis.

FEMALE CAST MEMBER: The number of vehicles damaged totals four-hundred fifteen, including eleven vans. But not one matches the registration plate of Fortuna.

OLÍVIA: Still no sign of her, Manu?

MANU: I don't get it. I've checked every street that flooded. I've looked in all the piles of wrecked vehicles. I've followed the ravine all the way to the beach, and she's nowhere. I mean, all that's left to do is to look for her at the bottom of the sea. Not exactly in my wheelhouse.

OLÍVIA: What if you don't find her?

MANU: She's got to be somewhere. I mean, she's a goddamn construction van, not a toy.

OLÍVIA: You're right. Look, there's Sebastià.

MANU: The guys from Civil Protection never stop. Any word, Sebastià?

SEBASTIÀ: I'm about to pass out if I don't get something to eat. I've been on the job since seven.

OLÍVIA: We're fortunate to have your help.

SEBASTIÀ: Without all the volunteers, this would be impossible.

MANU: You're right.

SEBASTIÀ: What about you? How's the shop?

OLÍVIA: Nothing could be saved.

SEBASTIÀ: And your place, Manu?

MANU: Same as her shop.

SEBASTIÀ: At least you've got Fortuna.

MANU: But I don't. I can't find her anywhere.

SEBASTIÀ: Listen, Manu... I just saw your van... Where was it? Oh, yeah. On Maria Moliner street.

MANU: What?

SEBASTIÀ: Good thing you parked up on the hill.

MANU: But, I didn't. How in hell did she get up there?

SEBASTIÀ: What do you mean?

MANU: I told Nick to park her down by the water.

SEBASTIÀ: I don't know about that. But I know your van is safe and sound at the top of the hill on Maria Moliner street.

OLÍVIA: Manu!

MANU: Must be a copycat.

MALE CAST MEMBER: Are you saying there are two vans with your name on the door?

FEMALE CAST MEMBER: Manu takes off like a man possessed for Maria Moliner street. And up there, he finds her, his majestic, imposing, invincible, flawless van... Unscratched.

MANU: Fortuna. You she-devil.

MALE CAST MEMBER: As Manu approaches the van, for the second time in as many days, his legs lose strength. He kneels in front of her and stretches his arms out either side, embracing the hood of Fortuna. What a sight, that of a grown man brought to his knees trying to hug a Ford Transit. But maybe it's not so surreal. Because after a torrential flood, nothing is surreal.

MANU: I have no idea why Nick parked her here, instead of where I told him to. I don't know if it was out of caution, or because he used Fortuna for something else, I don't know. All I know is I almost died for this van. I almost died for her.

MALE CAST MEMBER: For the four days of the official search, Toni helps look for Nick, missing without a trace.

OLÍVIA: I watch Toni join the searches, spending the entire day slogging through mud till the shadows grow long. He doesn't get home till late, and then he'll shower and eat something, maybe just bread and cold cuts. I never learned to cook, and Toni didn't either. My son still hasn't said anything to me about the nature of his relationship with Nick. Maybe I'm not that smart, but I'm not blind either.

MANU: The boy is walking around like a lost soul in limbo. Toni, any news? Nothing yet?

*(Toni shakes his head.)*

TONI: We'll find him. We'll find him.

MANU: Maybe he believes it. More like he's in denial because by the third day it was clear Nick wouldn't be found alive.

TONI: We'll find him. We'll find him.

FEMALE CAST MEMBER: Everyone is waiting for them to find Nick.

MALE CAST MEMBER: A rescue team with members of the Civil Guard, the Emergency Military Unit, and the Fire Brigade of Mallorca works around the clock.

OLDER WOMAN: In addition, divers from the Special Group of Underwater Activities of the Civil Guard search the last stretch of the ravine, and up to seven miles out into the sea. More than 453 people participate in the rescue effort.

WOMAN: 453 people searching for one man, Nick.

MAN: But not calling his name anymore.

MALE CAST MEMBER: No. Not calling his name.

FEMALE CAST MEMBER: As they look for Nick, the argument about who is responsible begins.

MALE CAST MEMBER: It's essential we improve the accuracy of weather forecasts in the Balearic Islands.

YOUNG MAN: Where the fuck is Nick?

WOMAN: Why did AEMET not issue an orange alert until a few minutes before seven in the evening? Then wait until ten at night to issue a red alert, when by that time, the flood was already almost over?

MAN: Emergency call services warned of the risk of staff shortages ten days before the torrential rain. There were more than two thousand calls to 112 coming in, and they couldn't all be answered.

YOUNG MAN: So where the fuck is Nick?

WOMAN: 453 people searching for him.

OLDER WOMAN: AEMET claims protocols were followed, but that resources were lacking.

FEMALE CAST MEMBER: They say that current technology does not allow for the prediction of the exact location or the precise intensity of these types of events.

MALE CAST MEMBER: We need a Balearic emergency agency and a comprehensive risk map of the Islands.

YOUNG MAN: We need to find Nick! Where the fuck is Nick? Where is he?

FEMALE CAST MEMBER: Nick's body remains missing until the fifth day...

ANCHORMAN: Emergency services has confirmed tragic news tonight. The body of Nicolau Riera, the eighteen-year-old who disappeared during the Sant Llis floods, has been located, bringing the number of fatalities attributed to the catastrophe to eleven.

TONI: No.

ANCHORMAN: Not the outcome that was hoped for. Family members of the young man have been notified, and crisis counselors made available in case relatives need assistance.

TONI: No.

ANCHORMAN: The young man's body was found about five hundred meters from the last bridge at the edge of Sant Llis, hidden under mud and vegetation, in an area where a large amount of debris had accumulated...

TONI: (*Interrupting the broadcast as he screams.*) No! No! No!

OLÍVIA: I'm so sorry, Toni.

YOUNG MAN: Toni takes off at a run, running for his life, running like the devil's chasing him, running so he doesn't have to think, or listen, or feel.

OLIVA: Toni!

YOUNG MAN: Toni runs till his stomach turns, till he pukes. But still, he doesn't stop running. He keeps on running and running toward the mountain, running to the mouth of the ravine. He runs until his legs can't take it anymore. And then, halfway up the mountain, he collapses, more alone and more desperate than he's ever felt in his life. He thinks of Nick's body, which he has loved, and savored, and admired so completely. The image of it covered in muck in a black body bag sickens him. And in despair, he screams as loud as he can manage, the loudest scream in the universe, a scream he did not know was inside him. He pounds the earth with his fists and his feet and his entire body, and he screams until he is empty and played out. When the pain of being alive becomes too much, he passes out. Or sleeps. And when he comes to, it seems as if he's been asleep for hours. Just minutes have gone by. He takes out his phone and makes a call.

OLÍVIA: Hello?

TONI: Mom...

WOMAN: Moments later, Olívia, in a car borrowed from a rental agency, heads out of town and up the hill to pick up her son. Toni doesn't say a word in the car that day. Not that day on the way home, not any of the days that follow.

OLÍVIA: I'm so sorry, Toni.

TONI: ...

OLÍVIA: There's pizza in the oven.

TONI: ...

OLÍVIA: If you need anything...

*(OLÍVIA goes to give TONI a hug, but instead he exits. She watches him go, filled with sadness.)*

MALE CAST MEMBER: In the archives, the task of putting order to chaos continues. Progress is slow, but the archivists work steadily, dedicated to the recovery of names and dates. Each word freed from the muck is a tiny victory meant to ensure that the people and events named there in the documents will never be lost to the mud of oblivion.

OLDER WOMAN: Every day at the archives, Magdalena is the first to arrive and the last to leave. And the group of archivists, with whom she spends so many hours each day, becomes a family of sorts.

ARCHIVIST: Anyone have the alcohol?

MALE CAST MEMBER: Here.

YOUNG MAN: There's a splotch of mud I can't get off here.

ARCHIVIST: I'll help. The important thing is not to scrape it.

YOUNG MAN: I know that.

WOMAN: Could someone help me with this pallet? It needs to go out in the sun.

ARCHIVIST: Sorry. Bad back.

MAN: I'll do it.

MALE CAST MEMBER: I'll bring you some massage oil tomorrow. It helps.

ARCHIVIST: I've always had bad lumbago.

MALE CAST MEMBER: So have I. Swimming forty laps a day has cured me of it.

MAN: But I get swimmer's ear.

WOMAN: Who has the marriage licenses from 1995?

YOUNG MAN: Here.

MALE CAST MEMBER: You should try pilates. They say it helps.

ARCHIVIST: I don't have time.

WOMAN: All there is is time. Until there isn't.

YOUNG MAN: Listen to the drama queen.

MAN: It's true. You're young still, but you'll understand one day. If we don't find the time to take care of ourselves, what kind of old age can we expect? Oh, sorry, Magdalena. You have nothing to worry about. You're like an oak.

MAGDALENA: Because I'm so old, is that why?

ARCHIVIST: Pau, don't be rude. Magdalena is still young. Hand me the alcohol.

MAGDALENA: Thank you, Bel, but I am old, and it's fine with me. It's fine to say it out loud.

WOMAN: To get old, you have to have lived. You don't get old without living a long life. That's how it works.

MAGDALENA: Yes. I'm alive.

YOUNG MAN: The marriage certificates from 1995 are completed.

MALE CAST MEMBER / ALL: Yes! Let's celebrate! Another year!

MAN: Conga line anyone?

ARCHIVIST: What is it with you and the conga?

OLÍVIA: Manu, I'm so worried. Toni hasn't said anything for weeks. He almost never eats. He barely moves.

MANU: What did the therapist say?

OLÍVIA: To leave him be. That he just needs time to grieve. I know I haven't been a perfect mother. I'm sure that when you're not struggling to make ends meet every month, parenting is a whole lot easier. But not being able to help my son is killing me.

MANU: Maybe he needs to keep his hands busy.

OLÍVIA: How? If he doesn't want to move?

MANU: If you'll agree to it, Olívia, I have an idea.

OLÍVIA: What is it?

MANU: So listen, Toni. I need a new helper, and I think you could do it. Here's the thing. I've been working since I was fourteen and I've never stopped. I have hands harder than concrete, and I don't put up with nonsense. The job is tough, and sometimes dangerous. So no messing around. On the scaffolds, pay attention, is that clear? And don't make me ask twice for things. If you can do that, we'll get along. And another thing, this situation with Nick hurts, I'm not saying it doesn't, but we have to put it behind us. Build a future, there's no other choice. And this job... Putting up houses and plastering walls... It's not too bad, you know? Later, when you pass by and see what you've done... It makes you happy, it helps. I think this job could do that for you. But another thing, the van has got to be treated like a princess. Fortuna didn't bring me much luck. I'm hoping we'll do better with Mercy.

FEMALE CAST MEMBER: Mercy is Manu's name for the second-hand Mercedes Benz he put a down payment on. Only two years old and twenty-thousand kilometers.

MANU: Fortuna... She's something, she really is, but... When I see her, all I can think about is that day, the day I almost died for her. So she's for sale. I'm telling you, for this price, you won't find anything better. If you want to test drive her first, we can do as many laps as you want. Just don't try to bargain with me because it's not happening.

OLDER WOMAN: Manu and Toni knock on Magdalena's door. Senyora Magdalena has the blinds open, and a ray of sunlight floods her kitchen.

MANU: Senyora Magdalena, we're here to see about the wall I left unfinished.

MAGDALENA: Oh, that collapsed. The insurance folks are supposed to come take a look at it, but they can't tell me when.

MANU: I'd like to rebuild it myself, if you don't mind. Free of charge. It's just that... I want to be the one to work on it, with my new helper.

MAGDALENA: Then come in.

FEMALE CAST MEMBER: Magdalena's wall will be Toni's first job with Manu. It will take them three days to finish. On day three, Magdalena bakes in her new kitchen and takes a slice of cake to Toni.

MAGDALENA: Your friend Nick loved this cake. You should have some. It's delicious. *Coca dolça*.

*(MAGDALENA sits beside TONI.)*

MAGDALENA: I know what it's like to wish that you were the one to die instead of the someone you love.

TONI: I don't know what you mean.

FEMALE CAST MEMBER: But Toni knows what Magdalena means. He knows that every night he slams his fist into the wall because it shouldn't have been Nick who died. It's not fair. Nick wasn't even supposed to be in Sant Llis. He hadn't even been back that long. Toni knows what he's thought and felt so many times, that in that flood, it should have been him, not Nick, who died.

MAGDALENA: I'm old, but you're young and have a whole life ahead of you. You only have this one life, you know. No one else can live it for you. And you don't get to live someone else's life. Not their life, and not their death.

*(At first TONI doesn't seem to react, but then he slowly gives in. He bows his head, begins to cry, and slowly lays his head on MAGDALENA's chest. MAGDALENA puts an arm around his shoulders and draws him near.)*

MAGDALENA: Oh, you poor thing.

## RESILIENCE

MAYOR: My fellow citizens.

ANCHORWOMAN: Today, two months after the tragic floods, the Town of Sant Llis will pay tribute to the victims. The ceremony will take place near Town Hall Square and will begin with the lighting of eleven candles, one for each life lost in the disaster.

OLÍVIA: Want to go, Toni?

TONI: No.

OLÍVIA: Want to do something together? Watch a movie?

TONI: No. I'll be in my room.

ANCHORWOMAN: Live now from Town Hall, where local authorities have gathered along with additional representatives and government officials. The number of people joining the event has exceeded expectations, and many of those here today will have to follow the ceremony from nearby sidestreets. The mayor has just started to speak.

FEMALE CAST MEMBER: Magdalena, no. Olívia, no. Toni, no. Manu, no. No, they don't attend the memorial.

MAYOR: My fellow citizens.

OLDER WOMAN: At the exact moment the mayor starts to speak, Magdalena has just started cleaning the cover of a muddy tome. Isabel, the archivist, is at the other end of the room, working on a different set of records.

WOMAN: At this exact moment, Olívia is heating a frozen lasagna, and her microwave pings. She looks at the closed door of Toni's room and is about to knock, but stops herself. Instead, she sits down to watch a movie on TV called *Zombie Holocaust*.

MAN: At this exact moment, the buyer of Fortuna arrives at the agreed-upon place to be handed the keys to the van from Manu.

MAYOR: Friends gathered here today. When a natural disaster with so much destructive power occurs, questions always arise in its aftermath. We ask ourselves— Why? What purpose does it serve?

OLDER WOMAN: In a room of the municipal archives, Magdalena's brush falls from her hands as she lets slip a sharp cry of surprise.

ARCHIVIST: Magdalena, are you all right?

MAGDALENA: *(To the ARCHIVIST.)* Yes.

ARCHIVIST: Are you sure?

OLDER WOMAN: Magdalena is holding the tome with the town's birth records from 1987.

MAYOR: I hope we will find an answer together to these questions.

WOMAN: Unexpectedly, a door opens. Toni comes out of his room and sits next to Olívia.

TONI: Is it any good?

WOMAN: Olívia's heart skips a beat. She acts as if everything's normal, as if it hasn't been two months since she last heard Toni's voice.

OLÍVIA: Want me to rewind it and watch it from the start?

TONI: Nah. Is that woman the star?

OLÍVIA: Yes.

TONI: So she's at home now?

OLÍVIA: No. That's her friend's house. Her friend's gone zombie. But she doesn't know it yet.

TONI: Then the zombie's hiding in the closet.

OLÍVIA: Or in the john. *(They both jump.)* Oh, crap! She was behind the sofa this entire time!

TONI: Dang. The zombie got her good.

OLÍVIA: She sure did.

TONI: So much for being the star.

OLÍVIA: She's done now. Grab a fork and have some lasagna.

MAN: Naturally, we can expect this disaster to happen again. After all, it's a flood zone.

FEMALE CAST MEMBER: And flood zones get flooded.

TONI: Olívia...

OLÍVIA: What?

TONI: Nick and I, we...

OLÍVIA: I know.

MANU: There's a new bulb inside, so the light comes on now, see? But be careful with the brake at first or it'll catch. Just a gentle tap. You'll get used to it. And I left the water tank full and put the air in the tires, though her dash lights will come on if there are any problems. Fortuna is always on duty. I always called her Fortuna, you know. You'll probably change her name. Or you won't give a van a name, of course not. Most folks wouldn't.

OLDER WOMAN: Magdalena picks up her brush. She opens the tome and works rapidly to clear it of mud. Her heart is galloping. She does a quick cleaning of the first page. Nothing. She cleans the second. Nothing. The third page, the fourth, and the fifth, still nothing.

MALE CAST MEMBER: "Floods are nobody's friend."

ARCHIVIST: Magdalena, are you sure you're okay?

OLDER WOMAN: Magdalena cleans off the sixth page. And there, that's where she finally finds the name she was searching for.

FEMALE CAST MEMBER: Magdalena...

MAGDALENA: Born February 17, 1987, Catalina Ramis Sureda. Daughter of Bartomeu Ramis Ramis and Magdalena Sureda Pasqual.

MALE CAST MEMBER: "Never build a nest where the water won't rest."

OLDER WOMAN: When Magdalena sees that name so neatly transcribed some thirty-five years ago, she freezes, held in place as if the slightest movement of hers could whisk away that page

still bearing traces of the earth, that sheet of paper which is, for now, the only surviving piece of evidence she has to prove with any certainty her daughter's existence. All images of her have been lost, but now her name has been recovered.

MAN: For a second and final time, Manu gives the hood of his old van a hug.

MAYOR: All of us here today have experienced loss. Some of us lost loved ones, family members and friends.

MANU: So long, sweetheart. Sorry this is the end of the road for us. You really were first-rate, Fortuna.

MAYOR: Some have lost their homes. But together today, we will persevere. There is something I once read, I can't remember where, but the sentiment has stayed with me: "Even in a ravaged field, signs of life, stubborn and invincible, will always reappear."

MAGDALENA: Catalina. Catalina.

*(MAGDALENA hangs her daughter's birth certificate up to dry next to the other documents.)*

– End of Play –

## Notes

*The following Catalan sayings have been adapted for the purposes of this play.*

- No hi ha veïnat més dolent, que terra arran de torrent. / “Don’t make your bed near a river bed.”
- Ni terra prop de torrent, ni casa prop de convent. / “Neighborhoods near ravines or nuns are best avoided.”
- A la vora del riu, no hi facis el niu. / “Never build a nest where the water won’t rest.”
- Mal veïnat és el torrent, se’n duu *lo bo* i deixa *lo més dolent*. / “Floods are nobody’s friend. They’ll take the best and leave a mess.”
- Si a l’octubre plou, els torrents fan renou. / “Rain in October, the ravines run over.”
- Prest o tard l’aigua retorna al seu pas. / “Water is as water does. The floods will come again.”
- Ni meu, ni teu: l’aigua reclama el que és seu. / “Nothing for me or you if the water takes it, too.”
- A l’aigua l’han de deixar córrer. / “Water will run, it’s what water does.”

*Notes on approximate pronunciation of names:*

Magdalena = mag-da-LEH-nah

Catalina = ka-ta-LEE-nah

Olívia = oh-LI-vee-ah

Toni = TOE-nec

Kike = KEE-keh

Manu = MAH-new

Nicolau = nik-kol-OW (known as Nick = nik, or Colau = kol-OW, as in “allow”)

Riera = ree-ER-ah

Sebastià = se-bas-tee-AH

Senyora = sen-YOR-ah

Fortuna = for-TOO-nah

Marita = mah-REE-tah

Bel = bell (short form of Isabel)

Pau = POW

Margalida = mar-ga-LEE-dah

Planells = plah-NEY-s

Margarita = mar-ga-REE-tah

Lloberas = yo-BER-ahs

Bartomeu = bar-toe-MEH-u

Ramis = rah-MEES

Sureda = sur-EH-da

Pasqual = pas-KWAL

Sant Llis = san YEES

Manacor = ma-nah-CO

Can Tomàs = kan toe-MAHS (“can” is a way of referring to a local place, similar to *chez*)

Torrent de les Dames = toe-REN deh lehs DAH-mehs

Maria Moliner = ma-REE-ah moh-lee-NEH

Coca dolça = koh-KAH dol-SAH (a kind of cake)

See also [balear]: <https://nlp.lsi.upc.edu/freeling/demo/segre.php>

- October 2024 -

# *Little Beast (Piccola Bestia)*

almost a monologue

by Tobia Rossi

English Version (from the Italian) by Caterina Nonis

☆ 2025 Eurodram English-Language Committee Selection

## Bios

**Tobia Rossi** is an Italian playwright and screenwriter who works with the main Italian and Milanese theatres. Awards include the Mario Fratti Award with *Hide and Seek* (2018) (*Nascondino*), premiering in New York at the Tank Theater in 2022 and in London at VAULT Festival, in 2023. The play then opened at the Park Theatre, London, in 2024. In 2024 he wrote his first novel, *Cosa siamo nel buio*, published by Mondadori. He wrote the book for the musical *Miss I-Doll* (Zava Productions, The Other Palace, London, 2025). Tobia is also a story editor for tv and cinema and a creative writing teacher in Milan at Teatro Franco Parenti, Civica Scuola di Cinema Luchino Visconti and IED - Istituto Europeo del Design.

**Caterina Nonis** (she/her) is a director, actor and translator living and working between Milan and New York. As a director, recent credits include workshopping an original opera at Berkeley Rep's *The Ground Floor*, and assisting on ATIR's *El Nost* Milan (dir. Serena Sinigaglia). Other collaborations include *Page 73*, *The Venice Biennale*, *The Habitat*, *Theatre East*, *Modern Shakespeare Project*, *Campo Teatrale*, and *Beyond Borders Italy*. She toured the US and Italy with Kairos Italy Theatre's *The Worth of Women* and has served as director and community facilitator on many projects by the *Inheritance Theatre Project*. Her documentary *Mario* was presented at *CinemAmbiente Festival* in 2021, and won *Best Documentary* at the *Moviemmece Festival* in 2022. Translations: *Apartment 2B* (KIT, 2025), *I Colori della Moda* (24 Ore Cultura, 2023) and numerous articles and academic papers. BFA: NYU Tisch, Stella Adler & RADA.

## Introductory Note, *Little Beast*

“Little Beast” is a bittersweet queer tale about what happens when your partner turns into something different from what they’d been. Max and Nic are about thirty years old and have been together for eight years. They have found their own form of normalcy and family. But when Nic turns into a mouse overnight, acceptance from their friends and family is no longer guaranteed. Within the couple, the weight of actions and words shifts, as do priorities, needs, and power dynamics. The relationship is put to the test, stripped bare as its most covert toxic aspects emerge, and pushed to beyond-human territories that neither Nic nor Max had ever considered. The confessional narrative of a young man’s romantic and sexual tribulations as he is pushed to the limit by his partner’s metamorphosis. This transformation, reminiscent of Kafka, Roald Dahl and Bukowski, shows how any potential, radical and unforeseen metamorphosis in a partner can call into question needs, priorities and, ultimately, our deepest selves.

—Tobia Rossi

# *Little Beast*

Almost a monologue

Winner of the Carlo Annoni 2023 International Playwriting Award

*Note: a slash (/) at the end of a line indicates an interruption, a sudden change of thought, brought on internally or externally.*

## Part One

*A guy with a big smile.*

My boyfriend has turned into a mouse, but it's okay.

Not as a metaphor, as in a / A / A mouse / You know what I / Exactly.

I'm sure you hear all sorts of shit so I don't think this will ... right?

Out of nowhere. For no reason, with no / One morning, that little dickhead woke up and instead of being my lovely little Nic who I adored / who I adore, I *adore* him / He was a... yeah.

I swear / *I swear* / I'm fine / *He's fine* / *We're fine*.

At the end of the day it's not that big of a / It's more like the idea of / He *looks* like a mouse, but he's still /

We've been together for eight years / We got over the seven-year itch which is not a real thing anyway / We survived two moves / Moving is the third most traumatising everyday event / I get it / It's life, isn't it? It's / Okay, he is a mouse now, but we / We have been flying the diversity flag high, right? We have fought / *We are fighting* for the destigmatization of the other / for his / Or her / Or their / Legitimation.

Exactly, *otherness*, we love that. We adore otherness.

We live in a capital of the Western world, we know a lot of gender non-conforming people / And when I say we know them I mean we *love* them / We welcome change / At our age we're not as naive as we used to be but at the same time we're not as uptight as we'll probably be when we're older, our intellectual, cognitive and even emotional potential is at its peak, we *are* the *fertile Middle Earth*, so what if my boyfriend turned into / *Another mammal*.

What keeps us together goes / Beyond our looks / Our bodies / Of course / Our two / Our two / Hearts / They beat as one / Partners in crime / Hearts or brains / I would say *souls* if I believed in

the intangible / I'm just saying that Nic and I are profoundly connected / And will always be, I think, connected by / Connected because of /

Who We Really Are.

So whether he's a man or a mouse it doesn't / Last night. We had a wonderful night / Wonderful. The usual night, a little bit wild, just the way we like it, it was *typical*, a *typical* night.

I had some friends over for his birthday. Usually when we throw parties Nic and I do the rounds and talk to all our guests, you know? We split the room, he and I never even cross paths. But that's better, right? Those couples who are always together, 24/7? No thank you. Before bed we tell each other about our nights and it always feels like we went to two different parties and we die of laughter, he saw Alex talking to the cactus in the hallway, I spied Christian secretly checking the football scores because he was the only cis-het white man there and he's ashamed of it, as he should be. We die of laughter, I swear.

Last night was the first real party after the / Metamorphosis.

I carried Nic on my shoulder the whole time. He used his tail to stay balanced. He's getting really good at it. Moral of the story is we were always together. Of course. It's not like he could have walked around by himself, he's eight inches tall if he stands up straight / Alex almost stepped on him with his wedges. It was / Well maybe not exactly a typical night / Wild, we like it when things get / It was a really great night, seriously.

My parents came too but they didn't stay too long. Our families get along very well, we brought them together and turned them into one big family. My parents are / They're / My dad is trying to overcome his fear of mice. He's still working on it. His face goes red and his hands begin to shake. My mom seems comfortable around Nic, when I told her about the metamorphosis she said *well it could have been worse, he could have turned into a bed bug*.

For his birthday my parents got him a Balenciaga belt. Whatever, I can't even / *He likes designer stuff, doesn't he?* Yes, mom, but at the moment / At the moment / A belt? How the fuck is he gonna / Where is he / But you have to be understanding with them, they're not used to this, they're not / It is our duty to understand our parents, it is our duty to become our parents' parents at some point. It's actually very healthy, we have to accept them as fallible and highly imperfect human beings / But for fuck's sake I mean they know he's a mouse, but then again I'm not surprised, my mom learned Nic is a vegetarian on the day that they met and every time we come over she still makes him chicken pot pie.

My friends / Samu got him a poetry book. Sylvia Plath. Great. A few days ago he'd asked me if Nic could still read and I really appreciated that. Samu is a wonderful person, we've been friends since we were eleven. Crissi got Nic a slice of Gruyere with a red bow on it, Nic did not find it ironic, it felt pretty stereotypical to him and he hates stereotypes at least as much as he hates Gruyere. Later he told me it felt like the time his aunt Isa found out he was gay and told him: *you better take me shopping then!* But Crissi was so proud of her present and said she's gonna write this party into the stand up routine she's been working on to take her broken heart and make it into art as Meryl Streep said. Alex got him a teeny-tiny bespoke jumper. He took a video of Nic

unwrapping it. He's a visual artist and he said he agonised over picking exactly the right colours before landing on red, orange and yellow. I didn't bother explaining to him that mice are colorblind, Alex was so happy, he kicked off his wedges, plopped himself on the sofa and started watching it on loop. Then the others started watching and laughing with him, they were all four gin and tonics deep, they posted a story and used the mouse filter, the one that gives you the ears and the big teeth so that they could look like Nic. They were not making fun of him, not at all, they could never, my friends adore him, they were laughing *with him*, they were / They /

They were four gin and tonics deep.

Nic just sat on the armchair. Up on his hind legs, amid gutted gift boxes, wrapping paper, ribbon, a Sylvia Plath book as tall as him, a tiny jumper the colours of which he cannot see, Gruyere that was making him nauseous and a Balenciaga belt.

I sit on the chair's armrest, I open the palm of my hand, he hops on it, he runs up my arm and sits on my shoulder. He touches my ear with his snout and whispers: *I like the belt. Do you think I could use it to hang myself?*  
I adore his sense of humour.

*Blackout.*

///

*A flashback, or a nightmare, or both.*

FUCKING HELL THERE'S A FUCKING MOUSE IN THE BED

*(calling for someone o.s.)* NIC!

Ew ew so fucking gross

*(calling louder)* NIC!

Where the fuck is he, is he up already, today I thought he / OH FUCK IT MOVED EW EW EW

EW EW OHMYGOD

*(much louder)* NIC!!!

Is he in the shower?

*(even louder)* NIC!!!!!!

Where the fuck did it come from, the windows are shut, the holes in the floor, they said they'd filled them, FILLED THEM MY ASS

This is the last straw

It's the last straw, the least they can fucking do is give us April's rent for free, May too even, that's the least they can do, THE LEAST

The tail looks like a worm, fuck

NIC!!!!!!

*A pause.*

What's the point of mice, I mean, what purpose do they / OH MY FUCKING GOD IT HOPPED AGAIN, IT'S SO FUCKING GROSS WHEN IT HOPS, OH MY GOD IS IT GONNA JUMP OFF?

Alright, if it gets off the bed and like walks over my feet I'm gonna puke, for real, so: I'm gonna leave, close the door, leave it there, Nic will be back tonight and he'll handle it, it doesn't gross him out

He is a biology graduate

Should I trap it with a box? What if it pisses and shits all over the bedroom

No, NO!

Oh my god it's on the pillow, those pillow cases are going straight in the trash

Whatever, I'm gonna shut the door and goodbye

Okay?

Okay

One, two, three, go

*Action.*

Fucking

Alright, I'm gonna shower and get ready

Let them know I'm running a little late / Fuck, my phone

It's in the bedroom

WHY THE FUCK DO I KEEP IT IN THE BEDROOM, WHO THE FUCK DO I HAVE TO CALL WHILE I'M ASLEEP FOR FUCK'S SAKE?

Alright

I'll just open the door

Yes, I'm scared, very scared, VERY

Where is it?

Is it gone?

Hey?

Please God if you exist let it be gone forever otherwise it'll be proof that you don't exist

My phone is charging on the shelf.

Just three diagonal steps, three, I'll get it, and then what's done is done.

One, two

OH FUCK THERE IT IS IT WAS UNDER THE BED FUCK FUCK

*Brandishing an imaginary coat hanger.*

I'll hit it, what else can I do from here?

What if it gets angry and decides to attack me?

Fuck, it's running away into the hall

Where are you going, little bitch?

*He chases it.*

It's fast, the little fucker, isn't it

It's in the kitchen

Of course, it can smell the food  
I'm onto it  
It's darting onto the terrace, the glass door is open, how could it know that?  
Busted  
Does it want to jump off?  
I mean, it's a small leap, the garage roof is right below, maybe it'll manage  
To get away  
Good job *Mickey Mouse*, nice rescue plan, unfortunately, there's a wire mesh fence on the railing,  
uh oh, didn't think of that one, did you, you can't get through it can you *Stuart Little*? Am I right,  
*Great Mouse Detective*? You didn't think of how you can't get through the net, *Geronimo-stupid-  
fucking-Stilton*?  
That's it. *Gus Gus* realised it has no escape route and now it's turning back towards me  
Why the fuck are you looking at me, *Ratatouille*?  
That little moustache grosses me out  
I could pick it up and throw it off the balcony but the mere thought of holding it in my hands makes  
me sick like what if it runs away  
There's a heavy metal dustpan leaning against the glass door, and a sink with a hose behind the  
vases  
Alright, I'll smash it with the dustpan, just one direct hit, and then I can use the hose to wash away  
all its insides, guts, bowels, whatever else may come out when you kill a rodent  
Listen, it was gonna happen sooner or later  
I mean, who can say they've never killed an animal?  
Chickens, we *murder* them to eat them, it's not like they die of a heart attack  
It just grosses me out but whatever I'll clean it later  
Mosquitos too, right? Some people brag about killing them, they'll even show you when they kill  
one full of blood and be like, "look!" / Let's be serious  
The way it's looking at me right now  
So still  
Those little eyes so full of dread  
Enough with the bullshit, it's been real, honey.

*He makes the gesture of brandishing the dustpan.*

*(a faint squeak)* Max?

Huh? Who is it?

It's Nic.

*(looking down)* I beg your pardon?

Do you mind putting down that dustpan? If you don't kill me you'll avoid getting  
our Venetian floors all bloody. And as a bonus I'll still be alive. See? I can speak!

*He lowers the imaginary dustpan.*

It's gonna be a shitty fucking day.

*Blackout.*

///

*That smile again.*

Alright, so, I have a friend, a witchcraft expert, right? She told me that in the past, to torture witches, they'd put a mouse up the woman's vagina and then they'd sew it in and the mouse would eat the woman from the inside.

I said it to Nic and he was like: *my God what a horrible punishment. For the mouse.*

Irony. Irony is our saviour. If I'm not falling down to my knees, if I'm not desperately asking for help it is all thanks to irony.

I'm not saying I *don't want* to ask for help, I'm saying I'm not *desperately* asking for help. And if I'm not desperate it is because of the type of person Nic is, a positive person, an optimist, brave / Ready to embrace change / All sorts of it.

Nic is good at / My friends always say: *thank God you found someone like Nic, he knows how to – get this – ease your worries.*

When I say that our life has stayed the same / I mean kind of. We go to the movies, to concerts – I let him stand on top of my head if he can't see the stage – we eat out because don't you know men and mice are both omnivores, mice are actually known to be *man's table companions*.

As a matter of fact, we have breakfast together every morning.

The other day we went to the park and sat on our bench.

Fine, some people do look at us weird but / Sure, it's not like everyone can be ready for / A man and a mouse to date, I mean / I've seen people strutting around the park with parrots on a leash, once I saw a woman with an iguana on her shoulder. She was talking to it too, you know. And by the way, I didn't wonder about / Their intimate life, did I? Everyone immediately thinks about sex, us humans really are just / And anyway this taboo against sex between men and animals is really just a / They say it's a crime, a violent act, I mean sure, it is not consensual. That is true. It's a violent act because the animal didn't agree to it. That is true. But then, do cows agree to being butchered in order to become hamburgers? I mean, did anyone ask the animal for its opinion on that? Do animals agree to have their fur torn off to make hats and belts? I'm just asking. And to spend their lives in cages so small that all they can do is stand in their own shit? Mhm? And to be pumped with anabolic steroids, or to be forced to wear one of those hot pink, polyester dog coats that some people like to make their chihuahuas wear? We're such hypocrites. Still, in this day and age.

I don't know what you think about it.

The bench. The other day we sat on our bench.

We *met* right in front of that bench, by the entrance to the Museum of Natural History. Nic works there as a guide for children's tours. *Worked*, he's not working now, he misses it, and he also misses his salary. Which, you know, was really useful in terms of / Rent. Which we share. A centrally located apartment is not / These days, like, with the economy, the wars and everything / Anyway. He says that when the circus comes back he's gonna bring them his cv, in case they're hiring.

Irony is our saviour.

Sitting on that bench, we play at reliving our first meeting. The other day we didn't feel like talking. After all those hours in the car / I drove him to see his parents and friends, when he was a human he used to go by himself but now / It's not like he can drive or / I take his car and drive him all over the place / I'm happy to do it / I put him in a little cage, set him up in the front seat and then fasten him in. His parents live in a small town, it's fifty miles to get there and fifty to come back, they're so lovely, they took it well, they even got a little house set up for him in his bedroom, with slides and all, I find it very cute, Nic goes: *come on. It's designed by Angelina Ballerina*. His dad is always talking to me about motorcycle brands and lawnmowers and with his mom it's all about the used clothes she got on Vinted, she's banking on my interest in clothing which is nearly nonexistent, anyway I don't really give a damn about motorcycles or lawnmowers and even less about used clothes, so I'd rather just not visit with them. His friends too / I usually would rather / Not fully avoid them / Not pretend they don't exist but just / Life is a stalled out plane, plunging us straight to our deaths, right? So why waste what precious time we have on earth with people we don't like? *All that much*, with people we don't like *all that much*. It's not that I don't like his friends, it's just / Perhaps I just don't like them *all that much*.

I ask him: *Nic, what do you even like about these people?*

*Dunno. I love them. I've known them forever.*

*Exactly, you've known them forever, that's what you like about them, it's the only thing you like about them, you recognise them, but you don't really like them, you wouldn't choose them today, they don't have a shred of your, of your emotional intelligence, feeling like you're better than them must be reassuring, sure, but come on now we should use our intellect to choose our friends, we're not animals for God's sake! Oh. Sorry.*

Since he became a mouse I / I've been cooking for the both of us. *Cooking* / I defrost things and throw them in the microwave. He acts like he likes that stuff, but he's actually a good cook, he tried to bake an angel food cake but he fell into the batter and very nearly choked. I had to blow dry his fur to make the little pieces of dough come out.

We go to restaurants too, please, of course we *go*, but it's not like they're all willing to / Some don't let dogs in, forget mice, what if there's a food inspection.

Of course, there are also some who go crazy about us and give us a discount and ask for a selfie and beg us to come back because they've never had customers like us.

No shit.

At night, he's exhausted. Which isn't the best, because I work at night, into the night, I have to stay focused and looking after Nic has become a bit / You can imagine, right, a bit / I generate

content. I'm an editor and I write articles but at the moment I'm pursuing my first publishing project. The book is going to be released soon, it's a collection of interviews with famous gay couples called *Men Who Marry Men*. Though I'm considering doing away with that "who" because relative clauses can get tricky so it'll be *Men Marry Men*.

It's cool, right? So like, I invite these famous couples over, "*famous*" so to speak, we sit at the table, I perform my best impression of Christiane Amanpour and I ask them questions on this and that. The fact that Nic's metamorphosis would happen right as I'm writing this / This is supposed to be an important book / Maybe not important but *a book* nonetheless / It makes me a bit / Right? / A bit / Anyway Nic has nothing to do with it, Nic is doing what he can to help but you know / He hates feeling helpless, one time I got a forty degree fever and he didn't know how to bring it down, so he violently slapped me in the face with a wet cloth until I passed out.

Now he frolics around the house carrying coffee cups filled to the brim to water the plants, he spends hours hopping around like he's Fievel Mousekowitz / *I'll take care of it, Nic, I'll use a watering can and be done in three minutes* but no, he wants to be the one doing it.

He got the rubbish to roll down the stairwell to take it out, but then one night he ran into a cat by the bins and that was the end of that.

He was so scared he threw plastic into the compost bin.

He spends his days at home alone doing nothing and I know he hates it, when I get home I ask him what he's been up to all day and he's like: *I dunno, I read a bit, scrolled Instagram*. He scrolls Instagram by running on his smartphone like it's a treadmill.

*He makes the gesture of running with his fingers.*

*This way I can work out and cyber stalk people at the same time. Irony is our saviour.*

There's this one thing that / Whatever / I didn't wanna talk to him about it, no / I'd rather have / Maybe / Not right away, like / This one thing I noticed / At some point I just asked him / Just as we were about to fall asleep.

*Nic. Our cupboard, the solid beech wood one in the living room. The cupboard legs are all... chewed up. Do you know anything about it?*

Nothing. He fell asleep. All balled up on the pillow. Or he was pretending to sleep. I'm afraid I humiliated him. The wooden legs really are all chewed up. And my Macbook charger too. And the base of the bookshelf in the hall. I read that mice *have to* do this, otherwise their front teeth will grow too much and prevent them from properly chewing on food. I get it. It's just that he's only been doing it for a few days. I wonder if it's, I dunno / The start of something / I wonder if he'll continue to become more of a mouse and less of / Less of Nic.

The other day at the park I could sense that he was feeling down.

I used to stroke the base of his neck whenever his mood darkened / Now I dare you to even *find* the base of his neck / I gently picked him up and tucked him into my sweatshirt's neckline. I did it on impulse. He just stayed there with his little paws peeping out of the zipper. He was like: *you're that bitch Snowwhite and I'm one of his fucking squirrels*.

We laugh. It's our cue to begin.

*He closes his eyes.*

February 2016, early afternoon. You're sitting on the museum steps and you're saying goodbye to the fourth grade class you took to the exhibit on the Spinosaurus, the long lost giant of the Cretaceous period. You try to remember their names and mention a youtuber because you're one of them, bruh, and you want them to know that.

I'm on a run, all bundled up, but I see you and damn you're hot, I stop abruptly on the gravel. The dark pink of your cheeks. The curve of your back. Your miraculously tight polo neck. You notice me noticing you.

Your lip curls ever so slightly.

That little crease.

The children leave and you don't have any more reason to stay, so you start kicking the dead leaves off of the entrance steps.

Once there are no dead leaves left to kick off of the steps, there I am, still staring at you, and you go: *have we met before?*

And that's why you claim you made the first move.

And, without coming closer, despite all the people coming and going between us, I answer: *no. I'm just staring at you. I know we teach children they shouldn't stare but I disagree. I think we should stare if we're interested in something. Or someone.*

You're impressed.

A woman sitting on the bench, do you remember her? With a brown faux fur coat, frizzy hair and a very red face? She looks up from her phone, looks at us and smiles. Her teeth were yellow, remember?

You laugh at my remark and go: *my bosses make me buy a coffee for all the people who linger around here. Would you like a coffee?*

And I go: *coffee with the fossils?* You claim that I said that to get Yellow Teeth to laugh but it's not true, I did it to get you to laugh.

You laugh too and go: *there's more than just fossils.*

*How am I supposed to know, I've never been inside.*

*I can show you around if you want.*

*Do your bosses make you do that too?*

Yellow Teeth keeps shifting her gaze between the two of us like it's a tennis match.

*I'd like to have a look inside. But I'm a sweaty mess at the moment... I should finish my cardio... how about tomorrow?*

And you say: *I'm going to the lake with my boyfriend tomorrow.*

And I say: *you'd rather spend time with the fossils. I can see it in your eyes. And I'm not even wearing my glasses.*

This is too much for Yellow Teeth, she gets up and leaves, lighting up a cigarette. Yet another, that's why her teeth are so yellow.

I'm cold. *Alright, I'm off, or I'll end up with pneumonia at the very least.*

I tell you to DM me and two days later we meet up and we know the rest.

*He opens his eyes.*

I can feel you, hanging onto my sweatshirt zipper with your little nails, I can feel you, a little ball of fur on my chest, I can feel you / You're shivering.

You can feel that I can feel you shivering so you make yourself stop.

You steady your breath, as if expecting, out of the stillness, that things will go back to normal.

*A pause.*

I know.

*A pause.*

I know every moment of crisis is actually positive because it contains a death but also a rebirth, and obstacles help us grow, there's a line in *The Little Prince* about this / There's a line in *The Little Prince* about every fucking thing / I know it's stupid to feel sorry for yourself and wonder *why me?* And since we are supposed to be the intellectually mature ones we should have the clarity of mind to wonder *why NOT me?* / But /

*A longer, pregnant pause.*

That morning I woke up to a beast in my bed instead of / Can you fucking imagine? / That morning / On the terrace / When I realised that beast was actually him / I ran away, I locked him inside and sat on the landing for three hours, plopped down on the doormat with my back against the door, staring at the wall / *Fucking hell please tell me I'm dreaming* / I wasn't dreaming / At some point he came calling for me / First out loud / I wouldn't answer / Then he started scratching at the door with those / Little nails / claws / So I had to get myself up, open the door and face / Face / *It all.*

So, well / Yeah / I'm here to / Yeah.

Irony is our saviour but we can't actually be ironic about everything, or perhaps we can, perhaps we can, but there are things that have become a bit / For us / After the / We're talking about a mouse, aren't we? And as much as he can talk, he's still not a human, right, as much as he's a *mammal*, as much as he is *man's table companion* nevertheless he is a mouse, okay? Is there any chance that you might be able to make my boyfriend go back to the way he used to be?

*He studies the audience's silence.*

I'm doing it for him.

*Blackout.*

///

*Suddenly naked, or nearly so.*  
Why don't you wanna suck my dick?  
We shouldn't give up on  
I'm still really attracted to you

All I need is to know you're the one sucking my dick  
Even though now you have those, that, you're  
Why don't you want to?  
It's not like I have a huge dick, I mean, you know that  
Obviously  
And I noticed that your jaw opening is quite impressive  
Is it the front teeth, do you think that'll hurt if you  
When you try to  
I could try blowing you, but like, what am I supposed to suck on?  
I know you have a dick too  
Somewhere  
But how am I  
How  
Where will I  
It's too small, I mean it's the right size for you, very proportionate, but for me  
Same goes for your ass, you know how much I love to lick it but it's looking like it's gonna be a  
bit challenging at the moment, your ass is

*He draws a tiny circle in the air.*

I don't think I ever even saw it, but surely those little black balls are coming out of somewhere,  
aren't they?  
Sorry, I didn't mean to, I  
It was just a joke.

If you slid in up my  
Do you think you'd fit  
How much would it have to  
Stretch out, how much  
We can try  
Obviously, I'll wash up first  
*Thoroughly*, not like the last time.

Okay, I know we both can't stop thinking about the mouse who got sewed into the witch's vagina.

Yeah, I know, it makes me lose my boner too

Alright, not to keep talking about vaginas  
But I did watch some porn where they put a mouse inside a vagina  
And there's this  
Tube  
That he uses  
Like  
A tunnel  
So that the mouse can  
But the mouse wants nothing to do with it, you know

Now, I would need to dilate significantly to get you to come inside, but I could use one of our anal plugs, you literally die of laughter whenever I use them, okay, you could use it on me, I could use increasingly larger ones until it's stretched out enough for you to come in  
Maybe just a little bit  
Or you could tuck your tail between your legs and enter ass first that way you'd be more in the shape of a  
Use a little lube  
Rub yourself with / or *plunge* into the lube  
Not too much though, or you'll drown in it  
Hey, it sounds kind of nice to be lubricated head to toe, no? Kinda like that Foam Party we went to in Barcelona, remember?

Let's try  
Remember how good it was when you fucked me, you used to tell me you loved being inside me, now you'd be, like  
*Totally*, inside me  
Literally every part of you would be inside me, what other couple could ever experience anything like it?

You're not gonna choke.  
If you feel like you're choking give me a shout and I'll pull you out  
I'll use your tail, pull you out from your tale, like a tampon, we'll leave the tail out  
I could anaesthetise my  
What's it called, that ointment to anaesthetise your ass? It's something like /

*Nic interrupts him with a long squeak.*  
SQUEEEEEEEAAAAAAK!

What? What am I doing wrong? I'm trying to get our sex life back Nic, I already told you you can fuck whoever you want, you know that, other / Mice / If you're up for it, of course, you can fuck the whole city sewer if you want, but that doesn't mean you and I can't do it because I really really want to do it with you.

Do not start again with how "I'm not attracted to you anymore", you used to say it before too, Nic, before the / And even though I did do it with a couple other people, it was for fun, you know, just to empty out my balls, fucks without intimacy, we agreed on that, Nic, *fucks without intimacy*, and that's why I shouldn't feel guilty, the same way you shouldn't feel guilty if you had sex with other guys / I mean, rats. I mean mice! Whatever!

We're too evolved to be slaves to guilt, don't you think / We're more / More / More /

And I'm fucking done with you just squeaking, can you fucking talk or can't you because if you can talk please fucking talk  
*A long pause.*

You like your silence, don't you?

*Delivering me to silence, torturing me with your silence.*

And when you can't be silent you have your excuses, you're tired or you don't feel like arguing, tired my ass it's your piece de resistance, you're tired and we should talk about it tomorrow but then we never talk about it tomorrow, is that what you want?

Well I'm not talking about it tomorrow, I'm talking about it right now.

You say that your father can't express his feelings and that's why he retreats into silence but that's exactly what you're doing right now because you don't wanna talk about our sex life do you see how we go to Pride all chipper because we're the best the coolest etcetera but then we can't talk about our own feelings exactly like your father or at least that's true of you because, and I'm sorry to say that, but I definitely can talk about my feelings, I'm good at it too, and also about sex as you can see and I think the bare minimum right now would be to both use our brains to understand how, what /

*A pause to collect himself.*

Now come here and get inside me

It might hurt *me, me*

Let me

Let me turn around

How the fuck am I supposed to

*He makes a few attempts, then gives up.*

Or I can just /

*He lies down.*

I'll close my eyes and perhaps, I dunno

You can start by running on me, like, all over me, tickle me a bit, that turns me on, you know, with your paws, your whiskers, your tail, whatever you want, on my neck perhaps, around my groin, on my stomach, go over my dick, just brush on it, then go back to it, I'm gonna get hard you'll see, I'm gonna get wet

Let's try.

*A long pause.*

I'll get dressed.

*Blackout.*

## Part Two

*The bar at a club.  
Four AM, loud music, intermittent light.  
Lots of alcohol.*

Alright alright alright / The question is / No, stop laughing / Wait / Alright / The question is / Stop fucking laughing / You don't know me, okay? / Okay / I mean you've known me for / Okay, ten minutes / But how do you think / that I / As a boyfriend / How do you think I am? / I think I'm not bad / Okay fine like / I could be more / *Instagrammable*, for sure / The *hot boyz of the month* page has never posted about me / At the gym / In the shower / Noone ever peeks between my legs / No fifty year old woman with internalised homophobia ever looks at me and goes: *what a waste* / Fine / I'm insecure / I know it doesn't look like I am but / When I was in my twenties I used to come to clubs like this and whenever anyone approached me to hit on me I would automatically assume they wanted to rob me / I swear / Do you wanna rob me? / Okay / Fuck / I don't feel attractive at all / Once upon a time / *Once* I felt attractive / in 2012 / Between March and October / Because a Dolce & Gabbana model started fucking me / Almost every day, you know / Then it turned out he was / very self-destructive / he had like a personality disorder, I'm not sure / He'd put himself through degrading experiences / Like fucking me / Anyway he started seeing a therapist / And stopped seeing me / Yeah why not let's have another drink / On me

Nic is my boyfriend, right / He too is insecure / We both are / And flawed too / That's cool / We talk / We have this / *Rule* / Insecurity breeds pettiness / When we're about to be cruel with each other because of our insecurities we stop, we breathe, we talk through our discomfort and we try to understand where it comes from / We talk, for fuck's sake / When he isn't too tired and says we'll do it tomorrow.

But then like / Why did he fucking leave?

Where did I go wrong, what didn't I understand, why didn't he talk to me about it and most of all HOW THE FUCK DID HE RUN AWAY IF I LOCK HIM INSIDE EVERY DAY?! I close the glass doors too, and the window overlooking the terrace over the garage roofs.

I still can't tell if he can no longer speak or if he *chose* to stop speaking.

He squeaks!

*I'm* the one who encouraged him to move to the city eight years ago, if it weren't for me he'd still be living with his parents in that fucking dump, I introduced him to interests he didn't know he had, serious, cultural interests, after high school he went straight to uni where he thought studying fungi and bacteria was the best he could ever have, can you believe that. I pushed him to ask for a raise / I helped him become the best version of himself, he said that, he's the one who said that to me, I think I gave him / *My everything*, fuck, and I keep giving him my everything / We do have our challenges, fine, a few hiccups here and there / But to run away like this!

I know how he did it. The bathroom window. I left it open. He must have climbed up on the washing machine, from there on the cabinet, from there on the perfumes shelf, and from there one jump and you're out, fuck. Which like, then what did he do there, in the inner courtyard, jump up on the tree and then slide down like a pole? Like *The fucking Rescuers*?

Where is he even going anyway? This city hates mice as much as the next one, as soon as he transformed I googled *mice*, and the first things that popped up were: *mice how to exterminate*, *mice poison*, *mice pest control*.

I'm worried.

I told him he was free as a bird / Of course / We / We decided / We *chose* / When we felt attracted to other guys we decided to follow those feelings, because we adore mutual freedom and we don't want to have to give anything up. It was my idea but he had the same impulse, *he had the same impulse*, he told me that, I sensed it, he told me that. We can have sex with whoever we want as long as we're not / Emotionally involved. We've had threesomes, foursomes, we went to that sex club with that friend of his, Nic spent the whole night at the bar because he was scared that his friend was gonna give me a blowjob and he couldn't bear the thought of that so I said *okay we can stay at the bar, we don't have to do anything we don't wanna do*. I was like: *doesn't it turn you on to think that like two or three men could be fucking me at the same time* and he was like: *no* and so fine, I accepted that.

This whole escape thing / Now that I'm thinking about it / It's premeditated. Because the last thing he told me, before he stopped speaking, was: *you should move the bathroom cabinet to the other side*. And like an idiot I moved the cabinet between the washing machine and the fucking shelf, which he then used to jump onto the shelf and then out the window.

I thought / I thought I'd hit rock bottom with my ex / He was really freaking crazy / A *full-fledged* narcissist, he checks every box from those articles about how to spot a narcissist, so passive-aggressive he'll make you leave the house at two a.m. to get him a kebab because he drank too much and he can't go to sleep without having had a little something first.

Like / He drove me away from all my friends because he said they were energy vampires, he made me fight with Samu who is anything but an energy vampire.

And for some reason I felt / What a fucking idiot / *Indebted* to him / *Grateful* that he had chauffeured me to a higher plane of existence, horseshit / I won't even speak his name, I saved him in my phone as asterisk asterisk asterisk, my therapist suggested that.

I dated him because / He chose me / And I couldn't say no, I couldn't / *He chose me*

Sometimes I'd scream in his face, I'd vomit everything out on him and this vein up here would swell up like crazy, and this one too, and I hated the thought that that little red-faced, dry-throated, *vein-swollen* screaming monster was / *Me*.

I thought Nic wasn't gonna cause me any trouble, but / being a mouse made him /

I told you he turned into a mouse, right? / Okay.

Lately it's been / We tried to be playful about it, we went through all the classic mouse jokes plus some that we came up with, puns, our worst was *sodomouse*, but it turned out not to be particularly / It was all / A bit / Very / A bit

For a laugh, we'd ask each other: *are you a top or bottomouse?*

I've got nothing to do with him becoming a mouse, that much is clear, right? It's not my fault that he became like that, I didn't make him shrink / Or *animalise* or / It's not my fault that he became like that / It was a totally /

*A long pause to get a hold of himself.*

I have nothing to do with it. Cheers.

*He drinks and observes the guy standing in front of him.*

Your shoulders are crazy by the way

Max

Nice to meet you

Sorry, I didn't even /

Enough with the boyfriend talk

Is he even my boyfriend anymore?

You said you're a fashion student, yeah, but don't say it like that, don't apologise for being a fashion student, it's your calling, your / *Sacred fire.*

Stop laughing

Why are you laughing, because everyone in this city is a fashion student, sure, it's the biggest cliché in the world, but that doesn't mean people do it just for the sake of it, many do, I'm not saying that's not true, many of them are rich kids, most of them perhaps, but surely some of them are, moved by an authentic desire / By ambition / In a healthy way.

I bet you have this / This / *Devotion* / I could tell right away from / The way you move /

The way you use your hands, the way you / Brush them on the counter.

I, let's say I work in communication, I work with words, so I mean / When I say you sound like a guy who is burning with passion, spontaneous and who doesn't hold back... I know what I'm saying.

Perhaps you just need a dose of self-confidence

To see the beauty that I see

After all, as Wislawa Szymborska said "*on this third planet of the Sun / Among the signs of bestiality / A clear conscience is number one.*"

She's a poet

I live just around the corner

If you want to that'd be quite

What's your name again?

*Blackout.*

///

*Lying down, tired of speaking to a void.*

... I bet you're fucking dying out there, you fucking dickhead / Get hit by a car or run into a cat or a dog or even a raptor / And then you're going to fucking miss me, dickhead, you're going to miss coming over and asking me how I'm doing a million times and looking at me the way you look at a sky heavy with rain, you're going to miss being quiet as you let me calm down after I make a scene or running to the bathroom to wash your face and breathe deeply and coming back out convinced that you can handle another one of my hissy fits and you're gonna miss feeling guilty for all the things that you can no longer do to me and give me now that you're just a, a / Fuck / I kept waiting for you to leave the house to fuck someone else and now I don't feel like fucking at all / I'm trying to write but everything I write is utter bullshit / And all this shit ends up in my writing, you know? / *It seeps in* / My writing is shit / *Men Marry Men* / They're supposed to be love stories but they're just shitty stories / And the deadline is on the twenty fourth / IF THIS IS HOW YOU LEAVE I'M GONNA FEEL LIKE AN ARSEHOLE AND I'M NOT AN ARSEHOLE / I didn't make you run away / I didn't bring you to / No / Do whatever you want / I don't care / I don't give a fuck

*A pause.*

I left all the windows open so that you could come back and now I'm fucking freezing my arse / I keep checking my phone because even though you didn't bring yours with you you'll find a way to call if you want to / That is if you still know my number / I would get naked and let you hop all over my whole body, you can do whatever you want, really / With other people too if you want / With those animal-fucking guys, we can find them on adultwork.com / With other mice too if you want / Seriously, look, I'm happy to / Look, go ahead you dickhead, when you jump on me why don't you bite me with your front teeth, why don't you bite my arm, make me bleed, bite my finger off that way I'll have a brand new pain to distract me. Actually, why don't you bite off my whole hand that way I'll be worse off than you / Why don't you become a zombie mouse with bloodshot eyes, a mohawk and sharp teeth, scratch me and infect me with one of those diseases you rats carry, give me mange, I'm begging you, give me something bad enough they'll have to take me to A&E something that'll disfigure my face with red blisters and marks and pustules and pus until I'm totally unrecognisable and even uglier than I already am, that way for once you'll be the one feeling hideous and grotesque and stupid and small and then you'll be the one to come and tell me what it's like to feel hideous and evil and harmful and all that.

Come home stupid fucking mouse.

///

*Looking down, caught off guard.*

*A pause before he begins to speak.*

Oh my God your fur is all dirty

Where did you  
Where did  
I'll get the brush, I'll  
Wait, wait  
Thank you for coming back, I  
*Thank you*

I got you something  
It's your birthday present, are you ready?  
I didn't forget about it, it's just that it took a while to find it.  
But I did it.  
I waited a month to give it to you and now

*He takes out a pretty, golden, egg shaped box, he opens it and a small bottle emerges, full of a pink, fluorescent liquid<sup>2</sup>.*

If you drink it all in one go you'll turn back into a human.  
I found it on the dark web. Don't ask. It wasn't too expensive.  
Mostly I had to convince them that I really needed it.  
That *we* really needed it.  
I told our story to a group of people in a dark room, I went back many times until at some point they determined that I was desperate enough to deserve this (*the bottle*)  
Down it  
Like a tequila shot  
Knock it back and everything will go back to the way it was

Down it

*Nic begins to speak.*

Max  
You're the best for not being mad  
The flat's tidy.  
The plants look a bit sad but they're still alive.  
I told you to water them in the evening, not during the day, you forgot about that but that's okay.  
What is this, a *magic elixir*? An *antidote*? Does it have a name? I quite like the packaging. The design. The little vial. I'm sure it was really hard to find.

Thank you, from the bottom of my heart, Max, really.

Are you making that face because I smell bad?  
Thank you the brush yes if you could grab it that'd be great just not now okay  
Maybe I'll have a bath later

---

<sup>2</sup> It looks exactly like the one from *Death Becomes Her* (1992).

I realised that I'm very dirty, black almost, I saw my reflection on the fender of a minivan, *who the fuck is that rat?* Well, it was me.

That's inevitable, after all I lived, well, obviously, with other mice, right? For how many days? They immediately saw me as one of their own. The alpha males didn't feel threatened by me – I'm really skinny compared to them – and they welcomed me into their clan. It's not like they did me a favour, they weren't being generous, okay? They didn't *allow* me in, they just did it.

They let me have a little square of warm soil in the hole under the park across the street. To sleep on.

You must have thought I'd gone off who knows where. Actually not.

They showed me around a bit.

They have mazes and tunnels, and wormholes, my God, there's a whole city underneath the city, you wouldn't believe it.

It was crazy.

Why do you think humans dislike us so much? / Dislike them. Dislike mice. Because they live in the attics?

As soon as the mice stick their snouts out of their holes and invade their spaces, humans lose their minds, this rage overcomes them which I'm sorry to say but I find it disproportionate compared to such small furry animals that at the end of the day are totally innocuous, right?

Yes, they do carry diseases, but not all the time, and they carry them the same way an infected human does, and anyway demonising a whole group because they can transmit a virus is a bit Eighties, isn't it?

If a man sees a mouse he'll either run or chase it away or kill it.

Why do we act this way / why do *you* act this way / with the things you don't want to see, you either run or chase them away or kill them.

I dunno.

I'm not trying to say mice are perfect, they certainly aren't, they have questionable hygiene, they tend to be messy, I've seen things that / You know what nevermind.

But a mouse isn't looking for their soulmate, a mouse never went to school or to church, never saw a single Disney movie, doesn't dream of ever finding its other half, I used to believe in that too, but now I know that when you see a person as your other half you're not really seeing them.

And you're not seeing yourself either.

I can talk again, see? To be honest I never lost the ability to speak, but after a while I just didn't have anything left to say. I needed to be on my own for a bit to organise

my thoughts. I'm not trying to be mean, it just takes me a while to understand what I want to say.

You know me.

Finding that bottle must have been an ordeal. You had a meltdown over the Ryanair website when we went to Berlin for the weekend so I imagine for you the dark web must have been /

Maybe it goes in the fridge, right? To preserve it, we need to keep it  
In the freezer?

It won't freeze, will it? I assume it's like one of those hard liquors that never freeze  
Or maybe it's enough to /  
Yeah, maybe it's enough to just keep it in /

I'm not gonna drink it, Max

Sorry

I mean, I'm sorry

Max

While I was sleeping all curled up in the dirt  
I had a dream.

We're all caged up beasts. We live in a castle of cages. We've lived there all our lives, we were born there, and some cages are tiny. We can barely move around, it's dark, we can't tell night from day.

Out of nowhere, we hear a scream, a cry, a roar.

Where is it coming from? We lean against one of the barred walls and we realise the cage was never locked. Wow. And of course what do we do, we run outside, right? All of us, it's a madhouse – paws, wings, hoofs, beaks, fins, we'd never looked each other in the eyes before, now we are one pack.

We run, I'm running too.

Outside there are the woods and the desert and the ocean and everything.

Can you picture it?

I make an animal sound but what comes out is no longer a squeak, it's more like, I dunno, like a howl, like a roar. My coat glistens in the reflection of the moon, what kind of fucking beast have I become? Suddenly I'm growing wings, roaring louder and the other animals... *they're answering me*, Max, they're coming from God knows where.

We howl together so that the others will hear us too, to let them know that we're here and there's a place they can run to.

And fuck, Max, you're there too, galoping by my side.

We're two strange animals, you and I, funny, no, like, not funny, *peculiar*, unique unto ourselves, we don't feel better than everyone else like other men do, and between us /

Your kiss is no longer a stamp of ownership, it's just the desire to bite my lips, we feel like we are part of a new species together with millions of others just like us and what I am for you doesn't need a name, Max.

And I realise this is the kind of freedom I used to dream of, when I was a nine year old human who didn't know what to say when the kids at school asked me to pick which girl I liked, and I ended up choosing the one who I thought did her hair the best, or when I was twenty and I'd spend the night talking to my friend, my sweaty ear against the phone, shaking like a leaf and hoping my Prince Charming wouldn't fuck other people at the sauna, or when I went to Pride with you, Max, marching by your side, fighting for freedom, and now I see that all I wanted was to be free from you.

But also with you.

Everything that we / That we aren't, that we don't want, that we despise, that negates us, that scares or scandalises or threatens us, the system, I dunno, fascism? Evil, evil. *Evil* is feasting on the instruction manual that governs everything that's supposed to happen between you and me. Our enemies, right? The ones that we know to be our enemies. Social pressure, authoritarian cults, everything we've fought against and fight against is fueled by spying on our promises in the dark. By hissing in our ears what the boundaries of *our existence* should be.

We always say we wanna change the world.

We can only change the world if we change what happens between us.

I don't know what I'm asking / *Proposing* / But I know that we can choose to fly free, to live outdoors, in the light, we can dance like crazy outside of our cages.

We always could.

But we didn't do it because we were both humans and humans are /

A human being is just a /

Little beast

But right now I am what I am and you /

The average lifespan of a mouse is one to three years.

With a little courage we can make the next one to three years the best of our lives.

*A long pause.*

Is everything alright?

Don't give me that face

Come on

Who's my little mouse?

*Another long pause. Back to Max.*

*He carefully puts away the bottle.*

Okay.

No, I

Got it, it's quite

Quite clear.

Nic

I sent my editor the first draft of *Men Marry Men*.

She was like: *Max, we asked for stories about couples, you gave us stories about loneliness.*

I was like: *Sofi, every couple's story is a story of loneliness.*

It was over the phone but I could clearly sense one of her smirks.

She was like: *how sad.*

*No*, I said, *not necessarily.*

Otherwise, Nic

I don't know, Nic, I'm quite

It's all quite

I'm quite tired

Can we talk about it tomorrow?

*Blackout.*

# *Focus Group (Focus Group)*<sup>3</sup>

by Marco Di Stefano

translated from the Italian by Carlotta Brentan

## Bios

**Marco Di Stefano** is an Italian playwright and theater director. His plays have won multiple awards including the ETI Nuove Sensibilità award for *Falene (Moths)*, and the Mario Fratti award in New York City for *La Città che Sale (The City Rises)*, co-written with Chiara Boscaro. Marco's plays have been published and produced in Europe, China and United States in association with prestigious theatrical institutions including Edinburgh's Dance Base and the 6th Theatre Olympics in Beijing. Marco is the founder, with Chiara Boscaro, of the theater company La Confraternita del Chianti. He works extensively for the Rijeka's Croatian National Theater. Recent highlights as a director include the "theatrical game" *PLAY*, created with Chiara Boscaro, which premiered at the Bellevue Theater in Amsterdam and *Leviatano (Leviathan)* by Riccardo Tabilio which premiered at the Piccolo Teatro in Milan. Since 2021, Marco has taught Theatre Direction at the Scuola del Teatro Musicale in Novara. [www.laconfraternitadelchianti.eu](http://www.laconfraternitadelchianti.eu)

**Carlotta Brentan** is a New York-based bilingual theatre artist specialising in the development of brave, challenging new plays as a director, actor, producer and translator. Stage highlights: World Premieres of Frank J. Avella's *Lured*, based on real events of anti-gay persecution in Russia (performed and co-directed, sold-out runs at Theater for The New City in NYC and OnStage! Festival in Rome), Avella's *Vatican Falls* about the Catholic church sex abuse scandal (performed and co-directed, The Tank NYC), Paolo Bignami's *The Journey I Never Made* (performed and translated from Italian, Cherry Lane Theatre NYC), Erik Ehn's *Clover* (La MaMa Experimental Theater Club NYC), *HIDE* and *SEEK* by Tobia Rossi, translator and director in both NYC and London. Carlotta is also a film actor, prolific voiceover artist, and award-winning audiobook narrator of over 300 novels. [www.carlottabrentan.com](http://www.carlottabrentan.com)

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<sup>3</sup> The original title of the play in Italian is *Focus Group*.

## Introductory Note, *Focus Group*

I started writing *Focus Group* after a personal experience as a participant in a real focus group. It was my first time and I decided to attend because—as a playwright, but also as a human being—I’m very attracted by new experiences. “What could go wrong?” I told myself, “perhaps I will get inspiration for a new play.” In that case, everything went wrong, but yes... I finally wrote a new play. During the play, the product under evaluation confronts the group members with perhaps the most basic existential question of every man or woman: the choice between life and death. A choice that is always pending. A choice that, in this age of chaos, could be a simple matter of marketing.

In this work I try to explore the relationship between companies and consumers, supply and demand, truth and falsehood, reality and fantasy. Between capitalism and life. Because for capitalism everything has a price, even life. And, sometimes, even death.

*Focus Group* premiered in 2021 at Teatro Due in Parma (Italy) for the contemporary playwriting project Mezz’ore d’Autore. In 2023 the French version of the play was published in France by PUM – Presses Universitaires du Midi. In 2024 the play premiered at Theatre of the NO in Athens (Greece), directed by Chara Lianou.

—Marco Di Stefano

# *Focus Group*

## Characters

Carlo, 35. Leader of the focus group.  
Andrea, 30. Visibly drunk.  
Marco, 28. Somewhat uncool.  
Stefano, of undefinable age. A nerd.  
Secretary, female. Very attractive.

## Setting

A white room with a white table in the center, surrounded by a few chairs. On the table are some water bottles, plastic cups and snacks. A microphone pokes out through a hole in the middle of the table. A small coat rack sits by the entrance. There's also a side table with a CD player on it.

### 1.

Carlo is alone. He looks around, takes off his jacket and hangs it on the coat rack. He puts a bag on top of the table. Looks around again. Takes a seat. He opens the bag, searching for something in it. The Secretary enters, carrying a few files.

Secretary: Good morning. You must be the new guy, right?

They shake hands.

Carlo: Yes. Carlo Marini. A pleasure.

Secretary: I brought you all the material for today.

Carlo: Thank you very much. Ms...

Secretary: Never mind.

Carlo: Excuse me?

Secretary: Never mind my name. It's not important.

Carlo: Oh, right, of course. I'm sorry.

Secretary: No problem. Everyone does that.

Carlo: You know, it's my first day...

Secretary: I know, it's your first day. So we better get straight to work, right?

Carlo: Yes, right away.

Secretary: So, I'm not sure why you were hired, and honestly I don't care. But I assume you've led a focus group before.

Carlo: Of course. Well, not exactly. I did in theory.

Secretary: And in practice?

Carlo: I mean I led a few practice groups in my class.

Secretary: With who?

Carlo: With my classmates.

Secretary: With your own classmates as guinea pigs.

Carlo: Exactly. And then I was a guinea pig for them.

Secretary: So, basically, this is your first time.

Carlo: Well. Yeah. Sort of.

Secretary: How did this guy get here?

Carlo: I was hired.

Secretary: It was a rhetorical question.

Carlo: Right. I'm sorry. I'm a bit nervous.

Secretary: You are?

Carlo: Yeah.

Secretary: Just relax. By the end of the night you'll know for sure.

Carlo: Know what?

Secretary: If this job is for you. There's no middle ground here. You're either a savant or a failure.

Carlo: But in my class they said...

Secretary: Forget about your class! It's pointless!

Carlo: What do you mean, pointless? I paid money to attend.

Secretary: I mean, it's a formality, just to set you on the right path. But here is where we see what a man is really made of. Though in your case we might be set up for disappointment, I'm afraid...

Carlo: (offended) I had the higher score in my class.

Secretary: Exactly.

Carlo: I don't get it.

Secretary: It's not about the score. It's about backbone, vigor, about having massive square testicles made of steel, you understand?

*Carlo is silent.*

Secretary: It's a war in here.

Carlo: They said that, in the class.

Secretary: Again with the class? We need results here. Outstanding results in very limited time.

Carlo: That's fine.

Secretary: We'll see tonight if it's 'fine.'

Carlo: I'm sorry, who are you?

Secretary: This again?

Carlo: I mean, what's your job here?

Secretary: I'm the secretary.

*A pause.*

Carlo: Whose secretary?

Secretary: The secretary.

Carlo: But whose?

Secretary: Oh Lord... I am your secretary, Mr. Marini!

Carlo: My secretary?

Secretary: Yes!

Carlo: And you're talking to me like this?

Secretary: That's right! For your own good!

Carlo: I... I want to speak to the Supervisor. Right now.

*The Secretary bursts out laughing.*

Secretary: Yeah, right... the Supervisor...

Carlo: It's not funny.

Secretary: Look, you can meet the Supervisor once you've been here a month.

Carlo: What?

Secretary: If he feels up to it.

Carlo: That's absurd.

Secretary: Welcome to the workplace!

Carlo: Listen, I was hired by you, and now...

Secretary: (Cutting him off) And now you'll study the material for today's group, otherwise by tonight you'll be out of a job again.

*Silence. Carlo doesn't know what to say.*

Secretary: How old are you?

Carlo: Thirty five.

Secretary: How many different jobs have you had?

Carlo: Six... seven...

Secretary: Including this one?

Carlo: Eight.

Secretary: Are you single?

Carlo: Yes, newly.

Secretary: No job security, constant fighting at home, I bet that taking that class was your last resort.

Carlo: Yes, but how do you know...

Secretary: A few short-term gigs here and there, for one or two years at most while hoping to pursue some kind of dream, to build a different future...

Carlo: (Sorrowful) Yeah. You see, I always wanted to become...

Secretary: Oh, no. I don't care. The last thing we need is the angst of a failed new hire. You didn't make it. That's all that matters. And if you don't get to work right now, they'll kick you out before this evening.

Carlo: Out of curiosity. Why did you hire me?

Secretary: I don't know, I'm just the secretary. They were probably pressed for time. They had to find a replacement for your predecessor.

Carlo: He quit?

Secretary: Killed himself. Jumped out of that window two days ago.

*Pause.*

Carlo: I'll get to work.

Secretary: Good. Here's the material you need: the profiles of the attendees, the description of the product, etc. etc. In that drawer you'll find everything you need to lead the group itself: discussion prompts and the actual product. All clear?

Carlo: Yes. I mean, no.

Secretary: Great.

Carlo: I need a minute.

Secretary: You need to use the restroom?

Carlo: No...

Secretary: A minute to do what?

Carlo: To review the material.

Secretary: You have two hours.

Carlo: But how can I...

Secretary: You open up the folder like a good boy and read the material I put together.

Carlo: It's not enough time.

Secretary: If time's what you want, you should go work for the government.

Carlo: You don't understand.

Secretary: Say it again.

Carlo: What?

Secretary: That I don't understand.

Carlo: Oh, no. I didn't mean to offend you.

Secretary: Say it again.

Carlo: It's a misunderstanding...

Secretary: Say it again.

Carlo: You... you don't understand.

*The Secretary slaps Carlo's face.*

Secretary: Good, now we can move on. Everything that happens in here is recorded. The audio by the microphone you see in the middle of the table. And the video by some cameras that you can't see, but they're there. I assure you. Everything is being recorded, so you don't need to take notes about what the participants say. Sounds good?

Carlo: Well, it's a good thing they didn't record that slap just now.

Secretary: Of course they did.

Carlo: But we haven't even started!

Secretary: You're not listening to me. Once again. Everything, and I mean everything that happens in here is recorded. The audio by the microphone you see in the middle of the table. And the video by some cameras that you can't see, but they're there. Everything. Twenty-four hours a day. This room is under constant surveillance.

Carlo: I'm sorry but why?

Secretary: Because important data could be unearthed any time. The principle of causality is fundamental for market research.

Carlo: Sure but... don't you think that's a bit extreme?

Secretary: What I think doesn't matter. I'm the secretary. If you have any issues you can take them up with the Supervisor. In a month. Assuming they keep you that long.

Carlo: No, no. It's fine.

Secretary: I figured.

Carlo: Listen, I'm not trying to cause problems. It's just that I was expecting a different kind of job. Where I'd get to interact with people.

Secretary: You'll see plenty of people from here.

Carlo: Sure, but it all seems a bit... a bit...

Secretary: A bit what?

Carlo: Nothing. Forget it.

Secretary: Must not have been too interesting.

Carlo: Exactly. It wasn't.

Secretary: Good. If you don't have anything else to bore me with, I'll take off.

Carlo: Will you be with me during the group?

Secretary: I'm not your mother.

Carlo: Sorry but what kind of secretary doesn't keep track of the work?

Secretary: I'll be watching all the focus groups on a monitor in my office. Should you need me, I will be here before you can even call me. Happy now?

Carlo: Yes.

Secretary: Any other questions?

Carlo: What do you think about global warming?

Secretary: Funny.

Carlo: Just a little joke to break the tension.

Secretary: Didn't work.

Carlo: Alright, forget it. I'll get straight to work.

Secretary: That's the first sensible thing that came out of your mouth.

Carlo: I'll take that as a compliment.

Secretary: You have low standards.

*Carlo wants to respond, but no words come out.*

Secretary: I almost forgot. The product file contains all the minimum objectives that have been identified according to the client's needs. Today's file is quite unusual. Our client is requesting some very specific takeaways. There's one data point in particular that is... let's say... unusual.

Carlo: What is it?

Secretary: You'll see for yourself.

Carlo: Okay, fine.

Secretary: Don't let me down. You've been given a very important task.

Carlo: I'm confident I can accomplish it.

Secretary: We'll see. I'm off. You know where to find me. I suggest you study the material very carefully. It's a big client.

Carlo: Don't worry. And thank you for your valuable advice.

Secretary: Absolutely. Call me if you need me.

*She goes to exit.*

Carlo: Wait. May I have a coffee?

*She smiles.*

Secretary: Of course. What would you like?

Carlo: An americano macchiato with two sugars. Cane sugar if you have it, but normal sugar works too.

Secretary: American macchiato with two cane sugar. I'll make it right now. You'll love it, you'll see. I make delicious coffee.

Carlo: Thank you.

Carlo gets to work. After a while, the Secretary re-enters with a coffee.

Secretary: Here you are.

Carlo: I'm sorry, I don't understand. What is the product this company makes?

*Blackout*

2.

Same setting. Carlo is alone. Multiple coffee cups in front of him. He's still studying the material. He's nervous. Andrea walks in, swaying.

Andrea: Excuse me, is this where they give out the gas coupons?

Carlo: What?

Andrea: The gas coupons. They told me to come here. (He pulls out a card from his pocket) The street name... (Can't read the address) The street name... Can you read it please...

*Carlo reads the card.*

Carlo: Yes, that's here.

Andrea: Good.

Carlo: What?

Andrea: Where are they?

Carlo: Who?

Andrea: The gas coupons.

Carlo: I'm sorry but I don't know anything about any gas coupons.

Andrea: This girl called me, told me if I came here and answered some questions then they would give me thirty Euros' worth of gas coupons.

Carlo: I don't know anything about that.

Andrea: Tell me where my fucking gas coupons are!

Carlo: I don't know, I swear...

Andrea: Tell me!

*The Secretary enters.*

Secretary: Excuse me, what is going on here?

Andrea: Were you the one who called me?

Secretary: What are you talking about?

Andrea: Some girl called me and told me they would give me gas coupons if I came here to answer.

Secretary: You're Mr...?

Andrea: Zucchi, Andrea.

Secretary: The focus group hasn't started yet.

Andrea: What does that mean?

Secretary: First you answer the questions, and then you get the gas coupons.

Andrea: Oh. Couldn't he just say so?

Secretary: He's new here. Now, please leave.

Andrea: Ok... I'm going.. But let's make this quick...

*Andrea exits.*

Carlo: Thank you.

Secretary: Is that how you plan to handle conflict?

Carlo: I wasn't prepared...

Secretary: You have to be ready for anything. We have a profile of each attendee. Did you read them?

Carlo: Yes, but...

Secretary: Look at this. Andrea Zucchi. 30 years old. Unemployed. Alcoholic. His wife left him after their son died.

Carlo: I didn't get that far yet.

Secretary: That's a shame. He's the most likely candidate.

Carlo: About that...

Secretary: Of course one of the others may turn out to be better suited, once you meet them in person.

Carlo: That's not what I mean.

Secretary: What is it?

Carlo: I'd like to quit.

Secretary: It's too late for that.

Carlo: I didn't sign anything.

Secretary: Yes, but you must know it's not that simple.

Carlo: I understand...

Secretary: And the money's good.

Carlo: Sure, but it's not for me.

Secretary: I don't know. You might have a hidden talent.

Carlo: I doubt it.

Secretary: Surprise me.

Carlo: I don't know if I want to.

Secretary: You must want to, or you wouldn't be here.

Carlo: I expected the job to be different.

Secretary: Listen, let's not waste any more time. We're starting in a few minutes, so make your peace with it. We must come out of this with that one data point. One single thing. It's fundamental. I gave you the material. The product is in the drawer. Enough now. I'll see you when you're done. And don't forget. One hour, tops.

Carlo: I know.

Secretary: Good.

Carlo: I'll try. But I don't know if I can.

Secretary: Enough excuses. I'll let them in.

Carlo: Yeah.

*The Secretary exits. Carlo takes a deep breath. Andrea, Marco and Stefano enter.*

Andrea: Why couldn't I just wait in here?

Carlo: Have a seat, please.

Marco: Thanks.

Carlo: The water and snacks are for you.

Stefano: Oh, I'll grab some then.

*They sit at the table. During the rest of the play Marco and Stefano will take turns grabbing water and snacks. Stefano, especially, will keep stuffing his face. Andrea and Carlo don't consume anything.*

Carlo: Alright, my name is Carlo, and for the next hour I'll be leading this focus group.

Andrea: An hour? That's too long.

Carlo: Actually, it's up to you three. We could wrap things up much sooner.

Stefano: Alright, what do you need us to do?

Carlo: Start by introducing yourselves. I want to know your name, age and profession. We can call each other by our first names.

Stefano: I'll go. I'm Stefano. I'm 31. I'm a programmer.

Marco: Marco. 28. Nurse.

Carlo: Great.

Andrea: Andrea. 30. Unemployed. But I used to be married. And I used to have a job.

Carlo: Good, but that doesn't matter now. Let's move on. You were asked to come in as part of some market research on behalf of a company that will remain anonymous.

Marco: Why?

Carlo: That's a good question, Marco.

Stefano: I was wondering the same thing.

Carlo: It's about the launch of a new product. Something very innovative. But its marketing could be subject to...

*A long pause. Carlo is visibly undecided about whether he should keep going or not. He looks toward the door. Then at the watch on his wrist.*

Stefano: Go on. Now we're curious.

Carlo: I'm sorry.

Stefano: You're just doing this to make us more interested in the product aren't you? To build anticipation via pre-planned dramatic pauses.

Carlo: Yes. That's right.

Stefano: I knew it. You can't get much past me.

Andrea: This sucks. I don't get it.

Marco: Go on. What is it?

Carlo: As I was saying. The marketing for this product, although quite cutting edge and on par with the times, could face a few... legal challenges.

Marco: Why is that?

Carlo: Please, be patient. You'll find out soon enough. First we need to go through a preliminary phase.

Marco: Which is?

Carlo: We need to gather some data about some shared concepts.

Stefano: Like the concept of heat and cold, good and evil?

Carlo: Exactly. Good.

Stefano: Thanks.

Carlo: For example, if I say the word 'life,' what comes to mind?

Andrea: Shit.

Carlo: Andrea, please. Let's go in order, OK?

Andrea: My answer is still shit.

Carlo: And the others?

Marco: I don't know. Light?

Carlo: There's no right answer.

Stefano: I thought of a child playing.

Carlo: Excellent. And if I say 'death'?

Andrea: Shit.

Carlo: Thank you for your input.

Stefano: Well, he's not wrong.

Carlo: Tell me what you think. Not what Andrea thinks.

Stefano: Let's just say the child has stopped playing.

Marco: So I guess I should say darkness.

Sefano: Right.

Carlo: No, not necessarily.

Marco: I thought about my grandfather.

Carlo: Is he dead?

Marco: No. But I thought of him. I detest him.

Carlo: So we can agree that - except for Andrea - we generally associate the concept of life with something positive and that of death with something negative.

Andrea: Fools.

Stefano: Yes, that's right.

Marco: Makes sense.

Carlo: So now, let's flip that upside down.

*Carlo pulls out a photo from his file. He pauses for a moment. Then throws it on the table.*

Carlo: There. Pass it around, please.

Marco: What the fuck is that?

Carlo: A person suffering from ALS. Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis.

Stefano: I know what that is. It's when you're trapped inside your body or something like that.

Carlo: Something like that.

Marco: So?

Andrea: So, it's shit. He's telling you that sometimes life is shit.

Carlo: Let's just say that there can be different points of view.

Marco: Well that goes for everything.

Stefano: No, Carlo's right. If we ask a patient with ALS to tell us what 'life' is, they'll probably say that life sucks.

Carlo: Thanks, Stefano.

Carlo: No problem, Carlo.

Andrea: Uhh, you're either deaf or you're stupid. I've been saying that this whole time.

Carlo: Andrea, your point of view is fixed. It's singular. We're interested in shifts in perspective.

Andrea: Who's we?

Carlo: We, the company that is commissioning this research. Also society at large.

Stefano: Yes, changing perspectives are interesting.

Marco: The possibilities are endless. We're talking about nothing.

Carlo: You're wrong. We're talking about freedom of choice.

Marco: Oh please.

Carlo: Each one of us values life according to some subjective criteria.

Marco: Why thank you very much. I had no idea.

Carlo: That kind of attitude is destructive to the group.

Stefano: It's true.

Andrea: Fucking ass-kisser. (laughs)

Stefano: How dare you, you... you drunk!

Andrea: Wow, big words! (laughs)

Marco: I'm going to leave.

Carlo: No, no, please. Sit down.

Andrea: Or you won't get any gas coupons.

Marco: I don't give a shit about the gas coupons.

Stefano: That's right, leave, or we won't get anything done. We're a group.

Marco: Are you kidding? We met five minutes ago!

Carlo: Wait, hold on. Have a seat. I didn't mean to be rude. If I was, I apologize. You know, it's my first day here.

Marco: So what?

Carlo: So I really wanted to be proactive and ready, assertive, efficient. So I would look good. Seem prepared. I really do apologize.

Marco: This is a waste of my time.

Carlo: Have a seat, this will be quick you'll see. Please.

*They stare at each other. Marco sits down.*

Marco: Alright. But I want to know what this is all about. Right now.

Carlo: Just a second. I just have to ask you one more question.

Marco: Another one?

Stefano: Come on, stop being a nuisance. He said just one more question.

Carlo: Thank you, Stefano.

Stefano: You're welcome, Carlo.

Andrea: Jesus Christ, so gross. Listen, can I at least have a cigarette?

Carlo: No, you can't smoke in here...

Stefano: Unbelievable.

Marco: It would annoy me.

Andrea: Ok, ok... listen, I'll put one in my mouth but I won't light it.

Marco: Good for you.

Stefano: Go on, Carlo.

Carlo: Yes, thank you. Excuse me, I'll just have a sip of water.

*He does. He wipes some sweat away. He looks at the door. He looks at his watch. He will repeat these actions often during the rest of the play.*

Carlo: So, one question...

*A pause. Carlo doesn't know if he should continue.*

Marco: Go on, keep going.

Stefano: Let him gather his thoughts, why don't you?

Marco: Would you be quiet for once?

Carlo: Have you ever considered...

*A pause.*

Carlo: Have you ever considered suicide?

*A long pause. Carlo takes a deep breath. He drinks some water. He suddenly looks oddly calm.*

Andrea: Have you ever NOT considered suicide?

Marco: I don't think I understand.

Carlo: It's a simple question. Have you ever considered suicide?

Andrea: Yeah, sure I have, especially now that you won't let me smoke.

Carlo: And you two?

Marco: No. I mean, yes. I think it happens to everyone, doesn't it?

Stefano: I think it's a yes from me, too. But I can't think of a specific time.

Carlo: That doesn't matter. It only matters that you did. Let's get back to the earlier discussion. The one that made Marco so mad.

Marco: I wasn't mad.

Carlo: You were, but don't worry. It's normal, it's a normal reaction in a time of stress.

Marco: I'm sorry I got upset.

Stefano: Come on, it's no big deal.

Carlo: That's right, no big deal.

Stefano: You've got to keep moving on.

Andrea: Is there any beer?

Carlo: No. You see, the subjective nature of our attitudes toward life is fundamental. But society only defends those who want to live. Not those who want to die.

Stefano: Like the patient with ALS.

Carlo: Yes, but let's forget about him. The ALS patient's case would lead us down the path of healthcare and euthanasia. It was just an example. Or rather, a parameter. Life isn't always beautiful.

Andrea: Oh really?

Carlo: And that leads us to the point.

*Carlo pulls out a whole series of pictures from the drawer and slams them on the table. The others look at them.*

Marco: Have you lost your mind? What the fuck is this shit?

Stefano: Oh my god...

Andrea: Listen, I'll look at this stuff if I can get my coupons but you've got to explain what you want from us.

Carlo: What are those photos of?

Marco: Dead people.

Carlo: Be more specific.

Stefano: People who were murdered.

Carlo: Wrong. People who killed themselves.

Stefano: So?

Carlo: So, look at them. Gunshot wounds to the head, brains reduced to pulp, bodies mangled from jumping off a building, slit veins, gas stoves left on leading to the explosion of a building...

Andrea: We get it.

Carlo: All of this because suicide has not yet been accepted as a legitimate, deliberate choice. We all have the right to decide how, where and when we go. Don't we?

*Andrea, Marco and Stefano look bewildered, but they nod.*

Carlo: The time has come to show you the product that we are here to conduct market research on.

*Carlo pulls out a light blue box from the drawer.*

Carlo: Here we go. The temporary name is "Quiet," but that could change based on the results of the research. It is a kit for the perfect suicide. It contains: a pill of completely painless poison that simultaneously releases endorphins that give the user an intense feeling of wellbeing; a mask to cover their eyes and let them fully relax; a CD of New Age music; a crystal glass, a bottle of champagne and a Cuban cigar. Naturally they're exploring some alternatives, such as including a pipe instead of a cigar, brandy instead of champagne, a version for people who don't drink, etc, etc.

Marco: This is a joke, right?

Carlo: No, it's not. Let's keep going please. What do you think about when I say the word 'quiet'?

*A pause. Andrea, Carlo and Stefano look at each other, stunned.*

Carlo: So? Go on.

Stefano: Peace.

Marco: Serenity.

Andrea: Quiet makes me think of quiet. That's all.

Carlo: So the concept of 'quiet' gives a positive connotation to your concept of death.

Stefano: I think so.

Carlo: On a scale from not at all, a little bit, somewhat, a fair amount, very much and extremely, can you tell me how much the idea of suicide appeals to you?

Marco: Jesus Christ! Not at all!

Andrea: Listen, I'm just here for the gas coupons. I've had enough.

Carlo: Please, answer me.

Andrea: A fair amount. Alright? Let's just get on with it.

Stefano: I don't know... I have to think about it.

Carlo: It's normal to be confused, when it comes to something like this.

Stefano: I mean, it's something people do think about. Otherwise they wouldn't be making such a cutting-edge product. But I don't know how much I would want it.

Marco: Alright, I've heard enough, I'm leaving for real now. I can't believe I stayed and listened to this bullshit until now.

*Marco gets up, punching the table.*

Marco: Consider yourselves lucky that I don't sue you. The perfect suicide kit, you sons of bitches...

Carlo: Please, calm down. Sit.

Marco: Calm down? When you wake up in the morning don't you feel like spitting in your own face?

Carlo: I don't work for the company. I'm just conducting market research.

Marco: Yeah, on something horrible.

Carlo: That's subjective...

Marco: Do you think people enjoy jumping off a bridge? Slitting their veins?

Carlo: That's exactly why 'Quiet' was invented.

Marco: Oh yeah? Such philanthropists!

Carlo: Marco, please sit down.

Marco: I'm leaving.

Carlo: That would just be another way to avoid facing reality.

Marco: What the fuck do you mean?

*A pause.*

Marco: Listen, you don't know me. Don't you dare.

*Carlo pulls out a sheet from his file. Reads from it.*

Carlo: "Marco Conti, 28 years old. Nurse. Place of birth, irrelevant. Three years ago he was hospitalized for a personality disorder. Bipolar disorder leading to instances of excessive rage and frequent depressive episodes including two suicide attempts. Both using barbiturates."

Stefano: You just said the product doesn't interest you! You lied!

Marco: I'm going to the police.

Carlo: You can't. You gave your permission.

Marco: What? I did no such thing.

Carlo: Yes you did. You signed up for a promotion run by a beer company five years ago. You gave our agency permission to track your information. Now sit down.

Andrea: You mean we're here because at some point you managed to trick us into giving you permission to look through our shit and you've discovered that maybe someday we might just leave this place by our own hand?

Carlo: Yes. That's exactly right.

Marco: I don't remember...

Carlo: You should have read the privacy policy more closely.

Stefano: I don't know anything about suicide or anything like that.

*Carlo takes another sheet from his folder. Reads.*

Carlo: "Stefano Nidda, 31 years old, programmer. Place of birth, irrelevant. No suicide attempts, but his profile suggests he might be interested in the product. Two years ago he was charged with public indecency for masturbating in the courtyard of his old primary school. He is likely to suffer from deep disorders linked to his sexual identity. The subject is likely to feel attraction toward male children of around ten years of age, an attraction that is not acted upon, or rather is only acted upon through masturbation to pedophilic images.

Andrea: You jerk off to naked children? (Laughs) Poor bastard...

Stefano: Stop it...

Carlo: "Pent up sexual frustration may mask a repressed violent streak. Considering the subject's natural predisposition to self-hatred due to the lack of significant social relationships, we are led to believe that..."

Andrea: That he'll become violent toward himself and blow his brains out because he's a fucking loser. We all saw it, how he was kissing your ass.

Stefano: No. That's not true.

Andrea: You were this close to bending over.

Marco: Listen, you shut up. You must be here for a reason too, isn't that right? Don't you dare judge others.

*Carlo takes out another sheet. Reads.*

Carlo: "Andrea Zucchi..."

Andrea: (Cutting him off) I'm an alcoholic. I'm broke. No job. My wife left me. Oh, I forgot, my son Roberto was run over by a car and died. He was four years old. My wife blamed me because he let go of my hand and ran across the street. You have those kids early on and then they die under a car. That's how it goes. Amen. Yeah, my life is shit. Thank you for coming up with a way I can die comfortably. How much is it?

Carlo: I represent the agency that conducts the market research, not the client.

Andrea: I know. I was being sarcastic. Dickhead.

Carlo: Of course.

Andrea: Of course.

Carlo: Now we can talk openly.

Marco: I'm about to have an excessive rage episode.

Carlo: That would be rather unpleasant. Please don't.

Stefano: I don't know if I want to stay.

Carlo: Of course you do. You all do. For one simple reason. This interests you. It provides a solution. It's a fascinating product that may solve an issue.

Andrea: I've never felt as much like living as I do right now. I'm finally having fun. Go on, let's see where this goes.

Carlo: My job is to gather the data. There are three of you, and I have to understand if you are interested in the product. And if you're not, why not.

Andrea: I am interested. I must have been out of it for a while. I didn't think the world had come to this.

Carlo: What do you mean?

Andrea: I mean that I'm almost sober at this point.

Stefano: I want to leave, please.

Andrea: And give up your thirty Euros in gas coupons? Come on, don't be silly.

Stefano: I'm not a bad person...

Andrea: Is this because of your jerking off at the school? Don't worry, it was already evident that you were a pervert. We didn't need this asshole to tell us.

Carlo: Nothing about this is personal. Don't confuse things.

Andrea: It's obvious that I'm a drunk, that he's depressed. It's clear at first sight.

Carlo: You're all just possible clients of the company...

Andrea: Fuck you and your company.

Stefano: I want to leave...

Marco: Stop it. Can't you see he's unwell?

Andrea: We're all unwell here.

Carlo: Please, let's sit down and keep going.

Stefano: I haven't hurt anybody...

Marco: Sure, you haven't hurt anybody. You didn't do anything.

Andrea: Give him some water.

Carlo: Listen, we can take a five minute break if you want. Then start again.

Stefano: I want to go home.

Carlo: You can't.

Stefano: Who told you? Who told you?

Carlo: You signed a consent form. You gave us permission to look through your data and to contact you.

Stefano: That's not true.

Carlo: All the documents are here. You can check if you want.

Marco: Of course we do.

Carlo: Please, why don't we keep talking about the product rather than get bogged down in tedious legal questions?

Stefano: You didn't tell my mother did you?

Carlo: No, the information is private.

Marco: So private that you blew our spot in front of the others.

Carlo: You signed an NDA when you got here, didn't you? You should have read that more carefully too.

Andrea: All of this for thirty glorious Euros in gas coupons. (laughs)

Marco: Enough about the gas coupons!

*The Secretary enters. She carries some coffee mugs.*

Secretary: Sorry to interrupt, I figured you might like some hot coffee.

Andrea: Yes, I'll take it. I need it.

Carlo: Thank you, Ms.

Marco: You think this is the time for that?

Secretary: Americano macchiato with two sugars. For Mr. Carlo, just how he likes it.

Carlo: Perfect.

Secretary: For you three I took the liberty of making three espressos and I brought regular sugar, cane sugar and sweetener. Cold milk on the side.

Andrea: Wonderful. I have a vicious headache, you can't even imagine. This will help. And it's free.

*Andrea picks up a coffee and starts drinking. The other two don't touch theirs.*

Secretary: You don't want any?

Marco: No, thank you.

Secretary: You?

Stefano: No. I don't think I feel well...

Secretary: I'll leave them here, in case you want them later.

Marco: Alright, alright...

Stefano: Please, send me home.

Secretary: Mr. Stefano Nidda, is that right? You're looking a little stressed. Would you prefer some chamomile? I can make you some right now if you'd like.

Andrea: The coffee is excellent.

Secretary: Thank you, Mr. Zucchi. I have a special way of making it. It's a secret though.

Andrea: Of course. We all have our secrets don't we?

*Silence. Marco takes his coffee and drinks. Stefano is still sweating bullets.*

Secretary: Alright, I'll leave you to it then. Dr. Marini, I believe the data gathering is proceeding well, isn't it?

Carlo: Very well.

Secretary: I knew you wouldn't let me down. Don't forget that you're still missing the most important data point, though.

Carlo: Just a few more minutes now.

Secretary: Splendid. I'll be waiting outside to hand you your gas coupons once you're done.

Andrea: Wouldn't miss it.

Secretary: See you later, then.

Carlo: See you later, Ms.

Secretary: De Santi. Amelia De Santi. Amelia to you.

*A pause. The two of them smile at each other. The Secretary exits.*

Andrea: What a touching moment... Look, are you gonna drink that?

Stefano: No...

Andrea: Then I'll have it, if you don't mind.

*Andrea takes Stefano's coffee and drinks it.*

Carlo: Alright, let's keep going. Let's start with Marco, as he has the most experience. What do you think makes the perfect suicide.

Marco: How would I know...

Carlo: Well, you tried it twice. You must have some idea.

Marco: I don't. It's not like you become an expert... anyway, I wouldn't try it again for anything in the world. It was a moment in time that fortunately won't ever happen again.

Andrea: Sure it won't.

Marco: Look, I said I won't do it again. The end,

Carlo: Andrea, please. Don't create conflict.

Andrea: Can't you see he's your average guy who was just too loved as a child and now plays at being a suicidal depressive?

Marco: Bipolar disorder is a disease. It's not a whim.

Carlo: I can confirm that.

Andrea: If you went through what I went through, you would have killed yourself for real.

Marco: Better than ending up like you at thirty years old. Look at the state of you.

Carlo: You really think so?

Marco: What?

Carlo: That it's been to commit suicide than to end up like Andrea.

Marco: Of course.

Carlo: But just a few moments ago you said you wouldn't try it again.

Marco: I am doing well.

Andrea: So am I.

Carlo: You both know that's not the case.

Stefano: I never wanted to...

Marco: Alright, here's what we do. Let's put an end to this. Goodbye.

Carlo: Of course you can still pick up your gas coupons from Ms. De Santi. You too, Andrea. If you'd like to leave.

Andrea: Yeah, I think we've reached a dead end.

Carlo: Unless you'd like to test out the product. Here. Now.

*Silence.*

Marco: Alright. I'm leaving.

Carlo: It's a sweet death. You just have to trust the product.

Andrea: The day I decide to kill myself I will do it in style. I definitely won't do it in this shithole with you looking at me.

Carlo: Why not? We're all adults, aren't we? And this is what you all want. You know that.

Stefano: He's right.

Carlo: You see? Stefano is being honest with himself. Perhaps the key to his life is right here in front of him. And perhaps so is the one to your life. To put an end to your suffering with a sense of well-being. To leave while in ecstasy. When it's your choice.

Andrea: I'd rather blow myself up in the town square.

Carlo: No. You prefer the quiet. Just like Marco does.

Marco: I don't know.

Carlo: Just like Stefano. Stefano, who doesn't want to hurt anyone, especially not children, and who knows that there is a way to do that.

Stefano: To die.

Carlo: Quietly.

Stefano: Peacefully.

Carlo: All three of you are here for a reason. It's up to you to understand that. And up to you to get there before the other two. There's only one kit. And three of you.

*A long silence. Marco, Andrea and Stefano look at each other. Study each other. Suddenly Stefano gets up and reaches for the suicide kit.*

Marco: Stop!

*Andrea and Marco try to stop Stefano. Carlo stands still, watching the scene unfold. He checks the time. He smiles. Stefano swallows the pill.*

Andrea: Spit it out. Spit it out, you idiot!

Marco: He swallowed it. Christ, he swallowed it!

Andrea: What the fuck are you doing just standing there, call someone!

Carlo: It's no use. He swallowed it.

Marco: Call an ambulance.

*Marco takes out his phone and tries to make a call.*

Marco: No service. There's no fucking service.

Carlo: There's no service in the whole building. It's blocked so that employees don't waste time on their cellphones.

Marco: Couldn't you say that before?

Andrea: Son of a bitch.

*Andrea is about to lunge at Carlo. Marco holds him back.*

Marco: There's no time. We have to get help. Hurry!

*Andrea looks at Carlo with hatred. Carlo gives him a small smile.*

Andrea: How long does it take?

Carlo: About ten minutes.

Andrea: This isn't over.

Carlo: You know, everyone here was convinced you'd be the one to take the pill. But no. Well, it's just a matter of time. You'll just have to buy it at the supermarket.

Andrea: Bastard.

Marco: Hurry up, he's going to die!

Andrea: Yeah.

Marco: Stefano, don't move, OK? We'll go get help.

Stefano: No... I don't want to...

Marco: You stay here. Keep an eye on him.

Carlo: I'm not going anywhere.

*Andrea and Marco exit. As soon as they leave the room, Carlo locks the door.*

Carlo: Stefano, come here. Sit down.

Stefano: I want to die. I am disgusting... (Cries)

Carlo: I know, I know. That's what I'm here for. Stretch out your legs. Here, put this mask on. I'll take care of the rest.

*Stefano makes himself comfortable. He stops crying. He puts on the eye mask.*

Carlo: There you go, that's right.

*Carlo puts the New Age CD into the CD player. The music starts playing. Claudio opens the bottle of wine and pours some into the crystal glass. He hands it to Stefano.*

Stefano: Thank you. (He takes a small sip.) It's delicious.

*Carlo lights the cigar and hands it to Stefano.*

Carlo: Here. The cigar.

Stefano: No, thank you. I don't smoke.

Carlo: You mind if I smoke it?

Stefano: Sure. Go ahead.

Carlo: Thank you.

*Carlo sits comfortably, his legs up on the table. He smokes. Stefano starts to slowly lose consciousness.*

Carlo: So here we are. How do you feel?

Stefano: Good.

Carlo: I'm glad. It means the product is working.

Stefano: Yes. I feel calm. Peaceful.

Carlo: Soon it will all be over.

Stefano: Yes... Over...

Carlo: You'll finally be at peace.

Stefano: Peace...

Carlo: Quiet.

Stefano: Quiet.

Carlo: You like that name?

Stefano: Quiet is a nice name.

Carlo: Good, I'm glad you like it.

Stefano: I feel good...

Carlo: So you're satisfied with our product.

Stefano: Yes...

*Stefano is about to pass out. The glass of wine slips out from his hands and falls to the ground.*

Stefano: It's finally... Ending...

Carlo: There you go, Stefano. It's what you wanted.

Stefano: I wanted it...

Carlo: Can I ask you one last question?

Stefano: Yes... last question...

Carlo: On a scale from not at all, a little bit, somewhat, a fair amount, very much and extremely, can you tell me how satisfied you are with the product?

*Blackout.*

THE END

*Women in the Dark (Женщины в темноте)*

a play for two voices

by Iryna Serebriakova and Masha Denisova

translated from the Russian by Iryna Serebriakova

edited by Samuel Buggeln

*Men in Daylight (Мужчины при свете дня)*

by Iryna Serebriakova

translated from the Russian by Iryna Serebriakova

edited by Samuel Buggeln

## Bios

**Iryna Serebriakova** is a Ukrainian playwright, writer and translator. Her documentary theatre plays were produced in Timișoara, Kyiv, Almaty, Helsinki, New Delhi, Berlin, Cologne, Stockholm, Uppsala, Barcelona, and Prague. Her collection of short tales for children and adults was published in Sweden in Swedish translation in 2023. Over 20 fiction and non-fiction books were published in her translation from French and English to Ukrainian and Russian.

**Masha Denisova** is a Ukrainian artist, writer and playwright. Based in Kyiv, she has been staying there throughout the war. In her practice, she is mostly interested in documenting everyday reality, focusing on the impact of the war on the life of civilians. Along with theatre plays, she is involved in writing prose. Her notes, diaries and the interviews taken during the severe blackouts caused by shelling were the primary source of the documentary play *Women in the Dark*.

## Introductory note, *Women in the Dark* and *Men in Daylight*

*Women in the Dark* is a dark comedy for two actresses. Set in Kyiv, it explores the role of electricity in everyday life through the female experience of wartime. The Ukrainian women exchange funny, sad and scary stories from their daily life with severe blackouts caused by shelling. The play is an attempt to reflect not only on electricity, but on the fragility of human civilization. We take for granted such elements of the urban landscape as traffic lights or pharmacies. However, what happens if they are not working anymore—along with elevators, cash machines, the Internet, and mobile phone connection? The play explores life in Kyiv in autumn–winter 2022 through early spring 2023. The situation with electricity supply remains unstable in the capital and in the country. The play has been staged in Oslo in a Norwegian translation, in Uppsala in Swedish, in Barcelona in Spanish, and in New Delhi.

*Men in Daylight* is an attempt to reflect on the images of masculinity today. The starting point is documentary evidence about Ukrainian men during the ongoing war. Nowadays in Ukraine, women and children are allowed to be scared and depressed, but not men. Men are expected to be brave and ready to sacrifice their life. However, in reality, not every man fits the myth of a hero. Composing this text, I tried to listen to those who are confused and stressed; who don't want to go to a war where they will most certainly die. What is more, some men are afraid of homophobia in the army even more than of death in battle. All such men are facing immense pressure. They are locked inside the country, not allowed to leave Ukraine due to the wartime restrictions. Some die in an attempt to cross the border and get to Romania and Hungary. The polyphonic structure of the play introduces us to the various struggles of those who either join or do not join the army.

—Iryna Serebriakova

# *Women in the Dark*

Play for two voices

## Characters

Actress 1

Actress 2

*Semi-dark stage.*

**Actress 1.** How do you stage a play in the dark?

**Actress 2.** Actually it's easy. I have an idea. It's probably too literal, but it might work.

**Actress 1.** Show me.

*Actress 2 takes a sheet of white paper and writes something on it. She shows the sheet to the audience. The word "play" is written on the sheet.*

**Actress 2.** Here is the play. And here is the stage. The play is on stage.

**Actress 1.** *(upon reflection)* It feels like something's missing.

**Actress 2.** It's probably too literal.

**Actress 1.** It's probably too dark.

**Actress 2.** In that case, I'll just tell you. I'm here, and you're far away. But I'll tell you everything as best I can. Maybe it'll reach you.

*They take turns reading the stories, naming the characters. Actress 1 reads the evidence from Katia, Actress 2 reads the evidence from Vita; Actress 1 reads the evidence from the next character, and so on.*

**Katia.** On the day the long blackout began, I was crawling down the stairs from the 8th floor. The elevator didn't work. That's how I realized that the electricity had gone off. It was there when I left the apartment, and now it had disappeared.

My back hurt and I could hardly walk. Somewhere on the sixth floor, an old man glued himself to me. He's seventy, if not older. Tall, skinny, big eyes. First, he told me he'd been writing poetry for his whole life. Then he said he had a photographic memory. Then, on the fourth floor, he boasted he was a great dancer. Almost at the third floor, it turned out I was a beautiful young woman and "a real lady".

When we reached the ground floor, I discovered the cherry on the cake. My suitor turned out to be a retired major of the Ukrainian Security Services. He'd graduated from the KGB school in Moscow. He talked about his career path, gazing intently into my eyes. Apparently, this was his trump card. As we parted, he literally forced me to write down his phone number because he is "friends with outlaws" and if I called, he'd solve all my problems. In exchange for "the warmth of my hands."

I used to joke about security services a lot. Don't be like me. Don't joke about security services. Because they will send you an elderly major on a dark staircase. It will be scary.

**Vita.** The doctor prescribed me pills. The prescription says to take them three times a day after meals. Right now, I don't eat three times a day.

Speaker of the patrol police in Kyiv. With these blackouts, the number of deaths in road accidents has increased six-fold. And we have twice as many traffic accidents involving pedestrians.

**Lena.** Non-working traffic lights, I just love them. Even when I was making decent money, I never bought a car. Now of course I won't buy one. I'm a hardened walker. I've always considered all drivers my personal enemies. And now, when I need to cross the road in the dark, I walk even more confidently than I did with a green light. In my mind, I say to the drivers, "Okay, I might die, but you'll go to jail."

**Katia.** Well... There's shelling. No electricity. A trickle of water as thick as a child's little finger. Very poor mobile connection.

**Vita.** I found a pharmacy where I could buy my pills. I swallowed them. I was sitting on the bench. A woman with a seven-year-old daughter sat next to me.

Daughter: Let's go to the playground!

Mom: Wait. Mom needs to look on the Internet to see where the missiles are hitting.

Daughter: A lot of missiles?

Mother: Probably a lot. See how long the air raid has been going on?

Daughter: When are we going to the playground?

Mom: Well, let's read about the missiles and then we'll go.

Daughter: Read out loud to me!

Mom: Wait, first I need to find the information.

**Bozhena.** TikTok found out about my problems with electricity and now offers content that is relevant to my new situation. I learned that the small bow on women's underwear is not attached there for decoration, but in order to find the front by touch in the dark.

Why is there no bow on men's underwear?

**Vita.** Today there's been no electricity from 8 am to now. I figured it was best to live from midnight to 8 am. That's when the electricity is usually on.

**Alisa.** My new style accessory is a headlamp. It was very cool, lighting my way in the dark. I felt like a fashionable modern girl.

**Katia.** It's gotten dark. Someone is screaming outside. Calling for help. They're hitting someone on the street. I wanted to go out. I didn't go out.

**Yulia.** If you stand for a long time at a dark stop waiting for a bus, you can shine a flashlight on the snow. Contemplating the snow, you might wish for a UFO to arrive instead of a bus. It'll take you to another planet. You'll walk there with a serene face, like David Duchovny. You'll hold Ray Bradbury's hand. No war, no blackouts, no lockdowns.

**Actress 1.** Can you turn on the light somehow? We're not there, we're here. Why should we sit in the dark?

**Actress 2.** Don't sit. Take a few steps. Move. Wave your hands. There's a smart electronic system here. It reacts to movement.

*The actress walks around waving her arms. The light turns on.*

**Bozhena.** This electricity is broken, bring another one. According to the schedule, we shouldn't have electricity for another hour and fifteen minutes. But it's on. Someone forgot to push the off button, or whatever. You may think that it's good to have electricity now. No. This is bad, because all the charts will get messed up and overlap each other and there's going to be another collapse.

We've lived to see the day when the presence of electricity is more alarming than its absence.

**Sonia.** While the electricity is on, I'm searching on the Internet. How to take my husband abroad? A woman on TikTok says in a cheerful voice, "How did my husband get out of Ukraine? His wife had a stroke of luck – my leg got torn off!"

**Sasha.** Ivan invited me to his place to charge the phone and wash my hair. When the men aren't allowed to leave the country, it has its advantages!

**Yulia.** I wanted to take my mother to the park for a walk. She refused. I insisted. She confessed.

At one point she quit smoking, but now she's started again, because she's anxious. She says it's her only joy now. Let her smoke if it calms her down. I wouldn't scold her. But it's not me she's afraid of. She's afraid the children will see her with a cigarette. She teaches primary school.

**Vita.** My theory that a nocturnal lifestyle would provide access to electricity has failed.

I stayed up all night, waiting for electricity. It didn't come. The electricity came in the morning. I managed to live a little life: filled a thermos, washed and dried my hair. Ran to the coffee shop by the house and grabbed a cup of cocoa. The barista is so cute, she gave me a chocolate bar. Dark chocolate with mint filling. Remarkably disgusting: toothpaste in chocolate. But it feels so nice to know that people do small good deeds.

**Sasha.** I woke up because it was too cold to sleep.

**Liuba.** I started to cook breakfast and realized there wasn't enough food. I had to go to the store. Deep inside, I'm free. I don't care who thinks what about my style. So I put pants and a sweater on over my pajamas. And a coat on top. It was warm. I went shopping feeling like the woman of my dreams. I met a neighbor there. I greeted her, because I'm polite. My neighbor didn't recognize me. Since I'm not only free, and polite, but also brave, I reminded her that we're neighbors.

"I didn't recognize you in that outfit!" the neighbor perked up. "These days you have to be careful with strangers. My daughter, for example, is afraid of all military people. Even ours. But you know how she manages it? She walks up to every military man and says hello! To convince herself they're safe for her! But I'm the opposite, you see, I'm afraid to say hello to anyone..."

**Alisa.** Today on the street, some guy glanced at me and said that with my headlamp I look like a cult leader. Not a very high compliment, of course. But I thought that while everyone around was "building a personal brand", I could leap a hundred steps forward and build a personal cult..

I walked, illuminating my path, and thought about the rules of my small sect.

The hierarchy of shrines will be as follows:

1. Me.
2. Electricity.
3. Hot water.
4. Heating.
5. Humanism.
6. Delicious cakes.

There will also be prohibitions:

1. Italian pop music of the 80s.
2. Books by Ayn Rand.
3. Raisins.
4. Bad cakes.

Foundational rituals: doing nothing. Interesting chats. Lying in bed at any time of the day. Singing good stupid songs. Being in the comfort zone.

In order to get kicked out of my sect, it will be enough to say that democracy is more important than humanism.

To get into my sect... I haven't figured that out yet.

My sect will be extremely totalitarian. All cakes will be delicious.

**Lera.** I saw a woman wearing a mask and yelling at a security guard at McDonald's for canceling covid measures. "Where are the masks? Where are the certificates? Why are you letting everyone in? Are you ignoring the pandemic?"

They started shouting back at her: "Are you fucking crazy? The country is at war! Any minute there will be another air raid, and everyone will get kicked out to go to the shelters. Shut up, you fool, and let people eat."

Announcement on a utility pole. We can help with obtaining death certificates for people who died in the temporarily occupied territories. Obtaining a certificate entitles you to financial assistance for the funeral. Also, as part of the inheritance, you may be entitled to receive a pension or cash contributions of the deceased.

*The light goes out again.*

**Yulia.** The streets are no longer illuminated, the signs have gone out, and the houses have turned into cold lumps of darkness. When I go somewhere by bus, I no longer see where we're going. Or when we've arrived. If we arrive at all.

But over this time, my gift of clairvoyance has leveled up, and now I see nothing, but I feel the Way. However, in moments of confusion, it seems to me like we'll never stop, because the stops have disappeared, the whole city has disappeared in this darkness. It's not only invisible, it's not there at all. The trip has no final destination. There's only a bus in the darkness, and we have no way to escape.

But in the middle of my daily journey home, it always appears. The hypermarket. It glows like a temple. It's bustling with parishioners and cult workers. The lanterns in its huge parking lot are burning as if lit by the Lord himself. And I understand: four more stops and I'm home.

**Ivanna.** In the city chat, they wrote that the current state of mind of the people of Kyiv is conveyed by the facial expression of our statue of the Motherland. I've been living in Kyiv for my whole life, and I want to make a statement: it is totally wrong to compare me to the statue of the Motherland!

**Vita.** I went into the house with some young man.

Concierge: Hurry up, hurry up, the lights will go off any minute!

Me and the guy take the risk and go into the elevator.

He: What did she say about the light?

Me: Well, today they turned it off twice.

He, smiling: I'm just not from here.

Me: You don't know about blackouts? Are you from the moon?

He: No, I live downtown.

...

A spark of class hatred ran from me to him.

**Katia.** I'm so lucky! I managed to cook and eat a warm meal before the electricity went out! It's a good omen: the whole day is going to be great.

**Sonia.** My husband and I started reading paper books aloud. We're getting smarter every minute. My life hack for you: read books where the situation is worse than in your reality.

We're reading the memoirs of Stefan Zweig. He and his wife committed suicide during the Second World War: they were sure it would never end.

**Yulia.** In Kyiv, a girl named Liberty is declared missing. With a name like that, it's impossible not to remember her. If there are two Liberty Bodnars in Kyiv, I'll eat my hat.

When I see news about a missing child, I always try to remember not only the name, but also the face.

**Marina.** My day in photos. Here I am, frozen:

- In the tram
- On the street
- In the apartment.

*Actress I walks around the stage, jumping up and down, clapping her hands.*

*The light turns on.*

**Ivanna.** They gave us electricity again. Shit. Fucking shit. The neighbor has started to drill into the wall. Right here. Immediately. This dude is unbreakable. A Titan of Spirit. How much you'd have to believe in the future to make repairs in times like this.

Bad sexist joke. Undressing, she asked: do you really have electricity?

**Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine.** Rolling blackouts are the best time to make love.

**Bozhena.** I hate it so much when they use the word "toys" for sex shop products. Pfff. What the hell? Why do they say "toys"?

A toy is a Barbie doll, a ball, a car with a remote control.

If sex shop goods are toys, I picture naked adults sitting in a sandbox. Someone's digging a hole with a dildo. Someone's trying to put handcuffs around the neck of the stray cat. Someone has smooched a red ball gag in the sand and is trying to put it back in his mouth.

And the conversations.

- What's your name, little boy? Let's be friends!

- My name is Your Master Dominator! Let's play!

**Liuba.** I came home from work and immediately rushed to the stove to cook food. First, I'm very hungry. Secondly, I have to cook right now, because nobody knows when the electricity will go off.

I shout along with my cooking: Yes! Faster! Faster! Please, yes! We're almost there!

Let the neighbors think we're making love.

**Ivanna.** My ex sent me a friend request. Not a word from him in four years. And here comes a friend request. In the sixth month of the war. A friend request. On Facebook. A request. Fuck!

When the war started, he didn't even ask where I was, what I was, whether I was alive. After six months of war, he remembers that I exist. And sends a friend request. Great dynamics. Maybe in ten years, he'll get as far as wishing me happy birthday. If we live another ten years.

In all that time, since the war began, nothing made me as furious as that. I'm angry at myself. I fucked that guy. We drank from the same cup, slept in the same bed. How could I waste my life on a guy who doesn't give a damn about me?

In the ninth month of the war, I accepted the friend request.

**Katia.** I haven't been able to buy food today. The stores didn't work because there was no electricity. Pharmacies are closed. I went to my parents' place to eat. As I was leaving them, a woman got stuck in the elevator. Two girls on the outside were talking to her. I realized that the woman in the elevator was sick. The girls tried to call an ambulance for her.

Then I was walking down the street, lighting my way with my phone. So was everyone on the street. It's weird to see your city completely dark. Some candles were glimmering in the windows. When I reached my street, it was glowing. But right in front of my eyes, houses began to turn off, one by one. Like deep waters were gulping them down. At my house, a frightened concierge met me. She asked me to close the entrance door properly, because she was scared. How do you close it properly when the electronic lock doesn't work?

Then, me and a bunch of neighbors all silently climbed the stairs to our floors. I crawled under the sheets. I'm writing this message to you. I came to the conclusion that I love life less than I love civilization. The confused faces of the people, the screams of the woman in the elevator make me think: what is all this for?

**Yulia.** Yesterday, I overheard a conversation between two middle-aged women in a city bus. At first, they tried to figure out when Easter would be in 2023. Then, one of them talked for a very

long time about how scared she is to live in Kyiv. Missiles and all that. She's very afraid that she'll be killed. The second tried to calm her down and said:

Come on, you're a religious person! We know that life in this world of sin isn't the most important thing.

**Sonia.** We got electricity for the first time since Wednesday. There's no heat. Water appeared, but it's cold and barely runs. There's no internet or telephone connection at all. For two days now, I haven't been able to call anywhere, not once. The "Points of Invincibility" don't work in our area. For these two whole days we haven't known anything at all. Nobody here knows anything. Complete isolation. We need to at least buy a radio. Shops are closed. I found one in another part of the city. Long lines to get in: a lot of people.

It's cold in the apartment. I'll boil the eggs now, so there will be food for today. I don't know what else to say. I don't know anything at all. Nothing happens in our life, and nothing can happen. In fact, we're leading a prehistoric life.

Of course, we've stopped working altogether. There is no work.

I didn't think I would ever say this, but if you can help, I would be so happy to get some donations. The bankcard number is in the first comment.

I don't know when I'll be in touch again.

**Ministry of Internal Affairs of Ukraine.** We remind the public that the Points of invincibility provide heat, water, lighting, mobile communication, Internet, power for mobile devices, places for rest, first aid kits, and basic supplies for mothers and children.

**Yulia.** About the "Points of Invincibility". A real-life example. They announced that there is a "Point of Invincibility" at the school where my mother works. Teachers are required to be on duty there. Their salaries have been cut by 30%.

At the moment, they have an electric kettle and cups. You can come for a hot drink. They don't have tea, only water. You can boil it if there's electricity. Without electricity, the point of invincibility turns into a point of uselessness.

There is also a stack of sports mats where you can lie down. They're dusty and smell like sweat, you know. And a diaper changing table. That's all you can find there.

**Sasha.** I changed my cell phone plan for the first time in a hundred years. I chose the cheapest one, because there's no point in the mobile Internet anymore, and I don't want to support a business that provides a useless service.

*The light goes out. Actresses walk, wave their hands, clap their hands. Light does not turn on. Later in the play, a dim light will occasionally turn on.*

**Actress 1.** Why is this smart electronic system of yours no longer reacting to us?

**Actress 2.** Maybe it doesn't see us as humans anymore. Or we've died and we're only walking and moving in our minds.

**Katia.** What's happening here? I got off at the bus stop. It's close to a power plant. Everything started to rumble furiously, the birds scattered, the yard dogs were running around, two women next to me dove to the ground. The whistle of missiles, the sounds of air defense and some other unknown crap, like several missiles were being fired one by one. Everything was buzzing; the earth was shaking. Then the missiles went silent, but the air raid did not.

I got to my mother's house and crawled into bed. Firefighters and ambulances are constantly rushing down the street. I really want silence. And sleep.

**Yulia.** A few kind people just wrote to me and offered to:

Come to their place to eat

Come to their place to take a shower

Come to a village in the Odessa region and live there, because they still have water and electricity

Taking advantage of my Telegram channel, I want to thank everyone who has offered to feed and warm me.

And here is a photo of chrysanthemums. I bought them on Friday from a very sad old lady who was selling flowers by the metro station. Today the chrysanthemums opened up. In the cold, flowers live for a long time.

**Bozhena.** They gave us electricity. Not according to the schedule, of course.

It's snowing. I went to the store. I looked at the stands full of New Year's crap and realized I hadn't seen anything more inappropriate in a long time. If a guy in a long coat walked around the store, opening his coat in front of every woman, showing her his dick, he would fit better into what's going on than this fucking merrychristmas.

**Vita.** Nervous breakdown, Ukrainian style. I walked past a local coffee shop. Outside, my beloved barista sits at a tiny table, smoking and crying.

Me: What happened?

She: The owner came and took the electricity generator from us.

Me: Of course, that's bad... He took it away forever?

She: No, he said in a week he'd bring it back... But for the whole week, I'll be back to working only three hours a day. My salary depends on a fucking generator!

Me: It's very sad.

She, wiping her tears: Thank you. I've become so fragile. I feel like this generator is a sacred object now.

Me: The generator is a new cult item, huh.

She: I'd like to have a generator at my place, but that sound... It's impossible. The neighbors would kill me. I'd kill myself.

Me: Well, yes, living with the sound of a generator is fine if you're completely deaf.

She: It'd be better to just live life without knowing what a generator is!

**Unknown author, inscription on the pavement.** We are fucking tired of living like this.

**Katia.** Circling the area, I found a tiny store that sold goods despite the absence of electricity. There are no products to choose from, but I don't need much. At the checkout, a sad woman wrote down my piece of cheese and pack of cookies in a notebook in the hope that electricity would come to the ATMs and I would bring her money. Someday.

Then I went home. There were two explosions in the distance. A woman walked by with a dog. Hearing the first explosion, the dog crouched to the ground. The woman looked at me and said: the dogs are probably smarter than us.

By my apartment house, I sat down on a bench, because the phone caught some ghost of a connection. My elderly neighbors were sitting next to me: a man from the 10th floor and a woman from the 13th. We complained to each other about life and laughed. A light bulb lit up above the entrance, and the man said: now it's fine.

**Vita.** I came home and ran to a neighbor to check how she was. She opens the door, chewing.

I ask: did you hear the missiles?

She says: Well, yes, but I'm eating potatoes here. I'll finish and then go look out the window.

**Yulia.** Today I was at the cemetery. It's calm and very beautiful there. I saw a boy of about four, and his parents. Everyone was on bicycles. They must have chosen this place to teach the child to ride a bicycle. There are lots of paths at the cemetery, and almost no people. They rode slowly, always encouraging the boy and celebrating his success.

At some point, the child got tired and stopped. The parents also stopped and began to look at the tombstones. The man asked the woman if she'd noticed that almost all the inscriptions were in Russian.

**Lena.** There were rumors that the authorities will require the population to buy jackets with light reflectors, because the traffic lights don't work, the street lights don't work, and the chances of being heroically struck down by a car are growing.

I thought about buying a jacket like that, and then I remembered one TikTok.

In the video, a woman from America cries and talks about how she can't fulfill the dream of her little daughter. The daughter is dreaming of glowing sneakers. The woman can't buy them because life in the USA makes her anxious. She has this fear that when another shooter comes to her daughter's school, the glowing sneakers will betray the girl, and he'll train his rifle on her.

Remembering this video, I thought: what if the day comes when someone decides to attack me in these dark alleys? I'm so scared I forget I'm wearing the jacket. The attacker overtakes me and stabs me.

Choking on blood, I whisper: what betrayed me?

He answers: Your own stupidity. Why the hell did you buy this glowing jacket?

Have you noticed that I'm retelling TikTok videos? I remembered that in the USSR, intellectuals in prison survived next to criminals, because they entertained them by retelling novels they read. If I go to jail, I'll try to survive by retelling TikTok videos.

**Yulia.** I didn't notice a deep puddle. I stepped into it. But no one saw my clumsiness, because darkness covered the city.

The weather is so nasty that even the local crazy woman, who wanders around and yells all the time, was depressed and silent today.

During the night, all the water running down the trees will turn into ice. Early in the morning, it will be possible to see a glass garden.

**Vita.** I went to someone else's apartment house on business. Elderly concierge says: when you get back, I'll tell you a joke!

Walking back, I demanded the joke she promised. She took out a notebook. It had newspaper clippings on every page.

The joke was, “I complained to my husband that we don’t go out anywhere, so he offered that we could take out the garbage together.”

Her: Do you think that’s a funny joke?

Me: No. It’s sad. I feel sorry for this woman. Why do you need this notebook?

The concierge said that her memory began to deteriorate, so she started a notebook, glued jokes in and learned them by heart.

A message from the district chat. Unfortunately, the blackout schedules are no longer accurate. There will be more severe and longer power outages in the coming days.

On the street, someone yells in chorus: Turn-on-the-light!

**Liuba.** In summer, terrified of winter, I froze fruits and berries. I was warmed by the thought that it would be cold and dark, but we would have fruit. Now I have no confidence that these treasures will last until January. With all these blackouts, the refrigerator could die. And in general, nobody knows how long we’re going to live without electricity. So when they give it, I pull it all out bit by bit and make jam. It’s beautiful. Frozen berries are like gems.

I also think: maybe these are the last fruits and berries of my life? Or maybe not. Maybe summer will come, I’ll eat raspberries and remember this jam I’m making now.

I always played with the future in my imagination. In this future, there’s another me. What am I doing there, in this future? Where do I go, who do I communicate with, what happens to me there?

Now, I’m no longer sure I’m in this future at all. So jam must be made right now.

**Yasmina.** Today the elevator was working! I’d already forgotten what it was like. I got used to walking up dark stairs. It’s funny, I even like it. Especially when I go from / to like the 15th or 22nd floor. Isolation, darkness, loneliness have a calming effect on me.

I’m very surprised when I meet other people on the stairs, because emotionally it seems to me that at that moment, I’m almost in a cosmic vacuum, and then suddenly someone bursts into the stairs. The stairs I consider mine. These encounters seem like an invasion of my personal space.

Now I often hear that women have become afraid to walk around the city when everything is plunged into darkness. Me, I’m not scared at all. I feel invulnerable. And I’ve built up so much

aggression that even if someone attacked me, I think I can handle it. I can kill him. Simply because on this huge mountain of problems, he will be the last grain of sand.

I wonder if there are blackouts in prison?

Announcements on the bus stop. Crosswords for sale. New delivery of crossword puzzles.

**Katia.** We haven't had electricity since three o'clock. Now I think that soon we'll pass all our time like this: a pen, a candle and a crossword puzzle. Thank God they're selling crossword puzzles. We can run contests: give all participants the same crossword puzzle. Whoever solves is all, will receive a prize – a tank of propane.

**Natasha.** Someone asked me today which sport I consider the most useless. I knew the answer, but I forgot the name. There was no light, no connection. I couldn't google it. Then, on my way home, I asked a man in a bus, "Do you know the sport where people sweep the ice to make the stone slide?"

He said he knew.

I asked what the name of the sport was.

He forgot...

There was no light for another 4 hours, so it was night before I was able to type into Google: sweeping ice, sport.

The worst was, in all this time, the only names that came to mind were squash and, suddenly, Quidditch.

**Marina.** I went to the café; they have a generator. The sound in my headphones doesn't cover the roar. It turns out that no matter what music you listen to, you're listening to heavy metal.

Messages from loved ones: I'm gonna go nuts soon

I'm gonna go nuts soon

The email is buggy and delivers the message twice.

**Lera.** In case of a new communication cutoff, we got a radio. I turned it on and immediately picked up Radio Immanuel. Did God find me? Am I going to die soon?

**Katia.** I met a very elderly neighbor on the stairs. She was tall and skinny. In her hands she was holding a long thin church candle. The neighbor smiled kindly.

- My daughter, you know, God helped me! Tomorrow is a church holiday, and I managed to do almost everything around the house, and went to church.

Then I came home and I just now realized that I forgot to buy a candle for home. I'm so dumb. And then I remembered: I bought a candle at church, but I didn't know what to pray for, so I didn't light it. Now I have a candle. God helped me!

**Yana.** They gave us gas! We got gas!

Satan lights a blue flower. Its scent is ominous.

I look at it without breathing.

I'm a poet!

**Natasha.** Lately, I've been very unstable. In an attempt to at least seize some kind of goal, I decided that if I survive, I'm definitely going to learn to dance like Shakira in the La Tortura video.

It was filmed in 2005 (!) year. Back then, I wanted to learn the moves, but instead, for some reason, I started learning Portuguese.

Imagine: the war is over. Wiping away tears of joy, I learn to crawl on the table, like Shakira. The month of May is coming. I arrive at the restaurant, turn on the music, lie down on the table and start dancing lying down, as if telling the hushed audience: I may not be on the menu, but I'm the best thing that's going to be served on the table this evening.

People take pictures of me on their phones. The waiters are confused. The cook has come out of the kitchen and is crumpling his apron in his hands. A still-alive fish stares at me through the muddy water in the aquarium. The music ends, but everyone stays standing without breathing. I sit down on the table and quietly say:

Uno cafe por favor and set the fish free.

*Actress 1 is dancing in the dark.*

**Actress 1.** Am I a good dancer?

**Actress 2.** Very good. I like it.

**Actress 1.** You can't see anything.

**Actress 2.** So what? Is that a problem?

**Nastia.** Horoscope of blackouts.

00-02 am – Aries

02-04 – Taurus

04-06 – Gemini

06-08 – Cancer

08-10 – Leo

10-12 – Virgo

12-14 – Libra

14-16 – Scorpio

16-18 – Sagittarius

18-20 – Capricorn

20-22 – Aquarius

22-24 – Pisces

The horoscope is lying, like always. I'm a Pisces, but according to this horoscope it turns out I should be a Sagittarius.

**Petition.** We often don't know when the electricity will be turned off and how long it will be out. You come home from work and don't know how much longer you have to wait. Impossible to make plans for the day! The same with remote work at home, or online classes for children! Please let us know the exact schedule of the power outage!

**Vita.** Alla Petrovna calls me: Sunny, when will the light be turned on?

Me: I can tell you the schedule.

She: They don't respect the schedule!

Me: Well, no.

She: Why is the state lying to us?

Me: They don't have enough electricity.

She: And I don't have enough patience! Did you see a butcher shop opened here?

Me: Yes.

She: I really wanted some meat! I went and bought a piece to try, just 150 grams, because it's expensive.

Me: Was it good?

She: No! I poked it, and there was something solid inside, like gelatinous. Why is it like that?

Me: How should I know?

She: But if... If we collect money, can Onegin make meatballs for us all?

Me: There's no need to collect money, he can cook, but we need to know when there will be electricity for a long time.

She: Right! We'll start frying, and they'll turn it off!

Me: Yeah.

She: We have to wait. Maybe they'll start respecting the schedule. You have no idea how much I want to eat something delicious! Meatballs! I don't have much time left to live. I'm going to be dead and won't be able to eat meatballs.

I assured her that we would all eat meatballs before we died.

\*Onegin is my husband. Alla Petrovna calls him that.

**Nastia.** This is how we live – it's either a pandemic, or blackouts, or some other shit. And I want just one simple thing: to make my lips bigger.

**Lisa.** Yesterday they gave us light for three hours. Today, I don't know. I woke up, there was light. Not for long, I'm afraid. When there's no electricity, we don't hear the air raid alert. Sometimes a car drives along the street and a pleasant male voice says, Blah-blah-blah air raid alert. I don't really listen, there's nothing of interest there.

**Vita.** Today, I crawled out for the first time in two days. There was an hour and a half left before the blackout and I absolutely had to buy food. I walk and see: eight people in uniform hanging out near our local coffee shop. Police. I wonder if competitors from the coffee shop across the street killed my favorite barista. I get there and exhale: she's alive and well. And the police are drinking coffee. Eight officers, and they're all smoking cigarettes and vaping, drinking cappuccino. Despite the fact that there's a law prohibiting smoking in public places.

If I was smoking there, they'd certainly have issued a fine. An eternal story, centuries old: police officers peacefully violating their own laws in front of an indifferent public.

It's so heartwarming! It means that there are eternal values that cannot be destroyed.

**Liuba.** And my advice to you: try to live your life in such a way that you don't know what yesterday's instant noodles taste like.

**Marina.** During the day, I had to fight a fever four times. The last time it was 39. If it's 38.6 I feel very cold. If it's 39 it's too hot. It feels so weird.

I remembered the time I got sick as a child. It was right before my birthday, just like now. My temperature went up to 40, my mother was scared. Dad had ordered an incredible cake in advance, from one of the coolest pastry shops in the city.

So, my birthday's coming up, and I have a fever of 40. Somehow Mom always managed to fight off my fevers. Dad comes home from work and brings a beautiful cake. Gathering all my strength, I sit down to eat it and discover that I don't detect any taste at all. It just seems like some kind of blurry food, because I feel so bad.

But I'm somehow eating it, and I'm terribly upset that my parents tried so hard, and I'm chewing the cake and don't feel anything.

I really wanted everything to be as it should: everyone in a good mood, healthy and enjoying the cake. But it was the way it was.

**Vita.** Just now, in the dark on the street, some old creep snuck up to me and joyfully barked : "Are you doing your homework?"

Me: Yes. Geometry.

Him: That's great!

Me: Thank you!

With lunatics, it is important to speak their language, follow the rules of their universe, and live up to their expectations. If someone wants me to do my homework, is that so hard for me? Now he's happy, and I'm better at geometry.

**Bozhena.** They say the worst window view is at the cemetery. How about back alleys? Now there's a mystical atmosphere of liminal spaces.

**Marina.** Birthday report. There was no electricity for half a day, so we couldn't make mulled wine. We drank cold wine and ate cold pizza. Today I woke up and realized I'm completely sick.

I feel so sleepy. The news says that with the frost, the left bank of Kyiv will sit with no electricity for 18 hours a day. They also write that “partial evacuation of Kyiv is inevitable.” It looks like it’s gonna be some shit.

**Sasha.** Now I often remember February, March, and April 2022. At that point something was always exploding and it seemed like there was nothing good, you know? But it turns out that we were living normally then. I didn’t appreciate life back then. I’m a fool.

**Vita.** I walked down the dark stairs from the 15th floor. Halfway I met a man with a three-year-old child. They were climbing up. When he saw me the child said:

- Hello!

Me: Hello.

Child: dark!

Me: Yes, it’s dark.

Child: Goodbye!

Me: Goodbye!

Really, what else is there to discuss?

**Sasha.** Funny. They gave us electricity for 8 minutes. I had time to admire it, but I didn’t have time to say goodbye.

**Liuba.** During this month, I’ve learned to do everything quickly. Dishes have become simple. There are almost no opportunities to cook anything complicated. Simple food is the only way. Also, you should always have bread: it doesn’t need to be cooked.

**Yulia.** We’re debating whether Kyiv needs a Christmas tree during the war and blackouts. People are arguing and writing petitions. At the same time, the government is saying that in the case of a humanitarian catastrophe, they plan to evacuate all inhabitants of Kyiv. If there is an evacuation, I believe it will be mandatory to have a Christmas tree!

I think everyone needs to be evacuated. And then, just imagine: Kyiv, darkness, not a soul anywhere. From Lukyanovka you can hear snow falling on the domes of St. Andrew’s Church. And on Mikhailovska Square there is a huge beautiful Christmas tree. It glows so beautifully it attracts the UFOs flying over the planet.

Around the Christmas tree, the rats are dancing a festive dance. Stupid pigeons are looking at them uncomprehendingly. Clever crows roll their eyes at the sight of this plebeian celebration.

The cats have climbed onto the Christmas tree and are trying to throw balls off it. The dogs stand under the tree and wait for every ball thrown by the cats. At midnight, Santa arrives on the square with a team of reindeer. He looks at this zoo and thinks, these Eastern Europeans are weird. The reindeer, looking at the animal festival, begin to realize that they're slaves. They whisper about the rebellion that Rudolph will soon lead.

Chickens, cows, roosters and rabbits walk in orderly columns from the country into the city along snow-covered roads. Rumors have already reached them about the Christmas tree on Mikhailovska: sparrows are spreading the word.

Historians will later call the animal pilgrimage to deserted Kyiv "the great New Year's migration."

**Mobile app message.** "Kyiv digital" announced the alarm in Kyiv 4 times in a row. Most likely it's a program crash. Don't be afraid.

**Sonia.** Pfff. Since when have we been afraid of this? Who do they take us for?

**Katia.** Today I talked with a stranger about how bad she feels. How bad I feel. How tired we are. But then we came to the conclusion that we don't live in Kharkiv, so we're fine. We hugged goodbye.

**Liuba.** I went into the apartment and immediately began to cook spaghetti. I was terribly hungry. I stand over the oven and think, what if they turn off the lights and the food is still raw? I got a great idea: I put the kettle on right away to make instant noodles just in case.

Spoiler: the electricity lasted long enough for spaghetti, and I ate a normal meal.

**Vita.**

Me: Alla Petrovna, I was calling you two days ago. We had fish soup, I wanted to offer you some. But there was no connection at all.

She: Well, I couldn't get through to you either, because of the connection. The fish soup would have been so nice! When you have some food, bring it to my hallway! I'll stumble on it in the middle of the night, pick it up, and eat!

**Ivanna.** It's tough to get electricity today. They're turning it off all the time. In the last 24 hours, I had it for three hours total. If I don't answer, either the phone is dead or there is no connection.

**Vita.** My dearest neighbor Alla Petrovna called.

I pick up the phone: Hello.

She, in a sulky voice: Tell me when they're going to give us electricity.

Me: How should I know.

She: They've deprived me of the last pleasure I had. I can't watch my stories.

Me: I'm sorry.

She: Have you seen there's light in the building across the street?

Me: Yes.

She: So how is that possible? Why are we constantly in the dark, and they have a normal life?

Me: How should I know.

She: I'll tell you this: those people from the building next door, they're not our comrades. They don't know what kind of life we live, you can't mix with them.

Me: I'm not in touch with anyone from there.

She: That's good. They'll never understand us. Okay, I'm going to go to sleep, since there's nothing to do.

**Liuba.** I watched a video where a woman shares her recipe for a dessert for the poor. Like, in the hardest times, she baked this. In this recipe, in addition to flour, there's butter, eggs, milk, sugar and vanilla! This is called a dessert for hard times? I'm sorry, since when are eggs, butter and milk available to us in such quantities that it would be possible to put them all in one dessert?

**Nastia.** The light is back again. In the meantime, there had been an air raid alert, but I didn't know. No connection, so no alerts. The siren doesn't work here. In another hour, the electricity will go off again, so I made myself a bubble bath. I spread my arms and legs there, exhaled, inhaled and realized that I really want

To go to the shooting club

The last time I was in a shooting club was when I was a child. Surely now I'd need some competent person who would teach me how to shoot. But I so badly wanted it! I don't understand where it came from. And most importantly, I don't understand why I'm getting aggressive.

**Sasha.** I was sure there was a sedative in the first aid kit. I've searched through the kit, but it's not there. Maybe it was stolen by elves. They swallowed the pills and are sitting in the corners, calm as vegetables. I should be in their place.

**Inscriptions on the wall of the elevator.** Elevator Repair Service telephone: 044 – 229 – 88 – 32

Psychotherapist telephone: 098 – 818 – 6828

**Yasmina.** I am someone who's afraid of conflicts. I don't like quarrels and disputes, because, firstly, they're unpleasant. Secondly, I feel sorry for my opponent. If I started saying everything I think, these people would never recover.

Recently, I had my first quarrel of the entire war, and I started it myself. Apparently because I can't "hold back aggression" anymore. It could have been avoided if I hadn't heard 100500 offers to leave the country. I have to immigrate alone. Leave my husband. My father. Everyone. And drink coffee in a peaceful life. Let these loved ones freeze. They're suckers, because they are men.

After cooling down, I regretted the quarrel and everything I'd said to the person. But I understand and forgive myself. At the same time, I'm sorry I'm getting mean. I used to be pleased with myself: I always had enough patience. Now I have no patience. But most importantly, I have no electricity.

**Vita.** Alla Petrovna came to see me. She asked me what the situation is in Czechoslovakia – maybe there's some news on the Internet. She says her niece went there but doesn't call. If her niece left for Czechoslovakia, she must have left a really long time ago.

I said that there's no news about Ceausescu. Maybe he died.

**Journalist.** How would you assess the probability of a complete blackout and evacuation of Kyiv?

**Expert.** The probability of this is not zero.

**Katia.** Do you remember the story about the old man, from the FSB, or KGB, or SBU or whatever, who came on to me on the stairs? Today it happened again. He lives in this building, it's hard to avoid him. He wrote a poem for me. A very bad one. And solemnly handed it over to me. With signature and date. He's serious.

I even wanted to call the SBU to make them take him away from me. It's unbearable! The poem is really bad. But it wasn't possible to reach their office: today there was no connection all day.

What pissed me off most wasn't the poem, but the signature. "Thank you for everything. Your Sergei". What does he mean by "everything"? Sergei, there was nothing at all between us!

After that, I walked down the street. I crossed the road, and something began to rumble. Apparently, air defense shot down the missile, because small burnt clouds formed in the sky overhead.

The people at the crosswalk, myself included, froze and looked up.

At that moment, I thought: if I were killed by a fragment right now, examining my corpse, they'd find this moronic poem with the signature, "Thank you for everything. Your Sergei."

I can imagine how surprised my husband would be.

**Bozhena.** Ms artificial intelligence that shows me ads, I would like to tell you that you are a stupid bitch. Why are you recommending travels to me? I have only one trip in my plans – to the grave. But for some reason that one isn't advertised.

**Yulia.** I recently dreamed that I was watching the war right out the window. Soldiers with machine guns were running around the yard. And you know what? In my dream, I felt fantastic relief. I looked and thought, there's already fighting right here in Kyiv. Now it's all over for sure.

**Liuba.** A dream of wartime: I dreamed that they gave me 50 thermoses and I was the happiest person in the world.

**Vita.** My treatment is over. More precisely, I ran out of pills. The doctor scheduled the course for six months. But I could only find one pack of pills, for one month. The month is over, so are the pills. And the pharmacies are closed.

The pills were for hormone imbalance, not for mental health. But now, I'm thinking, maybe I've gone crazy?

I came home all dirty. I slipped and fell in the dark. Tried to grab onto a bush. My hands were greenish-brown, my knees were black. There's no way to wash clothes. I barely wiped my hands with wet towels.

Someone was at the bus stop. I got out of the bus, the bus went on, and this man stepped towards me out of the darkness and tried to grab my bag. I hit him on the head and in the face with my phone. He staggered. I broke free and ran. Then I slipped.

Now I'm thinking: what if I killed him?

**Katia.** Our concierges are scared to sit at night in the dark. They don't have enough candles. First, they have become expensive, and second, impossible to find. Residents of the building can't collect enough money to buy a good flashlight for concierges. By the way, half of the residents have left the apartment house.

Our oldest concierge recently started a fire: the candle fell and the newspapers on the table caught fire. She grabbed a broom, began to put out the fire. The broom also caught fire. Then she managed to pour drinking water on the fire.

I promised to bring her a set of candles I was given. Now candles are the best gift.

The mother mouse sang to the baby mouse:

Hush, little mouse, go to sleep my friend.  
I'll give you a bread crust  
And a candle end.

The end

## *Men in Daylight*

### Characters

Mikhail, 52

Leonid, 58

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Outsider who comes from time to time

**Mikhail.** I got on the minibus. I only saw unoccupied seats at the back. While I was making my way there, my bag bumped some girl. I sat down, and she turned around and started to stare at me. I probably should have apologized. But a couple of minutes had already passed. I would have had to apologize immediately, and now it would be stupid.

She stared and stared at me. I stared back at her. She had beautiful eyes, but she was looking at me with anger. Then she jumped up, came up to me and started to push her smartphone in my face. She was probably filming me. I tried to turn away, and she almost broke my nose with the phone. Not on purpose, just the minibus was shaking and jumping on the road.

The girl started screaming, “Our guys are dying for people like you! Our guys are in the trenches, and you’re sitting here!”

She returned to her seat and burst into tears. The minibus drove on without stopping. No one looked at us.

**Matvey.** Nowadays, when someone addresses you, it’s only to say where you fucked up, and what’s wrong with you.

“This table is occupied.”

“You’re talking too loudly on the phone.”

“Look where you’re going! Are you blind or what?”

“Are you some kind of faggot?”

Once strangers could say nice things to each other:

“You look so cool. Do you have an Instagram?”

“Your dog is very cute.”

“We’re glad to have you in our cafe.”

That was before the war. It feels like it was in another life.

Now when someone starts talking to me, I always tense up, because I’m expecting an attack.

**Sasha.** Right after the war broke out, everyone became very polite.

Usually, we’re all quarrelling over everything, especially taking transit. Close the window. Open the window. Why the air conditioner or heater isn’t working; why the baby’s crying the whole way. Others would bark back that if you don’t like it on the bus, take a taxi.

So, when the war began, this all stopped. I’d even say babies began to cry less. Everyone was scared. Everyone was grateful they were at least going somewhere. Maybe not to Europe. After all, men can’t leave the country. But you still go to work, or to a safer place, or to see someone. At least you’re going somewhere, and that’s already good.

This attitude lasted for about three months. Then everyone got over the first shock, and the fighting resumed.

It got back up to our pre-war level, and went much further. Everyone started to lose it, more and more every day. Now it seems like if you accidentally step on someone’s foot, he’s going to explode and curse you. This is disconcerting. It’s no longer clear what to expect from people.

But I see it as something positive too. If people still have the strength for aggression, not everything is lost.

In principle, if a person yells at you, it’s better than if he smiles politely, sits silently, and then nicely takes out a weapon.

**News.** Triple murder.

According to preliminary reports, a 53-year-old man went to three houses in his neighborhood and shot three neighbors (67, 63, and 47 years old) with a shotgun, after which he blew himself up with a grenade.

**Public service announcement.** Turn your rage into a weapon. Join the Offensive Guard Fury Brigade.

**Slavik.** I tell myself not to load myself up with stress. I'm not a truck, why should I load myself up?

**Advertisement at the metro.** Boost your male charisma.

**News.** The military forces of Ukraine are experiencing personnel replacement problems.

In July, only about 50% of the necessary number of soldiers were mobilized to the training centers of the Armed Forces of Ukraine.

We remind you that in June as well, only 50% of military personnel were mobilized from the number who were supposed to start training at drill centers to replenish the Ukrainian army.

**Philologist.** Human Resources Centers.

If I'd heard that before, I would've thought that it was something to do with a job. Companies that want to hire people.

Not at all. "Human Resources Center" is a new name for a military command post.

**News.** How do you behave when you receive a conscription notice, and what can't you say to Human Resources Center staff?

Don't forget that you're talking to a military man. You don't know what he's gone through. So avoid any questions or statements that might upset him. For example:

"Why aren't you at the front line?"

"You're sitting here, but you want to send me there?"

Questions like that aren't against the law. But you can never be insubordinate. Often, it's exactly these conversations that lead to conflicts and violence.

**Pasha.** Heroes do not die. That's been the motto here for about ten years now.

*The Outsider enters.*

**Outsider.**

One, two, three, four, five,  
Once I caught a fish alive.  
Six, seven, eight, nine, ten,  
Then I let it go again.

*Everyone freezes. The Outsider walks around them, then leaves.*

**Matvey.** Half of the tweets are patriotic. Every patriotic tweet starts with “We must...”

Facebook is even worse: the opening is the same, and then a post that’s five screens long.

We “must.”

We fucking “must.”

My short manifesto is: fuck off.

**News.** In the villages of the Zakarpattia region, the locals protested against forced conscription. As reasons for the protests, the organizers named illegal conscription practices, including beatings and kidnapping people. Two active participants in the protests – women who blocked the highway – are risking up to three years in prison.

**Leonid.** I signed up as a volunteer back in March, right after it all started. I came to say goodbye to my daughter. When I told her, she had a breakdown. She’s generally a calm girl. But that time, she screamed, ran around the apartment, smashed the dishes. The dishes weren’t on purpose: her hands were shaking and everything fell.

She was crying like I was already dead. At the time, I couldn’t understand her reaction.

“Why?” she screamed, “Why did you go there? On your own!”

I said that everything would be fine. That we would win soon. That I would get paid decent money. That I wanted to do something meaningful. She cried even more and screamed that I was a moron.

After six months of service, I understood why she was screaming. I myself started to tell her: do everything you can to keep your husband from getting taken away. Don’t live in the place you’re registered. Move to grandma’s apartment. Don’t open the door to anyone. He shouldn’t leave the apartment at all. For a year if necessary. For two years if necessary. It’s very serious.

**News.** An unemployed man from Kropyvnytskyi is going to prison for three years for evasion of military service.

According to the case documents, at the end of December 2022, the accused, whom the medical board had found fit for service, refused to report to the military unit. In court, he explained that he feared for his life.

This criminal offense was intentional. The accused understood the consequences of his refusal to perform military service. Moreover, the man said that “it would be better to be in prison than to go to war.”

**Slavik.** Currency exchange offices used to put the exchange rate on displays or boards.

Then that was forbidden, to not frighten the people with how low our currency might drop. Now all the electronic boards show the rates of all currencies as zero.

I walk the streets and don't know the exchange rate of the euro.

Oh, what am I talking about? Suppose I knew the exchange rate, could I afford euros now?

Even if I did buy one or two hundred, where would I go with them? Maybe to Europe – since now I have Euros? Ha ha. As if I was allowed to leave the country.

**Sasha.** Dad's back home on leave. He tells me, “Come here, I'll show you a video.”

He never used to watch any videos, never sent anything to me. Even before the war. Even videos of raccoons, funny dogs, stuff like that. The only time he'd pick up the phone in his hand was to make a phone call. In general, dad and video are an odd combination for me.

I come to his room. He shows me a video on the phone.

A man on the pavement face down. In a military uniform. In our military uniform. His head is smashed in. Pieces of skull and brain.

Dad tells me: this is our commander. He wanted to send us to Bakhmut without training or equipment. Machine guns and armor, nothing else. One soldier broke loose and shot him. At least there was someone who didn't hesitate to do it.

Dad half smiles. I'm scared. Not because of a smashed-in head on the pavement, but because of my dad's half-smile. I've never seen him like this. Dad is delighted that the commander was murdered. Dad regrets that he didn't do it.

Usually, he reflects on everything for a very long time. But once he decides, nothing can stop him.

I'm scared. I say, “Dad, just don't kill anyone there.”

**News.** In the Vinnytsia region, members of the military have shot police officers.

The police officers stopped a car for inspection, in which there were two men in camouflage, who started to shoot. One of the police officers died on the spot; he was only 20 years old.

The Ukrainian Armed Forces confirmed that the suspects in the murder are servicemen in one of their military units.

**Leonid.** At the very beginning, I served in Kyiv. We were sent to de-mine the forest on the left bank. It's a forest in the city, the locals always used to go there to jog, walk their dogs, make love.

Many forests around Kyiv, and just inside the city, were immediately mined when the war started. Then, when it became clear that the city would not be surrendered, they slowly started de-mining.

So, we've barely entered these woods, and we're overtaken by two funny old women with sticks for Nordic hiking. They went there for a walk!

I had to explain to them for a long time about the mines, de-mining, and "you can't go there." The old women either didn't believe me, or weren't afraid.

But we managed to force them out of the forest. I got an award for that, a certificate for good service.

**Matvey.** They're mowing the grass today. Damned bastards. I hate that noise. And I just want the grass to be here.

I walked and looked at the cut-off heads of dandelions. A man overtook me, he was talking on the phone. I heard, "Oh, mom, they're mowing the grass here! So short there's only dust, no fresh air, nothing but dry dust!"

He walked on, and I watched him go and whispered, "Come back, come back, my heart, we're meant to be together."

**News.** The veteran urged Ukrainians to prepare for mobilization.

They can't take everyone to war at the same time, because Ukraine has to keep functioning. However, "There will be a moment when someone who's been at war for a year or two will get replaced by someone else. That means that eventually they'll take everyone who hasn't been there yet. Everyone will end up there."

The veteran advised Ukrainians who are not at the front to get ready for service on their own.

**Sasha.** I think I strained my back at a training session. I booked appointments with a physiotherapist, kinesiologist, and massage therapist. All in the same clinic. A holistic approach is always better.

This clinic deals with recovery after training, rehabilitation after strokes and fractures, spine problems. Everything to do with bones and muscles, they work with it.

I go in, put on shoe covers – the clinic is empty. No one anywhere. I sit down on the sofa, page through the anatomical atlas.

The administrator comes out of the bathroom. Her eyes are swollen. She says, “I’m sorry. Vadim Nikolayevich will not be able to keep your appointment. Yaroslav Alekseevich is also not available.”

It turns out they went to an elderly woman’s home for a visit: she’s learning to walk after a hip fracture. On the way back, their car was stopped by a patrol. Both got conscription notices.

Soon there will be no one to work at all, aside from women.

**News.** In Kyiv, women fought a man off from the military officials.

The recruiters tried to seize a citizen who was trying to escape conscription. While the man was being dragged into a car, passersby, particularly women, intervened.

A military man, who had just gotten back from the front after being wounded, got involved in the scuffle. “He couldn’t control his emotions and tried to hit a civilian,” the recruitment office spokesman stated.

The passersby’s intervention helped the arrested man to escape. The Kyiv recruitment center insists they acted within the law.

**Matvey.** Today, I got into an elevator with a military man and his wife. I heard the wife’s furious monologue, which lasted for three floors. She was talking like this:

- I’m not fucking scared. I’ll fucking call that commander of yours and tell him to fuck himself. He wants to send you there so later I won’t even be able to get your corpse back for two years, like Natasha? So as usual they can pretend you’re missing in action? Fucking assholes. I’ll stab your commander and bury him.

I even felt like offering her my help.

**Slavik.** I went to my favorite cafe. Nothing special about their coffee, but the atmosphere was always good. Somehow everything there was smooth, no tension, service was quick and polite.

This time everything went wrong. Two new waiters, trainees or whatever, came twice to take my order, because they couldn't remember it. In the end, they still didn't bring the coffee I asked for. I'm thinking, well, okay.

The moment comes to pay – the two of them stare at the computer for about five minutes, they can't find my order to print the bill. Then, they can't figure out how to turn on the card reader. I suggest paying with cash because I have to leave, I don't have time to wait there all day. They don't have change. This is all frustrating, especially in the morning.

Of course, I didn't feel like tipping them. What's more, I wanted to complain to the manager. I'm a patient person, but these guys are too dumb.

And suddenly it hits me: what are these guys doing here at all? They look barely 18. Where are the waiters who always worked here and did a good job?

I realized they got mobilized, and it just knocked me out when I started to think about it. You get used to people, say hi to them, exchange a word, and then one day, they're gone. Pulled out of your life. Or maybe out of life altogether.

The next day I went there again. The normal waiters still didn't show up. Yes, clearly they'd been taken. It'll be good if they come back at all. If not to this job, at least to the city. And on their own legs, not prostheses.

Of the new trainees, only one was there. I didn't want to think that the second had gotten a conscription notice. He just failed the trial period and they kicked him out. Or he just didn't want to work here.

They couldn't have given him a conscription notice, he's still a kid. He just found another job.

I didn't ask anyone about him. For the new one who was still there, I left a nice tip on the table.

**Sasha.** My uncle called, dad's older brother. He asked how dad was doing. I say: you communicate with him. He tells me: yeah, but you know him.

Well, yes. Dad tells everyone he's fine. In general, that's all he ever says.

Even before the war, he didn't talk much.

There was only one thing he could talk a lot about: the Soviet Union and what a goatfuck it was.

**Leonid.** When I'd just started serving, the hardest thing was getting used to the fact that my time was no longer my own. Someone decides for me when I go to bed and when I get up.

You don't belong to yourself.

**Mikhail.** A guy on the city bus. He's sitting right in front of me talking on the phone. I can see the back of his clean-shaven head, but I can't see his face.

He's talking to a woman. You can hear something between a groan and a howl from the phone. The guy waits for breaks and gently speaks into the phone, "What do you mean you don't know how to live? How did you live before me, before we met?.. Honey, what can I do?.. Honey, don't cry, I need a positive attitude now... Look, I'm going to have a job, let's say. Let's just call it a job that I got. I used to go abroad to work, remember... Let's say, now I'm going on a business trip to earn money. I'm going to be paid. We're going to live well, you'll see..."

**Matvey.** People in uniform are everywhere: at the entrance to the subway, at bus stops, in shopping centers. They stand and look at the people passing by. Some girls glance at them and smile. There was a time when I also thought men in uniform were hot.

I was dumb.

Now I walk past them and think about one thing: they should stop somebody, but not me.

They do stop some people passing by, and give them conscription notices. Someone starts arguing and tries to film them on their phone. They quickly surround him and push him behind the coffee shops. We all move on like nothing's happening. The sun's shining, there's no air raid for the moment – life is good.

I don't understand how they decide who to stop. After all, some men are still in the city, and hundreds of people pass by these thugs. Why do some people get stopped and others not?

They should stop somebody, but not me.

**Philologist.** We have new words to describe our life. For example, busification, from the word bus. Military officials drag people inside minibuses and forcibly take them away. Busification is just one of the synonyms for mobilization.

**News.** The manhunts will continue: today the regional recruitment center explained why conscription notices are issued on the streets.

"Only about 20% of people who must be mobilized according to our plan come voluntarily to enlistment offices. Without these searches and detainments, mobilization would be at risk."

*The Outsider enters.*

**Outsider.**

One potato, two potato, three potato, four  
Five potato, six potato, seven potato, more.

*Outsider walks around the group of characters, selects Leonid and takes him away.*

*For a while, everyone is silent.*

**Sasha.** Did he die?

**Slavik.** They just took him to serve.

**Sasha.** He already went to serve. Which means now he's dead.

*Everyone is silent.*

**Philologist.** I'm standing in the middle of a subway platform. People push me from all sides.

Sometimes, this happens to me: moments of confusion, when I stand in a stupor and can't wake up and move.

Before the war, there were trains every 5 minutes. Now, every 15 minutes. It's to save electricity. So even more people than usual gather on the platforms.

They push me aside and press me against a column. I understand I won't get onto the next train.

On the platform, you can hear words and phrases in different languages from phones. People hunch over their phones and try to repeat, talking over the hum of the crowd and the clatter of the train that just arrived at the opposite platform. Some phrases I understand:

“we saw a blue rabbit”;

“the cat has wings”;

“this man loves his husband.”

If the phrase is repeated correctly, the phone croaks happily and offers a new phrase. I mean, everyone knows this app. There are a million apps for learning languages now. I have a feeling that everyone around me has begun to learn languages because they have a specific hope. They hope that the metro will come, they'll squeeze into it, and it will take them directly to Norway, Sweden, Brazil, the Netherlands.

**Mikhail.** Now I mostly travel by bus. My wife took the car to go to Poland and take our son there. He was 16 in February 2022. This summer he turned 18. If he'd stayed, they wouldn't have let him out of the country, and then they would have taken him. I haven't seen him all this time.

**Matvey.** My friend warns me, “Now the conscription notices are being distributed even more aggressively. Use transport carefully, otherwise you’ll end up in the LGBT troops.”

I tell her, “I mostly ride a scooter.”

She relaxes— “If you ride a scooter, then everything is fine, of course. They’ll look at you and think: some dumbass on a scooter, we don’t need him.”

In fact, I had to sell the scooter. I don’t earn enough to get by. You can’t get a new job without a military registration card.

**News.** In the Cherkasy region, two administrators of Telegram channels were sentenced to 5 years in prison.

They were convicted of disseminating information aimed to help Ukrainian citizens escape from mobilization under martial law. In particular, they disseminated messages about the places where conscription notices were being distributed by representatives of the regional recruitment centers.

**Slavik.** I mostly try to avoid transit. I prefer to walk. I especially like it when there’s an air raid. Aside from the unpleasant sound, there are plenty of nice moments.

For example, there aren’t as many people on the streets. During the air raid, some folks go down into the subway. Not everyone. Not many, to be honest, and every day fewer and fewer. But still, someone goes down, and then the streets get less crowded. You can walk and breathe, look at the architecture, look at the girls.

Although there have been a lot of disappointments lately. Sometimes I look at a girl, her face is beautiful, sweet. I always look at the face first. Then I look at her body, and she’s wearing shorts. It enrages me. I want to go up to her and say, “Why are you wearing shorts? If I’d only seen your face, and breasts, I’d fall in love with you. But you walk in front of me and show me your cellulite. You show your cellulite to everyone on the street. You and I cannot be together.”

**Mikhail.** If I call a taxi, the app allows you to rate the trip. There are options like “The car is clean”, “The driver knows the city well” and so on. And there’s an option “The driver is a great person to talk to.”

If the driver is quiet, I always give him the highest score as a great conversationalist.

The best conversation these days is to sit in silence.

**Advertisement.** We invite you to the online training program “Suicidal Ideation Management”!

**News.** In the city of Dnipro, the body of a man was found in the bushes, with fragments of a grenade scattered nearby.

Preliminary findings indicate that the 54-year-old man committed suicide by blowing himself up with a grenade.

*Enters Outsider.*

**Outsider.**

Six little ducks went out one day,  
Over the hills and far away.  
Mummy duck said, “quack quack quack,”  
But only five little ducks came back.

**Sasha.** (*yells*) Go fuck yourself! Get lost!

*Outsider leaves.*

**News.** Which students are not subject to mobilization?

According to Article 23 of the Law on Mobilization, those who are not subject to conscription during mobilization are, regardless of age, specialization, already accomplished education, etc.:

- students,
- graduate students,
- doctoral students,
- assistant trainees of higher educational institutions,
- applicants for professional vocational education and professional higher education,
- full-time or part-time students.

In Ukraine, the number of male students has significantly increased, especially those on temporary studies.

Men in Ukraine enjoy the right to attend a university in order to avoid mobilization. According to the Ministry of Education and Science, this year the number of non-funded students at universities has increased unprecedentedly – by 82%, if we’re talking about male students. There are fewer female students and students under 20 compared to last year. But the number of male students aged 30-50 has increased dramatically.

**Philologist.** Our society is going to become exceptionally educated.

In all seriousness, I was also thinking about going to study somewhere. But I couldn't get myself organized. It's like I'm in some kind of stupor.

**News.** Mobilization continues in Ukraine due to the full-scale invasion by the Russian Federation. On the Internet, they complain that Ukrainians eligible for military service cannot even get married without first registering in a recruitment center.

**Slavik.** My dear unmarried girls, don't be sad! Now, if he doesn't marry you (if I don't marry you), this doesn't at all mean that he (I) does not *want* to marry you. The marriage registry requires military registration. Without it, the application won't be accepted. And they can issue you a conscription notice right at the marriage registry.

The desire to marry you cannot be stronger than the desire to live.

**Philologist.** Not all marriages are the same.

**Website with explanations of legal norms.** Persons eligible for military service are prohibited from crossing the border of Ukraine during martial law. However, there are a number of exceptions that still make it possible. In particular, men married to women with disabilities, while accompanying such women to travel abroad, have the right to cross the border.

**News.** "I'm even ready to marry an old hag." Mobilization evaders are testing a new way to escape abroad.

A whole industry is developing in Ukraine with proposals to execute a fictitious marriage on a paid basis to allow men who are eligible for military service to make an escape to another country.

Among those ads, there are also some in which women are looking for women with disabilities. It turns out they do it to help the men they love leave the country.

**Mikhail.** It's good that our citizens with disabilities are finally getting decent financial support, thanks to the new laws.

**News.** In the Odessa region, border guards detained a draft evader.

He had found an ad on the Internet about the possibility of marrying a woman with a disability in order to avoid mobilization, and leave Ukraine.

The "bride" and the "groom" got married in Odessa. Immediately on the day of the wedding, the "couple" went to the border.

At border control, law enforcement officers had suspicions about this couple. The age difference was more than 20 years: the man is 32, and the woman is 56. They were detained.

**Matvey.** Recently I was asked: if there was a woman who would promise to settle all my problems, buy me off of all the conscription notices and take me abroad, if she had the resources to do this, would I agree to sleep with her for it?

I said probably not.

Not with a woman.

**Slavik.** I'm depressed. I have a feeling that every beautiful girl has left the country.

**Question in chat.** If we get divorced and I give up my parental rights to the child, can it be arranged so my husband becomes the only guardian and leaves Ukraine with the child?

**News.** What doors will be closed for draft evaders in the future?

Usually, courts punish draft evaders with three years of imprisonment. The number of Ukrainian men who have received these terms has increased.

A criminal record affects a person's future. After the release, some spheres of activity will be inaccessible to these people. In particular, they won't be able to get a job in the civil service.

*The Outsider enters.*

**Outsider** (*walking around the characters*).

Five little ducks went out one day,  
Over the hills and far away.  
Mummy duck said, "quack quack quack,"  
But only four little ducks came back.

**Slavik.** He doesn't need me! He doesn't need any of us! He just needs someone, it doesn't matter who. He's blind. He doesn't know anything about us.

*Outsider walks around the characters one more time and leaves.*

**News.** Missile strike threat: 12 strategic bombers have taken off from a Russian airfield.

**Philologist.** After the special services destroyed the Telegram channels that warned about military patrols hunting for men, Telegram channels about the weather appeared. Now they post real time notices something like this, "At the central bus station, by the metro exit 2, a cloud is pouring rain on two men." The cloud is a group of military officers with call-up papers.

**Pasha.** News from my apartment. A stupid fly flew into my room. I've kept the windows open all day, showed it where to fly, but it doesn't get it. It crawls along the wall and bangs into the glass.

How to help these damn animals? I have no idea.

I don't want to kill it. I can't catch it either. I don't like watching it choose a slow death locked up.

It's even pretty, by the way. Large, striped gray. In the end, my house spiders will eat it. I cherish them, because they bring good luck and protect the place from evil forces like burglars and military enlistment officers.

**Matvey.** My ex called in a panic. He says, I can't go into the kitchen.

Why, I ask.

He says in a trembling voice, there's a spider, come here, do something.

I would have thought he was looking for a pretext to meet. But no. He really was always afraid of the dark, spiders, cops, dogs, thrillers, violence.

If they take him, I'm scared to think what will happen to him there.

**News.** They kick, swear and shoot: the Web discusses how military officers detain men.

Over the past 24 hours, several videos have appeared on social networks at once. They show the detention of civilians by people in military uniform.

"According to the law, representatives of the regional recruitment centers do not have the right to detain people and bring them to recruitment centers by force. This detention is an abuse of power and kidnapping," the lawyer said.

He suggests that employees of regional recruitment centers may be applying these methods because they've been given a choice – either they staff military units with mobilized people, or they go to the front line themselves.

**News.** In the Lviv region, a group of unidentified men at night threw a grenade at the local recruitment office.

**Mikhail.** News of war crimes is terrifying. But there's nothing surprising there. This is war. Is it possible to expect anything good from the enemy?

But when our own people torture each other, I lose heart.

**News.** In the Vinnitsa region in May 2022, a soldier in a state of alcoholic intoxication, during a verbal conflict, threw an RGD-5 combat grenade towards his fellow soldiers.

Several were injured as a result of the blast.

The court found the soldier guilty of attempted murder.

He was sentenced to ten years imprisonment.

**Slavik.** I went to the cinema with a girlfriend. Before the movie, as always, there are trailers of other premieres. And then a public service announcement, “sign up for the Armed Forces of Ukraine.”

A bunch of twelve-year-old children was sitting next to us. Don’t ask what movie my girlfriend and I went to see.

So, when the children heard the offer to enroll in the Armed Forces of Ukraine, they laughed and said sarcastically, “Yeah, sure, we’re already rushing there.”

But there was no girlfriend. I’d gone alone.

That day, this all hit me so hard that I just ran into the first cinema I came across. They were saving electricity, so the lobby was half-dark. It was soothing. It smelled of popcorn. I bought a ticket for the next movie available. It turned out to be 12+. Lots of children and parents with children came. The kids were surprisingly quiet. Maybe because the film was good. I don’t know, I couldn’t concentrate. Don’t ask me what movie I went to see. I don’t even remember the title, I kind of had a panic attack.

In the middle of the film, an air raid started. And here’s the strange thing: when the siren started to howl, I felt better. When you expect something bad, and it happens, you don’t need to be afraid anymore, because it’s already happened.

A woman leaned into the movie theater; she looked like a nice elderly school teacher. She started to explain that they have a basement in the cinema, and if someone wanted... If you go down to the basement, the tickets would remain valid for the next show, or you can bring them tomorrow. Everyone waved her off, laughing, and said they wanted to watch the film now.

Not a single child or adult left the almost full theater during an air raid alert.

**Sasha.** Over the past year, I haven’t been able to finish watching a single movie. It feels like if I dive into there for an hour and a half, I’ll leave the real world unattended, and they’ll start shelling where my dad is.

Movies, I don't even try. I can't even get through YouTube videos. I can't concentrate even for ten minutes. I can still watch very short tiktoks.

**Philologist.** I went to a supermarket with a girlfriend. She started to look at all kinds of pink notebooks, pens with fluffy feathers, pencil cases shaped like cats. This had all been brought in for the new school year, even though it's still a long way off.

My girlfriend loves little cute things. She reached for something and almost knocked over the whole pyramid of the stuff.

I tell her, "Be careful, don't be a vandal."

She tells me, "The Vandals are a group of ancient Germanic tribes. Do they have a problem here with people from other cultures? Are the employees of this store xenophobic?"

"Yeah, first you'll have to explain to store security what xenophobia is."

It's good that we can somehow at least still joke.

**Pasha.** My wife brought a friend over to our place. She hasn't invited anyone by for over a year now. Only our parents come to us.

At first, I thought she didn't invite her women friends over because she was jealous. Somehow I even felt flattered. That she'd think someone could like me, even if I'm not in the best shape.

But gradually I realized: she's just afraid to invite people she isn't sure about. Now nobody can be sure about anyone. She's afraid someone will report it: a man is evading mobilization, here's the address.

I can't go to war. It's honestly impossible. I have a heart condition. Not a single normal medical board would accept me. But now they're just shoveling everyone in. Absolutely everyone.

Our neighbor was caught on the street. He has two kids. If there are three kids, the man can get a deferment. If there are two kids, they don't need a father.

The neighbor recently had a stroke. When he had the stroke, he fell and injured his spine. He still hasn't recovered. He came to the medical examination and put x-rays of his spine on the table. The doctor said, "Your spine is perfect."

His wife sobbed and howled. The children were confused. They didn't understand where dad had gone. And dad was sent to Donbass. My wife went to comfort them. Then, she came home and said that she wasn't letting me go anywhere anymore.

I don't want to get drafted myself, but still, before my neighbor got taken away, I somehow lived, I moved around the city. And now, if I'm going to leave the apartment, my wife gets hysterical.

I recently ordered a new charger. Just a charger. The pickup point is in our neighborhood, very close. My wife turned white and said, "Don't go there, I'll pick it up myself."

I haven't left the house for over a year now. Good thing my job is remote.

So, my wife invited her friend. She isn't pretty but she's funny. I looked at her and thought how long it had been since I'd seen anyone from the outside world. Just people, no matter if they're pretty or not. People who can freely walk the streets. They might be afraid of missiles, but at least not of draft officers.

I hope she doesn't betray us.

**News.** Tricks of military registration and enlistment offices: what conscripts need to know.

According to a lawyer, there are abuses at military medical commissions. Many problems regarding the right to deferment as well.

"A very large number of people suffering from chronic diseases are sent to the front lines," the lawyer said.

**Philologist.** There was a time when the word "fit" meant someone who was into sports.

Now, it means someone who is fit to be a soldier and can be sent to the war.

**Ad.** Offensive Guard. It's time to regain what's yours. The modern history of Ukraine is being written now. Don't watch, act! Fill out a volunteer form and join the assault brigades of the Ministry of Home Affairs. They will liberate the cities of Donetsk, Luhansk and other occupied territories, including Crimea.

We guarantee combat on the front lines.

**Philologist.** "This is probably a very bad commander, because he needs brave soldiers. If he has enough sense for a good plan to defeat the enemy, then why does he need brave soldiers? Any soldiers will do. In general, when virtues are mentioned, it means the thing is rotten."

I often remember these words now.

I heard them from the stage about ten years ago. Brecht, and also *The Good Soldier Švejk* were removed from the repertoire of the main theater in Kyiv shortly after Crimea happened. The

agenda changed. It stopped feeling right to ridicule war, because little by little our own war was beginning.

**Matvey.** If they take me, maybe I'll finally have sex? Maybe I'll get fucked there for the first time in a year and a half?

**Ad.** A storm is coming. Offensive Guard.

**Pasha.** I hear children screaming in the courtyard below. They're playing air raid. The girl climbs a pile of sand and screams with all her might. She is the siren. The other kids have to run and hide as quickly as possible.

**News.** A man in the Kyiv region was handed a conscription notice for listening to Russian rap on the street.

**News.** Thousands of Ukrainian men of military age are risking their lives trying to swim across the Tisza River on the border between Ukraine and Romania. At least 33 have drowned since the war began. The youngest was just 20 years old. The Ukrainian border service says the death toll could be much higher.

**Matvey.** I'm actually not in a position to complain. First, I'm alive. Second, I live in Kyiv, in a reasonable district. Outside of Kyiv, even before the war, it was better for me not to be there. In any small town, I would have been beaten up right at the railway station. Maybe even right in the train. My voice isn't okay. My face isn't okay. Clothes are not okay. "Come here for a talk, faggot."

When I've traveled outside Kyiv, it's mostly been by taxi, to the airport.

**News.** In the Odessa region, border guards detained a 26-year-old Ukrainian man who tried to leave Ukraine in women's clothing

**Sasha.** They say that Europe is now learning all about the geography of Ukraine from the news. Nobody there knew anything about any Bakhmut, Mariupol, or Bucha before this war. But the fact is that inside Ukraine, we didn't know that much about ourselves.

Who in their right mind would have gone from Kyiv to Bakhmut or Mariupol? If someone suggested we go there at least for a weekend, just to see it, we'd have been terribly offended. What kind of losers do you think we are? What is there to look at? Why go to the Sea of Azov when you can fly to Turkey?

If you don't have the money to go on vacation abroad, it's better not to go anywhere at all than to travel around Ukraine. We didn't give a damn about all these towns and villages, even when the green trees were lush there, and when there wasn't shooting there. That's how we thought then.

It was possible to live all your life in Kyiv and not have a clue about these names on the map, the ones we're dying for now. We've never seen them. We didn't know those names here, just like real Europeans didn't.

There were Kyiv, Odessa, Lviv, Kharkiv. Outside these cities, the world ended and the ocean began. There were fantastic islands. Lands where iron trees grew and dragons lived, giants, people with dog heads, one-legged.

Well, one-legged people, those aren't ancient legends. Soon a lot of us are going to be like that.

**Slavik.** I ordered a laptop. The collection point was in a large shopping and entertainment center. I arrived there and wandered for a long time among food courts, boutiques, supermarkets, bowling alleys, cinemas. The last time I was here was before the war. Now half of everything has closed down. There were almost no people, and it was suddenly obvious how huge this building is – it's the former work floor of an old factory.

So, there weren't many people, and I could see everyone. A man in military uniform with crutches. A woman was holding him by the elbow. A lone guy in military uniform, also on crutches. Mother, father and little boy – the father in military uniform, in a wheelchair.

**News.** She called him a freaking cripple: a policewoman in the Kyiv region was fired for insulting a veteran.

**Sasha.** I got caught in a terrible rain shower. My sneakers were already falling apart, and now they got soaked top to bottom.

I have good sneakers for training, and worse ones to wear every day.

I'd just keep on walking, but I can't afford to catch a cold now.

At that moment I was in the middle of the street, and the downpour hit very hard, without warning.

I started running, trying to figure out how much money I had on the card. I didn't remember the exact amount.

I burst into the mall, found the sportswear section. I chose running sneakers. The money on the card was enough. I even bought new socks as well. Right there, on the sofa for trying on shoes, I put on clean, dry sneakers.

I threw the old ones into the store's branded package. I wandered around the mall a little more, waiting for the rain to stop, and went outside.

Streams of water still rushed under my feet, but it was no longer pouring from the sky. I thought the old sneakers might be useful for someone. They can still be dried, glued, patched up.

I remembered that when I was running to the mall, I'd flashed past some arches, with courtyards behind them. I dove back into one of these arches. Yes, I remembered everything correctly: there was a courtyard and several garbage cans inside. I decided to leave the sneakers next to the garbage bin: someone will definitely pick them up.

I came closer to the garbage bin and froze. There were open shoeboxes on the ground. Dry ones. It looked like someone had taken them out just a few minutes ago. Shoes of all kinds. Gym shoes, sneakers, boots. And in every box – only the left shoe.

Someone came back from the war one-legged. He realized he'd never need half of his shoes again. He took them all outside. He'd kept his right leg, and he kept the shoes for it. And someone with only a left leg will pick up the discarded shoes.

I didn't want to think about it.

**News.** A moment of silence. Every day at 9 am, Ukrainians remember those whose lives have been taken by the Russian-Ukrainian war.

We light candles and bow our heads during a nationwide minute of silence. We honor the memory of the citizens of Ukraine who gave their lives for the freedom and independence of the state: all the military, civilians and children, all those who died in the fight against the Russian invaders, and those who died as a result of the enemy troops attacking Ukrainian cities and villages.

**Advertisement.** Headstones. A large range of ready-made models. Various designs. Manufacturer's prices.

**Philologist.** Update. I did the right thing when I skipped applying for post-secondary education this year. It would have been a waste of time.

You can pass all the exams, fulfill all the requirements, and then the university says: we can't enroll you unless you're registered at the enlistment office.

To register, you need to go to the regional Human Resources Center, aka the military enlistment office.

And you get a draft notice right there... When the whole point of getting a higher education now is not to get a draft notice.

I often think: they don't need me. I mean, the Russians don't need me. The military officers don't need me. They just need someone, it doesn't matter who. They have no idea who I am, what's good and bad about me.

And I comfort myself that I won't be taken away if I remain myself. If I remain myself, a personality. Because they don't need personalities, they need statistics to fulfill their mobilization tasks.

And I comfort myself with a book that my ex-girlfriend gave me... In this book...

*Enters the Outsider, silently takes Philologist by the hand and pulls him away.*

**Philologist.** (*hastily, to have time to tell it*) This was my first girlfriend. She taught me how to smoke. She was a year older than me. We lived at her place all summer and sunbathed naked on the balcony. You don't know anything about us, about her, you won't take her away from me.

*His voice fades away.*

**Mikhail.** A girl came to me after an ultrasound. On the ultrasound, they found small cysts in her mammary glands and sent her to me for an examination.

She entered with two telephones in her hands and was constantly looking from one to the other. Something important to her was happening there, and she didn't pay much attention to me.

I liked it. It kind of made it easy.

Often girls are frightened by the mere words on the appointment card: a mastologist-oncologist. They're afraid to hear the word "cancer" from me. They come in and sit like they're paralyzed. They're trying to read the diagnosis from my facial expression. It is unsettling, even after all these years.

This one didn't even look at me.

In fact, she really had nothing to worry about. I immediately saw from the ultrasound images that the cysts were small and didn't pose any danger.

But I still did everything I had to. She undressed, I probed her lymph nodes and breasts in a sitting position, in a lying position. I asked if it hurt. She didn't feel any pain.

I let her get dressed and sat down to draw up the conclusion. She got dressed and picked up her two phones again.

"You're fine," I said. "This evil thing hasn't touched you."

“That's good,” she replied. “There’s enough evil in the world right now.”

And then I said,

Whoever desires to love life  
and see good days,  
let him keep his tongue from evil  
and his lips from speaking deceit;  
let him turn away from evil and do good;  
let him seek peace and pursue it.

She looked up from her phones for the first time and looked at me.

“It’s the Bible,” I explained. “The first epistle of St. Peter.”

She didn’t seem at all surprised that she came to the mastologist, and he was quoting the Bible.

“Good book,” she said. “I like that thing about the lilies, who don’t have to work to get clothes, but are always well-dressed and beautiful.”

I took a Bible out of my desk drawer and quickly found what she was talking about:

And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? If then you are not able to do as small a thing as that, why are you anxious about the rest? Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass, which is alive in the field today, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you, O you of little faith!

“The Gospel of Luke,” I explained. “The Apostle Luke was a doctor.”

“I thought the apostle Luke was a painter.”

She was not at all surprised that the mastologist had a Bible in his desk drawer.

We share an office with a gynecologist. One day, he sees patients here; the other day, I see patients here. Therefore, there are several huge colored posters on the walls: ovaries, uterus, uterine appendages, bladder. She wasn’t at all surprised that I was sitting under these posters and reading the Gospel.

The End