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Leonard Melfi's Encounters

An Annotated Translation and Analysis

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Foreword

Although Off-Off-Broadway has been extensively examined by literary critics, Leonard Melfi has been mostly ignored or confined to a marginal role within the history of twentieth-century American theater. He was one of the most gifted playwrights of the sixties and wrote plays for the following thirty years, yet for large part of press and critics he has always been nothing more than the author of *Birdbath*, a scruffy type who met a tragicomic end that much resembled the plot of his plays.

I came across this playwright while I was preparing for the exam of American Theater; I had to choose between *Fences* by August Wilson and *Birdbath*. I went for Melfi's play sight unseen, and as soon I finished it, I thought I had just read one of the most staggering plays ever. So I decided that I wanted to read other works by the same author – I read *Encounters*, *Later Encounters* and whatever book available on the market, which in the case of Melfi means just a few other books. In this regard, I think that the word rare is an adjective that suits him well both in the concrete sense that he has almost completely disappeared from the records and in the sense that he is an incredibly good writer.

The things I like most about Melfi are his ability to recreate such powerful and contrasting feelings in the span of one single act, and his use of chance encounters to dig dip into the real nature of human beings. Language too represents one of the strengths of his production – his play are all characterized by the right mix of gentleness, roughness and humor blended with a dash of unpredictability that makes them unique.

The plays by Leonard Melfi have never been officially translated into Italian and this, alongside the absence of criticism on the author, never allowed him to make himself a name in our country. With my thesis I hope I can do justice – at least partly – to such brilliant playwright.

I feel that life is divided into the horrible and the miserable. That's the two categories. The horrible are like, I don't know, terminal cases, you know, and blind people, crippled. I don't know how they get through life. It's amazing to me. And the miserable is everyone else. So you should be thankful that you're miserable, because that's very lucky, to be miserable.

Woody Allen – Annie Hall

PART I

BIRDBATH

THE PEOPLE OF THE PLAY

FRANKIE BASTA, a poet in his late 20's.

VELMA SPARROW, 26, a nervous and troubled young lady who is rapid speaker and sometimes trembles.

WHERE THEY ARE

New York City: a midtown cafeteria, the streets outside, and FRANKIE's basement apartment.

WHEN

Contemporary: a night in February. The action is continuous.

Hazy music coming from a piped-in-system. The curtain rises. We are in a garishly lit cafeteria. To our right we see FRANKIE BASTA behind the cash booth before the cash register. He lights a cigarette, eyes his wrist watch, and then begins to read a book.

To our left we see VELMA SPARROW. She is clearing off a table in her working area. As she wipes the surface we are aware of her delicate, slow and easy nature, fused together with strange anxiety. Every so often she gives a quick look over at FRANKIE. He, in turn, does the same thing. But their eyes never meet. They never catch each other. It is almost as though they both know the precise moment when to steal brief glances without being noticed. This little "game of glances" goes on for about two minutes before they are finally caught staring each other, both face-to-face. There is a pause wherein they both seem semi-mesmerized, as they both continue to stare at each other.

FRANKIE Hi.

VELMA Hi.

BIRDBATH¹

I PERSONAGGI

FRANKIE BASTA, un poeta prossimo ai trent'anni.

VELMA SPARROW, ventisei anni, una giovane donna ansiosa e irrequieta che parla in fretta e che a volte è assalita dal tremore.

DOVE SI TROVANO

New York City: una tavola calda² nel cuore di Manhattan³, le strade circostanti e l'appartamento di FRANKIE nel seminterrato.

QUANDO

Al giorno d'oggi: una notte di febbraio. L'azione è continua.

Musica soffusa proveniente dagli altoparlanti. Si alza il sipario. Siamo all'interno di una tavola calda vivacemente illuminata. Alla nostra destra, dietro al bancone e davanti al registratore di cassa, troviamo FRANKIE BASTA. Si accende una sigaretta, dà un'occhiata all'orologio da polso e si mette a leggere un libro.

Alla nostra sinistra vediamo VELMA SPARROW. Sta sparcchiando un tavolo in sala. Mentre ne strofina la superficie ci accorgiamo della sua indole tranquilla e pacata frammista a una strana inquietudine. Ogni tanto lancia un'occhiata veloce in direzione di FRANKIE. Lui a sua volta fa lo stesso. Eppure i loro sguardi non si incontrano mai. Nessuno dei due riesce mai a cogliere l'altro sul fatto. È come se entrambi sapessero il momento preciso in cui lanciare la propria occhiata furtiva senza essere visti. Questo giochetto di sguardi prosegue per un paio di minuti prima che si sorprendano a fissarsi l'un l'altro, faccia a faccia. C'è una pausa nella quale i due, continuando a fissarsi, sembrano come sospesi in uno strano magnetismo.

FRANKIE Ciao.

VELMA Ciao.

FRANKIE How are you doing?

VELMA (*Shrugging*) Okay . . . I guess.

(*She goes back to her work; FRANKIE goes back to his book*)

VELMA (*Going over to him*) What's your name?

FRANKIE (*Looking up*) Frankie. What's yours?

VELMA Velma

FRANKIE I'm glad to meet you, Velma.

VELMA Likewise, I'm sure. (FRANKIE smiles) You jist started workin' here tonight, didn't you?

FRANKIE Yeah. That's right.

VELMA And you don't like it, do you?

FRANKIE How can you tell that?

VELMA By the way you look.

FRANKIE How's that?

VELMA Well, first of all, if you don't mind my sayin' so, you jist don't look like you belong in a lousy place like this. I think you look pretty high-class to me. My mother would really go for you.

FRANKIE Yeah? How old is your old lady – I mean your mother?

VELMA (*Giggling*) Oh, I didn't mean that way, Frankie! Now you got me blushin'. My face is red, huh? If my mother was here she'd really be blushin'. What I meant to say was she'd think you were jist *right* . . .

FRANKIE Right for what?

VELMA I . . . I . . . oh, I don't know how to say it. Forget it . . . I guess. But do you know what, Frankie?

FRANKIE (*Kindly*) What's that, Velma?

VELMA Well, I used to be real skinny, you know what I mean? I used to be all bones, almost like one of them skeletons. But since I been workin' here for Mr. Quincy, well, I've been puttin' on some weight. (*She pauses*) That's why, in a way, this job isn't really that bad – because of the free meal they let you have. My mother said to me, "Velma, you take advantage of that free meal. You eat as much as you can . . . when something's free you make use of it . . . take as much as they let you have." And so, I've been eating pretty good lately, and Mr. Quincy, he's a nice man, he never tells me that I'm eating too much. In fact, I think he's a real nice man, because he hired me without my having any experience at all. This is the first time I've ever had a job where I cleaned off the tables and everything when the people were through eating. Boy, at first I was real scared about this job. I didn't think I was gonna be able to do it right . . . you know?

FRANKIE You're doing okay . . .

FRANKIE Come va?

VELMA (*Stringendosi nelle spalle*) Tutto a posto . . . direi.

(*Torna al suo lavoro; FRANKIE torna sul suo libro*)

VELMA (*Va verso di lui*) Come ti chiami?

FRANKIE (*Alza lo sguardo*) Frankie. E tu?

VELMA Velma

FRANKIE Piacere di conoscerti, Velma.

VELMA Altrettanto. (*FRANKIE sorride*) Hai iniziato a lavorare qui stasera, giusto?

FRANKIE Sì. Esatto.

VELMA E non ti piace, o sbaglio?

FRANKIE Da cosa si capisce?

VELMA Dal tuo aspetto.

FRANKIE Come sarebbe a dire?

VELMA Beh, intanto, con rispetto parlando, tu non hai niente a che fare con un posto squallido come questo. Mi sembri uno che ha classe da vendere. Piaceresti proprio tanto a mia madre.

FRANKIE Ah sì? E quanti anni ha la tua vecchia – cioè tua madre?

VELMA (*Con una risatina*) Oh non intendevo in quel senso, Frankie! Adesso mi fai arrossire. Dimmi, sono tutta rossa in faccia, eh? Se mia madre fosse qui sta sicuro che sarebbe tutta rossa. Io volevo dire che secondo lei tu saresti proprio il *tipo giusto* . . .

FRANKIE Giusto per cosa?

VELMA Io . . . io . . . ah, non saprei come dire. Lascia perdere . . . dai. Comunque sai una cosa, Frankie?

FRANKIE (*In tono gentile*) Cosa, Velma?

VELMA Beh, una volta io ero davvero molto magra, sai? Ero tutta ossa, quasi come uno di quegli scheletri. Ma da quando lavoro qui dal signor Quincy, beh, ho messo su qualche chilo. (*Fa una pausa*) Ecco perché, in un certo senso, questo lavoro non è poi tanto male – per il mangiare gratis che ti danno. Mia madre mi ha detto, “Velma, approfittane di quel pasto gratis. Mangia più che puoi . . . quando qualcosa viene regalata bisogna farne buon uso . . . tu prenditi tutto quello che ti danno.” E così ultimamente ho mangiato abbastanza bene, e il signor Quincy, lui è una brava persona, lui non mi dice mai che mangio troppo. Sul serio, penso che sia proprio un brav’uomo perché mi ha assunta anche se non ho nessuna esperienza. È la prima volta che a lavoro sparcchio tavole e compagnia bella dopo che la gente ha mangiato. Ti dirò, all’inizio questo lavoro mi faceva davvero paura. Non pensavo di essere in grado . . . sai?

FRANKIE E invece te la cavi . . .

VELMA Although, you know what?

(*She starts to bite her fingernails*)

FRANKIE What's that, Velma?

VELMA Well, sometimes Mr. Quincy says things to me . . . or he gives me certain kinds of looks . . . like for instance . . . (*Embarrassed*) I was his . . . *girlfriend*, maybe. (*She looks at FRANKIE, waiting hopefully for him to agree with her. FRANKIE gives her a slight smile of comfort, but it is not a smile of agreement*) I told my mother about the way Mr. Quincy is to me sometimes, and right away she wanted to come down and meet him. She asked me how old he was and she wanted to know how he looked, and after I told her everything she wanted to know, she said that some night she would get all dressed up and then come down here and wait for me until I got off, and while she was waiting I could introduce her to Mr. Quincy. (*She walks away and begins to wipe the same table top over again*) You know what she said to me, my mother? She said that it was all up in my mind that Mr. Quincy might just be . . . *interested* . . . in me. She said that it wasn't true and that I should just concentrate on my job and forget about all those pipe dreams, otherwise I would be getting' fired. (*She pauses*) Sometimes . . . sometimes it's so hard for me to figure my mother out . . . because right afterwards she's tellin' me that maybe I shouldn't eat so much after all because then I would be goin' from one extreme to the other. She said when I was real skinny I couldn't find a nice boy, and, well, if I kept on eating the way I've been doing lately I'd get real fat, and so it would still be the same old story for me. (*She laughs a desperate, frantic sort of laugh*) My mother . . . changes her mind so much sometimes . . . that it gives me a headache.

(*She begins to wipe the table top with great pressure. FRANKIE watches her for a moment*)

FRANKIE (*Lightly*) Velma, what are you trying to do?

VELMA (*Quickly*) What?

FRANKIE Are you trying to wear that table top off?

VELMA Oh . . . yes . . . I know what you mean.

FRANKIE You can get a headache just by doing things like that, Velma.

VELMA Yeah . . . I guess you're right. (*She goes back over to him*) You know something?

FRANKIE Yes? I'm listening to you, Velma.

VELMA Oh, what a funny coincidence. That's what I was just goin' to say to you, Frankie. I was goin' to say: you know something? You make me feel good, Frankie, because you're listening to me. And then I was going to thank you for it, and tell you how much I appreciated our conversation with each other. There's not too many people I can talk to. Or what I should say is that there's not too many people who will listen to me because they think I talk too much. (*FRANKIE glances at his wrist*

VELMA Anche se sai una cosa?

(*Inizia a mangiucchiarsi le unghie*)

FRANKIE Cosa, Velma?

VELMA Beh, a volte il signor Quincy mi dice di quelle cose . . . o mi dà di quelle occhiate . . . ad esempio come . . . (*Imbarazzata*) se io fossi la sua . . . fidanzata, tipo. (*Guarda FRANKIE nella speranza che lui sia d'accordo. FRANKIE le fa un mezzo sorriso di rassicurazione, ma non è un sorriso d'intesa*) Ho detto a mia madre di come il Signor Quincy si comporta con me a volte, e lei subito si è messa in testa di venire qui a conoscerlo. Mi ha chiesto quanti anni ha e che aspetto ha, e dopo che le ho detto tutto quello che voleva sapere, lei ha detto che una sera si sarebbe messa tutta in ghingheri e sarebbe venuta qui ad aspettarmi fino a quando non staccavo, e che mentre aspettava la potevo presentare al Signor Quincy. (*Si allontana e si mette a strofinare la superficie dello stesso tavolo*) E lo sai lei cosa mi ha detto, mia madre? Mi ha detto che era tutta una cosa che mi ero messa in testa io, che il Signor Quincy possa anche soltanto essere . . . *interessato* . . . a me. Ha detto che non era niente vero e che dovrei concentrarmi solo sul mio lavoro e lasciar perdere tutte quelle fantasticherie, altrimenti va a finire che mi licenziano. (*Fa una pausa*) A volte . . . a volte per me è così difficile venirne a capo con mia madre . . . perché subito dopo mi viene a dire che forse, dopo tutto, non dovrei mangiare così tanto perché poi andrei da un estremo all'altro. Quando ero troppo magra non riuscivo a trovare un ragazzo per bene, e insomma, se continuassi a mangiare come negli ultimi tempi diventerò davvero grassa, e così per me sarebbe sempre la solita vecchia storia (*Emette una specie di risata isterica e convulsa*) Mia madre . . . cambia idea così tante volte . . . che mi fa venire il mal di testa.

(*Si mette a sfregare la superficie del tavolo in modo insistente. FRANKIE la guarda per un istante*)

FRANKIE (*In tono gentile*) Velma, cosa stai cercando di fare?

VELMA (*Velocemente*) Cosa?

FRANKIE Lo vuoi proprio consumare quel tavolo!

VELMA Ah . . . già . . . ho capito.

FRANKIE Ti verrà il mal di testa a forza di fare le cose in quel modo, Velma.

VELMA Sì . . . forse hai ragione. (*Ritorna da lui*) Sai una cosa?

FRANKIE Sì? Ti sto ascoltando, Velma.

VELMA Ma guarda un po' che strana coincidenza. Stavo proprio per dirti la stessa cosa, Frankie. Ti volevo dire: sai una cosa? Con te sto bene, Frankie, perché mi ascolti. E poi volevo ringraziarti per questo e dirti quanto mi ha fatto piacere parlare con te. Non ho molte persone con cui parlare. O forse faccio prima a dire che non ci sono molte persone che mi stanno ad ascoltare perché secondo loro parlo troppo. (*FRANKIE dà un'occhiata all'orologio da polso*) È quasi ora di andare, eh?

watch) It's almost time to go, huh?

FRANKIE Five minutes and we'll be free.

VELMA You really don't like this job, I can tell. You can't wait to get out of here, can you?

FRANKIE You know what you're talking about.

VELMA But I don't know as much as you.

FRANKIE You can't really say things like that.

VELMA (*After a pause*) What . . . do you do . . . when you leave here? I mean, if you don't mind my askin'. I know it's none of my business . . .

FRANKIE I would like to go out and get drunk!

VELMA Boy, do you sound mad all of a sudden.

FRANKIE That's the way I am sometimes.

VELMA (*Rapidly*) Are you married?

FRANKIE (*Trying to be pleasant*) Velma . . . I have a hard time just taking care of myself.

VELMA (*After a pause*) You know, you really look nice. You don't belong here, that's all there is to it. You should be in the movies. You know what I mean? You could be an actor. I always wanted to be in the movies. I'd love to be an actress, but my mother says I'm not pretty enough . . . and I guess she's right . . . or was she?

FRANKIE Why don't you relax, Velma?

VELMA How come you're telling me that?

FRANKIE You're shaking. You should learn how to be calm. It would make things a lot easier for you.

VELMA (*Very nervously*) Well, it's almost time, isn't it? It's almost midnight . . . time to quit and everything . . . so I better go and change. (*She starts to move away, but it is an immense effort for her to do so*) I'll see you again tomorrow night, Frankie, okay?

FRANKIE Sure . . . okay . . . Velma.

VELMA (*Running off*) 'Bye! And nice talkin' to you . . .

(*She is gone*)

FRANKIE 'Bye . . . (*Then, more to himself*) Nice talkin' to you, too.

(*A quick blackout. The lights come up again. We are on the streets outside. VELMA is standing alone. She is out of breath. Then FRANKIE enters from our right*)

VELMA Hi, Frankie.

FRANKIE What are you doing here?

VELMA I . . . I . . . left . . . before you did! I've been standin' here waitin' for you!

FRANKIE You're shivering to death.

FRANKIE Cinque minuti e siamo liberi.

VELMA Non ti piace proprio questo lavoro, si vede. Non vedi l'ora di uscire da qui, o no?

FRANKIE Tu sì che te ne intendi.

VELMA Tu anche di più me, se è per questo.

FRANKIE Non so proprio come fai a dirle certe cose.

VELMA (*Dopo una pausa*) Cosa . . . fai . . . quando te ne vai di qui? Cioè, sempre se non sono indiscreta. Lo so che non sono affari miei . . .

FRANKIE Vorrei uscire e prendermi una bella sbronza!

VELMA Accidenti, adesso di colpo sembri arrabbiato.

FRANKIE A volte faccio così.

VELMA (*Velocemente*) Sei sposato?

FRANKIE (*Cercando di essere gentile*) Velma . . . faccio già fatica a badare a me stesso.

VELMA (*Dopo una pausa*) Sai, sei davvero carino. Tu non ci fai proprio niente qui, c'è poco da fare. Dovresti stare sul grande schermo. Capisci cosa voglio dire? Tu potresti benissimo essere un attore. Io avrei sempre voluto recitare al cinema. Mi piacerebbe tantissimo fare l'attrice, ma mia madre dice che non sono abbastanza bella . . . e forse ha ragione lei . . . non è vero?

FRANKIE Perché non provi a stare calma, Velma?

VELMA Ma perché mi stai dicendo una cosa del genere?

FRANKIE Stai tremando tutta. Dovresti imparare a stare calma. Ti renderebbe le cose molto più facili.

VELMA (*Con grande concitazione*) Beh, è quasi ora, no? È quasi mezzanotte . . . ora di andare a casa e via discorrendo . . . quindi sarà meglio che vada a cambiarmi (*Inizia ad allontanarsi, ma le costa uno sforzo enorme*) Ci vediamo domani sera, Frankie, va bene?

FRANKIE Certo . . . va bene . . . Velma.

VELMA (*Andando via di corsa*) Ciao! È stato un piacere parlare con te . . .

(*Se n'è andata*)

FRANKIE Ciao . . . (*Poi più tra sé e sé*) È stato un piacere anche per me.

(*Buio completo per qualche istante. Le luci si alzano nuovamente. Siamo fuori in strada. VELMA se ne sta lì sola. Ha il fiatone. Quindi FRANKIE entra dalla nostra destra*)

VELMA Ciao Frankie.

FRANKIE Che ci fai qui?

VELMA Io . . . io . . . me ne sono andata . . . prima di te! E sono rimasta qui ad aspettarti!

FRANKIE Stai tremando come non so cosa.

VELMA I was jist wonderin' if you would walk me to the subway. I'm usually never afraid, but tonight, well, I jist can't explain why I got the jitters.

FRANKIE Where do you live?

VELMA In the Bronx. It's pretty far. It takes about one hour on the subway. Where do you live?

FRANKIE Around the corner.

VELMA Oh, geez! You're lucky! I wish I lived near where I worked. My other job is jist as far away as this one. I never have any luck when it comes to my jobs.

FRANKIE You mean you have another job?

VELMA My mother wants me to. She says we need the money. For a while I only had the day job. But my mother said it wasn't enough. So then I got this job from Mr. Quincy about a month ago. He's a real nice man. I'll bet if you get to know him he'd be a lot like the way my father was.

FRANKIE Your father dead?

VELMA We really don't know. He might be. I ain't seen him since I was six years old. That's twenty years ago. I'm twenty-six.

FRANKIE What did he do? Where did he go?

VELMA He deserted us and no one's been able to find him since. But actually, he didn't leave me and my brother Herbert; it was my mother who he left. He said that if he didn't run away my mother would drive him nuts. But I don't think that would've happened because she didn't drive me and my brother Herbert nuts. We're both okay. Of course Herbert hasn't lived with us for a long time now. He got married when he was only nineteen and we hardly ever see him any more. Do you know something? You're almost as handsome as Herbert. He's the most handsome person you ever saw. My mother always wanted him to be a movie star, and he could've been too if he didn't run away and get married like he did. My mother never stopped telling him that he was going to make a lot of money someday for all of us and that we would be so proud of him because he would be famous throughout the whole world. (*Very wistfully*) I wish he would've listened to her. Then I wouldn't have to work any more.

FRANKIE It's getting pretty cold standing here, Velma. One thing I don't like is cold weather. Let's start walking toward the subway.

VELMA Okay.

(*They begin to walk*)

FRANKIE Wouldn't you know that I would be born during the month that has the lousiest weather?

VELMA (*After giving a long sigh*) We should celebrate, Frankie!

FRANKIE Why?

VELMA Mi stavo solo chiedendo se magari mi accompagni fino alla metropolitana. Di solito non ho paura, ma stasera, beh non so proprio perché ho tutta questa tremarella.

FRANKIE Dove abiti?

VELMA Nel Bronx⁴. È abbastanza distante. Con la metropolitana ci vuole circa un'ora. Tu dove abiti?

FRANKIE Dietro l'angolo.

VELMA Ah però! Sei fortunato! Anch'io vorrei vivere vicino a dove lavoro. L'altro posto è distante tanto quanto questo. Quando si tratta di lavoro, non ho mai fortuna io.

FRANKIE Ah, perché hai anche un altro lavoro?

VELMA È mia madre che vuole. Dice che abbiamo bisogno di soldi. Per un po' ho avuto solo il lavoro di giorno. Ma mia madre diceva che non bastava. E così più o meno un mese fa ho trovato questo posto dal signor Quincy. È davvero una brava persona lui. Scommetto che a conoscerlo meglio è proprio com'era mio padre.

FRANKIE Tuo padre è morto?

VELMA Non lo sappiamo. Potrebbe anche esserlo. Non lo vedo da quando avevo sei anni. Cioè vent'anni fa. Io ho ventisei anni.

FRANKIE E cosa ha fatto? Dove è andato?

VELMA Ci ha abbandonati e da allora non si è fatto più trovare. Beh, a dire il vero non è me e mio fratello Herbert che ha abbandonato; lui ha lasciato mia madre. Diceva che se non se non avesse tagliato la corda mia madre l'avrebbe mandato fuori di testa. Io però non credo che sarebbe successo perché non ha mica fatto andare fuori di testa me e mio fratello Herbert. Noi due stiamo bene. Sì, certo, Herbert ormai è un bel pezzo che non vive più con noi. Si è sposato quando aveva appena diciannove anni e da allora non l'abbiamo quasi più visto. Sai una cosa? Tu sei bello quasi come Herbert. E lui è la persona più bella che ci sia. Mia madre avrebbe sempre voluto che diventasse una stella del cinema, e ce l'avrebbe anche fatta se non fosse scappato per sposarsi, come invece ha fatto. Mia madre non la smetteva mai di dirgli che un giorno avrebbe fatto un sacco di soldi, per tutti noi e che noi saremmo state così orgogliose di lui perché sarebbe diventato famoso in tutto il mondo. (*Con profondo rammarico*) Vorrei che le avesse dato retta. Così non sarei più costretta a lavorare.

FRANKIE Fa un freddo a stare qui fermi, Velma. E se c'è una cosa che non sopporto, è il freddo. Dai, andiamo verso la metropolitana.

VELMA Va bene.

(*Iniziano a camminare*)

FRANKIE Ma lo sai che io sono nato proprio nel mese col tempo più schifoso?

VELMA (*Dopo aver emesso un lungo sospiro*) Dobbiamo festeggiare, Frankie!

FRANKIE Perché?

VELMA I was born in February, too.

FRANKIE Congratulations.

VELMA Ain't that a coincidence?

FRANKIE Sure is. And it's also getting colder.

VELMA When is yours?

FRANKIE When is my what?

VELMA The date. Mine is already gone. It was the seventh.

FRANKIE Well, happy birthday anyway, Velma. Mine hasn't arrived yet. It's the twenty-first.

VELMA Well, then, when I see you on the twenty-first, I'll wish you yours, too.

FRANKIE You do that.

VELMA You jist sound so unhappy compared to when we first started talking tonight. February isn't that bad a month. I think it's the *best* month of all, Frankie.

FRANKIE How do you figure that?

VELMA Because of the people born in this month. There's George Washington, and Abraham Lincoln . . . and there's . . . *tomorrow!*

FRANKIE What's tomorrow?

VELMA Saint Valentine's Day!

FRANKIE Oh . . . yeah . . .

VELMA You won't believe this . . . but . . . I never once got a valentine in my whole life.

FRANKIE (*After a long pause*) It's getting colder by the minute, isn't it, Velma?

VELMA But do you know, Frankie, I didn't mind too much. My mother used to take me to Schrafft's and then afterwards we'd go to the Radio City Music Hall every Valentine's Day while I was still going to school. She said it would take my mind off not getting any valentines. My mother did good things for me except sometimes she would yell at me and say that I was homely and skinny and that I shook too much and it made her nervous and so she'd scream at me to go into another room so's she wouldn't have to look at me for a while . . .

FRANKIE (*Quickly*) This is it! You want to come in for a minute?

(*He stops and so does VELMA*)

VELMA Come in where, Frankie?

FRANKIE This is where I live. Do you want to come in for some coffee? It'll warm you up.

VELMA I really got to get back home. My mother will be waitin' up for me . . . and . . . oh . . .

VELMA Anch'io sono nata in febbraio.

FRANKIE Congratulazioni.

VELMA Ma guarda che combinazione!

FRANKIE Eh già. E tra l'altro si sta facendo sempre più freddo.

VELMA Quand'è il tuo?

FRANKIE Quand'è il mio cosa?

VELMA Il giorno. Il mio è già passato. Era il sette.

FRANKIE Beh, Velma, auguri lo stesso. Il mio deve ancora arrivare, è il ventuno.

VELMA Bene, allora quando ti vedrò il ventuno ti farò gli auguri.

FRANKIE Ci conto.

VELMA Mi sembri così giù di morale rispetto a quando abbiamo iniziato a parlare stasera. Febbraio non è poi tanto male come mese. È il miglior mese che ci sia, Frankie.

FRANKIE E perché mai?

VELMA Per tutte le persone che sono ci nate. C'è George Washington, e Abraham Lincoln . . . e c'è . . . domani!

FRANKIE Cosa c'è domani?

VELMA È San Valentino!

FRANKIE Ah . . . già . . .

VELMA So che adesso non ci crederai . . . ma . . . in tutta la mia vita non ho mai ricevuto un biglietto di auguri di San Valentino.

FRANKIE (*Dopo una lunga pausa, in tono impaziente*) Ogni minuto che passa fa sempre più freddo, non ti sembra, Velma?

VELMA Ma lo sai, Frankie, che neanche ci facevo più di tanto caso. Mia madre mi portava sempre da Schrafft's⁵ e poi andavamo insieme al Radio City Music Hall⁶, ogni San Valentino, quando andavo ancora a scuola. Diceva che mi avrebbe aiutata a distrarmi e a non pensare al fatto che non ricevevo bigliettini da nessuno. Mia madre si è sempre comportata bene con me, a parte quelle volte che mi urlava dietro che ero brutta e rinsecchita, e che tremavo troppo e questo la faceva innervosire e quindi mi gridava di andare in un'altra stanza così per un po' non mi avrebbe avuta sotto gli occhi . . .

FRANKIE (*Velocemente*) Eccoci qua! Vuoi entrare un attimo?

(*Si ferma e VELMA fa lo stesso*)

VELMA Entrare dove, Frankie?

FRANKIE Io abito qui. Vuoi entrare che preparo un po' di caffè? Ti scalderà.

VELMA Devo proprio tornare a casa. Mia madre sarà rimasta sveglia ad aspettarmi . . . e . . . beh . . .

FRANKIE C'mon. Look, you're trembling because it's cold out here. It's even beginning to snow now.

VELMA No, no. I'm not trembling because I'm cold. You know how I tremble a lot, don't you? I'm really warm. I almost feel as though it was beginnin' to sweat, as though it was the summertime, or because I was worried about something.

FRANKIE What are you worried about, then?

VELMA Well, I started to say before that my mother would be . . . waitin' up for me . . . but . . .

FRANKIE All right, then. C'mon, I'll walk you up to the subway. I can't waist any more goddam time!

VELMA No, Frankie! I forgot! You see . . . my mother's not home . . . I mean, she *is* home but she's not waitin' up for me tonight . . . and so . . .

FRANKIE Yes? So?

VELMA So I suppose it'll be all right if I come in for a few minutes. I guess I really would enjoy some hot coffee before I leave . . . for home.

(FRANKIE *takes out his keys and walks down the steps to his apartment. He opens the door and turns on the light*)

FRANKIE Well? Are you coming in, Velma?

(VELMA *is trembling almost violently*)

VELMA (*Standing on the stairs*) I . . . I . . . yes . . . I'm coming . . .

FRANKIE Jesus! Control yourself, will you?

VELMA I'll be okay, Frankie, in a minute. It's jist that I've never been in a man's apartment before. It's jist that I've never been alone with a man before. Oh, I forgot . . .

FRANKIE Hey! I don't have much patience left, Velma!

VELMA I forgot that I *was* alone with a man before. My brother Herbert. But that doesn't really count, does it? Because he's my brother, huh, Frankie?

FRANKIE If you don't come down here in one more second, I'm shutting the door on you and you're walking to the subway by yourself!

VELMA (*Finally going down the stairs*) You know, Frankie, maybe instead of the coffee I'd better have hot tea instead. (*The lights are beginning to dim*) My mother says . . . she used to say . . . that I drank too much coffee. Ever since I was a little girl I drank coffee, and always told me that that was why I was so skinny and not very tall like most girls, and that's why I shake so much, and that's why I'll probably never find a nice man to marry me someday . . . but now I'm gaining weight and everything . . .

FRANKIE Dai andiamo. Senti, stai tremando perché qui fuori fa freddo. E adesso inizia anche a nevicare.

VELMA No, no. Io non sto tremando perché ho freddo. Insomma lo sai perché tremo così tanto, no? Io mi sento tutta calda. Mi sembra quasi di iniziare a sudare, come se fosse estate o come se fossi in pensiero per qualcosa.

FRANKIE E per cosa saresti preoccupata, sentiamo?

VELMA Beh, prima ti stavo dicendo che mia madre sarebbe rimasta . . . su ad aspettarmi . . . ma . . .

FRANKIE Va bene allora. Dai, ti accompagno alla metropolitana. Non ho altro tempo da perdere, porca miseria!

VELMA No Frankie scusa! Mi ero dimenticata! Sai . . . mia madre non è a casa, cioè è a casa ma stasera non è rimasta sveglia ad aspettarmi . . . e così . . .

FRANKIE Sì? E quindi?

VELMA Quindi credo che non succeda niente se mi fermo da te un attimo. Forse un po' di caffè caldo è proprio quello che mi ci vuole prima di andare . . . a casa.

(FRANKIE *tira fuori le chiavi e scende gli scalini che portano al suo appartamento. Apre la porta e accende la luce*)

FRANKIE Allora, Velma? Ti decidi a entrare?

(VELMA *è scossa da un tremore quasi violento*)

VELMA (*In piedi sugli scalini*) Io . . . io . . . sì . . . adesso arrivo . . .

FRANKIE Cristo! Cerca di controllarti, mi fai 'sto piacere?

VELMA Va tutto bene, Frankie, solo un attimo. È solo che io non sono mai stata nell'appartamento di un uomo. È solo che non sono mai rimasta da sola con un uomo, io. Ah, scusa, mi sono dimenticata . . .

FRANKIE Ehi! Sto perdendo la pazienza, Velma!

VELMA Mi sono dimenticata che in realtà ero già rimasta sola con un uomo. Mio fratello Herbert. Ma lui non conta, giusto? Perché è mio fratello, eh, Frankie?

FRANKIE Se non vieni qui giù immediatamente ti chiudo fuori e te ne vai da sola fino alla metropolitana!

VELMA (*Finalmente scende gli scalini*) Sai, Frankie, forse invece del caffè è meglio se prendo un bel tè caldo. (*Le luci si fanno più soffuse*) Mia madre dice . . . diceva sempre . . . che bevevo troppo caffè. Io il caffè l'ho sempre bevuto fin da bambina e lei mi ha sempre detto che era per quello che ero così magra e non ero alta come tutte le altre ragazzine, che è per questo che tremo così tanto e proprio per questo, forse, non troverò mai un uomo come si deve che un giorno mi sposerà . . . anche se però adesso sto mettendo su peso e tutto . . .

(*Complete blackout. We hear music now. It's the old-time, dance-band type of music coming from a phonograph. The lights slowly come back up. We are in FRANKIE's apartment. VELMA is sitting on the edge of the bed drinking her hot tea. FRANKIE is standing up before the refrigerator with the door opened; he is drinking from a bottle*)

VELMA I don't wanna sound stupid or anything, Frankie, but what's the name of that record?

(*FRANKIE takes another long slug, puts the bottle back into the refrigerator and slams the door shut*)

FRANKIE (*Turning around, facing VELMA with a smile*) "I Only Have Eyes for You."

(*VELMA blushes and turns her face away; she stifles a giggle*)

VELMA It's a pretty song . . .

FRANKIE (*With half-a-sigh*) It sure is! Makes me nostalgic. That's why I'm playing it, because I like feeling nostalgic . . .

VELMA I don't know what it means . . .

FRANKIE They used to play this song when I was in high school. It was the theme song of the ole' hometown band.

VELMA I'll bet you had as much girls chasin' you as my brother Herbert did.

FRANKIE (*Singing*) "Are the stars out tonight? . . . I don't know if it's cloudy or bright . . ."

VELMA (*Embarrassed*) It's certainly a romantic song.

(*She sips her tea*)

FRANKIE ". . . 'cause I only have eyes for you . . ." (*He begins to dance*) Would you like to dance with me, Velma?

(*He bows to her*)

VELMA (*Really embarrassed*) Oh . . . I . . . I forgot to tell you. But I *did* get a few valentines when I was younger. My brother Herbert used to mail them to me.

FRANKIE Jesus Christ! Will you shut the hell up about your goddam brother Herbert!

VELMA Geez . . . you get mad easy, don't you?

FRANKIE And stop trembling like that. My bad is going to fall apart.

(*He goes back to the refrigerator and takes out the bottle*)

VELMA You drink a lot, too, don't you?

FRANKIE (*Drinking*) No shit, baby!

VELMA And . . . when you drink . . . you curse a lot, too, don't you?

FRANKIE You don't like it?

VELMA No . . .

(*Buio completo. Si sente una musica. È quel genere che andava una volta, suonata da un'orchestra da ballo, proviene da un grammofono. Le luci si rialzano lentamente. Siamo all'interno dell'appartamento di FRANKIE. VELMA beve il suo tè caldo seduta sull'orlo del letto. FRANKIE è in piedi di fronte allo sportello aperto del frigorifero; beve da una bottiglia*)

VELMA Non vorrei sembrarti stupida né niente, Frankie, ma come si chiama questa canzone?

(*FRANKIE manda giù un'altra bella sorsata, rimette la bottiglia in frigorifero e lo chiude sbattendo lo sportello*)

FRANKIE (*Si volta, guarda Velma con un sorriso*) "I Only Have Eyes for You."⁷

(*VELMA arrossisce e distoglie lo sguardo; soffoca una risatina*)

VELMA È una bella canzone . . .

FRANKIE (*Con un mezzo sospiro*) Certo che lo è! E mi fa diventare nostalgico. Ecco perché l'ho messa, perché mi piace tutta questa nostalgia . . .

VELMA Non . . . so a cosa ti riferisci.

FRANKIE Questa canzone la suonavano sempre quand'ero alle superiori. Era il cavallo di battaglia dell'orchestra locale.

VELMA Scommetto che anche a te tutte le ragazze correvano dietro, come a mio fratello Herbert.

FRANKIE (*Cantando*) "Are the stars out tonight? . . . I don't know if it's cloudy or bright . . ."

VELMA (*Imbarazzata*) È proprio una canzone romantica.

(*Sorseggia il suo tè*)

FRANKIE ". . . 'cause I only have eyes for you . . ." (*Inizia a ballare*) Vuoi ballare con me, Velma?

(*Si inchina davanti a lei*)

VELMA (*Molto imbarazzata*) Ah . . . io . . . io mi sono dimenticata di dirtelo. In realtà qualche biglietto di San Valentino io l'ho ricevuto quand'ero più giovane. Me li spediva sempre mio fratello Herbert.

FRANKIE Cristo santo! La vuoi smettere di nominare quel maledetto di tuo fratello Herbert!

VELMA Mamma mia . . . certo che ti scaldi facilmente, eh!

FRANKIE E piantala di tremare in quel modo. Va a finire che me lo demolisci il letto.

(*Torna al frigorifero e tira fuori la bottiglia*)

VELMA Ti piace anche bere, eh?

FRANKIE (*Beve*) Puoi dirlo forte, piccola!

VELMA E poi . . . quando bevi . . . ti metti anche a parlare male, giusto?

FRANKIE E non ti sta bene?

VELMA No . . .

FRANKIE (*Pausing, then smiling*) I'm sorry . . . Velma.

VELMA What's that that you're drinkin'? If you don't mind my askin'?

FRANKIE Ice-cold martinis. Already mixed. You can but it in any liquor store, all prepared, ready and waiting for you. Saves a lot of time, you know. Not much time left . . . Velma . . . Sparrow!

VELMA How . . . did you know my last name? I never told it to you.

FRANKIE I guessed.

VELMA Aw, c'mon, I don't believe you.

FRANKIE Honest to God, I did.

VELMA It's spooky then, don't you think?

FRANKIE Not at all. It's a beautiful name, Velma. It goes perfect with you.

VELMA I didn't tell it to you before because I've always been ashamed of it.

FRANKIE How could you be?

VELMA When I was in school the kids used to always whisper behind my back. They'd say: here she comes, here comes Velma the ugly sparrow.

FRANKIE You forget about those creeps!

VELMA Well, you know what I did? I quit school jist so's I wouldn't have to listen to them any more. And I only had a year left before I would've got my diploma, too. Sometimes I think about going to night school, but my mother says it's all too late now. You know, my mother is a peculiar woman. First she's sayin' to me, "Velma, we gotta save money, that's all there is to it!" And then . . . the very next minute she's askin' me to loan her five dollars for the beauty parlor or something like that.

FRANKIE Doesn't your mother work?

VELMA You sound so mad again.

FRANKIE I am mad again!

(*He takes another swig of the bottle*)

VELMA No, she doesn't work because she usually doesn't fell too well. That's why I have two jobs. During the days I work in a movie house in Greenwich Village. I'm an usherette. My mother didn't want me to work down there at first because she thinks the Village is dangerous. She doesn't like the idea of me being around all those fairies and those leprechauns. Well, I'm not afraid of the fairies but *those leprechauns* really scare me.

FRANKIE (*Scratching his head*) What do you mean by leprechauns?

VELMA You know what I mean: those girls who don't like men; they like to be with women instead.

FRANKIE Uh, Lesbians, Velma, Lesbians. Not leprechauns.

FRANKIE (*Fa una pausa, poi sorride*) Mi dispiace . . . Velma.

VELMA Che cos'è che stai bevendo? Sempre se non sono indiscreta?

FRANKIE Martini ghiacciati. Già miscelati. Li trovi in qualsiasi negozio di liquori, sono lì belli pronti che ti aspettano. Ti fa risparmiare un sacco di tempo, sai. Col poco tempo che resta . . . Velma . . . Sparrow!

VELMA Come . . . facevi a sapere il mio cognome? Io non te l'ho mai detto.

FRANKIE Ho tirato a indovinare.

VELMA Oh, andiamo, non ci credo!

FRANKIE Te lo giuro, è così!

VELMA Allora è inquietante, non trovi?

FRANKIE No davvero. È un bel nome, Velma. Ti si addice proprio.

VELMA Non te l'avevo detto prima perché mi sono sempre vergognata.

FRANKIE E perché mai?

VELMA Quando ero a scuola i bambini bisbigliavano sempre alle mie spalle. Dicevano: eccola che arriva, ecco quella spaventapasseri⁸ della Velma!

FRANKIE Ma lasciali perdere quei quattro imbecilli!

VELMA Beh alla fine sai cosa ho fatto? Mi sono ritirata da scuola per non sentirli più. E mi mancava solo un anno per prendere il diploma, tra l'altro. A volte ho una mezza idea di iscrivermi ai corsi serali, ma mia madre dice che ormai è troppo tardi. Sai mia madre è una donna tutta particolare. Prima mi dice "Velma dobbiamo fare economia, su questo non si discute!" E poi, un attimo dopo mi viene a chiedere se le presto cinque dollari per il salone di bellezza o una cosa del genere.

FRANKIE Ma tua madre non lavora?

VELMA Mi sembri di nuovo arrabbiato.

FRANKIE Certo che sono di nuovo arrabbiato!

(*Butta giù un altro sorso dalla bottiglia*)

VELMA No, non lavora perché di solito non si sente un granché bene. È per questo che ho due lavori. Di giorno lavoro in una sala cinematografica nel Greenwich Village⁹. Faccio la maschera di sala. All'inizio mia madre non voleva che lavorassi laggiù perché è convinta che il Village sia pericoloso. A lei non le va l'idea che io sia circondata da tutti quegli invertiti e da tutte quelle bislacche¹⁰. Beh, io non ho paura degli invertiti, ma quelle *lì tutte bislacche* sì che mi spaventano.

FRANKIE (*Grattandosi la testa*) Cosa intendi per bislacche?

VELMA Lo sai benissimo cosa intendo: sono quelle ragazze che non vogliono gli uomini; preferiscono andare con le donne.

FRANKIE Ah, Lesbiche, Velma, Lesbiche. Non bislacche.

VELMA Oh, that's right, Les-bi-ans.

(FRANKIE *takes off his shoes and socks*)

FRANKIE I'm making myself comfortable, so don't worry about a thing.

VELMA Oh, well, it's your apartment, so why should I mind, huh? Besides, I don't really mind anything right now. I'm having a good time here with you. (*She looks around*) This is a real artist's apartment, isn't it?

FRANKIE If you think so.

VELMA So Frankie, what do you do? I know that being a cashier isn't your life. You're too handsome for that. And you're too smart. I've never seen so many books in all my life.

FRANKIE I'm a writer, Velma.

VELMA (*Thrilled*) Gee! You must have a big imagination! You'll probably be rich and famous some day, and then I'll be able to say that I knew you, won't I?

FRANKIE I'm a poet, really. Poets don't make very much money and they hardly ever become famous.

VELMA Who's that on the wall? He looks real familiar to me.

FRANKIE That's Van Gogh. A self-portrait.

VELMA (*Excited*) Did he give it to you?

FRANKIE No, Velma

VELMA And who are these people in this picture? (*She looks closer*) Oh! You're in the picture, too! It must be your family, huh?

FRANKIE That's right.

VELMA They all look so happy: your father and your mother and sister and brother . . . and you! Are they all happy as the picture?

FRANKIE Yes, they are, most of the time. I'm pretty proud of them . . . and they're pretty patient with me.

VELMA You're soooooo . . . lucky!

FRANKIE Why's that?

VELMA To be able to have such a nice family.

(FRANKIE *drinks some more*)

FRANKIE I'm getting stoned . . . drunk, Velma. Don't mind me if I do. I might get a little vulgar . . . a little truthful . . . I might start talking about myself . . . but I'll try to be nice . . . I really . . . *like you*, Velma!

VELMA (*Nervously*) And do you know who else was born during this month? My favorite actress! And you probably like her because she is the most beautiful woman in the entire world!

VELMA Ah, giusto, Les-bi-che.

(FRANKIE *si toglie le scarpe e i calzini*)

FRANKIE Mi sto mettendo comodo, non farci caso.

VELMA Oh, beh, qui siamo nel tuo appartamento, quindi perché mai dovrebbe darmi fastidio? E comunque adesso non c'è proprio niente che mi sta dando fastidio. Me la sto passando bene qui con te (*Si guarda attorno*) E così questo è l'appartamento di un vero artista, eh?

FRANKIE Se lo dici tu.

VELMA Allora cosa fai, Frankie? Lo so che fai altro nella vita, a parte il cassiere. Sei troppo bello per fare solo quello. E sei troppo in gamba. Io non ho mai visto così tanti libri in vita mia.

FRANKIE Faccio lo scrittore, Velma.

VELMA (*Elettrizzata*) Oddio! Allora devi avere tanta immaginazione! Magari un giorno sarai ricco e famoso, e allora potrò dire che ti conoscevo, no?

FRANKIE Io sono un poeta a dire il vero. I poeti non fanno mai tanti soldi, e non diventano quasi mai famosi.

VELMA Chi è quello lì sulla parete? Non mi è una faccia nuova.

FRANKIE È Van Gogh. Un autoritratto.

VELMA (*Eccitata*) E te l'ha dato lui?

FRANKIE No, Velma.

VELMA E chi sono queste persone nella fotografia? (*Guarda più da vicino*) Oh! Ma ci sei anche tu qui in mezzo! È la tua famiglia, giusto?

FRANKIE Proprio così.

VELMA Sembrano tutti così felici: tuo padre e tua madre, tua sorella, tuo fratello . . . e anche tu! Sono tutti contenti come in questa fotografia?

FRANKIE Sì, di solito lo sono. Io sono molto fiero di loro . . . e loro portano molta pazienza con me.

VELMA Oh . . . sei coooooosì fortunato!

FRANKIE E perché mai?

VELMA Perché hai proprio una bella famiglia.

(FRANKIE *beve ancora*)

FRANKIE Mi sto prendendo una bella sbronza . . . mi sto ubriacando, Velma. Non darmi più di tanta retta se parto. Potrei diventare un po' volgare . . . dire le cose senza tanti giri di parole . . . potrei iniziare a parlare di me . . . però cercherò di essere gentile . . . tu mi piaci . . . sul serio, Velma!

VELMA (*Con fare nervoso*) E sai chi altro è nato in questo mese? La mia attrice preferita! E probabilmente lei ti piacerà perché è la donna più bella che ci sia!

FRANKIE Who's that?

VELMA Elizabeth Taylor! What do you think of that?

FRANKIE Liz, huh? Marvelous! We're in good company, aren't we, Velma?

VELMA I knew you'd like to hear that.

FRANKIE Velma, I'm going to make myself some tea. I really shouldn't be getting this drunk. I'm a bad host, huh?

VELMA Oh, no, I don't think so at all.

FRANKIE Thank you. You're beautiful.

VELMA I don't know what . . . to say . . .

FRANKIE You don't have to say anything. Just keep me company, that's all.

VELMA I like you when you drink. It's like watching a show on TV or something. You never know what to expect next. First you're very funny and then you're very mad. In a way, it's fun. (*There is a pause*) I'll bet I know why you don't have a TV set here.

FRANKIE (*Trying to make some tea*) Why?

VELMA Because if you had a TV set then you wouldn't write your poems, would you?

FRANKIE You're very much on the ball.

VELMA I wouldn't know what to do without a TV set in the house. My mother and me, we sit and watch all of the *love* stories! I used to go to Loeee's Paradise a lot. You ever been there?

FRANKIE What is it?

VELMA A movie house. It's jist like a castle out of the fairy tales. You really dream there: Looeee's Paradise!

FRANKIE It's *Loew's* Paradise, not *Loeee's*, isn't it?

VELMA It is? Geez. My mother and me have always called it *Loeee's*, and we've been goin' there for years and years. But you must be right because you're educated and because you're an artist.

FRANKIE Where is this place?

VELMA It's in the Bronx. I used to go on Saturday nights. Thy have stars on the ceilings. Thousands of stars twinkling on and off. It's like another world. And if you sit right in the middle of the theater there's a big full moon above your head. It's so romantic. You should see it! But . . . I stopped goin' because most of the girls and boys go in couples and they all try to sit underneath the big full moon . . . and I was beginning to feel out of place.

FRANKIE Velma, do you want more tea?

VELMA I was thinkin' that maybe I'd like jist a little sip of that martini mix, if you don't care, Frankie?

FRANKIE E chi sarebbe?

VELMA Elizabeth Taylor! Allora che ne dici?

FRANKIE La Liz intendi? Stupenda! Siamo in buona compagnia, giusto, Velma?

VELMA Lo sapevo che questa ti sarebbe piaciuta.

FRANKIE Velma, io mi preparo un po' di tè. Non dovrei davvero ridurmi in questo stato. Dimmi, sono un ospite pessimo, vero?

VELMA Oh, no, figurati.

FRANKIE Grazie. Sei fantastica.

VELMA Non so cosa . . . dire . . .

FRANKIE Non devi dire niente. Fammi compagnia, e basta.

VELMA Mi piaci quando bevi. È come guardare uno spettacolo alla televisione o cose del genere. Non sai mai cosa aspettarti. Prima sei esilarante e un attimo dopo sei arrabbiatissimo. In un certo senso è divertente. (*Una pausa*) Credo di sapere perché qui non hai una televisione.

FRANKIE (*Intento a preparare del tè*) Ah sì?

VELMA Perché se tu avessi una televisione allora non scriveresti poesie, giusto?

FRANKIE Sei proprio in gamba, Velma!

VELMA Io non saprei proprio come fare senza una televisione in casa. Io e mia madre, noi due, ci sediamo lì davanti a guardare tutte quante le storie d'*amore*. Una volta andavo sempre al Loees's Paradise. Ci sei mai stato tu?

FRANKIE Che cos'è?

VELMA È un cinema. È proprio come un castello venuto fuori dalle fiabe. Lì dentro al Loees's Paradise ti sembra di stare davvero in un sogno!

FRANKIE È il Loew's Paradise¹¹, non Loees's, o no?

VELMA Ah sì? Accidenti. Io e mia madre l'abbiamo sempre chiamato Loees's, e ci siamo andate per diversi anni. Comunque mi sa che hai ragione tu perché hai studiato e perché sei un artista.

FRANKIE Dov'è 'sto posto?

VELMA È nel Bronx, io ci andavo sempre il sabato sera. Ha le stelle sul soffitto. Una miriade di stelle, tutte che luccicano. È come un altro pianeta. E se ti siedi proprio al centro della sala ti trovi una grande luna piena sopra la testa. È così romantica. Dovresti vederla! Beh comunque . . . ho smesso di andarci perché quasi tutte le ragazze e i ragazzi ci vanno in coppia e tutti vogliono sedersi sotto la luna piena gigante . . . e io cominciavo a sentirmi fuori posto.

FRANKIE Vuoi un altro po' di tè, Velma?

VELMA Stavo pensando che forse mi andrebbe solo un gocchetto di quel Martini già pronto, sempre se non ti dispiace, Frankie.

FRANKIE Of course I don't care. It's my pleasure. (*He pours her a glass*) Salut!

VELMA (*Lifting her glass*) Cheers . . .

FRANKIE Cheers then. It's all the same.

(*He drinks more too*)

VELMA It's strong . . . but I like it.

FRANKIE Very good. Enjoy yourself.

VELMA This is a real treat. I like treats. Every payday when I bring home the money, my mother decided that we both should have a treat, and so the next morning, every single week that I can remember, we have coffee cake and caviar for breakfast!

FRANKIE Coffeecake and caviar?

VELMA Oh, it's delicious together. Some day you'll have to come to our apartment for breakfast. You'll love it . . .

(*She sips some more*)

FRANKIE Drink up, Velma. There's a lot more yet. Relax. (*FRANKIE flops down on the bed next to her*) My head is beginning to spin.

(*VELMA immediately rises from the bed*)

VELMA (*Trembling*) I used to work at The Merry-Go-Round Club once. I was the hat-check girl, but my mother said they fired me because they wanted a girl who was prettier than me. Do you know that it was my favorite job, though, even if I didn't last very long. I saw all the stars and celebrities. Once I even saw Ed Sullivan!

FRANKIE Relax, Velma.

VELMA (*Drinking some more*) Oh, I'm okay. I'm relaxed. (*She goes to his desk*) This is where you write, huh?

FRANKIE When I'm working on my book.

VELMA You're writing a book, too? You're really smart! I'll bet you're a good typist, too, aren't you?

FRANKIE I never compose my poetry on the typewriter; only my book.

(*VELMA sits down at his desk*)

VELMA Well . . . anyway . . .

(*She finishes the drink rapidly. FRANKIE sits up on his bed and stares over at her*)

FRANKIE You want more?

VELMA I don't think I'd better. I'm getting' sleepy now. Maybe I'd better go home . . . my mother is . . . well, she's *not!* . . . really . . .

FRANKIE Certo che non mi dispiace. Prego. (*Gliene versa un bicchiere*) Salute!

VELMA (*Alzando il bicchiere*) Evviva . . .

FRANKIE Evviva allora. Fa lo stesso.

(*Beve di nuovo anche lui*)

VELMA È forte . . . ma mi piace.

FRANKIE Molto bene. Buon divertimento.

VELMA Questo sì che è trattarsi bene. E a me piace trattarmi bene. Ogni giorno di paga, quando porto a casa i soldi, mia madre ha stabilito che dobbiamo concederci una piccola ricompensa, e così, praticamente ogni settimana, il giorno dopo facciamo colazione con torta al caffè¹² e caviale!

FRANKIE Torta al caffè e caviale?

VELMA Ah, sono una vera delizia assieme. Un giorno dovrai venire da noi a colazione. Ti piacerà tantissimo . . .

(*Ne beve un altro sorso*)

FRANKIE Su, Velma, finisci di bere. Ce n'è dell'altro in arrivo. Stai tranquilla. (*FRANKIE si lascia cadere nel letto accanto a lei*) Comincia a girarmi la testa.

(*VELMA si alza di scatto dal letto*)

VELMA (*Tremando*) Una volta lavoravo al Merry-Go-Round Club¹³. Ero l'addetta al guardaroba, ma mia madre ha detto che mi hanno licenziata perché volevano una ragazza più bella di me. Ma lo sai che però è stato il mio lavoro preferito, anche se non è durata molto. Vedevo tutti gli attori e i personaggi famosi. Una volta ho visto addirittura Ed Sullivan¹⁴!

FRANKIE Sta' calma, Velma.

VELMA (*Beve di nuovo*) Oh, io sto bene. Sono tranquilla io. (*Va alla sua scrivania*) E così è qui dove scrivi, eh?

FRANKIE Quando lavoro al mio libro.

VELMA Ah perché stai scrivendo anche un libro? Sei proprio intelligente! Scommetto che te la cavi bene anche con la macchina da scrivere, vero?

FRANKIE La poesie non le scrivo mai a macchina; solo il libro.

(*VELMA si siede alla scrivania*)

VELMA Beh . . . dai . . .

(*Finisce di bere in velocità. FRANKIE si alza a sedere sul letto e la osserva con sguardo fisso*)

FRANKIE Ne vuoi ancora?

VELMA Forse è meglio di no. Adesso mi sta venendo sonno. Forse è meglio se vado a casa . . . mia madre sta . . . beh, non sta . . . in realtà . . .

FRANKIE I would like to hug you, Velma. I would like very much to put my arms around you, and I would like to hold you ever so gently, and I would like to whisper tenderly in your hear; I would like to say to you: “Velma-honey, believe me, little-girl-Velma, things are not really that bad. Everything’s going to be all right, okay, you just wait and see. Take my word for it, Velma.”

(VELMA *does not know what to do; she glances back and forth at her wrist watch*)

VELMA Well! It’s Valentine’s Day now! I’ll bet you have so many girl friends, don’t you? I can jist see it in the morning when you wake up. Your mailbox will be stuffed with hundreds of valentines, won’t it? From all your girl friends?

FRANKIE It used to be that way one, but no more, and I like it that way. You see, Velma, most girls, after they flip their corks over me, find out pretty fast that they don’t go for me anymore. They discover that there is competition. They believe I’d rather make it with my typewriter. Did you know that every chick I’ve ever sacked becomes insanely jealous of that innocent little machine over there on my desk? Isn’t that the stupidest thing you ever heard of? Harmless portable! . . . inanimate black mother, old pawnshop object that never gives me any bullshit!

VELMA You’re really somethin’.

FRANKIE Would you bother me if I sat down and typed away whenever I felt that I had to, whenever the urge was suddenly the most important thing in my life? You’d live me alone, wouldn’t you?

VELMA Yes . . .

FRANKIE You wouldn’t show any signs of bitterness, would you?

VELMA No . . .

FRANKIE (*Drinking some more*) I know you wouldn’t let me down, Velma. You see, these chicks, almost all of them, they want all of your time and all of your attention. They say they understand you, but when it comes right down to the actual test, well, their lovely precious pussies panic! And so what do you do? You make it with a guy and there’s just as much bullshit here too! (*Quietly*) The thing to do is to find out where the hell the right chick is . . . under my bed? . . . in the bathroom? . . . up in the Bronx, maybe? (VELMA *giggles*, FRANKIE *sips his drink*) I’ll tell you something: I’d rather *come* all over the keys of that hot typewriter . . . that’s the way I feel sometimes! (*He gets up from the bed*) Besides . . . (*He laughs bitterly*) maybe it’s not such a bad idea . . . it’s a whole lot safer. No sweat. How can you knock up a typewriter? (*He stops and stares at her*) But . . . you don’t even know what I’m talking about, do you? (VELMA *simply smiles back at him*) Anyway, that answers your question about how many valentines I’ll be getting in the morning. (*He begins to*

FRANKIE Vorrei abbracciarti, Velma. Vorrei tanto stringerti tra le mie braccia e coccolarti, e mi piacerebbe sussurrare dolcemente al tuo orecchio; dirti: “Velma, tesoro mio, dai retta a me, Velma, piccolina, le cose non vanno poi tanto male. Tutto si metterà a posto, dai, aspetta e vedrai. Te lo prometto, Velma.”

(VELMA non sa cosa fare; continua a lanciare delle occhiate all' orologio che ha al polso)

VELMA Ecco! Adesso è San Valentino! Scommetto che hai tantissime amichette, vero? Già me lo immagino quando ti alzi domani mattina. Dimmi, la tua cassetta delle lettere sarà piena zeppa di bigliettini di San Valentino, vero? Di tutte le tue amichette?

FRANKIE Una volta era come dici tu, ma adesso basta e mi sta bene così. Vedi, Velma, quasi tutte le ragazze, dopo che hanno perso la testa per me, molto presto si accorgono che non gli piaccio più. Si sentono in competizione. Credono che io preferisca farmela con la mia macchina da scrivere. Ma tu lo sai che ogni ragazza che mi sono portato a letto è diventata follemente gelosa di quell'innocua macchinetta che se ne sta lì sulla mia scrivania? Non è la cosa più assurda che si sia mai sentita? Povero aggeggio . . . nera procreatrice senz'anima, vecchia cianfrusaglia raccattata al banco dei pegni che non mi pianta mai grane.

VELMA Certo che sei proprio un bel tipo.

FRANKIE Ti sogneresti di venirmi a rompere le scatole se prendo e mi metto a scrivere a macchina, così, quando mi sento in vena, quando all'improvviso questo bisogno diventa la cosa più importante nella mia vita? Mi lasceresti in pace, o no?

VELMA Sì . . .

FRANKIE Non mi dimostreresti alcun rancore, giusto?

VELMA No . . .

FRANKIE (*Beve ancora*) Lo so che tu non mi deluderesti, Velma. Vedi, queste tipe, quasi tutte, pretendono ogni tuo istante e tutta la tua attenzione. Dicono che ti capiscono, ma poi quando si arriva ai fatti, beh, le loro adorabili farfalline iniziano a dare i numeri. E quindi cosa fai? Vai a letto col primo tizio che capita ma anche qui non c'è verso di venirne fuori. (*Adagio*) L'unica cosa da fare è scoprire dove diavolo si trova la tipa giusta . . . sotto il mio letto? . . . in bagno? . . . su nel Bronx magari? (VELMA fa una risatina, FRANKIE sorseggia il suo drink) E ti dirò una cosa: vorrei tanto venire sui tasti di quella macchina da scrivere così eccitante . . . ecco come mi sento a volte (*Si alza dal letto*) E poi . . . (*Con una risata amara*) non sarebbe del tutto una brutta idea . . . è molto più sicuro. Niente pensieri. Come si potrebbe mettere incinta una macchina da scrivere? (*Si ferma e la fissa*) Ma . . . tu non sai neanche di cosa sto parlando, vero? (VELMA si limita a sorridergli di rimando) Beh, ad ogni modo, questo risponde alla tua domanda su quanti biglietti di San Valentino

take off his shirt. VELMA *gets up*) Don't worry about anything. I'm only making myself comfortable, that's all. (*He takes off his pants*) Will you please sit down? I'm not going to harm you.

(*He goes into the bathroom*)

VELMA Please don't get mad at me, Frankie.

FRANKIE (*Offstage*) I'm not getting mad at you. I'm just disappointed, that's all.

(*He begins to sing and/or hum his song from the bathroom. Then he returns in a bathrobe*)

VELMA (*After a moment*) Maybe I can stay here, just for a little while? My mother won't even know about it . . . since she's not waitin' up for me . . .

(*She begins to shake again*)

FRANKIE You're confusing me, baby, and I get confused enough when I got gin in my belly. Make up your mind. And forget about your mother. I'm sick and tired of hearing about your old lady!

VELMA Okay . . .

FRANKIE If I give you just a small glass of this martini mix, it'll make you stop shaking like that.

(*He goes and pours her some more*) Now here. Take it and drink it in one gulp.

VELMA Will it? Will it make my shaking stop?

FRANKIE Don't ask questions. Just do as I told you.

VELMA Okay . . .

(*She manages to get it all down in one swig*)

FRANKIE You see? You did it. Now come back over here and sit down like before and make yourself at home. And take you coat back off. (*VELMA walks away from him and sits back down at the desk*) Well, aren't you going to take your coat off?

VELMA In a minute, Frankie, in a minute.

FRANKIE Velma? You want to know something?

VELMA What, Frankie?

FRANKIE I'm glad that you came home with me tonight. You're the first woman I've had here in a long time.

(*VELMA shows signs of wanting to leave. She nervously notices a book lying on the desk*)

VELMA (*Reading as she picks the book up*) "Poet in New York . . ."

FRANKIE A great goddam good poet, too, let me tell you!

VELMA Fed-er-ico . . . Garcia . . . Lorca . . .

FRANKIE And God bless him! Amen.

riceverò domattina. (*Inizia a togliersi la camicia. VELMA si alza*) Non preoccuparti. Mi sto solo mettendo comodo, tutto qui. (*Si toglie i pantaloni*) Mi fai il piacere di sederti? Non voglio farti del male.

(*Va in bagno*)

VELMA Ti prego, Frankie, non prendertela con me.

FRANKIE (*Da dietro le quinte*) Non me la sto prendendo con te. Sono solo deluso, ecco tutto.

(*Inizia a cantare e/o canticchiare la sua canzone dal bagno. Poi ritorna in accappatoio*)

VELMA (*Dopo un attimo*) Magari posso restare qui, solo un pochino? Mia madre neanche lo verrà a sapere . . . visto che non mi sta aspettando alzata . . .

(*È assalita di nuovo dal tremore*)

FRANKIE Mi stai confondendo le idee, piccola, e sono già abbastanza confuso per conto mio quando ho del gin in corpo. Deciditi. E lascia stare tua madre. Non ne posso più di sentire nominare in continuazione la tua vecchia!

VELMA Va bene . . .

FRANKIE Se ti do solo un bicchierino di questo Martini già miscelato la smetterai di tremare in quel modo. (*Va a versargliene un altro po'*) Ecco qua. Tieni e bevillo tutto d'un fiato.

VELMA Davvero? Davvero mi farà smettere di tremare?

FRANKIE Piantala di fare domande. Fa' come ti ho detto e basta.

VELMA Va bene . . .

(*Riesce a buttarlo giù tutto d'un fiato*)

FRANKIE Vedi? Ce l'hai fatta. Adesso torna qui, siediti come prima e mettiti comoda. E togliti quel cappotto. (*VELMA si allontana da lui e si siede su nuovo alla scrivania*) Allora, te lo togli sì o no quel cappotto?

VELMA Solo un attimo, Frankie, un attimo.

FRANKIE Velma? Vuoi sapere una cosa?

VELMA Cosa, Frankie?

FRANKIE Sono contento che stasera tu sia venuta a casa con me. Sei la prima donna qui dentro dopo tanto tempo.

(*VELMA dà segni di volersene andare. Con fare nervoso si accorge di un libro che sta sulla scrivania*)

VELMA (*Leggendo mentre solleva il libro*) "Poeta a New York . . . "

FRANKIE E che gran poeta, lasciamelo dire!

VELMA Fed – er – ico . . . Garcia . . . Lorca . . .

FRANKIE Che Dio lo benedica! Amen.

VELMA I . . . never heard of him. Is he a Puerto Rican?

FRANKIE (*Softly*) Where did I find you?

VELMA Does he still live in New York?

FRANKIE Oh, sure. He's pushing boo up in East Harlem for the winter.

VELMA Oh.

FRANKIE (*Going to her*) Please . . . let me just hold you, Velma, okay? (*VELMA shows signs of wanting to leave again*) Don't move! Stay where you are . . . I'm not going to harm you. If only you'll believe that, then everything will be okay. Take my word for it, please . . . okay?

(*He gives her a very honest smile*)

VELMA (*After a moment*) Okay . . . I guess.

FRANKIE Good, Velma. Besides, I need someone to talk to, and you need someone to talk to. Right?

VELMA Right, I guess.

FRANKIE In other words, we both need someone to listen to us.

VELMA You mean those other women . . . I mean, didn't those other girls even want to listen to you, Frankie? I mean the ones who used to come here?

FRANKIE Never! That's the trouble, Velma.

VELMA They just wanted to talk about themselves, huh?

FRANKIE That's it, Velma. That's exactly it.

VELMA And that's why you're not married yet, huh? Because maybe you can't find a girl who'll listen to you?

FRANKIE Yeah, maybe it's one of the reasons . . .

VELMA It's so hard to believe that you're not married, though. I think you'd make a nice husband and be a good father, too.

FRANKIE (*Sharply*) Why would I make a nice husband and be a good father?

VELMA (*Jittery again*) Well . . . because your kids would have so much fun with you. You'd make them laugh and everything. I never really had a father to make me laugh and have fun with because I hardly remember him.

FRANKIE You're making me feel good, Velma. In a way, you're making me feel sort of happy. You see, about a year ago around this time I almost got married. I had this girl friend, and . . .

VELMA Was she pretty?

FRANKIE It doesn't really matter now. It's not important anyway. Her name was Carrie and we went together for over a year. Then she wanted to get married. I didn't. Remember, Velma: I have a very hard time just taking care of myself. Well, anyway, that's all she talked about was getting married.

VELMA Io . . . non l'ho mai sentito nominare. È un portoricano?

FRANKIE (*A mezza voce*) Ma da dove salta fuori questa?

VELMA Vive ancora a New York?

FRANKIE Oh sicuro. D'inverno spaccia erba su a East Harlem¹⁵.

VELMA Ah.

FRANKIE (*Va da lei*) Ti prego . . . fatti abbracciare un attimo, su, dai, Velma. (*VELMA dà di nuovo segni di volersene andare*) Non muoverti! Ferma dove sei . . . non ti voglio mica fare male. Se solo ti fidassi, allora tutto si metterebbe a posto. Credimi, ti prego . . . va bene?

(*Le sorride in modo davvero sincero*)

VELMA (*Dopo un attimo*) Va bene . . . dai.

FRANKIE Brava, Velma. E poi io ho bisogno di qualcuno con cui parlare e tu hai bisogno di qualcuno con cui parlare. Giusto?

VELMA Sì, giusto.

FRANKIE In altre parole, tutti e due abbiamo bisogno di qualcuno che ci ascolti.

VELMA Vuoi dire che quelle donne . . . cioè, Frankie, quelle ragazze, non volevano mai stare a sentire quello che dicevi? Intendo quelle che venivano qui di solito?

FRANKIE Mai! Questo è il guaio, Velma.

VELMA E volevano parlare solo di loro, vero?

FRANKIE Esatto, Velma. Proprio così.

VELMA Ed è per questo che non sei ancora sposato, giusto? Perché non riusciresti a trovare una ragazza che ti ascolti?

FRANKIE Sì, forse questo è uno dei motivi . . .

VELMA Certo che però è difficile credere che tu non sia sposato. Secondo me saresti un marito come si deve e anche un buon padre.

FRANKIE (*Bruscamente*) E perché mai sarei un marito come si deve e anche un buon padre?

VELMA (*Di nuovo tremando*) Beh . . . perché i bambini si divertirebbero un mondo con te. Li faresti ridere e via discorrendo. Io un padre che mi facesse ridere e divertire non ce l'ho mai avuto in realtà, perché del mio mi ricordo poco niente.

FRANKIE Mi fai stare bene, Velma. Per certi versi con te sono quasi felice. Vedi, circa un anno fa in questo periodo c'è mancato poco che mi sposassi. Avevo 'sta fidanzata, e . . .

VELMA Era carina?

FRANKIE Questo non ha importanza adesso. E comunque non vuol dire niente. Si chiamava Carrie e siamo stati assieme per più di un anno. Poi lei voleva sposarsi. Io no. Ricordatelo Velma: faccio fatica anche a badare a me stesso. Beh, insomma, lei non faceva altro che parlare del matrimonio.

In a church. The whole works. And having lots of babies afterwards. It scared me, Velma. She was ashamed now. She didn't think we should go on living together. (He laughs bitterly) We had to make it all legal! Carrie said some pretty stupid things to me. I was beginning to feel nervous and miserable. "Frankie Basta," she screamed at me, "you're not a man! You can't face up responsibilities!" Over and over again she said this to me. Christ, Velma, I couldn't even take care of myself then. Almost like now: no job, no prospects, no nothing. And I didn't know whether I was a good poet or a bad one. I still don't know. And so, I asked her to try and understand. I knew I would fail her then. I said to her, "Please, Carrie-baby, just hold on and wait, and then we'll see, Carrie-honey...we'll see, okay?"

VELMA But she didn't huh?

FRANKIE Didn't wait, you mean? No, she didn't wait and she wouldn't see. You can't do it, Velma, you can't do it! It's almost impossible to make people understand certain things, especially the people who you care so much about, the people who you love . . . or the people you could care about and love . . .

VELMA (*Softly*) I . . . don't know what to say to you.

FRANKIE You don't have to say anything, Velma. Just keep me company, that's all. (*He goes to the phonograph*) What would you like to hear? Do you have any favorite songs, Velma?

VELMA I like the one you played a little while ago.

FRANKIE No, I mean one of your own. Don't you have one of your own favorites? That's my favorite song.

(*There's a short pause*)

VELMA Well . . . it's mine too . . . now.

(*She smiles faintly at him*)

FRANKIE (*Smiling back*) Then I'll play it again, for the both of us.

VELMA It would make me happy, Frankie . . .

FRANKIE What's the matter all of a sudden? I thought you *were* happy.

VELMA I am . . . but I'm also worried . . . and I'm getting tired . . . I'm feelin' weak and everything . . . (*The music begins to play softly*) Oh, that's so nice . . . it makes me forget . . . things . . . easier . . .

FRANKIE And you're not rambling any more, either, are you?

VELMA Geez, you're right! I never even thought of it.

(*He has somehow managed to get her to get her to dance with him. It's all rather awkward: his drunkenness, her fear*)

In chiesa. Di fare le cose in grande. E poi di avere tanti bambini. La cosa mi spaventava, Velma. E allora questa si vergognava. Era convinta che noi non dovessimo continuare a vivere insieme. (*Con una risata amara*) Dovevamo legalizzare il tutto! Carrie mi diceva di quelle cose davvero assurde. Avevo iniziato a innervosirmi e a sentirmi un fallito. “Frankie Basta,” mi ha urlato dietro, “tu non sei un uomo! Non sai assumerti delle responsabilità!” E me lo diceva in continuazione. Cristo santo, Velma, all’epoca non riuscivo neanche a badare a me stesso. Più o meno come adesso: niente lavoro, niente prospettive, niente di niente. E nemmeno sapevo se ero un bravo poeta o un buono a nulla. Neanche adesso lo so. E così le avevo chiesto di cercare di capire la situazione. Sapevo che l’avrei delusa. Le ho detto, “Ti prego, Carrie, piccola, devi soltanto tener duro e aspettare e poi si vedrà, Carrie, tesoro mio . . . vedremo più avanti, no?”

VELMA Ma non l’ha fatto, eh?

FRANKIE Non ha aspettato, intendi? No, non ha aspettato e non ha voluto capire. Uno non ce la fa, Velma, non ce la fa! È quasi impossibile far capire certe cose alla gente, soprattutto alle persone a cui tieni davvero tanto, le persone che ami . . . o quelle a cui potresti tenere e che potresti amare . . .

VELMA (*Sommessamente*) Io . . . non so cosa dirti.

FRANKIE Ma non devi dire niente, Velma. Tienimi compagnia e basta. (*Va al grammofono*) Cosa vuoi ascoltare? Hai qualche canzone preferita, Velma?

VELMA Mi piace quella che hai messo poco fa.

FRANKIE No, voglio dire una delle tue. Non ne hai una di tua? Quella è la *mia* canzone preferita.

(*Una breve pausa*)

VELMA Beh . . . è anche *la mia* . . . adesso.

(*Accenna un sorriso*)

FRANKIE (*Le sorride di ritorno*) Allora la metto su di nuovo, per noi due.

VELMA Così sarei davvero felice, Frankie . . .

FRANKIE Beh cosa succede tutto d’un tratto? Pensavo che tu *fossi* felice.

VELMA Lo sono . . . ma sono anche preoccupata . . . e . . . mi sento stanca . . . mi sento debole e tutte ‘ste cose qui . . . (*La musica inizia a diffondersi sommessamente*) Oh, è così bella . . . adesso è così facile . . . dimenticare . . . tante cose . . .

FRANKIE E hai anche smesso di tremare hai visto?

VELMA Oddio, hai ragione! Non ci avevo neanche fatto caso.

(*In qualche modo è riuscito a farla ballare. Il tutto lascia trasparire una certa goffaggine: l’ebbrezza di lui, la paura di lei*)

FRANKIE (*Singing, dancing*) “Are the stars out tonight? . . . I don’t know if it’s cloudy or bright! . . . ‘Cause I only have eyes for . . . YOU!”

VELMA (*Pulling away, embarrassed*) This picture of you and your family sure is nice, don’t you think? Don’t you think so, Frankie?

FRANKIE (*Singing*) “Dear Velma . . . Oh, the moon may be high . . .”

VELMA . . . and you can tell that you’re different from the rest of them. I mean you look like an artist and everything . . . all the rest of them look nice and ordinary . . .

FRANKIE (*Singing*) “ Maybe millions of people go by”

VELMA . . . but you really stand out in the picture! You look nice and . . . *wild!* If you know what I mean? Frankie? Please, don’t sing to me any more, please! I’m getting to feel scared and I can’t think when you keep singing to me like that, please!

FRANKIE (*He turns off the phonograph*) I’m sorry, Velma. Look, anything to make you cozy.

VELMA Boy, oh boy, you really are drunk, aren’t you?

FRANKIE Why do you say . . . that?

VELMA Well, because you’re acting so funny.

FRANKIE I know, I know . . . Velma. Look, from here on in . . . well, just don’t mind me too much . . . excuse me if I seem . . . in any way clumsy to you, okay?

VELMA Frankie?

FRANKIE Let me have your coat. I’ll hang it up for you.

VELMA (*Motionless*) Frankie, I’m getting a tiny headache . . . do you think, Frankie, that you could keep a secret? I’ve never been so worried . . .

FRANKIE C’mon now: your coat?

VELMA Yes . . .

(*She hands her coat to him. FRANKIE goes and puts the coat on a hanger. He notices a newspaper half-exposed in one of the pockets*)

FRANKIE (*Looking at it*) Velma, why are you reading a newspaper like this?

VELMA You’re mad again, aren’t you?

FRANKIE How can you waste money this way?

VELMA I buy it for my mother. She reads it.

FRANKIE I don’t wanna hear another word about your MOTHER! Do you hear me?

VELMA (*Beginning to tremble again*) Yes, yes, Frankie.

FRANKIE Yeah, sure! You buy this rag for your old lady, but you read it too, don’t you?

FRANKIE (*Cantando, ballando*) “Are the stars out tonight? . . . I don’t know if it’s cloudy or bright! . . . ‘cause I only have eyes for . . . YOU!”

VELMA (*Si allontana, imbarazzata*) Questa fotografia di te e la tua famiglia è proprio bella, non credi? Non credi anche tu, Frankie?

FRANKIE (*Cantando*) “Cara Velma . . . Oh, the moon might be high . . .”

VELMA . . . e si può dire che tu sei diverso da tutti loro. Cioè, si vede che sei un artista e via discorrendo . . . tutti gli altri sono gente per bene qualunque . . .

FRANKIE (*Cantando*) “Maybe millions of people go by”

VELMA . . . ma te invece, nella fotografia, ti si vede proprio! Sei carino e . . . *ribelle!* Non so se mi spiego, Frankie? Ti prego, smettila di cantare, per favore! Mi sta venendo su l’angoscia e non riesco a pensare se continui a cantare in quel modo, ti prego!

FRANKIE (*Spegne il giradischi*) Mi dispiace, Velma. Senti, sul serio, qualsiasi cosa per farti sentire a tuo agio.

VELMA Mamma mia, sei proprio ubriaco, eh?

FRANKIE Perché dici . . . così?

VELMA Beh, perché ti stai comportando in modo davvero strano.

FRANKIE Lo so, lo so . . . Velma. Guarda, d’ora in avanti . . . beh, non darmi più di tanta retta . . . scusami se davanti a te sto facendo la figura . . . del maleducato, d’accordo?

VELMA Frankie?

FRANKIE Dammi pure il cappotto. Lo vado ad appendere.

VELMA (*Immobile*) Frankie, mi sta venendo un po’ di mal di testa . . . tu, Frankie, credi di saper mantenere un segreto? Non sono mai stata così preoccupata . . .

FRANKIE Dai, su: il cappotto?

VELMA Va bene . . .

(*Gli passa il cappotto. FRANKIE va lo va a mettere sull’attaccapanni. Nota un giornale che sporge da una delle tasche*)

FRANKIE (*Gli dà un’occhiata*) Velma, ma perché leggi un giornale del genere?

VELMA Sei di nuovo arrabbiato, vero?

FRANKIE Ma come fai a buttare via i soldi in questo modo?

VELMA Lo prendo per mia madre. È lei che lo legge.

FRANKIE Non voglio sentire un’altra parola su tua MADRE! Hai capito sì o no?

VELMA (*Di nuovo assalita dal tremore*) Sì, sì Frankie.

FRANKIE Sì, certo, come no! Compri questa carta straccia per la tua vecchiaia, ma lo leggi anche tu, o giusto?

VELMA It . . . has lots of gossip in it . . . about all the stars and the celebrities . . . and *everything!*

FRANKIE (*Reading*) “Mother Uses Daughter’s Head For Hammer!” (*He rips the newspaper up with great fury*) Velma, why do you read such shit? What are you trying to do to yourself? (*Angrily*) “Mother Uses Daughter’s Head For Hammer!” (*He moves closer to her*) God, Velma, I mean what’s happening?

(*He makes an attempt at embracing her*)

VELMA Please, please, please! Oh, nooooooo! I’M SCARED OF YOU! I’M SCARED OF EVERYBODY, OF EVERYTHING! (*She tries to run from him*) I never thought of it ‘til now . . . they’ll do somethin’ to me, won’t they? I want my coat back! I’VE NEVER BEEN ALONE WITH A MAN BEFORE! My mother would think . . . *my mother!*

FRANKIE (*Violently*) FUCK YOUR MOTHER! YOUR MOTHER IS ROTTEN!

VELMA I can’t stay here tonight! Maybe it just isn’t right for me to stay here with you . . . not tonight!

FRANKIE You’ve got to now. You’re in no shape to go anywhere. It’ll be all right, Velma. You’ll sleep in my bed, and I’ll sleep on the floor. Nothing hard about that, is there?

VELMA I can’t Frankie! *I’ve . . . got . . . to . . . be . . . there!*

FRANKIE What are you talking about? (*He moves towards her again, his arms outstretched*) Please, just let me hold you and whisper in your ear, Velma?

VELMA NOOOOOOO! (*She pulls a small kitchen knife out of her pocketbook. It is partly caked with dry blood*) YOU STAY AWAY FROM ME! I DON’T WANT YOU TO TOUCH ME! We’re not even married yet . . . (*She is trembling as she holds the knife at FRANKIE*) You leave me alone, Frankie . . . or I’ll *kill* you! (*FRANKIE is motionless*) When . . . we got up this morning, my mother and me, we had coffeecake and caviar for breakfast. It was a big surprise. My mother said that we were havin’ the treat even if payday was three days away yet. She said it was sort of special celebration. My mother said that she was leaving for the mountains this afternoon. She was going to a resort with a man. Harriet, my mother’s friend who lives in the next apartment, she told my mother that there were a whole lot available man at this certain resort up in the mountains, the Catskills, I think, and my mother said she was goin’ no matter what, and that I must send her money every weekend until she has some luck. She said that I couldn’t go because I would scare the men away, that I would ruin her chances, and that I was really such an ugly girl, that I looked like the mother and she looked like the daughter . . . and then she said that was why were having the treat early: to celebrate! The coffeecake and caviar . . . and then she asked me to cut her a big piece of the coffeecake and to cover it with a whole lot of caviar . . . and so I started to cut the coffeecake with this here knife, but . . .

VELMA Ci sono un sacco di pettegolezzi . . . su tutti gli attori e i personaggi famosi . . . *e tutto il resto!*

FRANKIE (*Leggendo*) “Madre usa testa della figlia come martello” (*Strappa il giornale con molta rabbia*) Velma, ma perché leggi questa merda? Si può sapere in che stato vuoi ridurti? (*Con veemenza*) “Madre usa testa della figlia come martello!” (*Le si avvicina*) Cristo santo, Velma, vuoi dirmi cosa sta succedendo?

(*Prova ad abbracciarla*)

VELMA Ti prego, per favore, ti prego! Noooooooo! MI FAI PAURA! TUTTI QUANTI MI FANNO PAURA, TUTTO! (*Prova a sfuggirgli*) Fino ad adesso non ci avevo mai pensato . . . oddio mi faranno qualcosa? Ridammi il mio cappotto! NON SONO MAI STATA SOLA CON UN UOMO PRIMA D’ORA! Mia madre penserebbe . . . *mia madre!*

FRANKIE (*Violentemente*) “FANCULO TUA MADRE! TUA MADRE MI FA SCHIFO!”

VELMA Non posso stare qui stanotte! Forse non va proprio bene che io stia qui con te . . . non stanotte!

FRANKIE E invece adesso ti tocca per forza. Non sei nelle condizioni di andare da nessuna parte.

Andrà tutto bene, Velma. Tu dormirai nel mio letto e io dormirò per terra. Niente di complicato, no?

VELMA Io non posso, Frankie! *Io . . . devo . . . andarci!*

FRANKIE Ma di cosa stai parlando? (*Va di nuovo verso di lei, a braccia tese*) Ti prego, lascia che ti abbracci e che ti sussurri all’orecchio, Velma?

VELMA NOOOOOOOO! (*Tira fuori dalla borsetta un piccolo coltello da cucina. È in parte incrostato di sangue secco*) STAMMI LONTANO TI HO DETTO! NON MI TOCCARE! Non siamo neanche sposati . . . (*Trema mentre punta il coltello contro FRANKIE*) Lasciami stare, Frankie . . . o ti ammazzo! (*FRANKIE è immobile*) Quando ci siamo alzate . . . questa mattina, io e mia madre abbiamo fatto colazione con la torta al caffè e il caviale. È stata davvero una sorpresa. Ha detto che ci stavamo concedendo la nostra solita ricompensa anche se mancavano tre giorni alla paga. Era una sorta di festeggiamento speciale il nostro. Nel pomeriggio lei doveva partire per la montagna. Doveva andare in un luogo di villeggiatura per conoscere un uomo. Harriet, l’amica di mia madre che vive nell’appartamento di fianco, è stata lei a dirle che ci sono un sacco di uomini disponibili in questo posto in montagna, nelle Catskills¹⁶ mi sembra, e mia madre ha detto che ci sarebbe andata a tutti i costi e che io dovevo mandarle su i soldi ogni fine settimana fino a quando la fortuna non sarebbe girata dalla sua parte. Io non potevo andare, ha detto, perché avrei fatto scappare gli uomini a gambe levate, le avrei precluso molte possibilità io, perché ero una ragazza orrenda e io sembravo la madre e lei sembrava la figlia . . . ed era per questo che ci stavamo concedendo la nostra solita ricompensa: per festeggiare! Con la torta al caffè e il caviale . . . e poi mi ha chiesto di tagliarle una fettona di torta e di ricoprirla con un sacco di caviale . . . e così ho iniziato a tagliare la torta con

(*VELMA trembles to such a degree that the knife falls from her hand and onto the floor. She runs to the bed and throws herself upon it in a burst of hysterical sobbing*)

FRANKIE Velma, what have you done?

(*He picks up the knife and lies it on his desk*)

VELMA It's my mother's blood! I didn't know what to do. I don't . . . know why I did it! I don't even really remember that much, Frankie. When I got in the subway to come to work afterwards it was jist like nuthin' happened, nuthin' at all! But do you know? I thought, I thought when my mother asked me to cover her piece of coffeecake with a whole lot of caviar, I thought . . . my mother . . . she thinks my head is a *hammer!* That's what she thinks! AND IT ISN'T! IT ISN'T! Tell me, Frankie, please tell me that my head is not a *hammer!*

FRANKIE (*After a pause*) No, Velma, no. Your head is *not* a hammer.

VELMA (*A brief pause*) Can I sleep here tonight?

(*FRANKIE goes to the bottle and takes the longest gulp he can manage. He falls, exhausted, down into a chair. He closes his eyes*)

FRANKIE Sure . . . Velma.

(*VELMA continues to sob on the bed, but it is growing softer now. FRANKIE gets up and turns off all the lights. The moon is shining in through one of the windows*)

VELMA (*Very quietly*) What will they do too me? I'm scared Frankie . . .

FRANKIE They're not going to do anything . . . to you. I'll make sure of that . . .

(*FRANKIE goes and sits down at his desk. He begins to scribble swiftly on a piece of paper*)

VELMA (*Vaguely*) It makes me sleepy . . . alcohol . . . makes me soooooo tired . . . I've never felt soooo . . . tired . . . before in my whole life . . . (*She is no longer crying*) Help me . . . help me . . . help . . . me . . .

FRANKIE (*Still writing*) Yes, yes . . . *I will*, Velma Sparrow . . . I promise you that *I will*.

(*VELMA is breathing heavily now. FRANKIE continues to write with great speed. He stops and then begins to read*)

FRANKIE (*Aloud with a strange sobriety*)

“Dead birds still have wings
Dead birds, saddest-looking things
Because they're dead, on the ground
With their still wings, on the ground
Saddest-looking things
Dead birds still have wings,

questo coltello qua, ma . . .

(VELMA trema a tal punto che il coltello le cade di mano e finisce atterra. Si precipita verso il letto e ci si getta sopra in un'esplosione di singhiozzi isterici)

FRANKIE Velma, che cos'hai fatto?

(Raccoglie il coltello e lo mette sulla scrivania)

VELMA È il sangue di mia madre! Io non sapevo cosa fare. Io non so . . . perché l'ho fatto! E neanche mi ricordo più di tanto, Frankie. Poi, quando ho preso la metropolitana per venire a lavorare era come se non fosse successo niente, niente di niente! Ma sai cosa però? Io ho pensato, quando mia madre mi ha chiesto di ricoprirle la sua fetta con tutto quel caviale, io ho pensato, ho pensato . . . che mia madre . . . lei crede che la mia testa sia una *martello!* Ecco cosa pensa! E INVECE NO! E INVECE NO! Dimmelo Frankie, ti prego, dimmi che la mia testa non è un *martello!*

FRANKIE (*Dopo una pausa*) No, Velma, no. La tua testa non è un martello.

VELMA (*Una breve pausa*) Posso dormire qui stanotte?

(FRANKIE va alla bottiglia e manda giù il sorso più grande che può. Esausto, si lascia cadere su una sedia. Chiude gli occhi)

FRANKIE Certo . . . Velma.

(VELMA continua a singhiozzare nel suo letto, ora però in modo più sommesso. FRANKIE si alza e spegne tutte le luci. La luna rischiarava l'interno attraverso una delle finestre).

VELMA (*Con un filo di voce*) Cosa mi faranno? Ho paura, Frankie . . .

FRANKIE Non ti faranno . . . niente. Te lo assicuro . . .

(FRANKIE va a sedersi alla scrivania. Inizia a scribacchiare velocemente su un pezzo di carta)

VELMA (*Vaneggiando*) L'alcool . . . mi fa venire sonno . . . mi fa sentire coooooosì stanca . . . non mi sono mai sentita coooooosì . . . stanca . . . in tutta la mia vita (*Ha smesso di piangere*) Aiuto . . . aiutami . . . devi . . . aiutarmi . . .

FRANKIE (*Continuando a scrivere*) Sì, certo . . . *lo farò*, Velma Sparrow . . . ti prometto che *lo farò*.

(VELMA adesso ha il respiro pesante. FRANKIE continua a scrivere a gran velocità. Si ferma e quindi inizia a leggere)

FRANKIE (*A voce alta, con un'insolita compostezza*)

“Passeri morti con le loro ali

Passeri morti, visioni invernali

Se ne stanno lì immobili, a terra

Con le loro ali immobili, a terra

Visioni invernali

Passeri morti con le loro immobili ali

Dead on the ground

Instead of the sky . . .”

(*VELMA is sound asleep; her breathing is peaceful. FRANKIE turns and faces VELMA’s weary and forlorn figure. His eyes are full of tears. He stands up and lights a cigarette*) I have a treat for you in the morning, Velma. (*He turns out the desk lamp*) I’ve just written you . . . a valentine.

Curtain

Fermi a terra

Non volteggiano più nel cielo . . .”

(VELMA dorme profondamente; il suo respiro è tranquillo. FRANKIE si gira e osserva VELMA in tutto il suo sfinimento e il suo abbandono. Ha gli occhi pieni di lacrime. Si alza e accende una sigaretta) Domani mattina ho una sorpresa per te, Velma. *(Spegne la lampada da tavolo)* Ti ho appena scritto una cosa . . . per San Valentino.

Sipario

Note al testo

¹ Il termine «birdbath» indica alle vasche d'acqua che molto spesso si trovano nei giardini a scopo ornamentale e che hanno il fine pratico di dare ristoro agli uccellini di passaggio. Il titolo è altamente metaforico ed è stato lasciato in inglese proprio perché racchiude in sé l'essenza dell'intero dramma – la sua traduzione in italiano avrebbe compromesso questo perfetto equilibrio.

² L'italiano «tavola calda» si avvicina solo in parte al termine inglese «cafeteria» indicante un ristorante self service in cui il cibo è generalmente esposto al bancone o in appositi supporti.

³ L'aggettivo «midtown» letteralmente significa «del centro città», ma poiché l'azione si svolge a New York il termine si riferisce alla zona centrale di Manhattan chiamata Midtown.

⁴ The Bronx è uno dei cinque *boroughs* di New York; si trova nella zona nord della città, a nord di Manhattan e del Queens.

⁵ Schrafft's è il nome di una catena di ristoranti molto popolare negli Stati Uniti e soprattutto a New York. Il picco del successo commerciale di Schrafft's venne raggiunto all'inizio degli anni sessanta, quando soltanto a New York si contavano una cinquantina di ristoranti; successivamente la compagnia iniziò una fase di lento declino fino alla scomparsa definitiva negli anni ottanta. Nell'immaginario collettivo Schrafft's era un locale per signore appartenenti alla borghesia medio-alta, a questo contribuiva senz'altro il fatto che molti di questi ristoranti si trovassero nelle migliori zone della città e che gran parte del personale fosse femminile. Nonostante le modifiche apportate ad alcuni dei locali, quella femminile fu sempre la clientela predominante e Schrafft's non riuscì mai a togliersi l'etichetta di "ristorante da donne". (NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission)

⁶ Il Radio City Music Hall è un teatro di New York sulla Sixth Avenue, fa parte del complesso architettonico del Rockefeller Center. L'edificio venne costruito nel 1932 su progetto dell'architetto Edward Durell Stone; gli interni vennero invece affidati al designer Donald Deskey. Lo stile impiegato è quello Art Deco di ispirazione europea. Dalla sua inaugurazione nel dicembre del 1932 fino agli anni ottanta funzionò sia come teatro sia come cinema, successivamente soltanto come teatro. (radiocity.com)

⁷ *I Only Have Eyes For You* è una canzone del 1934 scritta da Al Dubin e Harry Warren. Negli anni trenta ebbe un discreto successo grazie al suo utilizzo al cinema, tuttavia giunse alla consacrazione definitiva soltanto nel 1959 grazie al gruppo dei Flamingos. Altri celebri interpreti del pezzo sono stati Frank Sinatra, Ella Fitzgerald e Billie Holiday.

⁸ La mia è una traduzione libera. «The ugly sparrow» fa riferimento al cognome del personaggio; letteralmente il termine «sparrow» indica il passerotto.

⁹ Il Greenwich Village, o semplicemente il Village, è un quartiere di Manhattan. Nel corso del ventesimo secolo è stato il fulcro di numerosi movimenti d'avanguardia sia artistica sia sociale e proprio per questo motivo è passato alla storia come il quartiere bohémien di New York. Nel Greenwich Village ha avuto inizio la anche produzione teatrale *Off-Off-Broadway*.

¹⁰ Nel testo in inglese «Leprechauns» è un termine che indica un personaggio del folklore irlandese. Si tratta di un folletto che secondo la leggenda è in grado di rivelare dove è sepolto un paio d'oro a chiunque riesca ad acchiapparlo (Webster's New World College Dictionary). Il gioco di parole inglese è ovviamente irripetibile in italiano.

¹¹ Il Loew's Paradise è un teatro situato nel Grand Concourse, uno dei viali principali del Bronx. L'edificio venne progettato dall'architetto John Eberson e venne costruito tra il 1927 e il 1929. Il Loew's Paradise venne inizialmente utilizzato come cinema; faceva parte del colosso dell'industria dell'intrattenimento Loew e rientrava nel gruppo dei Loew's Wonder Theatres. La peculiarità di questo edificio sono i suoi interni in perfetto *atmospheric style* ispirati ai giardini barocchi del diciassettesimo secolo. (NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission)

¹² Il termine «coffeecake» si riferisce alla torta che normalmente viene servita assieme al caffè; essa non è necessariamente al caffè. La mia scelta di usare l'italiano «torta al caffè» è soltanto una della possibilità di traduzione.

¹³ Il nome Merry-go-round Club potrebbe riferirsi al Club 82 o ad uno degli spettacoli da esso allestiti. Il Club 82 era un nightclub dell'East Village, venne fondato nel 1953 e fu attivo fino ai primi anni settanta; al suo interno andavano in

scena spettacoli di varietà all'insegna della trasgressione più estrema. Tra il pubblico vi erano spesso anche molti personaggi famosi come Liz Taylor, Montgomery Clift e Judy Garland. Nei primi anni sessanta il Club 82 allestì un varietà chiamato East Side Merry-Go-Round. (huffingtonpost.com)

¹⁴ Ed Sullivan (1901 -1974) è stato un attore, presentatore e personalità di punta del mondo dello spettacolo americano del 20° secolo. Viene ricordato soprattutto per l'*Ed Sullivan Show*; a lui è stato dedicato un teatro di Broadway (edsullivan.com).

¹⁵ East Harlem è un quartiere del *borough* di Manhattan; data la grande presenza di immigrati latini – soprattutto portoricani – è detto anche Spanish Harlem.

¹⁶ I Monti Catskill sono una catena montuosa che si estende nella parte meridionale dello stato di New York.

HALLOWEEN

THE PEOPLE OF THE PLAY

LUKE LOVELLO, he's going to be 30 very soon.

MARGARET MOON, she hit 50 the other day.

WHERE THEY ARE

Manhattan: somewhere in the West Eighties off West End Avenue. An old residence-type "hotel", full of furnished rooms, trite and threadbare, with bathrooms in the hallways; somewhat clean and tidy and quiet, but antiquated, dreary-looking, musty-smelling.

WHEN

Very late in the afternoon, a few days before Halloween; the present.

The lights slowly come up on a dismal corner of a hallway on the third floor. LUKE enters in the semi-light, carrying a small brown paper bag with him. He is humming quietly to himself. Then he gets louder and begins to half-sing since he is not certain of the words of the song.

LUKE sings something like: "Someday she'll come along . . . The girl I love . . . And I'll be big and strong . . . For the girl I love . . . And when she comes my way . . . She'll understand . . . And everything will be okay . . . Because she's found her man . . . Her one and only man . . . The girl I love . . ."

He unlocks the door to his furnished room and then he switches on the lights. The place has been ransacked.

LUKE Hey, what the hell's going on here? (*He stands in the open doorway*) Son of a bitch! I've been robbed! (*He looks around*) Goddammit! My clock radio is gone . . . my hi-fi is missing . . . my tape recorder's disappeared . . . my electric shoe-polisher isn't here. (*He moves in now very carefully*) My polaroid camera! My electric razor! None of my things are here any more. (*He is suddenly tense*) Somebody's robbed me! (*He flings the brown paper bag violently up against a*

HALLOWEEN

I PERSONAGGI

LUKE LOVELLO, a breve compirà trent'anni.

MARGARET MOON, ha varcato la soglia dei cinquanta l'altro giorno.

DOVE SI TROVANO

Manhattan: un posto come tanti in un isolato dell'Upper West Side, non molto lontano dalla West End Avenue¹. Una vecchia casa-albergo, piena di stanze arredate, vecchie e logore, coi bagni nei corridoi; abbastanza pulita, in ordine e tranquilla, ma antiquata, cupa e pervasa dall'odore di muffa.

QUANDO

Nel tardo pomeriggio, qualche giorno prima di Halloween; nel presente.

Le luci si alzano lentamente in un angolo lugubre di un corridoio al terzo piano. LUKE fa il suo ingresso nella semioscurità, ha con sé una busta di carta marrone. Sta canticchiando tra sé e sé. Poi alza la voce e inizia a cantare in modo incerto dal momento che non è sicuro delle parole della canzone.

*LUKE canta qualcosa come: "Someday she'll come along . . . The girl I love . . . And I'll be big and strong . . . For the girl I love . . . And when she comes my way . . . She'll understand . . . And everything will be okay . . . Because she's found her man . . . Her one and only man . . . The girl I love . . ."*²

Aprire la porta chiusa a chiave della sua stanza ammobiliata e quindi accende le luci. Il posto è stato messo a soqquadro.

LUKE Ehi, ma che diavolo succede qui? (*In piedi sulla soglia della porta spalancata*) Porca puttana! Mi hanno portato via tutto! (*Si guarda intorno*) Maledizione! La mia radiosveglia è sparita . . . il mio giradischi è sparito . . . anche il registratore . . . e dov'è il mio lucidascarpe elettrico? (*Entra con fare molto circospetto*) La polaroid! Il rasoio elettrico! Tutte le mie cose sono sparite. (*Assalito da un improvviso nervosismo*) Qualcuno mi ha ripulito. (*Scaraventa contro il muro la busta di*

wall) Someone's taken everything I own! (*He goes to the wide-opened window*) The rotten bastards! I'll kill them! (*He looks far out the window*) I'll murder them . . . I swear to shit I will! POLICE! (*He begins to search in the rest of the place*) All my cuff links . . . my rings . . . my tie pins and tie clasps, my Confirmation watch and my Holy Communion identification bracelet. If I get my hands on them I'll strangle them to death! AND I CAN DO IT TOO! (*Continuing the search*) My cigarette cases, my cigarette lighters . . . my fountain pen and pencil set! (*He runs out in the hallway*) HEY! I'VE BEEN ROBBED! CALL THE POLICE, SOMEONE, WILL YOU! (*He goes back in his room*) They came in through the window, that's it! On the fire escape! (*Out of the window*) HEY, POLICE! POLICE! (*He goes and opens up the closet door and then rushes through his clothes*) My suit! My best suit! My two-hundred-dollar blue silk suit! I'll kick the bastards to death! (*He bangs the closet door shut*) Awwwwwww . . . ! For Christ's sake! For Jesus Christ's sake! (*He throws himself down on the bed*) I hope the bastards bleed to death! I hope they get hit by a car, a bus, a train. And I hope and pray to God that they will suffer! (*He behaves like an impetuous child, tossing and turning and moaning and gritting his teeth on the bed, kicking and punching the pillows and the wall*) My rubber box! No, man . . . please, dear God, don't make them have taken my rubber box! (*He looks in the opened drawer of the small table beside his bed*) It's gone! They took it! My rubber box! I'LL KILL THEM! (*He runs in the hallway again*) POLICE! It was solid gold! And it had a diamond on it, and my name was engraved on the bottom of it. My . . . rubber box . . . (*He goes back into the room*) I feel just like plain goddam crying out loud, that's what I feel just like doing right now. (*He sits on the edge of the bed and puts his hands up to his eyes*) Awwwwwww . . . God! What did I do to deserve all of this? (*He begins to cry to himself*) Shit! That's what I say: *shit!* (*He gets up, his eyes full of tears*) Look at them! Will you just look at them all? (*He glances around at the ceiling and the walls and the floor*) Filthy cruddy cockroaches! I hate the dirty lousy crawling creepy bastards! (*He begins to attack them with his hands*) I'll fix you little shitheads now! Man, you've all had it now! (*He takes a large can from out of the brown paper bag that he threw against the wall. He begins to spray like a madman*) You don't have a chance now! None of you, you understand? (*He bangs the window shut*) Die! You miserable little pricks! Die! (*He bangs the door shut and continues to spray impulsively*) Look at them come out of their secret little nests. Hundreds of them: the mothers and the fathers and their children: their spoiled little brats. Boy, they must really fuck a lot: cockroaches! A human being doesn't have a chance. I mean, just take a good long look at them, will you? All of the expectant mothers are carrying those tiny tan-colored sacks around with them. There must be a hundred brand-new little kids inside of those tiny dragging sacks. (*He sits down on a chair in the middle of the room*) Bang, boom, CUH! Die! You lousy creepy bastards you! Die! (*He makes a long sound like*

carta marrone) Qualcuno si è fregato tutte le mie cose! (*Va verso la finestra spalancata*) Bastardi schifosi! Io li ammazzo! (*Guarda fuori dalla finestra*) Io li faccio fuori . . . puoi scommetterci! POLIZIA! (*Si mette a ispezionare il resto della stanza*) Tutti i miei gemelli . . . gli anelli . . . le mie spille da cravatta e i fermacravatta, l'orologio della Cresima e il braccialetto col mio nome della Prima Comunione. Se riesco a mettergli le mani addosso li strangolo fino a lasciarli secchi. ECCOME SE LO FACCIIO! (*Continuando a rovistare*) I miei portasigarette, i miei accendini . . . la mia stilografica e i set di matite! (*Corre fuori nel corridoio*) EHI! MI HANNO PORTATO VIA TUTTO! CHIAMATE LA POLIZIA, DAI, QUALCUNO! (*Torna nella sua stanza*) Sono entrati per la finestra, ecco com'è andata! Quella sulla scala antincendio! (*Fuori dalla finestra*) EHI, POLIZIA! POLIZIA! (*Spalanca la porta dell'armadio e poi passa in rassegna i vestì come una furia*) Il mio completo! Il mio completo più bello! Il mio completo in seta blu da duecento dollari! Io li pesto a sangue quei maledetti! (*Chiude la porta dell'armadio sbattendola*) Ohhhhhhh . . . ! Cristo santo! Gesù Cristo santo! (*Si butta sul letto*) Spero che quei bastardi muoiano dissanguati! Spero che vengano messi sotto da una macchina, da un autobus, da un treno. E spero, e prego il Signore, che soffrano! (*Sul letto si comporta come un bambino capriccioso, si gira e si rigira, si lamenta e digrigna i denti, tira calci e pugni ai cuscini e al muro*) La scatola dei preservativi! No dai . . . ti prego, Dio santo, fa che non si siano presi la scatola dei preservativi! (*Guarda nel cassetto aperto del comodino*) Sparita! Se la sono presa! La mia scatola dei preservativi! IO LI AMMAZZO! (*Corre di nuovo nel corridoio*) POLIZIA! Era d'oro massiccio. E aveva un diamante sopra, e il mio nome era inciso sul fondo. La mia . . . scatola . . . (*Torna nella stanza*) Ho solo voglia di urlare a tutto spiano, ecco cosa ho voglia di fare adesso (*Si siede sull'orlo del letto e si mette le mani davanti agli occhi*) Oddiooooooooo! Cosa ho fatto per meritarmi tutto questo? (*Si mette a piagnucolare fra sé e sé*) Merda! Ecco quello che dico: merda! (*Si alza con le lacrime agli occhi*) Ma guardali! Ma guarda te che roba! (*Dà un'occhiata intorno al soffitto, ai muri e al pavimento*) Luride bestie schifose! Io li odio 'sti maledetti bastardi schifosi che strisciano dappertutto. (*Si mette a schiacciarli con le mani*) Adesso vi sistemo io, stronzetti! Ragazzi, adesso ve la siete proprio cercata! (*Prende una lunga bomboletta dalla busta di carta marrone che ha scaraventato contro il muro. Inizia a spruzzare come un forsennato*) Non avete scampo adesso! Nessuno di voi, capito? (*Chiude la finestra sbattendola*) Dovete morire! Bastardi maledetti! Crepate! (*Chiude la porta sbattendola e continua a spruzzare preso dalla foga*) Ma guardali come vengono fuori da dove sono rintanati. In massa: maschi, femmine e i loro figli, razza di mocciosi! Certo che ci devono dare dentro un sacco 'sti scarafaggi! Un uomo non può tenergli testa. Ma dai, basta guardarli, no? Tutte 'ste future madri che si portano dietro quei così marroncini. Ci saranno un centinaio di nuovi marmocchi dentro a quegli affari che si trascinano dietro. (*Si siede su una sedia al centro*

a machine gun) Drop from the ceiling, I don't care! Crawl out from the cracks up there and the light fixtures. Crawl out from the dirty woodwork and from underneath the dirty rug. I don't give a good goddam any more, do you hear me? Bang, boom, CUH! Come out for air, stupid brown shitheads, but you're still going to croak in your tracks: your fat wives are and your fat husbands are and your fat brothers are and your fat sisters are. Come out of the cruddy stove and the greasy refrigerator and the moth-infested closet and from underneath the slimy sink. I see you over there: dying on the wet water pipes, falling in that paper garbage bag full of soggy, sloshing garbage. I can just imagine them all: crawling and creeping around like crazy nuts, in and out of the pockets of my slacks and sports jackets and suits and coats in that stinking dark closet there! (*He gets up*) But not in the silk-lined pockets of my two-hundred-dollar blue silk suit, *my best suit* . . . CUSTOM MADE! . . . especially tailored for me! No, man, you sneaky guys ain't gonna die no expensive deaths in that two-hundred-dollar silk suit of mine because it ain't here any more! IT'S BEEN STOLEN! I'VE BEEN ROBBED! (*He opens the closet door and begins to shake all of his clothes wildly*) Jesus, now, will you just stand there and look at them all? Will you, now! (*MARGARET appears in the hallway. She is dressed to leave and carries a full shopping bag with her*) Before I go to sleep here tonight in this frigging rathole, I'm going to make sure that each one of you is stone dead! DO YOU HEAR ME, YOU SHITHEADS? (*MARGARET stops and turns to LUKE's door. LUKE drops back down in the chair*) I wish I had a penny, that's all, just one single penny, for every single cockroach dying here right now. I'd be rich enough to buy everything back that was stolen from me this afternoon. (*MARGARET is now listening at the door. LUKE gets up from the chair and lies down on his bed. He is exhausted*) They really do fuck a lot: cockroaches! They must love to do it. I love to do it . . . too! I'M TELLING YOU: I REALLY DO LOVE TO DO IT! (*He begins to sob again*) I want to . . . so much sometimes . . . I really want to! It's not fair, God, it's really and truly not fair. You know, you actually piss me off sometimes, God, You really do! (*He quiets down for a moment*) I'VE BEEN ROBBED! (*MARGARET knocks lightly on his door. LUKE sits up on the bed*) Who is it? Who's there?

MARGARET It's Margaret . . .

LUKE (*Getting off the bed*) Who's Margaret? I don't know anyone named Margaret.

MARGARET I'm Margaret Moon. I . . .

LUKE What do you want?

MARGARET I heard you yell for help.

della stanza) Tsss, tsss, SCIÒ!³ Crepate! Maledette bestie bastarde! Dovete crepare! (*Emette un lungo suono simile ad una mitragliatrice*) Dai, continuate pure a venire giù dal soffitto, tanto non me ne frega niente! Potete anche venire fuori dalle crepe lì in alto e dalle lampade. E dal legno⁴ ridotto a uno schifo e da quello schifo di tappeto. Non me ne frega un bel niente di niente, avete sentito? Tsss, tsss, SCIÒ! Venite fuori a prendere aria, brutti farabutti marroni, tanto rimarrete stecchiti all'istante, voi e quelle fetenti delle vostre mogli, dei vostri mariti, dei vostri fratelli e delle vostre sorelle. Potete anche venire fuori da quello schifo di fornello e dal quel frigorifero tutto imbrattato di grasso, dall'armadio infestato dalle tarme e da sotto quel lavandino melmoso. Vi vedo come schiattate lì in fondo, su quei tubi che perdono acqua da tutte le parti e come andate a finire in quel sacchetto pieno di robaccia tutta inzuppata e molliccia. Già me li immagino come strisciano tutti quanti e si muovono come pazzi furiosi, dentro e fuori dalle tasche dei miei pantaloni e delle mie giacche sportive, nei miei completi e nei miei cappotti, in quel cesso di armadio che puzza come non so cosa! (*Si alza*) Ma non nel mio completo blu, di seta, da duecento dollari, con le tasche foderate in seta, *il mio miglior completo . . . FATTO SU MISURA! . . . fatto apposta per me!* Eh no cari miei, voi farabutti non avrete il lusso di crepare nel mio completo di seta, perché non c'è più! SE LO SONO PORTATO VIA! MI HANNO PORTATO VIA TUTTO! (*Aprire la porta dell'armadio e inizia a scuotere con furia tutti i suoi vestiti*) Cristo, ma guardali, ma guarda quanti sono! Eddai! (*MARGARET compare nel corridoio. È vestita per andare a casa e ha con sé una borsa della spesa piena di cose*) Stasera, prima di mettermi a dormire in questo maledetto tugurio, farò sì che ognuno di voi sia stecchito! Avete capito, farabutti? (*MARGARET si ferma e si gira verso la porta di LUKE. LUKE si lascia cadere sulla sedia*) Vorrei solo un centesimo, soltanto un centesimo per ogni scarafaggio che adesso sta schiattando qui dentro. Farei su abbastanza soldi per ricomprare tutto quello che mi hanno rubato 'sto pomeriggio. (*MARGARET ora sta ascoltando dalla porta. LUKE si alza dalla sedia e si distende sul letto. È sfinito*) Certo che 'sti scarafaggi ci danno davvero dentro! Deve piacergli da morire. Anche a me . . . piace tanto! Sul serio! DICO SUL SERIO: ANCHE A ME PIACE TANTO! (*Inizia di nuovo a singhiozzare*) Vorrei anch'io . . . così tanto a volte . . . vorrei davvero! Non è giusto, Signore, davvero, non è giusto. Sai, a volte mi fai incazzare, Signore, sul serio! (*Si calma per un istante*) MI HANNO PORTATO VIA TUTTO! (*MARGARET bussa lievemente alla porta LUKE si alza a sedere sul letto*) Chi è? Chi va là?

MARGARET Sono Margaret . . .

LUKE (*Scende dal letto*) Margaret chi? Io non conosco nessuna Margaret.

MARGARET Mi chiamo Margaret Moon. Io . . .

LUKE Che cosa vuole?

MARGARET Ho sentito che chiedeva aiuto a gran voce.

LUKE I didn't yell for help.

MARGARET I heard you say that you were robbed.

LUKE What do you do: listen at the keyholes all of the time? This place is giving me the creeps. I'm moving out of here as fast as I can.

(LUKE goes to the door very cautiously and with much suspicion in his manner)

MARGARET Oh? I'll go . . . then.

(She begins to move slowly away. LUKE then opens the door; he is slow and sure and careful as he does it)

LUKE (Peeking out) Who are you? What are you doing here?

MARGARET I'm Margaret Moon.

LUKE You told me before.

MARGARET Well, you asked me twice already.

LUKE You got a phone in your room? I gotta call the police.

MARGARET I don't live here.

LUKE Then what are you doing, sneaking around hallways like this?

MARGARET You just moved in yesterday.

LUKE How come you know so much?

MARGARET I work here.

LUKE Then maybe you know something about me being robbed.

MARGARET I'm one of the maids here.

LUKE The cleaning lady . . .

MARGARET I'm a maid. I clean up the rooms in this building. I do the third floor and the fourth floor all by myself, Monday through Saturday, six days a week, from eight 'til three o'clock every afternoon, except Saturdays when I go home at noon. You won't be seeing me for the next two weeks. Dolores will be cleaning your room while I'm away on my vacation enjoying myself.

LUKE (His patience gone) I was just robbed, miss! They cleaned me out! Swiped all of the things that meant so much to me, all of the things that were worth the most money.

MARGARET I'm sorry . . .

LUKE And this place is full of dying cockroaches!

MARGARET Yes, I know . . .

LUKE I'm moving out of here tomorrow!

MARGARET Why don't you give it all another chance? I'll be coming back in two weeks.

LUKE They got in through the window. The window was locked when I left today. Did you open the window?

LUKE Io non ho chiesto aiuto a gran voce.

MARGARET Ho sentito che diceva di essere stato derubato.

LUKE Beh, e adesso cosa fa: passa il tempo ad ascoltare attraverso il buco della serratura? Questo posto mi fa vomitare. Me ne andrò da qui il più presto possibile.

(LUKE *si avvicina alla porta con molta cautela e con fare alquanto diffidente*)

MARGARET Oh? Me ne vado . . . allora.

(*Inizia ad allontanarsi lentamente. Quindi LUKE apre la porta; nel farlo è lento, risoluto e allo stesso tempo guardingo*)

LUKE (*Dando un sbirciatina fuori*) Chi è lei? Cosa ci fa qui?

MARGARET Mi chiamo Margaret Moon.

LUKE Questo me l'ha già detto.

MARGARET Beh, me l'ha chiesto già due volte.

LUKE Senta, ce l'ha un telefono in camera? Devo chiamare la polizia.

MARGARET Io non abito qui.

LUKE E allora come mai è qui a gironzolare così, di soppiatto, per i corridoi?

MARGARET Lei è qui solo da ieri.

LUKE Come fa a sapere tutte queste cose?

MARGARET Io lavoro qui.

LUKE Allora forse saprà qualcosa sui ladri che mi hanno ripulito.

MARGARET Sono una delle cameriere ai piani.

LUKE La donna delle pulizie . . .

MARGARET Io sono una cameriera ai piani. Pulisco le stanze di questo stabile. Mi occupo del terzo e del quarto piano tutto da sola, da lunedì a sabato, sei giorni alla settimana, dalle otto alle tre del pomeriggio, tranne il sabato che vado a casa a mezzogiorno. Non mi vedrà nelle prossime due settimane. Dolores pulirà la sua stanza mentre io sarò in vacanza a divertirmi.

LUKE (*La sua pazienza è esaurita*) Mi hanno appena portato via tutto, signorina! Mi hanno ripulito! Mi hanno fregato tutte le cose a cui tenevo così tanto, tutte le cose che valevano più soldi.

MARGARET Mi dispiace . . .

LUKE E la mia stanza è piena di scarafaggi mezzi morti!

MARGARET Sì, lo so . . .

LUKE Domani me ne andrò via da qui.

MARGARET Perché non si dà una seconda possibilità? Io torno tra due settimane.

LUKE Sono entrati dalla finestra. Oggi, quando me ne sono andato, la finestra era bloccata. Ha aperto lei la finestra?

MARGARET I . . . no . . .

LUKE Yes, you did! I can tell!

MARGARET Don't raise your voice to me like that.

LUKE You're lying to me!

MARGARET You stop that!

LUKE You did open the window, didn't you?

MARGARET What are you implying: that I'm a liar?

LUKE Yes, you're a liar! I can tell!

MARGARET Don't call me a liar, young man! And stop that screaming at me, do you hear? If I get my Irish temper up you'll be sorry!

LUKE Yeah? Well, I already got mine up!

MARGARET You're not Irish. I saw your name. It's Italian.

LUKE You know too much.

MARGARET I happened to see it on one of your suitcases in the closet.

LUKE Like I just said before, miss – you know too much!

MARGARET You have no respect for other people, do you?

LUKE I'm both, miss.

MARGARET You're both what?

LUKE My mother's name was O'Leary. My father's the Italian. I'm Luke O'Leary Lovello.

MARGARET I see.

LUKE So that's really something, don't you think? An Irish temper is bad enough. But combined with the temper of an Italian? Well, it will knock you right on your ass!

MARGARET Watch your language with me, young man! You're not talking to just plain trash! Do you hear me?

LUKE All right, I'm sorry . . . (*He goes down the hallway*) POLICE!

(*There is a short pause*)

MARGARET I feel bad about the robbery.

LUKE Thanks. But it doesn't do me any good.

MARGARET I did do it . . .

LUKE Do what?

MARGARET I *did* open the window.

LUKE I knew it! Now wasn't that a stupid thing to do?

MARGARET I told you not to rise your voice to me. Have some respect for your elders.

MARGARET No . . . io . . .

LUKE E invece sì! Me la sento.

MARGARET Non alzi la voce con me in quel modo.

LUKE Non mi sta dicendo la verità.

MARGARET Ma la smetta!

LUKE Sì che hai aperto tu la finestra, vuoi dire di no?

MARGARET Cosa sta insinuando, che sono una bugiarda?

LUKE Sì, sei una bugiarda. Si vede.

MARGARET Non darmi della bugiarda, giovanotto! E smettila di urlarmi dietro in quel modo, capito?

Se tiro fuori il mio carattere da irlandese te ne pentirai!

LUKE Ah sì? Io ho già tirato fuori il mio!

MARGARET Tu non sei irlandese. Ho visto come ti chiami. Sei italiano.

LUKE Tu sai troppe cose.

MARGARET L'ho visto per caso, su una delle valigie che hai in armadio.

LUKE Come le ho già detto, signorina – lei sa troppe cose!

MARGARET Lei non ha rispetto per le altre persone, o no?

LUKE Io, signorina, sono tutti e due.

MARGARET Sei tutti e due cosa?

LUKE Il cognome di mia madre era O'Leary. Mio padre è quello italiano. Io sono Luke O'Leary Lovello.

MARGARET Va bene.

LUKE È davvero pazzesco, non credi? Il carattere irlandese è già brutto che basta. Ma messo assieme a quello italiano? Ah, robe da sbatterti a terra e lasciarti secco all'istante!

MARGARET Bada a come parli, giovanotto! Non hai a che fare col primo sacco di spazzatura che trovi per strada. Hai capito?

LUKE E va bene, mi dispiace . . . (*Va verso il corridoio*) POLIZIA!

(*Una breve pausa*)

MARGARET Mi spiace per il furto.

LUKE Grazie. Ma non è che mi aiuti più di tanto.

MARGARET Sono stata io . . .

LUKE A fare cosa?

MARGARET Ad aprire la finestra.

LUKE Lo sapevo! E non è stata una cosa stupida?

MARGARET Ti ho detto di non alzare la voce con me. Abbi un po' di rispetto per chi ha più anni di

LUKE Do you want to come in? Do you want to come in and see what they took? (*He opens the door wide for her*) It will make you sick. All the things that meant so much to me: GONE! (MARGARET enters the room with him) The smell is going to make you sick too: cockroach poison everywhere in the air.

(*He slams the door behind them*)

MARGARET You're much too excited, young man.

LUKE Why not?

MARGARET What don't you make a try of being calm?

LUKE Of course I'm excited and of course I'm not calm. Wouldn't you be?

MARGARET It could have been a lot worse, you know?

LUKE Lady, it has been a lot worse, let me tell you!

MARGARET Then why be so upset?

LUKE Do you smoke?

MARGARET No.

LUKE I don't very much either. But I need a cigarette right now.

MARGARET Try some hot tea. It will make you feel better. It will give you a lift. It's good weather for hot tea. It's getting awfully cold out there. It's supposed to go down to thirty degrees tonight. That's very unusual for the end of October.

LUKE I'm mad, lady, really mad! Why didn't you leave the window closed and locked the way I left it? I was warned about the daily robberies in this neighborhood. Lots of Puerto Ricans around.

MARGARET Lots of them on the next street over.

LUKE This is all a new experience for me. I've never been on my own before.

MARGARET How old are you?

LUKE I'm going to be thirty very soon.

MARGARET Then it's about time, don't you think?

LUKE About time for what?

MARGARET About time that you were on your own.

LUKE Actually, lady, it's none of your business. Did you ever think of that?

MARGARET You're very fresh. Did you ever think of that?

LUKE Then get out! (*He opens the door*) G'wan! Leave, lady, I don't need you around to make things worse! You're the one to blame for my being robbed. You're the responsible one, lady! C'mon now: did you ever think of that?

te.

LUKE Vuoi entrare? Vuoi entrare e vendere cos'hanno portato via? (*Le spalanca la porta*) Ti farà venire la nausea. Tutte le cose a cui tenevo un sacco: SPARITE! (MARGARET *entra nella stanza con lui*) Anche l'odore ti farà venire il voltastomaco: la stanza è piena di insetticida per quelle bestiacce.

(*Chiude la porta alle loro spalle sbattendola*)

MARGARET Sei troppo agitato, giovanotto.

LUKE Perché non dovrei, scusa?

MARGARET Perché non provi a stare calmo?

LUKE È ovvio che sono agitato e non sto calmo. Tu non lo saresti al posto mio?

MARGARET Ti sarebbe potuta andare molto peggio, lo sai questo?

LUKE Signora, è andata molto peggio, questo è poco ma sicuro.

MARGARET Ma perché essere così arrabbiati?

LUKE Tu fumi?

MARGARET No.

LUKE Neanch'io più di tanto. Ma adesso ho proprio bisogno di una sigaretta.

MARGARET Prova con del tè caldo. Ti farà sentire meglio. Ti darà un po' di sollievo. Con questo tempo ci vorrebbe proprio un bel tè caldo. Fuori fa proprio freddo. Dicono che stanotte andremo giù a un grado. È molto strano per la fine di ottobre.

LUKE Sono incazzato, signora, davvero incazzato! Perché non ha sciato la finestra chiusa e bloccata come l'avevo messa io? Mi avevano messo in guardia su tutti i furti che succedono ogni giorno nel quartiere. Con tutti i portoricani che ci sono in giro.

MARGARET Ce ne sono molti nella strada qui a fianco.

LUKE È tutto nuovo per me. Non sono mai stato da solo prima.

MARGARET Quanti anni hai?

LUKE Molto presto ne farò trenta.

MARGARET E allora è proprio ora, non credi?

LUKE Ora di cosa?

MARGARET Ora che tu viva per conto tuo.

LUKE A dire il vero, signora, non sono affari suoi. Non crede?

MARGARET Certo che sei sfacciato. Non ti pare?

LUKE E allora vattene! (*Apri la porta*) Andiamo! Se ne vada, signora. Non ho bisogno di una che se ne sta qui intorno a peggiorare le cose! È sua la colpa se sono entrati i ladri! Lei è la responsabile, signora! Ma insomma, non ci arriva proprio?

MARGARET Please, please, please: don't say that. It's true. It was an accident though. I thought I was doing what only seemed right. I opened the window to let some air in while I was cleaning up, that's all.

LUKE All you do is make the bed and then you dust a little . . .

MARGARET And I run the sweeper on the rug!

LUKE Well, what good is it? You didn't get rid of the cockroaches.

MARGARET That's not part of my job.

LUKE Well, why not? You afraid of a few . . . a few thousand cockroaches?

MARGARET The exterminator is coming here on Monday. He knows about your room. I put it down as first on his list. The cockroaches aren't my fault. It was the man who lived in here before you. Mr. Potter. And he would never let me in here, for a whole year he kept me from ever coming in here. He paid his rent on time, exactly, every day at nine in the morning instead of by the week. He lived like a pig. The cockroaches are his fault, not mine. And not the landlady's either.

LUKE Yeah? Well, what the hell did he do, then? Keep them as pets? It looks to me as though he fed them every day, too on schedule, like he paid his rent so regularly. Listen, lady, I've been with the Sanitation Department of the City of New York for over ten years now, ever since I got bounced out of high school, and I ain't never seen cockroaches this big before in my whole life.

MARGARET Are you kidding?

LUKE Kidding about what?

MARGARET About being a garbage collector . . .

LUKE What's wrong with that?

MARGARET I mean working for the Sanitation department . . .

LUKE I said, what's wrong with that?

MARGARET I didn't say anything was wrong with it.

LUKE You say it like it's an insult or something.

MARGARET You just don't look the type, that's all.

LUKE Well, it's all over now. I quit two days ago. I got up early in the morning and I left. I came here. And now I'm ready to get up early tomorrow morning and leave again after all this bullshit.

MARGARET I told you to watch your language in front of me.

LUKE (*After a pause*) Are you staying?

MARGARET What do you mean?

MARGARET Per favore, ti prego, non dire così. È vero. È stato un incidente però. Ero convinta di fare soltanto il mio dovere. Ho aperto la finestra per cambiare l'aria mentre stavo facendo le pulizie.

LUKE Beh, cosa fai, fai solo il letto e dai una spolveratina . . .

MARGARET E passo il tappeto con l'aspirapolvere!

LUKE Beh, tanto a che serve? Non ti sei liberata degli scarafaggi.

MARGARET Non spetta a me farlo.

LUKE E perché no, scusa? Per caso hai paura di qualche . . . di qualche migliaio di scarafaggi?

MARGARET La disinfestazione verrà qui lunedì. Sanno della tua stanza. L'ho messa in cima alla lista. Non ne ho colpa io degli scarafaggi. È stato l'uomo che viveva qui prima di te. Il signor Potter. Non mi lasciava mai venire qui dentro, per un anno intero non mi ha mai fatta entrare. Pagava l'affitto puntualmente, preciso, ogni giorno alle nove invece che una volta alla settimana. Viveva come una bestia lui. È sua la colpa se ci sono gli scarafaggi, non mia. E nemmeno della padrona di casa.

LUKE Ah sì? Ma allora che diavolo faceva quello? Li teneva come animali da compagnia? Mi sa che anche gli dava da mangiare ogni giorno, sempre alla stessa ora, così come pagava l'affitto sempre puntuale. Senta, signora, sono stato per più di dieci anni nell'azienda che si occupa della raccolta dei rifiuti qui a New York⁵, da quando mi hanno sbattuto fuori da scuola, e non ho mai visto degli scarafaggi così grandi in vita mia.

MARGARET Stai scherzando?

LUKE Scherzando su cosa?

MARGARET Che sei uno spazzino . . .

LUKE Beh, e che c'è di male?

MARGARET Cioè che lavori per l'azienda dei rifiuti . . .

LUKE Ripeto: che c'è di male?

MARGARET Non ho detto che c'è qualcosa di male.

LUKE Lo dici come se fosse un'offesa o che so io.

MARGARET Non sembri il tipo, ecco tutto.

LUKE Beh, adesso è finita. Mi sono licenziato due giorni fa. Mi sono alzato di mattina presto e me ne sono andato. Sono venuto qui. E adesso sono pronto ad alzarmi presto domani mattina e ad andarmene di nuovo, dopo tutto 'sto casino.

MARGARET Ti ho detto di badare a come parli.

LUKE (*Dopo una pausa*) Allora rimani qui?

MARGARET Come scusa?

LUKE I'm going to close the door if you're staying. Keep the air full of poison for the cockroaches.

(*He closes the door*)

MARGARET I don't mind it . . .

LUKE Sit down, if you want to . . . goddammit!

MARGARET What's the matter?

LUKE I'm sorry. Sorry about the swearing again. But I'm mad. I'm really sore about my being robbed. Every time I think about it I feel I could kill someone . . .

MARGARET I don't blame you. (*She goes to the window*) I'll open the window up just a bit . . .

LUKE No! Don't! I don't want any of them escaping!

MARGARET (*Sitting down*) Do you know what I think? I think you should forget about the cockroaches.

LUKE Are you kidding?

MARGARET No, I'm not. And I also think you should forget your being robbed.

LUKE You *must* be kidding, lady!

MARGARET I'm not, Luke.

LUKE Forget about it! All those things – they were all I ever had. (*He begins to spay some more*)
Look at them! Sill coming out from everywhere. What did you say his name was?

MARGARET Whose name?

LUKE The guy who lived here before me.

MARGARET Mr. Potter.

LUKE Why did Mr. Potter move away?

MARGARET Well, it's sort of complicated.

LUKE Yeah? Well, I'll bet it was because of the cockroaches. They finally got the best of him and so he had to move out.

MARGARET Don't be smart, young man. It was because his wife died. Mr. Potter talked to me once, only once. He told me was married for forty-five years. To the same woman. From the very day they were married to each other he said that he never had anything to do with another woman in the way of love and romance or what have you. I'm sure that he was telling the absolute truth. The day after his wife's funeral he moved out of his house without ever telling anybody. There was no warning, no indication whatsoever. He had four sons and two daughters and lots of grandchildren. He didn't really any of them. Somehow, none of them mattered any more because his wife was dead and gone. He said that it was perfect while she was alive and she was his wife and he was her husband, but now it was all over, and she was dead and buried and in God's hands, and so nothing

LUKE Chiudo la porta se rimani qui. Così l'insetticida per 'ste bestiacce rimane bello concentrato.

(*Chiude la porta*)

MARGARET Non mi dà fastidio . . .

LUKE Siediti pure, se vuoi . . . ma porca miseria!

MARGARET Ehi che ti prende?

LUKE Mi dispiace. Scusa se ho parlato male un'altra volta. Ma sono arrabbiato. Mi secca proprio che mi abbiano portato via tutto. Ogni volta che ci penso sento che potrei ammazzare qualcuno . . .

MARGARET Non hai tutti i torti. (*Va alla finestra*) Apro la finestra solo un attimo . . .

LUKE No! Non farlo! Non voglio che me ne scappi neanche uno!

MARGARET (*Sedendosi*) Sai cosa, secondo me? Secondo me dovresti lasciare stare gli scarafaggi.

LUKE Stai scherzando?

MARGARET No. E secondo me dovresti anche lasciar perdere la storia che sei stato derubato.

LUKE Lei è in vena di scherzare, signora!

MARGARET No, Luke.

LUKE Lasciare stare! Quelle cose – erano tutto quello che avevo. (*Si mette di nuovo a spruzzare*)
Guardali che roba! Ancora che continuano a venire fuori da tutte le parti. Come hai detto che si chiamava?

MARGARET Come si chiamava chi?

LUKE Il tizio che viveva qui prima di me.

MARGARET Il signor Potter.

LUKE Perché il signor Potter se n'è andato?

MARGARET Beh, diciamo che è complicato da spiegare.

LUKE Ah sì? Beh, io scommetto che è stato per via degli scarafaggi. Alla fine loro hanno avuto la meglio e così lui ha dovuto sloggiare.

MARGARET Non fare lo spiritoso, giovanotto. È stato perché sua moglie è morta. Il signor Potter una volta mi ha parlato, solo una. Mi ha detto che è stato sposato per quarantacinque anni. Con la stessa donna. E dal giorno stesso in cui si sono sposati ha detto che non ha più avuto niente a che fare con nessun'altra donna per quel che riguarda l'amore e la vita sentimentale o quant'altro. E sono convinta che stesse dicendo proprio la verità. Il giorno dopo il funerale di sua moglie se n'è andato di casa senza dire niente a nessuno. Nessun preavviso, nessun segnale di alcun tipo. Aveva quattro figli maschi e due femmine, e molti nipoti. Non gliel'ha detto a nessuno. In un certo senso, nessuno di loro contava più niente perché sua moglie era morta e sepolta. Ha detto che era tutto perfetto quando lei era viva e loro due erano marito e moglie, ma che ormai era tutto finito, lei era morta per

else mattered any more. It was over a whole year before they finally tracked him down: living here, in your room now, all by himself, like you, and always keeping to himself. That was the day he talked to me. When his youngest son, the baby of the family, had found out where he was staying. It was also the same day that he moved. Real fast. (*She gets up*) I know exactly how he felt . . .

LUKE Don't leave, please . . .

MARGARET I'm not going anywhere. I thought I would give you a hand. I'll straighten up your place for you.

(*She takes off her coat*)

LUKE There's nothing to straighten up. I don't care, you see? I'm leaving here tomorrow, just as fast as Mr. Potter did. I'm going to find another place to stay.

(*There is a pause: he looks carefully at her figure*)

MARGARET What's the matter?

LUKE Nothing's the matter. Look, what should I do? Should I try calling the police?

MARGARET It wouldn't do much good.

LUKE Yeah, I guess you're right. (*He sits down on the bed*) You know what I think, lady?

MARGARET I told you my name is Margaret Moon. I want you to call me Margaret, and I'll call you Luke.

LUKE Okay, Margaret: you know what I think?

MARGARET What do you think, Luke?

LUKE I think you're a good-looking head. I think you got a nice body.

MARGARET Well, now, that's good to hear. Thank you, Luke. But you wouldn't believe it, would you? Well . . . maybe I shouldn't tell you, after all . . . it might just spoil things a little, and who wants to do that?

LUKE C'mon, what? Tell me.

MARGARET (*After a pause*) I just hit fifty the other day.

LUKE Aw, c'mon! I don't believe it! You look about thirty-five!

MARGARET I'm fifty years, exactly three days ago. I got a boy and two girls and they're all married and they've given me six grandchildren so far . . . and I got a husband: James Moon.

LUKE The world is all screwed-up, isn't it, Margaret? I mean, it's full of surprises.

MARGARET Lots and lots of surprises.

LUKE I can't take it any more: all these surprises. All my life it's been surprise after surprise. And do you know, surprises are supposed to be good, aren't they? Surprise parties. Surprise birthday presents, Christmas presents, wedding presents, graduation presents: all surprises. (*Quickly*) Do

sempre e nelle mani del signore e quindi non gli importava più niente di niente. Dopo più di un anno finalmente sono riusciti a trovarlo: viveva qui, in quella che adesso è la tua stanza, tutto solo, come te, e standosene sempre sulle sue. Ecco quando mi ha rivolto la parola, quando suo figlio più giovane, il piccolino di famiglia, aveva scoperto dev'era. E nello stesso giorno se n'è anche andato. In tutta fretta. (*Si alza*) Io lo capisco bene come si sentiva . . .

LUKE Non andartene, ti prego . . .

MARGARET Non me ne sto andando da nessuna parte. Pensavo di darti una mano. Darò una sistemata alla stanza.

(*Si toglie il cappotto*)

LUKE Non c'è niente da sistemare. Non mi interessa, capito? Domani me ne vado, in fretta come il signor Potter. Troverò un altro posto in cui stare.

(*Una pausa: studia la sua figura*)

MARGARET Che ti prende?

LUKE Niente non mi prende. Senti, cosa devo fare? Devo provare a chiamare la polizia?

MARGARET Non è che serva a molto.

LUKE Già, mi sa che ha ragione. (*Si siede sul letto*) Sa cosa penso, signora?

MARGARET Ti ho detto che mi chiamo Margaret Moon. Voglio che mi chiami Margaret, e io ti chiamerò Luke.

LUKE Va bene, Margaret: sai cosa penso?

MARGARET Cosa pensi, Luke?

LUKE Che sei una bella persona. Hai un bell'aspetto.

MARGARET Beh, dai, mi fa piacere sentirlo. Grazie, Luke. Non ci crederesti mai, eh? Beh . . . forse, dopo tutto, non dovrei neanche dirtelo . . . potrebbe rovinare un po' le cose, e per quale motivo, poi?

LUKE Dai, cos'è? Dimmelo.

MARGARET (*Dopo una pausa*) Ne ho compiuti cinquanta l'altro giorno.

LUKE Oh, andiamo! Non ci credo! Te ne do sui trentacinque.

MARGARET Ne ho fatti cinquanta tre giorni fa esatti. Ho un figlio maschio e due figlie femmine, sono tutti sposati e fino ad adesso mi hanno dato sei nipotini . . . e poi c'è mio marito: James Moon.

LUKE Il mondo è un gran bel casino, no, Margaret? Voglio dire, è pieno di sorprese.

MARGARET Sì, davvero molte sorprese.

LUKE Non ne posso più di tutte 'ste sorprese. La mia vita è stata tutta una sorpresa dietro l'altra. E si sa, no, le sorprese dovrebbero essere sempre belle, giusto? Feste a sorpresa. Regali di compleanno, regali di Natale, regali di matrimonio, regali per il diploma: tutte sorprese (*Velocemente*) Hai una

you have a transistor radio on you?

MARGARET What would I be doing with a transistor radio on me?

LUKE You see, that's a surprise: everyone has a transistor radio on them nowadays. They robbed that, too – my transistor radio! It was a surprise birthday present from my favorite aunt. It cost fifty-five dollars; real leather case to it and everything. I gotta have some kind of music. I can't live without music. Look, they swiped my hi-fi, but they didn't swipe any of my records, stupid creeps.

MARGARET (*Examining the inside of the closet*) I think I've just now figured it all out for you, Luke.

LUKE What?

MARGARET They dumped everything in your laundry bags. You see what they did: they dumped all of your dirty clothes out of the laundry bags and then they left. There had to be at least two of them. It would have been too heavy for one person to be able to carry both laundry bags when you think of some of the heavy things they took. You know, Luke, I'll bet you they didn't even leave by the fire escape the way they came in. I'll bet you they left by the door right here and then walked down the stairs and out onto the streets with their laundry bags slung over their shoulders. No one even noticed them. They could've been just two nice laundry men doing their job. It's a shame.

LUKE You know, Margaret, you know too much. You know just too damn much and I don't like it!

MARGARET It's not that I know too much. It's just that I'm not stupid, that's all. It doesn't take too much brains to figure that one out anyway. I'm a wise ole' dame, let me tell you.

LUKE You don't look as old as you say you are.

MARGARET I told you before how old I was. I've got twenty years on you. It's been a full-time job just trying to keep myself looking young. So take it or leave it!

LUKE You getting' sore at me?

MARGARET Well, you're getting' sore at me, ain't you? Besides, I really gotta be goin'.

LUKE Aw, c'mon.

MARGARET Well, I don't know. I'm worried.

LUKE What are you worried about?

MARGARET I'm worried about you.

LUKE Me? But what for?

MARGARET I'm worried about your temper. It sorta scares me. Maybe it's because we don't know each other. Maybe that's why I feel this way. After all, we are strangers, really . . .

LUKE (*Looking in the closet*) My umbrella!

radiolina portatile con te?

MARGARET E che me ne farei di un radiolina portatile?

LUKE Vedi, questa sì che è una sorpresa: al giorno d'oggi tutti quanti si portano dietro una radiolina. Mi hanno rubato anche quella – la mia radiolina! Era un regalo di compleanno della mia zia preferita. Costava cinquantacinque dollari; con la custodia in pelle e tutto quanto. Devo sentire sempre un po' di musica io. Non riesco a stare senza musica. Guarda, mi hanno portato via anche le casse, ma non mi hanno fregato nessun disco, razza di deficienti.

MARGARET (*Esamina l'interno dell'armadio*) Mi sa che adesso ci sono, Luke.

LUKE Cosa?

MARGARET Hanno buttato tutto nei tuoi sacchi per la lavanderia. Dai hai capito come: hanno tirato fuori tutti i tuoi vestiti sporchi dai sacchi per la lavanderia e poi se ne sono andati. Dovevano essere almeno in due. Non ce l'avrebbe mai fatta una persona sola a portare tutti e due i sacchi se pensi a certe cose pesanti che ti hanno portato via. Sai, Luke, scommetto che neanche se ne sono andati per le scale antincendio, come sono entrati. Scommetto che sono andati via per questa porta qui e poi sono scesi per le scale e sono usciti fuori in strada con i sacchi in spalla. Nessuno si è accorto di loro. Avrebbero potuto benissimo essere due bei signori del servizio lavanderia che stavano facendo il loro lavoro. Purtroppo.

LUKE Insomma, Margaret, tu sai troppe cose. Tu sai davvero troppe cose e non mi piace per niente!

MARGARET Non è che so troppe cose. È solo che non sono stupida, tutto qua. E comunque non ci vuole chissà che intelligenza per arrivarci. Sono una vecchia con un po' di buon senso, ecco cosa sono.

LUKE Tu non sembri tanto vecchia come dici.

MARGARET Ti ho già detto quanti anni ho. Ho vent'anni più di te. Ed è stato un lavoro a tempo pieno soltanto cercare di mantenere un aspetto giovanile. Che tu ci creda o no!

LUKE Te la stai prendendo con me?

MARGARET Veramente sei tu quello che se la sta prendendo con me, o no? E poi devo proprio andare.

LUKE Oh, eddai.

MARGARET Beh, non so. Sono preoccupata.

LUKE Preoccupata per cosa?

MARGARET Preoccupata per te.

LUKE Per me? Ma per cosa?

MARGARET Sono preoccupata per il tuo carattere. Mi fa un po' paura. Forse è perché non ci conosciamo. Forse è per questo che mi sento così. Dopotutto siamo estranei, sul serio . . .

LUKE (*Guardando nell'armadio*) Il mio ombrello!

MARGARET What?

LUKE My umbrella! They robbed that too!

MARGARET You weren't even listening to me before . . .

LUKE It was a damn good umbrella. It came all the way from Italy with a beautiful hand-carved handle on the top made of dark brown expensive wood. They knew what they were doing. That good black umbrella cost my old man twenty bucks the day he bought that for me. It was a surprise present from my ole' guy. He thinks it gives you a respectable appearance. He's a real old-fashioned guy, my old man. He said to me: "Luke, here's an umbrella for you. It'll make a good impression on the girls when you need to use it, in case they got a gown on and you got a tuxedo on for a formal dance, a prom or something like that." But I never really got to use the umbrella.

MARGARET (*Quietly*) I really think I should be goin'.

LUKE Don't.

MARGARET It's getting late, Luke.

LUKE I wish I had a smoke. I wish I had something to drink. A good stiff one would help me a little right now. I would like to be able to offer you a drink. I don't have anything here because I don't like to drink alone. I like to talk to people whenever I'm drinking. I usually drink in bars every night. I used to drink at the K. of C., you know: the Knights of Columbus. I belong to them. (*He takes the spray can in his hand*) Look at them: still coming out in droves, like dying flies.

MARGARET No more. Please, no more.

LUKE No more what?

MARGARET No more spraying, Luke. Let them be. They'll die now anyway. We'll die too if we don't get some air in here.

LUKE You dye your hair, don't you? I mean if you just hit fifty the other day then you must dye your hair.

MARGARET Of course I do.

LUKE Did you have much gray hair before?

MARGARET Lots of it.

LUKE How old were you when you started getting it?

MARGARET It started when I was your age.

LUKE Oh, Christ! That worries me.

MARGARET Don't let it worry you. I comes with worry.

LUKE It's really a surprise, the way you look for your age. It's a good surprise, though. But don't get

MARGARET Cosa?

LUKE Il mio ombrello! Anche quello mi hanno portato via!

MARGARET Non mi stavi nemmeno ascoltando prima . . .

LUKE Era un ombrello fantastico. Arrivava direttamente dall'Italia, con un'impugnatura bellissima, intagliata a mano e il resto del manico in legno marrone scuro, di quello che costa un sacco. Lo sapevano eccome quello che stavano facendo. All'epoca quel gran ombrello è costato al mio vecchio venti bigliettoni. Era un suo regalo. Lui è convinto che dia un aspetto rispettabile. È proprio un tipo all'antica il mio vecchio. Mi ha detto: "Luke, eccoti qua un ombrello. Ti farà fare bella figura con le ragazze quando ci sarà bisogno, se per caso loro hanno un vestito da sera e tu hai lo smoking, ad un ballo importante, al ballo di fine anno o cose del genere." Ma in realtà io quell'ombrello non l'ho mai usato.

MARGARET (*Sommessamente*) Credo davvero di dover andare.

LUKE No, non farlo.

MARGARET Si sta facendo tardi, Luke.

LUKE Vorrei fumarmi una sigaretta. Bere qualcosa. Adesso mi ci vorrebbe proprio qualcosa di forte. Vorrei tanto poterti offrire qualcosa da bere. Qui non ho niente perché non mi piace bere da solo. Quando bevo mi piace parlare con qualcuno. Di solito sono nei bar a bere ogni sera. Bevevo sempre al K. of C., voglio dire, al Knights of Columbus⁶. Faccio parte anch'io della congrega. (*Prende in mano la bomboletta*) Ma guardali: ancora che continuano a saltar fuori tutti assieme, come le mosche quando stanno per schiattare.

MARGARET Basta. Ti prego, basta.

LUKE Basta cosa?

MARGARET Basta spruzzare, Luke. Lasciali stare. Adesso moriranno comunque. E moriremo anche noi se non facciamo entrare un po' d'aria qui dentro.

LUKE Ti tingi i capelli, vero? Cioè, se hai fatto cinquant'anni l'altro giorno dovrai anche tingerti i capelli.

MARGARET Certo che me li tingo.

LUKE Avevi molti capelli grigi prima?

MARGARET Sì, molti.

LUKE A che età hanno iniziato a venirti?

MARGARET Hanno iniziato quando avevo la tua età.

LUKE Oh Cristo! Questo è preoccupante.

MARGARET Non farti prendere dalla preoccupazione. È la preoccupazione che te li fa venire.

LUKE Hai un aspetto davvero sorprendente per la tua età. Sorprendente in senso positivo, però.

me wrong, Margaret: there are an awful lot of bad surprises too.

MARGARET I know, Luke.

LUKE Like this robbery, for instance.

MARGARET I sorta got a surprise for you.

LUKE No kiddin'?

MARGARET I don't know whether it's good or bad, though.

LUKE C'mon. I'm ready for anything now.

MARGARET (*Sitting down in the chair*) I was lying to you before.

LUKE You mean about the window? You already admitted to me.

MARGARET No, I mean about the cigarettes. Look here. (*She takes a cartoon of cigarettes from her shopping bag*) A whole brand-new cartoon of cigarettes . . . for you, Luke. It's a surprise.

LUKE But it's a good surprise. What did you mean when you said you didn't know whether it was good or bad?

MARGARET Well, it's not good that I lied to you the first time you asked about smoking. Like it's not good that I lied to you the first time you asked me about who opened the window. I don't like lying at all. And I hate it when other people lie, don't you?

LUKE I usually can't sleep because of it.

MARGARET So here are your cigarettes. You can keep the whole cartoon.

LUKE Not my brand. But I still appreciate it.

(*He begins to open the cartoon*)

MARGARET I bought them for James, my husband. It was a little surprise for him. But I've changed my mind now. It's all right, so don't worry about it, Luke.

LUKE Would you like one?

(*He offers her a cigarette*)

MARGARET (*Taking a cigarette*) Are you hungry, Luke?

LUKE I don't have anything to eat here. I'm sorry there's nothing I can give you, Margaret.

MARGARET Not for me. I mean are *you* hungry, Luke? I've got some roast beef with me.

LUKE (*Lighting her cigarette*) You seem to have everything with you . . . (*He laughs softly*) In more ways than one, Margaret. (*He lights his own cigarette*) If you know what I mean?

MARGARET I know what you mean. You're a flirt, that's what you are, Luke.

LUKE (*Puffing away nervously*) Yeah, yeah, yeah!

MARGARET You're a hard one to figure out, you are.

LUKE (*Suddenly laughing*) We're going to die in here together! All this deadly cigarette smoke, all

Ma non fraintendermi, Margaret, ci sono anche un sacco di brutte sorprese.

MARGARET Lo so, Luke.

LUKE Come questo furto, ad esempio.

MARGARET Ho una specie di sorpresa per te.

LUKE Sul serio?

MARGARET Non so se sia bella o brutta, però.

LUKE Andiamo, ormai sono pronto a tutto.

MARGARET (*Sedendosi sulla sedia*) Prima ti ho detto una bugia.

LUKE Intendi per la finestra? Me l'hai già detto.

MARGARET No, intendo per le sigarette. Guarda qui (*Tira fuori un pacchetto dalla borsa della spesa*) Un bel pacchetto nuovo di zecca . . . per te, Luke. È una sorpresa.

LUKE Ma è una bella sorpresa. Cosa intendevi quando hai detto che non sapevi se era bella o brutta?

MARGARET Beh, non va bene che ti abbia mentito la prima volta che mi hai chiesto se fumavo. E non va neanche bene che ti abbia mentito prima, quando mi avevi chiesto chi aveva aperto la finestra. Non mi piace proprio raccontare bugie. E non sopporto quando gli altri le raccontano, anche per te è così?

LUKE Ah, io di solito non ci dormo la notte.

MARGARET Eccoti qua le sigarette. Puoi tenerti tutto il pacchetto.

LUKE Non è la mia marca. Ma va bene lo stesso.

(*Inizia a scartare il pacchetto*)

MARGARET Le ho prese per James, mio marito. Era un regalino per lui. Ma adesso ho cambiato idea. Tutto a posto quindi, non preoccuparti, Luke.

LUKE Ne vuoi una?

(*Le offre una sigaretta*)

MARGARET (*Prendendo una sigaretta*) Hai fame, Luke?

LUKE Non ho niente da mangiare qui. Mi dispiace, Margaret, non posso offrirti niente.

MARGARET Ma non per me. Voglio dire se *tu* hai fame, Luke. Ho qui del roastbeef.

LUKE (*Le accende la sigaretta*) Mi sembra che non ti manchi proprio niente . . . (*Ride sommessamente*) In tutti i sensi, Margaret. (*Si accende la sigaretta*) Non so se mi spiego.

MARGARET Ho capito benissimo. Sei un bellimbusto, ecco cosa sei, Luke.

LUKE (*Buttando fuori il fumo delle sigaretta con fare nervoso*) Eh già, già!

MARGARET Con te non se ne va proprio fuori!

LUKE (*Ridendo all'improvviso*) Moriremo assieme qui dentro! Tra le sigarette che fanno un fumo

the fumes of the poisonous cockroach spray, the window shut tight, the door closed solid, the sad smell of ole' Mr. Potter still here in the air, my dirty sweaty clothes over there, the stinking smell of the filthy low-down rats who robbed my place: that's still here too . . .

MARGARET The radiator. You forgot about the steam and heat and the smell from the radiator.

LUKE And the radiator. No air at all, Margaret Moon. Do you think you can stand it?

MARGARET I can stand almost anything.

LUKE I can too.

MARGARET Here's the roast beef in case you get hungry. (*She takes it out of her shopping bag*) I made it myself. All fixed up in this big empty pickle jar with my own special thick brown gravy to go with it.

LUKE What color was your hair before it got gray?

MARGARET It was the same color it is now. (*Instantly*) I brought this roast beef for my lunch today. We got a little stove down in the basement here where we can fix up things to eat. I just didn't feel like eating my lunch today even though I knew how delicious it would be. Dolores kept talking on and on about how she loves getting away with it. Well, I'll tell you, it made me sick to my stomach. I've been married since I was nineteen years old and I never even once thought of doing anything like that, Luke.

LUKE What's Dolores like?

MARGARET And I suppose this being the last day before my two-week vacation begins tomorrow also made me kinda nervous. I get two weeks off in the summer, but I never take my time off then – in the summer, I mean. I wait until the fall comes, because it's my favorite season – the autumn. (*A pause*) Don't get too acquainted with Dolores. This is a warning. She's a terror, a holy terror. She'll go for you. So be careful. I think it would be good for your own sake if you were cold to her. Just let her do her job, that's all.

LUKE (*Sitting down on the bed*) You know why you look so young? Because of the way you wear your hair. It's feminine, the way a woman's hair should be, not like the girls you see nowadays. And there are so many other things about you, too, Margaret.

MARGARET I don't wanna hear any more.

(*She gets up*)

LUKE Where are you going?

(*He gets up and touches her arm gently as if to hold her back*)

MARGARET I . . . I'm really not going anywhere . . .

tremendo, il tanfo micidiale dell'insetticida, la finestra che è chiusa e non lascia passare uno spiffero, la porta sigillata, l'odore deprimente del vecchio Potter che è ancora qui nell'aria, là i miei vestiti sporchi che sanno di sudore, la puzza di quei luridi topi di fogna che hanno ripulito la mia stanza, anche quella è ancora qui dentro . . .

MARGARET E il riscaldamento. Ti sei dimenticato del vapore, del calore e dell'odore che butta fuori il riscaldamento.

LUKE E il riscaldamento. Non si respira proprio, qui dentro, Margaret. Pensi di riuscire a resistere?

MARGARET Io resisto praticamente a tutto.

LUKE Anch'io.

MARGARET Qui c'è il roastbeef in caso ti venga fame. (*Lo tira fuori dalla borsa della spesa*) L'ho fatto io. E l'ho messo in questo barattolone per sottaceti, con la mia salsina speciale⁷, bella densa, che ci sta bene assieme.

LUKE Di che colore erano i tuoi capelli prima di diventare grigi?

MARGARET Erano dello stesso colore di adesso (*Immediatamente*) Avevo portato questo roastbeef per il pranzo di oggi. Abbiamo un fornellino, giù nello scantinato, dove possiamo prepararci qualcosa da mangiare. Oggi però non me la sono sentita di pranzare, anche se sapevo quanto era buono. Dolores continuava a parlare di come tradisce suo marito e di quanto si diverte a farla sempre franca. Beh, insomma, mi ha fatto venire la nausea. Sono sposata da quando ho diciannove anni, Luke, e io non ho mai pensato nemmeno una volta di fare una cosa del genere.

LUKE Com'è Dolores?

MARGARET E credo che questo, essendo l'ultimo giorno prima delle mie due settimane di vacanza, anche questo mi ha messo un po' di agitazione. Mi danno sempre due settimane in estate, ma non me le prendo mai in quel periodo – in estate, cioè. Aspetto che arrivi l'autunno, perché è la mia stagione preferita – l'autunno. (*Una pausa*) E non entrare troppo in confidenza con Dolores. Il mio è un avvertimento. Lei è insopportabile, davvero pestifera. Le piacerai. Quindi stai attento. Secondo me con lei faresti bene a comportarti in modo indifferente.

LUKE (*Si siede sul letto*) Sai perché sembri così giovane? Per come porti i capelli. In modo femminile, come dovrebbero essere i capelli di una donna, non come le ragazze che si vedono in giro al giorno d'oggi. E ci sono così tante altre cose, Margaret.

MARGARET Non voglio sentire altro.

(*Si alza*)

LUKE Dove stai andando?

(*Si alza e le sfiora il braccio come per trattenerla*)

MARGARET Io . . . io non sto andando proprio da nessuna parte . . .

LUKE Notice something?

MARGARET What?

LUKE This is the first time we've touched.

MARGARET Oh?

(*She moves away from him*)

LUKE Listen, Margaret, I didn't mean to get too personal with you or anything like that. I was just complimenting on you, that's all. Look, I'm sorry, I really am, if you're insulted in any way.

MARGARET I'm not insulted at all, young man, really I'm not.

LUKE Aw, c'mon, Margaret, cut out the "young man" baloney, okay? I keep thinking we're both the same age.

MARGARET Well, I'm sure there have been lots of young girls in your life. (*She forces a laugh*)
What do you want with an old bag like me?

LUKE Aw, c'mon, Margaret. Why do you have to say things like that for?

MARGARET I'm sure you can get all kinds of young girls . . . and I suppose that's the way it should be, Luke.

LUKE Oh, sure, sure, it's okay, I guess. Yeah, I have been pretty lucky. I've had the cream of the crop. I've had more girl friends in my life already than there are cockroaches dying in this very room right now. You know, I never went steady with any one girl, though. I liked having a different one whenever I felt like it. Any time I wanted to make a phone call . . . to a new one or an old one or one I hadn't seen in a long time . . . well, I would go ahead and do it. I've always enjoyed that sort of life. I like being a man and proud of the way I've been able to keep so many women on a string . . . without the string ever breaking, too. Yeah, Margaret, I've really been awfully lucky, let me tell you. I've never gotten myself into any trouble either with any of these girls, if you know what I mean. It's almost a miracle, in a way, because I got an awful appetite when it comes to you know what, and well, guys like me, we also lose control a lot, you know, like get too passionate and wild sometimes and not thinking beforehand. I guess I never really got myself into troubles or any of these girls into trouble, either, because deep down inside I'm a pretty religious guy, and so I pray a lot too, if you know what I mean?

MARGARET (*After a long pause*) I suppose I really better be goin'.

LUKE Don't go! Hey, what's the matter? Did I say anything wrong? I didn't upset you, did I?

MARGARET No . . .

LUKE Then what's wrong?

LUKE Hai visto?

MARGARET Cosa?

LUKE Ci siamo sfiorati per la prima volta.

MARGARET Ah. . .

(*Si scosta da lui*)

LUKE Senti, Margaret, non avevo intenzione di andare troppo sul personale con te, né niente del genere. Ti stavo solo facendo dei complimenti, e basta. Ascolta, mi dispiace, mi dispiace davvero se per qualche ragione ti senti offesa.

MARGARET Ma io non mi sono affatto offesa, giovanotto.

LUKE Oh, andiamo, Margaret, dacci un taglio con 'sta storia del "giovanotto", capito? Io continuo a credere che abbiamo la stessa età.

MARGARET Beh, sono sicura che nella tua vita avrai avuto un sacco di ragazze. (*Sforza una risata*) Cosa te ne fai di una vecchia decrepita come me?

LUKE Oh, andiamo, Margaret. Ma perché mai devi dire delle cose del genere?

MARGARET Sono sicura che puoi benissimo trovare tutte le ragazze giovani di 'sto mondo . . . ed è giusto che sia così, Luke.

LUKE Ah certo, come no, e va bene. Sì, ho avuto molta fortuna. Ho sempre avuto il meglio del meglio, io. Ho avuto più ragazze io nella mia vita fino ad adesso, di quanti scarafaggi stanno schiattando in questa stanza. Però, vedi, io non ho mai fatto coppia fissa con una ragazza. Mi piaceva averne una di diversa ogni volta che mia andava. Quando mi andava di fare una telefonata . . . a una nuova o a una vecchia, o a una che non avevo visto per un bel pezzo . . . beh, lo facevo e basta. Mi è sempre piaciuto vivere così. Sono contento di essere un uomo e sono fiero di essere riuscito a tenere così tante donne sulla corda . . . senza che mai si spezzasse, tra l'altro. Eh già, Margaret, sono stato molto fortunato, sul serio. E neanche mi sono mai messo nei guai con nessuna di queste ragazze, se capisci quello che voglio dire. In un certo senso è quasi un miracolo, perché io ho una voglia matta quando si tratta di tu sai cosa, e insomma, a volte i tipi come me, beh, perdono spesso il controllo, sai com'è, ci lasciamo travolgere, diventiamo dei pazzi scatenati e non pensiamo alle conseguenze. Credo di non essermi mai messo nei guai né di aver messo nei guai nessuna di quelle ragazze perché sotto sotto sono un tipo molto religioso, e quindi prego anche tanto, non so se mi spiego.

MARGARET (*Dopo una pausa*) Forse è meglio che vada.

LUKE No, non andare! Ehi, cosa ti prende? Ho detto qualcosa di sbagliato? Non ti sei offesa, vero?

MARGARET No . . .

LUKE E allora cosa c'è che non va?

MARGARET (*After a moment*) It's all a *lie*, Luke.

LUKE What?

(*He is suddenly very nervous*)

MARGARET *All a lie.*

LUKE What do you mean?

MARGARET You know what I mean.

LUKE I . . . I don't know what you're talking about, Margaret.

MARGARET Because you don't want to know what I'm talking about, young man, that's why.

LUKE What I just told you about my girls, my women. You think it's all a . . . lie?

MARGARET Yes, I do. I think it's all one big fat lie.

LUKE Well . . . I . . . really don't care what you think!

MARGARET I'm sorry . . .

LUKE Besides, what you think doesn't matter a goddam thing to me, do you understand?

MARGARET Watch your language around me.

LUKE The hell I will now! You calling me a liar!

MARGARET You called me one before.

LUKE That's right, I did. And then you even admitted it.

MARGARET The why you don't admit it now, about yourself? Oh, sonny boy, who are you ever trying to impress? You don't have to impress me, not with your lousy lies, you don't. I'm impressed with you already, just the way you are. Luke, I could see right through you. I know all about people who lie. I've been in love with a man for the last thirty years and he's spent a good deal of the last twenty of those years lying to me. I'm an expert at it, dear boy. My husband James has slept with more women than you'll ever be able to sleep with in your whole lifetime.

LUKE While he was married to you?

MARGARET While we were bringing up our children.

LUKE Your husband?

MARGARET My husband: James Moon. Ever since the day I met him, I would say to him, at least once a day: "James Moon, you make Margaret swoon." It was silly, but it was a nice way, I thought, and he did too for a long time, of saying to him: "I love you." Then, just these past few months, mind you, I found myself saying something else instead. Never out loud, though; never to him any more, but to myself. (*She smiles wryly*) "James Moon, you're such a goon." (*She pauses*) My husband, James Moon, is a no-good rotten son of a bitch!

LUKE But you still love him?

MARGARET (*Dopo un istante*) È tutta una *balla*, Luke.

LUKE Cosa?

(*Colto da un'improvvisa agitazione*)

MARGARET *Tutta una balla.*

LUKE In che senso?

MARGARET Lo sai benissimo.

LUKE Io . . . io non so di cosa stai parlando, Margaret.

MARGARET Perché sei tu che non vuoi capire, giovanotto, ecco perché.

LUKE Quello che ti ho appena detto su tutte le ragazze che ho avuto, sulle mie donne. Tu pensi che sia tutta . . . una balla?

MARGARET Sì. Per me è tutta una grande e grossa balla.

LUKE Beh . . . a me . . . a me non interessa proprio niente di quello che pensi tu!

MARGARET Mi dispiace . . .

LUKE E poi, quello che pensi tu per me non conta un accidente di niente, capito?

MARGARET Bada a come parli con me.

LUKE Adesso col cavolo che lo faccio! Tu che mi dai del bugiardo!

MARGARET Anche tu prima a me.

LUKE Sì, è vero. E poi tu l'hai anche ammesso.

MARGARET E allora perché adesso non lo ammetti anche tu? Ehi, ragazzino, con chi vuoi di fare il galletto? Non devi fare tanto l'intraprendente con me con le tue bugie da strapazzo, no davvero. Sono rimasta colpita da te per come sei veramente. Ho capito benissimo come sei fatto, Luke. Le conosco bene le persone che mentono. Per trent'anni ho amato un uomo che ha passato gran parte degli ultimi vent'anni a dirmi bugie. Sono un'esperta di queste cose, caro mio. Mio marito James è andato a letto con molte più donne di quante tu riuscirai mai a portartene a letto in tutta la tua vita.

LUKE Quand'era sposato con te?

MARGARET Mentre stavamo crescendo i nostri figli.

LUKE Tuo marito?

MARGARET Mio marito James, sì. Dal giorno in cui l'ho conosciuto gli dicevo sempre almeno una volta al giorno: "James, amore, mi metti di buon'umore."⁸ Era stupido, ma pensavo – e l'ha pensato che lui per un bel pezzo – che fosse un modo carino per dirgli che lo amavo. Poi in questi ultimi mesi, attento, mi sono trovata a dire qualcos'altro, invece. Ma mai ad alta voce; non più a lui ma a me stessa. (*Con una risata sarcastica*) "James, bugiardo, sei proprio un bastardo"⁹ (*Fa una pausa*) Mio marito, James Moon, è un grandissimo figlio di puttana!

LUKE Ma lo ami ancora?

MARGARET I don't know . . .

LUKE I don't think you do . . .

MARGARET Come to think of it, maybe I don't any more! You know, in the beginning it was perfect for me, Luke, the way it was perfect for Mr. Potter. It's not so perfect any more, though. I've never done anything like this before in my whole life. I've been hanging around all the afternoon since three o'clock. I don't want to go home tonight. What do you think? Do you think that maybe it has to do with hitting fifty the other day? Maybe I just have finally given up. Now that's a miracle if it's true. I'm even tired of crying about it, and God only knows how much I've cried about it all. I've always prayed too, Luke. I used to pray Saint Jude a lot . . .

LUKE Yeah, me too . . . whenever I was desperate, Margaret.

MARGARET He's for truly desperate cases, Saint Jude, and so I really took advantage of that. And I lit so many candles, Luke. And then for a very long time it was Saint Rita because I started not to feel too well . . .

LUKE I used to pray a lot to her too. I know what you mean by not feeling too well. It has to do with the heart. Your heart, my heart. It gets sick. You know, I really do believe in that expression: a broken heart. You *can* have a broken heart. I believe that people really do die from their broken hearts. Remember when Mario Lanza died? He was so young, and what a great voice. Well, remember not too long afterward? His wife died. Just like that! And she was even younger. They just found her dead in bed one day out in Hollywood. Her name was Betty, I always remember it, and she was Irish the way my mother is, and Mario was Italian the way my father is, and good Catholics too. And the doctors really didn't know how she died . . . but I think she probably died of a broken heart. She couldn't go on living without the man she loved. Just like Mr. potter, in a way.

MARGARET Yes . . .

LUKE Margaret, are you okay?

MARGARET Oh, I don't know . . .

LUKE I'll tell you something: I feel a little better than I did before. I guess it's our talking to each other.

MARGARET (*Quietly*) I can't go home tonight. It's the beginning of my vacation tomorrow and James will spend the whole two weeks with me like he's always done: lying, making believe. I can't take that sort of thing any more, you know what I mean, Luke? Sure, sure, I look good . . . real damn good, even if I have to admit it myself . . . but it was because I wanted him to love me again, like in the beginning. I've wasted myself for the last twenty years. Maybe that's why I look so good, huh? (*She laughs half-bitterly*) Because I've been preserved for the last twenty years of my life, that's

MARGARET Non lo so . . .

LUKE Io credo di no . . .

MARGARET No, pensandoci bene, forse non più! Sai, Luke, all'inizio era tutto perfetto per me, così com'era perfetto per il signor Potter. Adesso però non è più così perfetto. Non ho mai fatto una cosa del genere in vita mia. Me ne sono rimasta fuori casa tutto il pomeriggio, dalle tre. E non voglio tornare a casa stasera. Tu cosa dici? Secondo te ha a che fare col fatto che ho varcato la soglia dei cinquanta l'altro giorno? Forse mi sono arresa finalmente. Beh, se così fosse sarebbe un miracolo. Sono anche stanca di piangerci sopra, e solo Dio sa quanto ho pianto per 'ste cose. E poi, Luke, ho sempre pregato tanto. Pregavo sempre San Giuda¹⁰ . . .

LUKE Sì, anch'io, Margaret . . . quand'ero disperato.

MARGARET San Giuda è proprio quello per i casi disperati, e così mi ha anche dato una mano. E ho acceso tanti di quei ceri, Luke. E poi per un bel pezzo è stato il turno di Santa Rita¹¹ perché avevo iniziato a non sentirmi un granché bene . . .

LUKE La pregavo sempre anch'io, lei. So cosa intendi quando dici che non ti sentivi un granché bene. Ha a che fare col cuore. Il tuo cuore, il mio cuore. Si ammala. Sai, io ci credo proprio quando la gente parla di "cuore spezzato". Si può avere il cuore spezzato. Per me le persone possono morire sul serio di crepacuore. Ti ricordi quando è morto Mario Lanza¹²? Era così giovane, e che voce che aveva. Beh, ti ricordi poco dopo? È morta sua moglie. Dall'oggi al domani. E lei era anche più giovane. Un giorno l'hanno trovata lì, morta, nel suo letto, a Hollywood. Si chiamava Betty, questo mi è rimasto impresso, ed era irlandese, proprio come mia madre; e Mario era italiano, proprio come mio padre, ed erano buoni cattolici, tra l'altro. I dottori non avevano idea di come fosse morta . . . per me potrebbe benissimo essere morta di crepacuore. Non ce la faceva ad andare avanti senza l'uomo che amava. Proprio come il signor Potter per certi versi.

MARGARET Già . . .

LUKE Margaret, ti senti bene?

MARGARET Ah, non lo so . . .

LUKE Lascia che ti dica una cosa: io adesso mi sento meglio. Credo che sia perché abbiamo parlato assieme.

MARGARET (*Sommessamente*) Non posso tornare a casa stasera. Domani iniziano le mie vacanze e James passerà con me queste due settimane come ha sempre fatto: raccontandomi bugie, facendo finta. Io non ce la faccio più a sopportare queste cose, capisci quello che voglio dire, Luke. Certo, come no, faccio la mia figura . . . un figurone davvero, anche se devo ammetterlo . . . era perché volevo che mi amasse di nuovo, come all'inizio. Ho buttato via gli ultimi vent'anni. Forse è per questo che ho un bell'aspetto, eh? (*Ride con una punta di amarezza*) Perché sono vissuta sotto una

why.

(*She takes a paper bag from out of her shopping bag and then she pulls out a bunch of Halloween masks*)

LUKE What are you doing?

(*She puts one of the masks on her face*)

MARGARET Happy Halloween! I don't want you to see me cry, that's all. I'm sparing you that because I'm impressed with you, no matter what. Take one if you like, and put it on too. I bought them for my grandchildren. Tomorrow night's Halloween, isn't it?

LUKE I don't know. Is it?

MARGARET (*After a pause*) Don't lie to me any more, Luke.

LUKE (*Putting one of the masks on too*) It . . . wasn't . . . well, they weren't lies that meant to hurt you. If you really want to know something, they hurt me, right? I'm hurting myself because I almost believe that I had all those women in my life.

MARGARET I think you're a good man, Luke Lovello, I really do.

LUKE Thanks . . .

MARGARET I never slept with another man in my whole life. Only James Moon. He was the first . . . and there's been no one since.

LUKE I like your legs, Margaret.

MARGARET What's that, Luke?

LUKE I said I like your legs. I didn't notice them before. You weren't wearing a mask. I go for them a lot, Margaret. (*MARGARET sits back down in the chair still wearing the Halloween mask. She lifts her skirt above her knees and then she crosses her legs*) I got a candle here in a wine bottle. Shall I light it? It would be sorta fun, don't you think? Because of the Halloween masks and everything, don't you think?

MARGARET Go ahead and light it then, Luke.

(*LUKE lights the candle, then turns out the ceiling lights. He sits on the edge of the bed facing MARGARET across the room. He is still wearing his mask too*)

LUKE It's kinda way out, don't you think?

MARGARET Yes, it is, Luke.

LUKE (*After a long pause*) You're really . . . well, I mean that . . .

MARGARET Go ahead, Luke, say it.

LUKE I mean, you're really built okay, Margaret . . . (*A short pause*) Geez, I wish we had some music . . .

(*He gets up and begins to walk about slowly but nervously*)

campana di vetro per gli ultimi vent'anni della mia vita, ecco perché.

(*Prende una busta di carta dalla borsa della spesa e poi tira fuori un paio di maschere di Halloween*)

LUKE Cosa stai facendo?

(*Indossa una delle maschere*)

MARGARET Buon Halloween! Non voglio che mi vedi piangere, tutto qui. Te lo risparmio perché mi hai fatto una buona impressione, nonostante tutto. Prendine pure una se vuoi, e mettila anche tu. Le ho prese per i miei nipoti. Domani sera è Halloween, no?

LUKE Non lo so. È Halloween?

MARGARET (*Dopo una pausa*) Non raccontarmi più bugie, Luke.

LUKE (*Indossa anche lui una delle maschere*) Beh, non erano bugie per ferirti. Se proprio ci tieni, quello che si fa del male sono io, o no? Mi faccio male perché a momenti ci credo che ho avuto tutte quelle donne nella mia vita.

MARGARET Secondo me sei una brava persona, Luke, davvero.

LUKE Grazie . . .

MARGARET In tutta la mia vita non sono mai andata a letto con un altro uomo. Solo con James. Lui è stato il primo . . . e da allora non c'è stato più nessun'altro.

LUKE Che belle gambe che hai, Margaret.

MARGARET Come scusa, Luke?

LUKE Ho detto che mi piacciono le tue gambe, non le avevo notate prima. Non avevi addosso la maschera. Mi piacciono proprio, Margaret. (*MARGARET si siede sulla sedia con ancora addosso la maschera di Halloween. Alza la gonna sopra le ginocchia e poi accavalla le gambe*) Ho una candela qui, infilata nel collo di una bottiglia. La accendo? Potrebbe essere divertente, no? Per via delle maschere di Halloween e tutto il resto, cosa dici?

MARGARET Dai, Luke, allora accendila.

(*LUKE accende la candela, poi spegne la luce. Si siede sull'orlo del letto guardando dritto a MARGARET dall'altro lato della stanza. Anche lui indossa ancora la sua maschera*)

LUKE È abbastanza bizzarro, non trovi?

MARGARET Sì, è vero, Luke.

LUKE (*Dopo una lunga pausa*) Tu sei davvero . . . cioè, voglio dire . . .

MARGARET Coraggio, Luke, dillo . . .

LUKE Voglio dire, sei proprio ben messa, Margaret . . . (*Una breve pausa*) Dio, come vorrei un po' di musica . . .

(*Si alza e inizia a gironzolare lentamente ma con un certo nervosismo*)

MARGARET You don't want me to go, do you?

LUKE No! No, I want you to stay here with me. Margaret, I want you to listen to me. I'm sorry that I lied to you. I am sorry that I thought I should give you that impression about myself. I'm not that at all. Pardon the language, Margaret, but I'm not that ass-man I was telling you all about before.

(*The light of the candle flickers as he walks about in the room. It throws off weird and crazy shadows, especially over the masks they wear on their faces*)

MARGARET Maybe you'd better forget about it.

LUKE No, I want to tell you. I want you to listen to me.

(*He goes to the bed again and sits back down. There is dead silence*)

MARGARET I like the quiet . . .

LUKE Yeah . . .

MARGARET It's good for us to think a minute or two . . .

LUKE I know . . .

(*Another dead silence*)

MARGARET (*Finally*) What was that?

LUKE What was what?

(*He gets up*)

MARGARET Please sit back down again. Be calm.

LUKE Okay . . .

(*He sits back down on the edge of the bed*)

MARGARET There . . . now be calm.

(*Another silence*)

LUKE (*Finally*) Are you okay, Margaret?

MARGARET I'll be all right.

LUKE I think the noise you heard must have been the candle: the wax melting from it and then falling down the wine bottle.

MARGARET Yes, that's probably it.

LUKE I wish we had something to drink together, I really do.

MARGARET The smoking is good enough.

LUKE I was just thinking . . .

MARGARET Think to yourself for a few minutes more. Think about what you plan to do with yourself, with your future. Now . . . tonight . . .

LUKE I have some things to tell you first, Margaret.

MARGARET There it is again . . . that noise I heard before. Are you sure it's the wax on the candle?

MARGARET Non vuoi che me ne vada, vero?

LUKE No! No, voglio che rimani qui con me. Adesso mi devi ascoltare, Margaret. Mi dispiace averti raccontato delle bugie. Mi dispiace aver pensato di doverti dare quell'immagine di me. Io non sono mica così. Scusa il mio linguaggio, Margaret, ma io non sono quel coglione che ti dicevo prima.

(*La fiamma della candela guizza mentre gironzola per la stanza. Proietta delle ombre davvero strane, soprattutto sulle maschere che indossano*)

MARGARET Forse è meglio se lasci stare.

LUKE No, voglio dirtelo. E voglio che mi ascolti.

(*Torna al suo letto e si risiede. Silenzio di tomba*)

MARGARET Mi piace questo silenzio . . .

LUKE Già . . .

MARGARET Ci farà bene riflettere un paio di minuti.

LUKE Lo so . . .

(*Di nuovo silenzio di tomba*)

MARGARET (*Finalmente*) Cos'è stato?

LUKE Cos'è stato cosa?

(*Si alza*)

MARGARET Ti prego, sta seduto. Sta calmo.

LUKE Va bene . . .

(*Si risiede sull'orlo del letto*)

MARGARET Ecco . . . adesso stai tranquillo.

(*Ancora silenzio*)

LUKE (*Finalmente*) Tutto bene, Margaret?

MARGARET Sto bene, sì.

LUKE Per me il rumore che hai sentito era della candela, della cera che si scioglie e cola sulla bottiglia.

MARGARET Sì, probabilmente è così.

LUKE Vorrei proprio bere qualcosa con te.

MARGARET Va bene anche se fumiamo e basta.

LUKE Stavo solo pensando . . .

MARGARET Continua a pensare per conto tuo per un altro po'. Pensa a cosa vuoi farne di te stesso, a cosa vuoi farne del tuo futuro. Adesso . . . stasera . . .

LUKE Prima devo dirti delle cose, Margaret.

MARGARET Ecco, di nuovo . . . lo stesso rumore di prima. Sei sicuro che sia la cera della candela?

LUKE (*Getting up again*) Now wait a minute . . .

(*He begins to chuckle*)

MARGARET What are you laughing at?

LUKE (*Laughing*) Do you know what it is? It's the dying cockroaches. The little falling bastards . . . they're still dropping like flies from the ceiling. (*He begins to swat a couple of them with his bare hands*) Do you think I should spray some more, or do you think they've really had it by know?

MARGARET Oh, they've really had it by now, I'm sure of that.

LUKE What do you think about the guys who robbed me? Do you think the bastards will ever get caught?

(*He removes the mask*)

MARGARET They deserve to be, and that means that they will be, and so don't worry about it any more.

LUKE (*Picking up another mask*) How do I look in this one?

(*He puts it on*)

MARGARET (*After a moment*) It's funny. It's not a scary mask like the rest of them. It's more human, the more I look at you in it. And you look familiar now. (*Laughing quietly*) You look like someone I think I know.

LUKE No kidding?

MARGARET Someone famous, maybe . . .

LUKE Yeah? Who?

MARGARET Someone in the movies.

LUKE Can't you think?

MARGARET Well, in a very funny way, you look like Gene Kelly with that mask on your face.

LUKE Honest to God?

MARGARET You sound very happy about that.

(*She removes her mask*)

LUKE I suppose I am. You see, I used to be a big fan of Gene Kelly's. He was my favorite movie actor. (*He removes the mask*) I never missed one of the movies and I saw them over and over again. Hell, I always went to the movies, anyway. I loved the movies. Especially the musicals, the M-G-M musicals. I always had the money to go. My mother and father never stopped giving me money for the movies. I loved them all: Gene Kelly, Judy Garland, Esther Williams, Ricardo Montalban June Allyson, Gloria DeHaven, Van Johnson, Jane Powell. They were the M-G-M ones. Always in perfect Technicolor. And there was Betty Grable and June Haver. They were the

LUKE (*Si rialza*) Aspetta un attimo . . .

(*Si mette a ridacchiare sommestamente*)

MARGARET Cos'hai da ridere?

LUKE (*Ride*) Sai cos'è? Sono gli scarafaggi che stanno schiattando. Quei piccoli bastardi che continuano a cadere . . . continuano a piombare giù dal soffitto come le mosche. (*Si mette a schiacciarne un paio con le mani*) Secondo te dovrei dare un'altra spruzzata o dici che ne abbiamo già abbastanza?

MARGARET Ah, ne hanno già avuto che basta, questo è poco ma sicuro.

LUKE E che ne pensi dei tizi che sono stati qui a rubare? Secondo te verranno mai presi quei bastardi?

(*Si toglie la maschera*)

MARGARET Gli starebbe bene e questo vuol dire che succederà, quindi smettila di preoccuparti.

LUKE (*Prende un'altra maschera*) Questa come mi sta?

(*Se la mette*)

MARGARET (*Dopo un attimo*) È strana. Non fa paura come le altre maschere. Più la guardo su di te e più mi sembra umana. E non mi è una faccia nuova. (*Ridendo sommestamente*) Assomigli a qualcuno che mi sembra di conoscere.

LUKE Sul serio?

MARGARET A qualcuno di famoso, forse . . .

LUKE Ah sì? A chi?

MARGARET A qualche attore.

LUKE E non sapresti proprio quale?

MARGARET Beh, con quella maschera hai un che di Gene Kelly¹³, così, tanto per dire.

LUKE Dici davvero?

MARGARET Sembri proprio contento di sentirtelo dire.

(*Si toglie la maschera*)

LUKE Sì, in effetti è vero. Sai, una volta ero un grande patito di Gene Kelly. Era il mio attore preferito.

(*Si toglie la maschera*) Non mi sono mai perso neanche uno dei suoi film e li ho visti e rivisti un sacco di volte. E che, comunque io al cinema ci andavo sempre. Mi piacevano da matti i film. Soprattutto quelli musicali, quelli musicali della M-G-M. Avevo sempre i soldi per andarci. Mia madre e mio padre non la smettevano mai di darmi soldi per andare al cinema. E mi piacevano da morire tutti quanti: Gene Kelly, Judy Garland, Esther Williams, Ricardo Montalban, June Allyson, Gloria DeHaven, Van Johnson, Jane Powell¹⁴. Loro erano quelli dalla M-G-M. Dei

Twentieth-Century Fox ones. Always in beautiful Technicolor. And then there was Rita Hayworth. She was always in the ones from Columbia. Always in beautiful Technicolor. But it was Gene, Gene Kelly, and Esther, Esther Williams: they were really my favorites. I loved them both so much. I used to dream, think a lot about being like Gene. I always imagined myself dancing in the movies. Dancing and singing the way he did. And I used to always think that M-G-M should have a male type actor, a great swimmer, like Esther Williams, and he would be a star too, and they would play opposite each other. I used to always think that maybe I could become a star like that: a combination of Gene Kelly dancing and singing and a male-type version of Esther Williams swimming. I really loved those days when I used to go and see those pictures. You know?

MARGARET I never went to the movies very much. I raised a big family, remember? And James was never home. I read a lot. I read all the great books. I read *Gone with the Wind*, *The Good Earth*, *King's Row*, *A tree Grows in Brooklyn*, all of them.

LUKE I never read a book in my whole life. I didn't have the patience.

MARGARET It's too bad. It would have helped you a lot. It helped me a lot. I read all the great authors. Mostly the women: like Faith Baldwin, for instance. And Taylor Caldwell, and Kathleen Norris. It would really help me get through the day and the night sometimes, reading their books; learning about other people's problems and their troubles and things like that . . . especially when you're going through hard times yourself and you're not too happy and there's no one you actually can turn to . . .

(*She puts on another mask. There is another dead silence*)

LUKE Margaret . . . you know, you really appeal to me. In many ways you do, Margaret. I kinda got it for you now: I'm sure of it . . . and it makes me feel very good. But I want you to listen to me, and please don't say anything until I'm through. But do you know what? My life's been full of surprises, but mostly bad surprises. When I was a kid I was playing football once and I fell when some guy tackled me. I fell right straight down on a dirty piece of old glass from a broken Royal Crown Cola bottle. It cut right into my knee, clear through it went until it hit the bone, my knee bone. It happened when I was only in the sixth grade, and my mother and father then, they were pretty old-fashioned, and they sorta took care of the cut themselves. And I was glad they did, too, because I was scared stiff, but I was even more scared of doctors and hospitals. Well, I ended up in the hospital anyway. For over a year I was laid up in bed with my right leg up in the air because poison set in. And at first it went down to my right foot, and they had to keep a big long needle stuck clear through my ankle, sticking out both ends of it, so that my leg wouldn't stop growing because, like I told you

film bellissimi, tutti a colori.¹⁵ E c'erano Betty Grable e June Haver¹⁶. Loro erano quelle della Twentieth-Century Fox. Di quei film a colori stupendi. E poi c'era Rita Hayworth¹⁷. Lei era sempre in quelli della Columbia. A colori anche quelli, fantastici. Ma Gene, Gene Kelly, assieme a Esther, Esther Williams, loro erano davvero i miei preferiti. Mi piacevano così tanto tutti e due. Me lo sognavo sempre, avevo questo chiodo fisso di fare come faceva Gene Kelly. Mi ci vedevo proprio a ballare nei film. Cantare e ballare come faceva lui. E pensavo proprio che la M-G-M dovesse avere un interprete maschile, un gran nuotatore, come Esther Williams, così anche lui sarebbe stato famosissimo e avrebbero recitato in coppia assieme. Pensavo davvero che magari sarei potuto diventare un attore del genere: un misto tra Gene Kelly che canta e che balla, e la versione maschile di Esther Williams che nuota. All'epoca mi piaceva un sacco quando andavo a vedere quei film, sai?

MARGARET Io non sono mai andata tanto al cinema. Ho tirato su una famiglia numerosa, ti ricordi? E James non era mai a casa. Ho letto tanto io. Ho letto tutti i grandi libri. Ho letto *Via col vento*, *La buona terra*, *Delitti senza castigo*, *Un albero cresce a Brooklyn*¹⁸, tutti quanti.

LUKE Io non ho mai letto un libro in vita mia. Non ho mai avuto tanta pazienza.

MARGARET È un peccato. Ti sarebbe tanto servito. A me è stato molto di aiuto. Ho letto tutti i grandi autori. Soprattutto le donne, come Faith Baldwin ad esempio. E Taylor Caldwell e Kathleen Norris¹⁹. Leggere i loro libri mi aiutava a passare le giornate, e le notti, a volte; leggere dei problemi delle altre persone e cose del genere . . . soprattutto quando stai attraversando un brutto periodo e non sei molto felice e non hai nessuno a cui rivolgerti . . .

(*Indossa un'altra maschera. Di nuovo silenzio di tomba*)

LUKE Sai, Margaret . . . mi piaci proprio. Sotto molti aspetti, Margaret. Sento che adesso ho una specie di debolezza per te, ne sono sicuro . . . e la cosa mi fa sentire molto bene. Ma voglio che mi ascolti, e per favore non dire niente fino a quando non avrò finito. Sai una cosa? Nella mia vita ho avuto moltissime sorprese, soprattutto brutte sorprese. Quando ero ragazzo, una volta stavo giocando a football e sono caduto, un tipo mi ha placato e sono finito dritto sopra un lurido pezzo di vetro di una bottiglia della Royal Crown Cola²⁰. Quel vetro mi ha tagliato proprio il ginocchio e si è conficcato fino all'osso, l'osso del ginocchio. È successo quando avevo undici anni²¹, e all'epoca mia madre e mio padre erano abbastanza all'antica, quindi diciamo che si sono occupati loro della ferita. Tra l'altro ero contento che lo facessero, perché ero spaventato a morte, ma avevo ancora più paura dei dottori e dell'ospedale. Beh, alla fine ci sono finito lo stesso in ospedale. Per più di un anno sono rimasto a letto con la gamba destra in trazione perché la ferita si era infettata. E all'inizio mi ha preso tutto il piede destro, così hanno dovuto ficcarmi uno spuntone di traverso nella caviglia,

before, I was only in the sixth grade and so I was still a growing boy. But none of it worked. My leg stopped growing: my whole right leg. (*He puts another mask on; then he takes off his right shoe and begins to limp about the room; the candle flickers wildly*) You see! I got a special right shoe with a great big lift built into the bottom of it. (*He shows her*) You see! And then the poisonous gangrene – that awful green stuff, the awful rotten poison in my body – it went running through my system until it got all the way up to my shoulder and so they had to cut away up there, here, the doctors dug deep into my right shoulder four different times so that I wouldn't die. You should see it, Margaret. You should see how ugly my right shoulder looks: full of gashes and holes and deep scars. When I finally got out of the hospital I had to begin to learn to write with my left hand. I was kicked out of high school in my senior year because I turned out to be the meanest kid you ever come across in your whole life. (*He takes the mask back off*) I went to work with my father then. I wanted to. My father's with the Sanitation Department. I worked with the City for the last twelve years: collecting all the garbage, and building up my body, my muscles. (*Laughing nostalgically*) My mother helped me there a lot too: she's such a great cook, my old lady. Because of my father she turned into one of the best Italian cooks in the world. Every other night in the house it was either an Italian or an Irish supper. But on Sundays it was always Italian for my father. Hell, I had to do it, Margaret: work on the garbage trucks, because it was part of the family: my father wanted it that way. If he was a lawyer, that's the way I would've been; if he was a barber, then I would've been one too. Nothing scared me on those bright yellow garbage trucks: the live, half-dead brown rats that would sometimes come jumping out at me . . . (*He laughs*) . . . and all those millions of hungry stupid running cockroaches! None of it ever bothered me. I got used to it fast. I'm not afraid of anything. You know, Margaret . . . you know, I have never slept with a woman in my whole life! You can't believe that, can you? I never did, though, and that's the honest to God truth, Margaret. I was afraid, you know what I mean? I was scared and I was so ashamed. Ashamed of this limp; my short right leg. (*He begins to hobble around the room again*) Ashamed of my scar on my right weak knee. Ashamed of my shoulder: the ugliest right shoulder you ever saw in your whole life! I couldn't hold a girl in my arms with this shoulder, you know what I'm saying, Margaret? I had a couple of bad surprises with a couple of different girls, right when we were ready to finally go to bed together. I HATED WHAT HAPPENED! And before I knew it I was running. I ran so fast after that! I ran a thousand miles after that! (*A pause*) Do you know why I finally left home, why I finally quit the Sanitation Department two days ago and came here to live all by myself? Because my father caught me the other day . . . he suddenly came into my bedroom and he caught me doing it all by myself! I've been doing it all by myself ever since I can remember because I didn't feel ashamed then, by myself, alone, enjoying it without being scared of what the girl was really thinking about

da parte a parte, in modo da non bloccare la crescita della gamba, visto che come ti ho detto, avevo solo undici anni e quindi ero ancora un ragazzino. Ma non è servito a niente. La mia gamba destra, tutta quanta, si è bloccata. (*Indossa un'altra maschera; poi si toglie la scarpa destra e si mette a zoppicare per la stanza: il lume della candela sembra impazzito*) Vedi! La mia scarpa destra è fatta apposta, ha un plantare all'interno. (*Glielo mostra*) Guarda! E poi quella cancrena infetta – quella schifezza verdognola, quello schifo infetto che avevo in corpo – continuava a scorrermi dentro, in tutta la parte destra, fino a quando non mi è andato su sulla spalla e così hanno dovuto tagliare qui in alto, qui, e i dottori per non farmi morire hanno dovuto scavare per bene nella mia spalla, quattro volte. Dovresti vederla, Margaret. Dovresti vedere che razza di orrore è la mia spalla destra: tutta piena di tagli, solchi e cicatrici pazzesche. Quando alla fine sono uscito dall'ospedale ho dovuto imparare a scrivere con la mano sinistra. E all'ultimo anno sono stato sbattuto fuori da scuola perché ero diventato la canaglia più pestifera che esista. (*Si toglie la maschera*) Così sono andato a lavorare con mio padre. Mi andava bene così. Mio padre è nella nettezza urbana. Gli ultimi dodici anni li ho passati a lavorare al servizio della città, a raccogliere rifiuti, e a ricostruire il mio corpo, i miei muscoli. (*Ride con nostalgia*) E anche mia madre mi ha aiutato: è una cuoca così brava la mia vecchia. Grazie a mio padre è diventata una delle migliori cuoche italiane che ci sono in giro. Ogni sera a casa mia si cenava o italiano o irlandese. La domenica, però, era sempre italiana, per mio padre. Cristo santo, Margaret, mi è toccato per forza entrare in nettezza urbana, perché faceva parte della famiglia: mio padre voleva così. Se fosse stato un avvocato, anch'io sarei diventato avvocato; se fosse stato un barbiere, allora anch'io sarei diventato un barbiere. E non avevo paura di niente quand'ero su quei camion dei rifiuti tutti gialli sgargianti: né dei topi veri, quelli marroncini mezzi morti che a volte mi saltavano addosso . . . (*Ride*) . . . né di quella marea di stupidi scarafaggi assatanati che correvano dappertutto! Nessuno di loro mi ha mai dato fastidio. Mi ci sono abituato in fretta. Io non ho paura di niente. Sai, Margaret . . . sai, io non sono mai andato a letto con una donna in vita mia! Non ci credi, vero? E invece è così, questa è la verità, sul serio, Margaret. Avevo paura, non so se mi spiego. Ero terrorizzato e mi vergognavo così tanto. Mi vergognavo di essere zoppo, di avere la gamba destra più corta. (*Si mette a zoppicare di nuovo per la stanza*) Mi vergognavo della cicatrice sul mio ginocchio menomato. Mi vergognavo della mia spalla: la spalla più brutta che uno possa vedere in tutta la sua vita! Con questa spalla non potevo stringere tra le mie braccia una ragazza, capisci, Margaret? Ho avuto qualche brutta sorpresa con un paio di ragazze, proprio quando stavamo per andare a letto assieme. IO NON SONO RIUSCITO A SOPPORTARE QUELLO CHE È SUCCESSO! E prima di rendermene conto me l'ero già data a gambe. E sono scappato così in fretta! Sono scappato per non so quanto! (*Una pausa*) Ma lo sai perché ho lasciato casa mia, perché alla fine mi sono licenziato dalla nettezza urbana due giorni fa e sono venuto qui a

me. I was never so ashamed in my whole life: the way I was when my father caught me the other day. And he was really lousy about it too, really and truly lousy about it all. Yeah, Margaret Moon, whenever you go in life, it's full of surprises! But mostly bad surprises. I DON'T LIKE MYSELF! That's it! I HATE MYSELF: LUKE LOVELLO! I hate him!

(He sits back down on the bed and puts the mask back on. There is a long silence. They both sit there in the flickering candlelight wearing their Halloween masks)

MARGARET *(Finally)* I'm so very sorry, Luke . . .

(MARGARET takes off her mask. Then LUKE takes off his)

LUKE *(After a long pause)* You look good. You have a beautiful face. You got lips like a couple of ripe red plums. You know why I said plums instead of cherries? Because I got this good feeling going on inside of me that you're different than most women I've ever known. I like your eyes most of all, Margaret Moon . . . *(MARGARET smiles at him. LUKE gets up from the bed and goes to her. He kneels down before her. He touches her ankles)* You got nice ankles, too. *(MARGARET puts her hand on his head. LUKE stiffens a little. Then she begins to run her fingers through his hair. He begins to get nervous. He jumps up and quickly places his right hand on one of her breasts; then he pulls it away fast)* You see, I'm scared! Even with you. I'm scared . . . afraid. I don't know what to do. Look . . . I . . . maybe . . . if I can find . . . but they stole it! I mean, *no*, they didn't steal it! I must have left it in the bathroom: the . . . little solid gold box with the diamond on top of it. My uncle who works in Las Vegas, he's tall, dark, and handsome, he hires the beautiful tall showgirls for the famous night-clubs there . . . my uncle, he gave me the fancy little box to keep them in. "A man should always carry his . . . safeties . . . with him." He told me. Excuse me a minute, Margaret. I'll go into the bathroom to see if they're there. *(LUKE goes to the door and opens it. He exits into the hallway and then disappears into the bathroom. MARGARET finally gets up. She stands staring at the opened door. Suddenly she runs, slams it shut, and then locks it. LUKE comes running out of the bathroom)* I can't seem to find my little rubber box made of solid gold with the diamond on top of it. *(He tries to open the door)* Hey, Margaret, you locked the door! Hey, open it up, will you? Hey, do you hear me? *(He waits for a minute. MARGARET stands still)* Hey Margaret, why did you do that? Awwwwww . . . c'mon! What are you doing to me? *(He begins to bang on the door)* C'mon, open it up! Will you, please? Will you please open it up? *(He is almost on the verge of tears)* I don't deserve this! How come? Did I scare you? Did my limp make you sick? Did my story about

vivere per conto mio? Perché mio padre mi ha beccato l'altro giorno . . . è entrato all'improvviso in camera mia e ha scoperto che me la stavo facendo da solo! Ho fatto così per tutta la mia vita, perché così non mi vergognavo, per conto mio, da solo, mi divertivo senza dover temere quello che una ragazza pensa davvero di me. Non mi sono mai vergognato così tanto in vita mia come l'altro giorno, quando mio padre mi ha beccato. Ed era anche incazzato nero, davvero incazzatissimo per tutta 'sta storia. Eh già, Margaret, in qualsiasi posto andrai nella tua vita, ci sono sempre un sacco di sorprese! Ma soprattutto butte sorprese! IO NON MI PIACCIO! Ecco cos'è! IL SOTTOSCRITTO, LUKE LOVELLO, ODIA SÉ STESSO! Si odia!

(*Si risiede sul letto e indossa nuovamente la maschera. C'è un lungo silenzio. Entrambi se ne stanno lì seduti alla luce tremolante della candela, con addosso le loro maschere di Halloween*)

MARGARET (*Finalmente*) Mi dispiace, Luke . . .

(MARGARET *si toglie la maschera. Subito dopo se la toglie anche LUKE*)

LUKE (*Dopo una lunga pausa*) Sei proprio bella. Hai un bel viso. Le tue labbra sono come due prugne belle mature. Lo sai perché ho detto prugne invece di ciliegie? Perché ho come il sentore che tu sia diversa dalla maggioranza delle donne che ho conosciuto. E mi piacciono i tuoi occhi soprattutto, Margaret . . . (MARGARET *gli sorride. LUKE si alza dal letto e va da lei. Le si inginocchia di fronte. Tocca le sue caviglie*) Hai anche delle belle caviglie. (MARGARET *gli mette le mani sulla testa. LUKE si irrigidisce un attimo. Lei inizia a far scorrere le sue dita tra i suoi capelli. Lui comincia ad innervosirsi. Si alza di scatto e mette la mano destra sul seno di lei; la leva immediatamente*) Vedi, ho paura! Anche con te. Sono terrorizzato . . . ho paura. Non so cosa fare. Senti . . . io . . . forse . . . se riesco a trovarla . . . no, me l'hanno rubata! Cioè, *no*, non me l'hanno rubata! Devo averla lasciata nel bagno, la mia scatoletta in oro massiccio con sopra il diamante. Mio zio che lavora a Las Vegas è alto, coi capelli neri e ha un bell'aspetto; gestisce quelle stangone fantastiche che fanno gli spettacoli laggiù, in quei famosi night-club . . . è stato mio zio a darmi quella bella scatoletta per metterceli dentro. Mi ha detto: "Un uomo deve sempre avere . . . le sue protezioni . . . a portata di mano". Scusami un attimo, Margaret. Vado in bagno a vedere se ci sono. (LUKE *va alla porta e la apre. Esce nel corridoio e poi sparisce nel bagno. Quindi MARGARET si alza. Fissa la porta stando in piedi. Tutto d'un tratto si precipita a chiuderla e fa scattare la serratura. LUKE arriva di corsa dal bagno*) Mi sa proprio che non la trovo la mia scatoletta in oro massiccio col diamante sopra. (*Prova ad aprire la porta*) Ehi, Margaret, hai chiuso la porta a chiave! Dai, aprila per favore. Ehi, mi senti? (*Attende un minuto. MARGARET se ne sta immobile*) Ehi, Margaret, perché l'hai fatto? Ooooooh, andiamo! Cosa stai combinando? (*Inizia a picchiare sulla porta*) Dai, apri! Per favore, dai? Ti prego, mi vuoi aprire? (*Sembra quasi sul punto di scoppiare in lacrime*) Non mi merito una cosa del genere! Mi vuoi dire perché? Ti ho fatto paura?

my scars and gashes and limp and everything make you sick? Please don't say that it did! Please, don't! I know! It was because I was too forward with you, wasn't it? That's it! I was too fresh with you, that's it, isn't it? That's why you're mad and you won't open the door, isn't it? Because I touched your ankle, and because I touched . . . your breast. I'm sorry, Margaret Moon, I really am. (*He begins to rap on the door again; then he stops and waits. There is finally a long pause, a strange silence. LUKE's manner is very positive*) Margaret, you can't do this to me! I want you . . . and I know that you want me. I know that it will be all right. It won't be like it was with the other girls. (*A pause*) Margaret, it won't be that way with you. I can tell . . . I swear to God . . . please, Margaret Moon?

(*Another moment passes. MARGARET goes to the window and opens it. Music is heard blaring in: Spanish-type music: a romantic mambo perhaps, with a marvelous rhythm to it. She finally goes to the door and unlocks it; she moves back to the middle of the room, waiting. LUKE smiles a bit. He pushes the door gently open and then enters the room. He stops and stares at her; his smile goes away. He turns and closes the door behind him. He picks up a mask and puts it on. Then he picks up a mask for MARGARET. He begins to limp towards her. She goes to meet him, takes the mask he hands her, and then she drops it to the floor. She removes his mask from his face. She slowly puts her hands up to his face. They stare at one another in a half-embrace. There is a slow fadeout*)

Curtain

Ti ho fatto venire il voltastomaco perché sono zoppo? Ti ha fatto venire il voltastomaco la mia storia delle cicatrici, delle ferite, il mio modo di camminare e compagnia bella? Ti prego, dimmi di no! Ti prego, no! Ci sono! È perché sono stato troppo diretto con te, giusto? Ecco perché! Perché sono stato troppo sfacciato con te, è per questo, vero? È per questo che sei arrabbiata e non apri la porta, eh? Perché ti ho toccato la caviglia e perché ti ho toccato . . . il petto. Mi dispiace, Margaret, sul serio. (*Si mette di nuovo a bussare alla porta; poi si ferma e attende. Infine c'è una lunga pausa, uno strano silenzio. Il tono di LUKE è molto risoluto*) Margaret, non puoi farmi questo! Io ti voglio . . . e lo so che anche tu mi vuoi. Lo so che andrà tutto per il meglio. Non sarà come con le altre ragazze. (*Una pausa*) Margaret, non sarà così con te. Credimi . . . te lo giuro su Dio . . . ti prego, Margaret?

(*Passa un altro istante. MARGARET va alla finestra e la apre. Si sente un crescendo di musica: musica del tipo spagnolescante, qualcosa di simile a un mambo appassionato, con un ritmo eccezionale. Finalmente va alla porta e sblocca la serratura; torna al centro della stanza, resta in attesa. LUKE accenna un sorriso. Spinge lievemente la porta per aprirla e quindi entra nella stanza. Si ferma e la fissa, il suo sorriso sparisce. Si gira e chiude la porta alle sue spalle. Prende una maschera e la indossa. Poi prende una maschera per MARGARET. Si dirige verso di lei zoppicando. Lei gli va incontro, prende la maschera che le porge e poi la getta per terra. Gli toglie la maschera dal volto. Lentamente avvicina le mani al viso di lui. Guardandosi negli occhi si stringono in un mezzo abbraccio. Le luci si abbassano lentamente*)

Sipario

Note al testo

¹ L'autore fa riferimento alle «West Eighties» ossia a quell'isolato dell'Upper West Side la cui numerazione delle strade va dall'ottantesima all'ottantanovesima; è situato non lontano da Central Park e dal museo di storia naturale. La West End Avenue, invece, è una strada di Manhattan; si tratta di una segmento dell'11th Avenue compreso tra la 59th e la 107th West.

² Parte delle parole cantate da Luke appartengono alla canzone scritta dai fratelli Gershwin, *The Girl I Love*. Il testo di questa canzone, che inizialmente era destinata al musical *Lady, Be Good* (1924), è stato scritto da Ira Gershwin ed esiste in due versioni: *The Girl I Love* e la più famosa *The Man I Love*. Quest'ultima canzone, scritta per essere cantata da una donna, venne inclusa nella colonna sonora di altri due musical: *Strike up the Band* (1927) e *Rosalie* (1928). *The Man I Love* ha ormai raggiunto lo status di classico della canzone americana anche grazie alle numerose interpretazioni che ne sono state fatte nel corso degli anni. (Furia, 42)

Un giorno arriverà / La donna che amo / E io sarò un vero uomo / Per la donna che amo / E quando verrà verso di me / Capirà / E tutto si metterà a posto / Perché lei avrà trovato il suo uomo / L'unico uomo per lei / La donna che amo

³ La traduzione dell'onomatopea è libera.

⁴ «Woodwork» si riferisce alle parti in legno della casa, come ad esempio le porte, le scale o le modanature. Il termine compare anche nell'espressione «come out of the woodwork» (o «crawl out of the woodwork»): venire fuori all'improvviso e in massa dal posto in cui si è nascosti – è questo il caso degli insetti che infestano la stanza in cui si svolge l'azione.

⁵ Il Dipartimento municipale della nettezza urbana di New York - New York City Sanitation Department (DSNY) si occupa della gestione dei rifiuti e della pulizia delle strade della città. Venne fondato nel 1881 col nome di Department of Street Cleaning, per poi assumere nel 1929 il nome Sanitation Department tuttora in uso. (nyc.gov)

⁶ Knights of Columbus (Cavalieri di Colombo) è il nome di una confraternita cattolica fondata negli Stati Uniti nel 1892; si tratta per lo più di una società di mutuo soccorso e assistenza che nel corso degli anni si è diffusa in molti paesi del mondo. Tra gli anni sessanta e settanta i Cavalieri di Colombo godettero di molta popolarità e si consolidarono espandendosi sempre più all'interno degli stessi Stati Uniti. (kofc.org) Il nome così come la sigla «K. of C.» sono stati mantenuti in inglese per creare il senso di locale in cui bere.

⁷ Gravy è la salsa che si ricava dal sugo rilasciato dalla cottura della carne; ne esistono diverse varianti, tra cui la Brown Gravy.

⁸ Letteralmente «James Moon mi mandi in estasi»; la mia è una traduzione libera per mantenere la rima.

⁹ Letteralmente «James Moon sei proprio un idiota»; anche in questo caso la mia traduzione è libera. Il termine «goon» col significato di stupido e impacciato deriva dal nome del grottesco personaggio dei fumetti Alice the Goon, creato da E.C. Segar. Lo stesso fumettista, qualche anno dopo, creò anche il famoso marinaio Braccio di Ferro (Popeye the Sailor Man).

¹⁰ San Giuda Taddeo, secondo la religione cristiana è il santo protettore delle cause senza speranza e delle situazioni disperate.

¹¹ Santa Rita da Cascia secondo la tradizione cristiana è anch'essa una santa associata ai casi più disperati; inoltre viene spesso riconosciuta come la protettrice delle donne tormentate da un matrimonio infelice.

¹² Mario Lanza (1921-1959), famoso tenore e attore hollywoodiano di origine italiana. Lanza raggiunse l'apice del successo tra gli anni quaranta e cinquanta; una delle sue interpretazioni più famose fu quella del tenore Enrico Caruso nel film *The Great Caruso/Il grande Caruso* (1951). Anche se la causa di morte non venne mai accertata, molto probabilmente Lanza morì in seguito ad un attacco di cuore. La moglie, Betty Lanza, morì cinque mesi dopo di lui nel 1960. («Mario Lanza died 30 years ago, but his voice lives on», Don Beman)

¹³ Gene Kelly (1912-1996), ballerino, coreografo e attore. Tra i suoi più grandi successi *An American in Paris/Un americano a Parigi* (1951) e *Singing in the Rain* (1952), entrambi film musicali, genere per il quale diventò celebre. (nytimes.com)

¹⁴ Judy Garland (1922-1969), attrice, cantante e ballerina. Recitò con Gene Kelly in tre film, tutti e tre musicali e tutti e tre prodotti dalla Metro Goldwyn Mayer: *For Me and My Gal* (1942), *The Pirate/Il pirata* (1948) e *Summer Stock/L'allegria fattoria* (1950). (nytimes.com)

Esther Williams (1921-2013), nuotatrice e attrice, nonché stella degli anni d'oro della Metro Goldwyn Mayer. Esther Williams viene ricordata soprattutto per i film che includono coreografie acquatiche spettacolari come *Bathing Beauty/Bellezze al bagno* (1944), *Neptune's Daughter/La figlia di Nettuno* (1949), *Million Dollar Mermaid/La ninfa degli antipodi* (1952), *Dangerous when Wet/Nebbia sulla Manica* (1953) e *Easy to Love/Fatta per amare* (1953). (nytimes.com)

Ricardo Montalban (1920-2009), attore messicano che iniziò la propria carriera a Hollywood negli anni quaranta grazie a numerosi film musicali della Metro Goldwyn Mayer; recitò con Esther Williams in *Fiesta/La Matadora* (1947), *On an Island with You/Su un'isola con te* (1948) e *Neptune's Daughter/La figlia di Nettuno*. (nytimes.com)

June Allyson (1917-2006), attrice, cantante e ballerina comparsa in molti film della Metro Goldwyn Mayer; è nota per i suoi ruoli di moglie e fidanzata ideale, soprattutto al fianco di James Stewart e Van Johnson. (nytimes.com)

Gloria DeHaven (1925-), attrice, cantante e stella della MGM come gli altri attori citati. Recitò in film come *Two Girls and a Sailor/Due ragazze e un marinaio* (1944) con June Allyson e Van Johnson e *Summer Stock/L'allegria fattoria* con Judy Garland e Gene Kelly. (nytimes.com)

Van Johnson (1916-2008), attore e ballerino, nonché icona del cinema americano degli anni quaranta; i ruoli per cui viene maggiormente ricordato sono quelli del ragazzo per bene, del marinaio e del soldato. Anche Van Johnson fu una delle stelle della Metro Goldwyn Mayer e recitò sia con Esther Williams in *Thrill of a Romance/Luna senza miele* (1945), *Duchess of Idaho/La Duchessa dell'Idaho* (1950) e *Easy to Love/Fatta per amare*, sia con June Allyson, Gloria DeHaven e Gene Kelly. (nytimes.com)

Jane Powell (1929 -), attrice, cantante e ballerina protagonista di molti film musicali della MGM. Come altri attori, anche Jane Powell venne spesso associata ad uno stereotipo, nel suo caso quello della ragazza ingenua visto che in molte pellicole interpretò il ruolo della ragazza della porta accanto. (nytimes.com)

¹⁵ Letteralmente «in un sempre smagliante Technicolor»; tale frase però risulterebbe troppo ingombrante all'interno della battuta di Luke

¹⁶ Betty Grable (1916-1973), attrice, ballerina e cantante che raggiunse l'apice del suo successo negli anni quaranta. A differenza di attrici come June Allyson o June Powell, Betty Grable fu la pin-up per eccellenza. Recitò in numerosi film della 20th Century-Fox, tra cui *Million dollar legs* (1939), *Pin Up Girl/La fidanzata di tutti* (1944) e *How to Marry a Millionaire/Come sposare un milionario* (1953), in quest'ultimo al fianco di Marilyn Monroe e Lauren Bacall. (nytimes.com)

June Haver (1926-2005), attrice statunitense considerata da molti l'erede di Betty Grable, con la quale, tra l'altro, recitò nel film *The Dolly Sisters/Donne e diamanti* (1944). La sua carriera di attrice di successo fu abbastanza breve; la sua fama iniziò a diminuire all'inizio degli anni cinquanta, fino al suo ritiro dalle scene nel 1953. (nytimes.com)

¹⁷ Rita Hayworth (1918-1987), attrice, ballerina e icona del cinema americano. Anche lei come gli altri attori nominati in precedenza raggiunse la fama internazionale tra gli anni quaranta e cinquanta. Tra i film che la resero celebre: *You'll Never Get Rich/L'inarrivabile felicità* (1941) e *You Were Never Lovelier/Non sei mai stata così bella* (1942) con Fred Astaire, *Cover Girl/Fascino* (1944) nel quale recita al fianco di Gene Kelly e *Gilda* (1946). (nytimes.com)

¹⁸ Tutti e quattro i libri sono stati scritti da autori americani: *Gone with the Wind/Via col vento* (1936) da Margaret Mitchell, *The Good Earth/La buona terra* (1931) da Pearl S. Buck, *Kings Row/Delitti senza castigo* (1940) da Henry Bellamann e *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn/Un albero cresce a Brooklyn* (1943) da Betty Smith.

Sebbene tutti e quattro possono essere considerati libri di successo, *Via col vento* è senz'altro il più famoso a livello internazionale, e questo grazie anche al film del 1939 con Vivien Leigh e Clark Gable. *La buona terra* valse alla sua autrice il premio Pulitzer per la narrativa nel 1932 e anche da esso venne tratto l'omonimo film del 1937. Analogamente, nel corso degli anni quaranta vennero tratte le rispettive versioni cinematografiche dai best-seller di Henry Bellaman e Betty Smith. Tutti questi romanzi, come anticipato da Margaret, parlano di esistenze tormentate e storie d'amore infelici. Il libro di Bellaman venne tradotto in italiano mantenendo il titolo originale; il film *King's Row*, invece, giunse in Italia col titolo *Delitti senza castigo*. Nella mia traduzione, per ragioni stilistiche, ho deciso di usare il titolo del film anche se in riferimento al romanzo.

¹⁹ Faith Baldwin (1893-1978), scrittrice americana del Novecento. Nell'arco della sua vita scrisse oltre ottanta romanzi e numerosi racconti raggiungendo l'apice del successo tra gli anni trenta e quaranta. La produzione letteraria di Faith Baldwin rientra nel genere di letteratura femminile di consumo. (“Faith Baldwin, novelist, dies”)

Taylor Caldwell (1900-1985), scrittrice anglo-americana del ventesimo secolo. Nell'arco della sua carriera scrisse e pubblicò oltre trenta libri. Taylor Caldwell nacque in Inghilterra ma emigrò da bambina negli Stati Uniti dove passò il resto della sua vita. Tra i suoi libri di maggior successo ve n'è anche uno sulla vita di San Luca *Dear and Glorious Physician: A Novel about Saint Luke* (1959). (nytimes.com)

Kathleen Norris (1880-1966), scrittrice americana attiva nella prima metà del ventesimo secolo. Oltre a romanzi, scrisse anche per alcuni periodici tra cui *l'Atlantic Monthly*, *The American Magazine* e la rivista femminile *Ladies' Home Journal*. (kathleenthompsonnorris.org)

²⁰ La Royal Crown è una società statunitense che produce bevande analcoliche; venne fondata nel 1905 a Columbus (Georgia) dal farmacista Claud A. Hatcher. Per molto tempo la società si chiamò Nehi e assunse il nome di Royal Crown Cola soltanto dal 1959, visto che quello era il suo prodotto di punta. La Royal Crown Cola è sempre stata molto popolare negli Stati Uniti e negli anni quaranta venne pubblicizzata anche da attori come Joan Crawford, Shirley Temple e Ronald Reagan. (rccolainternational.com)

²¹ «Sixth grade» è il livello scolastico secondo il Sistema d'istruzione americano, esso si raggiunge all'età di 11 anni.

FERRYBOAT

THE PEOPLE OF THE PLAY

JOEY, 28, and good-looking. He wears a white-on-white dress shirt, a plain light-blue silk necktie, a neatly cut midnight-blue suit, and perfectly shined black shoes. His topcoat is also midnight blue. He wears a flashy gold wrist watch, a sparkling ring, and a tie clip and cuff links that match.

THE GIRL, about 19 or 20, and really quite beautiful. She has long black hair, a snow-white face devoid of any makeup, and a very fine figure. She wears a slightly wrinkled, lightly soiled woman's trenchcoat, black high-heels, and no stockings.

WHERE THEY ARE

Aboard the Staten Island Ferry.

The sound of a foghorn blowing in the darkness of the theatre; the whistle of a ferryboat; fading in: churning sounds of the ferryboat on the moving waters of the bay.

As the lights slowly come up we hear the faint cries of sea gulls in the distance. We are in the ferryboat interior: a particular section of it. THE GIRL appears. She is pleased, or so it seems, at having found a remote area to be by herself. She sits down on one of the passengers' benches, facing the audience. She makes herself comfortable and then begins to read a book.

Eventually, JOEY enters through the audience. It is obvious that he has been watching THE GIRL. He is sipping coffee from a paper container and holds a doughnut. He gives the place a good "going-over" and then THE GIRL becomes irresistible to him.

JOEY You don't mind, do you, miss?

GIRL Mind what?

JOEY If I sit here next to you, I mean.

(*He sits*)

GIRL You already are, aren't you?

FERRYBOAT

I PERSONAGGI

JOEY, ventotto anni e di bell'aspetto. Indossa una camicia bianca elegante, una cravatta in seta azzurra a tinta unita, un completo blu notte di ottima fattura e scarpe nere perfettamente tirate a lucido. Anche il soprabito è blu notte. Porta un vistoso orologio d'oro al polso, un anello scintillante, fermacravatta e gemelli coordinati.

LA RAGAZZA, sui diciannove, vent'anni e davvero molto bella. Ha lunghi capelli neri, un volto candido privo di qualsiasi trucco e un gran bel portamento. Indossa un impermeabile sgualcito e con qualche macchia, scarpe nere col tacco, niente calze.

DOVE SI TROVANO

A bordo dello Staten Island Ferry.

Il suono di una sirena da nebbia si diffonde nell'oscurità del teatro; il fischio di un traghetto; aumenta gradualmente d'intensità il tumultuoso ribollire del ferry-boat sulle acque agitate della baia. Mentre le luci si alzano lentamente, si percepiscono le strida dei gabbiani attutite dalla lontananza. Siamo all'interno del ferry-boat, in un punto ben preciso. Compare LA RAGAZZA. È contenta, o almeno così sembra, di aver trovato un posto appartato in cui starsene sola. Si siede su una delle panche per i passeggeri, rivolta verso il pubblico. Si mette a suo agio e inizia a leggere un libro. Infine, JOEY fa il suo ingresso attraversando la platea. È evidente che sta osservando LA RAGAZZA. Sorseggia del caffè da un bicchierone di carta e ha in mano una ciambella. Esamina attentamente il posto ed ecco che prova un'attrazione irresistibile per LA RAGAZZA.

JOEY Non le dispiace, vero, signorina?

RAGAZZA Mi dispiace cosa?

JOEY Se mi siedo qui vicino a lei, intendo.

(Si siede)

RAGAZZA Lo ha già fatto, no?

JOEY Yeah, I guess I am. (*He laughs*) Well, no matter, miss, thanks anyway . . . (*He sips*) Hey, how about some of this coffee? It's a regular one . . . milk and sugar. Is that the way you take it?

GIRL (*Icily*) Only black.

JOEY Let me buy you one, then, okay? (*THE GIRL gives out with an impatient sigh and goes back to her book*) That book sure has you interested, doesn't it?

GIRL (*Without looking up*) You're absolutely right.

JOEY You sure you don't want a coffee?

GIRL Positively

JOEY It's the best thing they sell . . . the coffee on this ferryboat . . . it's good . . . always fresh, too, that's the reason why. But it's only natural that it should be. Big turnover. They have to keep it making all of the time. You know . . . like the automat . . . food's always fresh there, too, because of the big turnover. (*Sipping some more*) Wow! Hot! But Good! Darn Good! You sure you don't want a coffee? (*A moment of silence*) I'm buying. A black coffee, okay? You said you take it black (*Another moment of silence*) Boy, just look at you, will you. Your eyes haven't blinked since we started talking to each other. You're certainly a concentrator, aren't you? It must be a good story that you're reading (*Unwrapping the doughnut*) Here. How about this? The doughnuts are always fresh here, too. You know . . . the big turnover, and all that . . . like the automat. Would you like half of it? It's a plain one. No sugar, no cinnamon, no chocolate. Who needs all that junk, right? Especially a woman . . . a woman like you . . . no makeup, nothing fancy, just a pure-type beauty, that's all. A natural. (*More silence*) You don't want any, huh? Well, okay. (*He begins to chew*) Really tasty, this plain doughnut. (*He sips*) This fresh coffee . . . delicious. (*He takes another bite from the doughnut*) You know, miss . . . when I first walked in here, and I spotted you, well, I said to myself, I know that broad, I mean, girl, woman, from somewhere. You looked real familiar to me. Did you ever go to high school over in Saint George? (*No response*) You didn't, huh? That's where I live, in Saint George. Went to high school there. I was born and raised in Staten Island. Still live there, too. (*He pauses*) Aw, that couldn't be right, anyway. We couldn't have gone to high school together. You must be about nineteen, twenty at the most. But not more than that, right?

GIRL (*Still reading*) Right.

JOEY I'm twenty-eight, myself.

GIRL (*Yawning*) Really?

JOEY Yeah. A long time ago. But seems like only yesterday. After I graduated from high school I took a Greyhound bus all the way out to the coast . . . L.A., Hollywood. I wanted to crash the movies.

JOEY Sì, credo di sì. (*Ride*) Beh, non fa niente, signorina, grazie lo stesso . . . (*Beve un sorso*) Ehi, che ne dici di un po' di caffè? È normale¹ . . . latte e zucchero. È così che lo prendi?

RAGAZZA (*Glaciale*) Solo nero.

JOEY Dai, lascia che te ne offra uno allora. (*LA RAGAZZA si lascia sfuggire un sospiro d'impazienza e torna sul suo libro*) Quel libro le interessa davvero, eh?

RAGAZZA (*Senza alzare lo sguardo*) Ha proprio ragione.

JOEY Sicura di non volere un caffè?

RAGAZZA Sicurissima!

JOEY È la cosa migliore che vendono . . . il caffè su questo ferry-boat . . . è buono . . . sempre fatto al momento tra l'altro, ecco perché. Ma del resto è normale che sia così. Gran giro d'affari. Devono prepararlo in continuazione. Hai presente no . . . come ai distributori automatici . . . anche lì le cose sono sempre fresche per via del continuo ricambio. (*Sorseggiandone un altro po'*) Uh! Bollente! Ma buono! Davvero buono! Allora, sicura di non volere un caffè? (*Un attimo di silenzio*) Dai, lo vado a prendere. Un caffè nero, va bene? Hai detto che lo prendi così. (*Un altro istante di silenzio*) No, dico, ma guardati un po', ma ti pare? Non hai battuto ciglio da quando abbiamo iniziato a parlare assieme. Tu di sicuro una che non si distrae facilmente, o no? Dev'essere una gran bella storia quella che stai leggendo. (*Scartando la ciambella*) Ecco. Che ne dici di questa? Anche le ciambelle qui sono sempre fresche. Sai . . . il gran ricambio e via discorrendo . . . come ai distributori automatici. Ne vuoi mezza? È senza niente. Niente zucchero, niente cannella, niente cioccolato. E chi ha bisogno di tutte quelle schifezze, giusto? Soprattutto una donna . . . una donna come te . . . niente trucco, niente di elaborato, soltanto una bellezza autentica e basta. Una al naturale. (*Ancora silenzio*) Non ne vuoi proprio, eh? E va bene. (*Inizia a mangiare*) Proprio gustosa, questa ciambella senza niente. (*Beve un sorso*) E questo caffè appena fatto . . . squisito. (*Da un altro morso alla ciambella*) Sa signorina . . . appena sono entrato qui e l'ho vista, beh, mi sono detto, quella tipa, cioè, ragazza, *donna*, devo averla già vista da qualche parte. Ha un'aria davvero familiare. Per caso è andata a scuola dalle parti di Saint George²? (*Nessuna risposta*) No, vero? Io abito proprio lì, a Saint George. Ho fatto là le superiori. Sono nato e cresciuto a Staten Island. E ci vivo ancora adesso. (*Fa una pausa*) Ma dai, non potrebbe essere, comunque. Devi avere sui diciannove anni, al massimo venti. Ma non di più, giusto?

RAGAZZA (*Continuando a leggere*) Giusto.

JOEY Io ne ho vent'otto.

RAGAZZA (*Sbadigliando*) Davvero?

JOEY Eh sì. Diverso tempo fa. Ma sembra solo ieri. Dopo essermi diplomato ho preso un torpedone³ e me ne sono andato dritto verso la costa . . . Los Angeles, Hollywood. Volevo sfondare nel cinema.

Be big-time . . . you know? Not just ordinary like everyone else. (*He sips more of the coffee*) But it was a lot tougher that I thought it would be. (*Finishing the doughnut*) I guess it was my fault, too, in a way. Too many beautiful women riding and speeding over the streets and the avenues and the boulevards of ole' Hollywood. In streamlined convertibles at the flashy drive-ins and the classy motels, on the beaches and the super-duper highways, and around all kinds of all sorts of different-shaped swimming pools. It was just too much, let me tell you! I must've wasted an awful lot of time. You know, I should've been born a concentrator, like you, a concentrator. I didn't have any patience, though. Better yet, I suppose you could say that I didn't have too much control. Like, for instance, to prove my point to you, miss: I was voted the Class Wolf of my graduating class in high school in Saint George. You see what I mean? And so, when you really think about it, Hollywood was the last place I should've gone to. Anyway, I wasn't getting' anywhere there, and so I got pretty disgusted after a while, with myself and with everything else out there, the people, the phonies, just everybody! And so here I am . . . I came back . . . *to here.*

GIRL (*Coldly*) Yes . . . *I know.*

JOEY But I'm learning to have more control now. (*He pauses*) Do you know what I think, though? I think the main reason why I hated Hollywood so much was because . . . well, there didn't seem to be any . . . *love* . . . there. I know that must sound pretty dumb to you because we all realize that there is love no matter where you go. Wherever there are people there is love. But, Jesus, I don't know, miss, but I felt that no one really cared about anyone else in Hollywood. To be honest with you, it scared me just a little too much. I had to come back East. (*He stares at her for a moment, awaiting any sort of reaction; she goes on reading*) Hey, miss! (*He snaps his fingers and gets up*) A frank! How about a frank? (*No answer*) Would you like a frank with sauerkraut and mustard? Or would you like one with relish and mustard? Or the whole works? That's even better still: the whole works! Why not live it up a little, huh? Go all the way! You see, they got good franks here, too. Always fresh. You know they have to be since they got such a big . . .

GIRL . . . *turnover!*

(*There is an uneasy pause*)

JOEY (*Quietly now*) Yeah, that's it. (*A pause*) You sure you don't want one?

GIRL Positive. But why don't you go and have one?

JOEY (*Sitting back down*) Aw, not me. I eat too much sometimes. Once I was so full of tension, worrying about my future and everything, that I ended up eating five of them before the ferry even pulled in. (*A pause*) Nerves, I guess. (*He takes out his cigarettes*) Cigarettes. I smoke a lot too,

Essere famoso . . . hai presente? Non un tipo ordinario qualsiasi. (*Beve un altro sorso di caffè*) Ma è stata molto più dura di quanto pensassi. (*Finisce la ciambella*) Credo che sia stata anche colpa mia, in un certo senso. Troppe donne stupende che se ne andavano in giro a tutta birra per le strade e i viali e i boulevard della vecchia Hollywood. A bordo di decappottabili da sogno ferme ai drive-in più pazzeschi e nei motel di lusso, sulle spiagge e sulle autostrade enormi, e attorno a piscine di tutte le forme possibili e immaginabili. Era davvero troppo, lo ammetto! Devo aver perso un bel po' di tempo. Sai, sarei dovuto nascere con più concentrazione, come te, che sei una che non si distrae facilmente. Non ho avuto neanche pazienza, però. Anzi, diciamo che non ho avuto abbastanza controllo. Ecco, ad esempio, signorina, soltanto perché si faccia un'idea: per tutti io ero il galletto della classe⁴ all'ultimo anno di superiori a Saint George. Capisce, no, cosa intendo? E così, se ci pensa un attimo, Hollywood era l'ultimo posto dove sarei dovuto andare. Ad ogni modo lì non facevo strada e così dopo un po' mi ha preso uno schifo totale, nei miei confronti e nei confronti di tutto il resto lì intorno, le persone, la gente falsa⁵, praticamente chiunque! E insomma eccomi qua . . . sono ritornato . . . *qui*.

RAGAZZA (*Con freddezza*) Sì . . . *lo so*.

JOEY Ma sto imparando ad avere più controllo, adesso. (*Fa una pausa*) Sai cosa penso però? Penso che il motivo principale per cui ho odiato Hollywood così tanto sia stato che . . . beh, non sembrava esserci . . . *amore* . . . da quelle parti. Lo so che deve sembrarti abbastanza stupido perché tutti sanno che l'amore esiste, sempre e ovunque. Dove c'è gente c'è amore. Ma Cristo santo, non lo so, signorina, eppure sentivo che a Hollywood a nessuno importava davvero di nessuno. A essere sincero la cosa mi spaventava un po' troppo. Me ne sono dovuto tornare indietro a est. (*La fissa per un istante in attesa di una qualsiasi reazione; lei continua a leggere*) Ehi, signorina! (*Schiocca le dita e si alza*) Un hot dog! Che ne dice di un hot dog? (*Nessuna risposta*) Le andrebbe un hot dog con crauti e senape? O ne preferisce uno con senape e salsa verde⁶? O facciamo con tutto quello che hanno a disposizione? Così va ancora meglio: ci mettiamo sopra tutto quanto! Perché non trattarsi bene una volta tanto, no? Facciamo le cose fino in fondo! Vedi, qui hanno anche dei buoni hot dog. Sempre fatti al momento. Sai, devono esserlo per forza per via del gran . . .

RAGAZZA . . . *ricambio!*

(*Una pausa di imbarazzo*)

JOEY (*Adesso in tono tranquillo*) Sì, esatto. (*Una pausa*) Sicura di non volerne uno?

RAGAZZA Sicurissima. Ma perché lei non va a prendersene uno?

JOEY (*Torna a sedere*) Oh, no di certo. A volte mangio anche troppo io. Una volta avevo addosso un'ansia incredibile, ero preoccupato per il mio futuro e compagnia bella, e alla fine ne ho mangiati cinque prima ancora che il ferry arrivasse in darsena. (*Una pausa*) Nervosismo, credo.

but it's not half so bad as it was before. I was really a chain-smoker once. (*Pause*) Hey, you wanna go out on deck with me? Look, it's the Statue of Liberty. Beautiful at this hour, all lit up and everything, and with the moon helping out there a lot, too. I'll bet I've seen the Statue of Liberty a million times, and still never get tired of it. Always gives me a few butterflies in my stomach. C'mon, you wanna . . . ?

GIRL (*Cuttingly*) Noooooooooo!

JOEY Oh? Well . . . you wanna come downstairs and have a smoke with me . . . on the lower deck? You can't smoke up here. (*No response*) I'm taking it for granted that you smoke. Most women I know nowadays smoke.

GIRL (*Impatiently*) You don't know me.

(*THE GIRL closes her book noisily and reaches for a magazine which she accidentally drops to the floor*)

JOEY (*Quickly*) Oh, your magazine fell. Here, let me get it for you.

GIRL Thanks.

JOEY That's one of those magazines for people with intellects. Some good stories in there, too. I remember once when I was in the Air Borne over in Korea. I read a story in it because I found the magazine lying around and there was nothing else to do so I read it. I'm not much of a reader, but I can still remember what the story was all about. It was about this guy who didn't know what he wanted to do with his life. He was, well, he was *searching*! You understand, miss? *Searching* . . . he really felt, deep down inside of him, this guy in the story, that he wanted to be big-time . . . you know, the way I wanted to be bi-time, and so I took off for Hollywood . . . well, this guy in the story felt the need to do cultured-type things; he had very artistic ideas about himself and about life in general. (*A pause*) But he only thought about it all; he really never tried to do any of them. Now, if I remember right, the main reason he didn't try to do any of them was because he knew that he had to get a good job and make some money . . . real fast . . . for sharp clothes and a neat car, and things like that. I can't remember . . . how the story ended up . . . but I do remember that it was pretty sad. (*A pause*) Well, anyway, I wish I could figure out who you remind me of. (*A sudden sigh*) Oh, now wait a minute! Wait just one minute! I got it! I know! (*He snaps his fingers triumphantly in mid-air*) Elizabeth Taylor!

(*There is a brief pause*)

GIRL (*Very Faintly*) Oh . . . ?

(*Tira fuori le sigarette*) Sigarette. Fumo un sacco, tra l'altro, ma neanche la metà di quello che fumavo prima. Una volta fumavo proprio una sigaretta dietro l'altra. (*Pausa*) Ehi, ti va di venire fuori con me sul ponte? Guarda, la Statua della Libertà. È stupenda a quest'ora, tutta illuminata e via scorrendo, e con la luna lì fuori che fa anche lei la sua parte. Avrò visto la Statua della Libertà un milione di volte, credo, e non mi ha ancora stufato. Mi fa sempre venire qualche farfalla allo stomaco. Dai, andiamo, ti va di . . . ?

RAGAZZA (*In modo risoluto*) Noooooooooo!

JOEY Oh? Va bene . . . vuoi venire giù con me a fumare . . . sul ponte quello più in basso? Non si può fumare qui sopra. (*Nessuna risposta*) Sto dando per scontato che tu fumi. La maggioranza delle donne che conosco al giorno d'oggi fuma.

RAGAZZA (*Impazientemente*) Lei non mi conosce.

(LA RAGAZZA chiude rumorosamente il libro e allunga la mano per prendere una rivista che accidentalmente le cade di mano e finisce a terra)

JOEY (*Velocemente*) Oh, le è caduta la rivista. Ecco, lasci che gliela raccolga.

RAGAZZA Grazie.

JOEY Questa è una di quelle riviste per gente sveglia. Ci sono anche delle belle storie lì dentro. Mi ricordo di una volta quand'ero nell'esercito⁷, giù in Corea. Avevo letto una delle storie perché avevo trovato la rivista lì in giro, non c'era nient'altro da fare e così mi ero messo a leggerla. Non sono un gran lettore, ma mi ricordo ancora adesso di cosa parlava la storia. Era su 'sto tipo che non sapeva cosa farne della sua vita. Lui stava, beh insomma, lui era *alla ricerca*! Capisce, signorina? Alla ricerca . . . sentiva davvero, nel suo profondo, questo tizio della storia, che voleva essere qualcuno . . . sa, come io volevo essere qualcuno e così ero partito per Hollywood . . . beh insomma, 'sto tipo della storia sentiva il bisogno di fare cose da intellettuali; aveva una concezione molto artistica di sé stesso e della vita in generale. (*Una pausa*) A tutto questo, però, ci pensava e basta; in realtà lui non aveva mai provato a mettere in pratica nessuna di queste idee. E adesso, se mi ricordo bene, il motivo principale per cui non aveva mai provato a metterne in pratica neanche una era che sapeva di doversi trovare un buon lavoro e fare soldi . . . molto in fretta . . . per vestiti alla moda e una macchina come si deve, e cose del genere. Non mi ricordo . . . come andasse a finire la storia . . . però mi ricordo che era abbastanza triste. (*Una pausa*) Beh, comunque vorrei riuscire a capire chi mi ricordi. (*Un sospiro improvviso*) Oh, aspetta un attimo! Aspetta solo un attimo! Ci sono! Lo so! (*Schiocca le dita a mezz'aria con fare trionfante*) Elizabeth Taylor!

(*C'è una breve pausa*)

RAGAZZA (*Molto timidamente*) Oh . . . ?

JOEY Ah! I finally got a smile out of you . . . not a very big one . . . but still, it's a smile anyway. (*More confident than ever now*) Yep . . . Elizabeth Taylor . . . what a face that woman has! (*He makes comfortable, relaxing sounds*) No makeup, either. She doesn't need any. Like you, miss . . . one of those real true beauties. I mean now, for instance, you don't need anything to help you – no tricks. Just look at you: nothing fancy at all: a plain trenchcoat, no stockings. You don't need any gimmicks because you got a face like a wild dream, baby. You know what you remind me of? (*No answer*) You remind me of one of those classical pieces of fine Greek sculpture. And you know something else? You even look better than Elizabeth Taylor. I suppose that's because you're so much younger. You've got everything in your favour. (*He begins to whistle softly*) Is it annoying you, miss?

GIRL Is what annoying me?

JOEY My whistling. Since you're trying to read. I'll stop if you want me to.

GIRL It's not that bad.

JOEY You mean you're saying I'm a good whistler?

GIRL I suppose so.

JOEY Thanks. You know, you should see me on the dance floor.

GIRL Do you whistle when you dance, too?

JOEY Come to think of it now, you'd be a big hit at Roseland. You ever been there?

GIRL Been where?

JOEY To Roseland.

GIRL I never heard of it.

JOEY Well, I go there a lot, being a good dancer and everything. You'd be the main attraction because you're such a true beauty. What I mean to say is, some of the girls there, they'd probably be true-looking beauties too, if they didn't wear so much makeup. (*He sighs*) It's the same at work. I'm the manager of a five-and-ten . . . one of the biggest and newest in New York. Great location. Some people say it's the best one around. Very good chances for advancing myself. From manager on upward! Who knows, huh? It's the five-and-ten in the new Socony-Mobil Building. You know the one: all made of bright aluminum, very modern. The first aluminum building ever built. It's right across the street from the Chrysler Building. Now there's a building for you! The Chrysler Building! I don't know what all the fuss is over the Empire State Building. It's just taller, that's all. But I think the Chrysler Building is beautiful. Did you ever look up at it on a clear afternoon when the sky is bright blue and the sun is shining? Well, it almost looks as though it were painted against the sky. I never saw anything so great and tall; the perfect-looking spire with that tremendous needle point going way up there in the painted blue. I swear to God, it's like a huge modern painting.

JOEY Ah! Finalmente sono riuscito a strapparti un sorriso . . . non grandissimo . . . ma sì, dai, è pur sempre un sorriso. (*Più sicuro di sé che mai adesso*) Eh già . . . Elizabeth Taylor . . . che viso che ha quella donna! (*Sospira mettendosi a proprio agio e stemperando la tensione*) E senza trucco, tra l'altro! Non ne ha bisogno. Come lei, signorina . . . una di quelle bellezze davvero autentiche. Dai, voglio dire che insomma, tu non hai bisogno di alcun espediente – niente sotterfugi. Ma guardati un attimo: niente di eccessivo: un semplice impermeabile, niente calze. Non hai bisogno di fronzoli perché tu, tesoro, hai un viso da sogno. Sai cosa mi ricordi? (*Nessuna risposta*) Mi ricordi uno di quei capolavori della scultura greca. E sai un'altra cosa? Tu sei anche meglio di Elizabeth Taylor. Forse perché sei molto più giovane. Hai tutto dalla tua parte. (*Inizia a fischiare sommessamente*) La disturba, signorina?

RAGAZZA Mi disturba *cosa*?

JOEY Che sto fischiando. Visto che sta cercando di leggere. Ma smetterò se vuole.

RAGAZZA Non è poi tanto male.

JOEY Cioè stai dicendo che fischio bene?

RAGAZZA Credo di sì.

JOEY Grazie. Sai, dovresti vedermi sulla pista da ballo.

RAGAZZA Fischi anche mentre balli?

JOEY Adesso che ci penso, avresti un gran successo al Roseland⁸. Ci sei mai stata?

RAGAZZA Stata dove?

JOEY Al Roseland.

RAGAZZA Mai sentito.

JOEY Beh, io ci vado spesso visto che sono un ballerino e via scorrendo. Avresti un gran successo perché sei un vero schianto. Quello che voglio dire è che anche alcune delle ragazze che sono lì potrebbero essere davvero uno splendore, se non si truccassero così tanto. (*Sospira*) E lo stesso al lavoro. Sono responsabile in un grande magazzino, di quelli che vendono cose a buon mercato⁹ . . . uno dei più grandi e nuovi qui a New York. Bel posto. Alcuni dicono che è il migliore della zona. Ci sono anche buone possibilità di far carriera. Da responsabile dritto verso i piani alti. E chi lo sa, eh? È il grande magazzino nel Socony-Mobil¹⁰. Sai, quello in alluminio tutto brillante, davvero moderno. Il primo palazzo tutto in alluminio. È proprio di fronte al grattacielo della Chrysler¹¹. Ecco un palazzo che fa per te! Quello della Chrysler! Non capisco tutte le storie che fanno per l'Empire State Building¹². È solo più alto, ecco tutto. Secondo me, invece, il palazzo della Chrysler è bellissimo. Ti sei mai messa a guardarlo di pomeriggio quando è limpido, il cielo è di quell'azzurro intenso e c'è il sole? Insomma, lo vedi lì, contro l'orizzonte, quasi come se fosse dipinto. Non ho mai visto niente di così alto e grandioso; quella spirale perfetta con quell'enorme punta a spillo che

Anyway, the girls there . . . the ones who work for me at the five-and-ten where I'm the manager . . . all of them, trying just too hard to look too good. They don't need all that stuff on their faces. But I get along with them okay. I'm a good boss to work for. Ask any of 'em, they'll tell you. Of course, I could tell them to do anything, and they'd do it, too. Most of them, well, you know how it is . . . young boss, bachelor, and everything . . . they all sort of got eyes for me. But it's all right, I guess: I even let them call me by my first name, Joey. Except when the district manager is on the scene. Then they have to call me Mr. Dove. That's my name, by the way, Joey Dove. What's yours?

GIRL (*After a pause*) It's not important.

JOEY (*Uneasily*) Well, anyway . . . that's the way it goes, huh? (*A depressed tone*) Pretty warm in here, don't you think? (*No response*) I think I'll take off my coat . . . unload some of the pressing weight. (*He removes his topcoat*) Whenever I get . . . *depressed*, I usually begin to perspire. I get very warm and full of tension. Not a cool tension like most people, but a warm tension. I'm a funny guy, you know? Everyone thinks I'm a happy-go-lucky person with no troubles at all. But if they only knew about how . . . *sad* . . . I can get sometimes. I guess I think too much; maybe I'm alone more than I should be. (*Chuckling*) Lone wolves . . . loners like myself: I wonder if they all think . . . (*Laughing loudly now*) about suicide the way I do. But naturally it doesn't mean a thing. I've been interested in that subject ever since I can remember. What about you? You seem to be a loner. Do you ever think about committing suicide? (*No answer*) Really warm in here.

GIRL Why don't you go out on deck? It's always *cool* out there.

JOEY Sometimes . . . *too* cool. Well . . . what about it?

GIRL What about what?

JOEY Coming out on deck with me?

GIRL No, thanks.

JOEY Aw, c'mon. Besides, we'll be docking any minute now.

GIRL I'm fine the way I am.

JOEY I always get a big kick out when we're pulling in on these ferries. All the bumps and the noise . . . and the crazy white foam that the water makes! C'mon . . . (THE GIRL *fumbles nervously with the magazine; she's unsure*) You're going to wear that magazine out.

GIRL It's my business.

JOEY (*Quickly*) Do you like to dance?

va su nel blu che sembra venuto fuori da un quadro. Dico sul serio, è come un enorme quadro moderno. Ad ogni modo, le ragazze lì . . . quelle che lavorano per me nel negozio dove sono responsabile . . . tutte quante, sono sempre lì che ce la mettono tutta per farsi vedere al meglio. Si mettono tutta quella roba sulla faccia che non serve a niente. Però vado d'accordo con loro. Io sono un buon capo per cui lavorare. Domandaglielo pure, sentirai cosa dicono. Ovviamente potrei chiedergli di fare qualsiasi cosa, e la farebbero anche. La maggior parte, beh, sai com'è . . . capo giovane, scapolo, e via dicendo . . . tutte quante hanno una specie di debolezza per me. Ma credo sia giusto così; lascio anche che mi chiamino per nome, Joey. Tranne quando è in scena il direttore di zona. Lì allora mi devono chiamare Signor Dove. A proposito, è così che mi chiamo, Joey Dove. E tu?

RAGAZZA (*Dopo una pausa*) Non è importante.

JOEY (*Insofferente*) Beh, insomma . . . così stanno le cose, eh? (*In tono afflitto*) Fa abbastanza caldo qui, non ti sembra? (*Nessuna risposta*) Sarà meglio che mi tolga il cappotto . . . mi libero di un po' di 'sto peso opprimente. (*Si toglie il soprabito*) Quando mi . . . *deprimo*, di solito inizio a sudare. Mi vengono su un caldo e un nervoso. La mia non è una tensione fredda come succede a molta gente, è una tensione calda. Sono un tipo strano, sai? Tutti pensano che io sia una persona felice, senza preoccupazioni. Ma se soltanto sapessero quanto . . . *triste* . . . posso diventare a volte. Mi sa che penso troppo; forse sono più solo del dovuto. (*Ridacchiando*) Lupi solitari . . . soli come me: mi domando se tutti loro pensino . . . (*Adesso ride di gusto*) al suicidio come ci penso io. Ma questo ovviamente non vuol dire niente. La questione mi è sempre interessata, da quel che ricordo. E tu invece? Sembri una solitaria tu. Ci pensi mai a suicidarti? (*Nessuna risposta*) Fa davvero caldo qui.

RAGAZZA Perché non te ne vai fuori sul ponte? Fa sempre *fresco* lì fuori.

JOEY A volte . . . *troppo* fresco. Beh . . . allora che ne dici?

RAGAZZA Che ne dico di cosa?

JOEY Di venire fuori con me sul ponte.

RAGAZZA No, grazie.

JOEY Oh, andiamo. E poi da un minuto all'altro siamo arrivati.

RAGAZZA Sto bene così.

JOEY È sempre un vero spasso quando raggiungiamo il pontile con questi traghetti. Tutti i colpi e il rumore . . . e tutta la schiuma bianca e pazzesca che fa l'acqua! Dai, andiamo . . . (LA RAGAZZA *si gingilla nervosamente con la rivista che ha in mano; è titubante*) Lo consumerai quel giornale.

RAGAZZA Sono affari miei.

JOEY (*Velocemente*) Ti piace ballare?

GIRL Never!

JOEY Not at all, huh? That's real shame. What I mean to say is, I think dancing is the best medicine for anything. Everyone should like it . . . should know how to dance. It's good for the . . . *ego*, I guess. Yeah, that's it . . . the perfect medicine for everybody's ego. It makes you feel free and easy . . . keeps people young and even a little wild. The best way possible, too, for men and women to meet each other and get acquainted easier. (*He hesitates to get a reaction, then he continues*) You should take it up sometimes. You don't know what you're missing. I've won a few dance contests. Last year, over at Palisades Park, across the Hudson River, I won for doing the frug. About a month ago I got fifty dollars, first prize, this girl and me, for doing the bossa like two professionals. It was up at Freedomland in the Moon Bowl. Ever been there? The Moon Bowl's my favorite spot for dancing. It's really okay. Listen miss... maybe you'd like to go with me this Saturday night?

GIRL (*To herself*) Oh dear...

(*A short pause*)

JOEY You didn't answer me, miss? Dancing? How about it? I think you'd...

GIRL (*Cutting in, sharply*) No, thank you!

JOEY (*Trying to show no concern over her attitude*) They always have a big-name singer, and there's always a top-name band for dancing. (*For the first time his voice sounds tense*) You sure you don't wanna go sometimes?

GIRL (*Tiredly, with a sigh*) Thank you . . . but I told you – no.

JOEY (*Becoming uneasy*) Well, anyway, the girls at work . . . I mean the ones who work for me . . . and the babes at Roseland . . . they find me a pretty attractive guy . . . no matter what you think, miss. I had a heck of a time when I was in high school. One heck of a time, let me tell you! The babes never left me alone. I think that's why I went to Hollywood. I knew I had what it takes. My old man was real proud of me. He used to call me Broadway Joe. He called me it all the way up until the time my mother died; then he lost practically all of his humour after that. He passed away almost exactly a year to the very day that she died – my mother. (*He pauses*) You know, I'll bet you have a hard time, too, don't you, miss? I mean, with that face of yours, like a beautiful piece of fine Greek sculpture . . . it's real classical-looking.

(*A brief pause*)

GIRL (*Then firmly*) You know something?

(*She looks straight at him now*)

RAGAZZA Per carità!

JOEY Proprio no, eh? È un vero peccato. Quello che voglio dire è che, secondo me, ballare è la miglior medicina per qualsiasi cosa. Dovrebbe piacere a tutti . . . tutti quanti dovrebbero essere capaci di ballare. Fa bene . . . all'ego, credo. Eh già, proprio così . . . la giusta medicina per l'ego della gente. Ti fa sentire libero e disinvolto . . . mantiene le persone giovani e anche un po' matte. E poi, per un uomo e una donna, è anche il modo migliore che ci sia per incontrarsi e conoscersi facilmente. (*Esita per ottenere una reazione, poi continua*) Dovresti provarci qualche volta. Non sai cosa ti perdi. Io ho vinto qualche gara di ballo. L'anno scorso, su al Palisades Park¹³, sull'Hudson, ho vinto ballando il frug¹⁴. Circa un mese fa ho vinto cinquanta dollari, il primo premio, io in coppia con 'sta ragazza, perché abbiamo ballato la bossa nova come due professionisti. Questo su a Freedomland, nel Moon Bowl¹⁵. Lì ci sei mai stata? Il Moon Bowl è il mio posto preferito per ballare. È davvero perfetto. Senta signorina... magari le andrebbe di venire con me questo sabato sera?

RAGAZZA (*A sé stessa*) Dio mio...

(*Una breve pausa*)

JOEY Non mi ha risposto, signorina? Ballare? Che ne dice? Penso che dovrebbe...

RAGAZZA (*Interrompendolo, in modo risoluto*) No, grazie!

JOEY (*Cercando di mostrare indifferenza nei confronti del suo atteggiamento*) Hanno sempre grandi nomi tra i cantanti, e c'è sempre un complesso di prim'ordine per ballare. (*Per la prima volta la sua voce risulta tesa*) Sicura che non ci vuoi andare qualche volta?

RAGAZZA (*Stanca, con un sospiro*) Grazie... ma ti ho già detto – no.

JOEY (*Cominciando a sentirsi a disagio*) Beh, ad ogni modo, le ragazze a lavoro... cioè quelle che lavorano per me... e quelle al Roseland... mi trovano tutte un tipo molto attraente... non importa quello che pensa lei, signorina. Me la sono passata alla grande quando ero alle superiori. Davvero alla grande, credimi! Le ragazze non mi lasciavano mai in pace. Per questo sono andato a Hollywood. Perché sapevo di avere la stoffa giusta. Il mio vecchio era davvero orgoglioso di me. Mi chiamava sempre Broadway Joe. Mi ha sempre chiamato così fino a quando non è morta mia madre; poi praticamente ha perso tutto il suo umorismo. Se n'è andato dopo quasi un anno esatto dal giorno in cui lei è morta – mia madre. (*Fa una pausa*) Sai, scommetto che è stata dura anche per te, vero, signorina? Cioè, con quel viso che sembra un capolavoro della scultura greca . . . davvero perfetto.

(*Una breve pausa*)

RAGAZZA (*Poi, risolutamente*) Sai una cosa?

(*Adesso guarda dritto verso di lui*)

JOEY What?

(THE GIRL gets up and begins stuffing her magazines and her books into her large pocketbook)

GIRL (*Very clearly*) If you like the crazy white foam that the water makes so much, then why don't you try to jumping into it sometime?

(THE GIRL turns to move away from JOEY, but he pulls her instantly by the arm, and then he holds her still and with great firmness. THE GIRL remains there, almost motionless, simply staring at him. There is the indication of a very slight smile on her lips)

JOEY (*Finally*) Yeah . . . miss . . . ! (*His voice is one the brink of cracking*) Yeah . . . ! I may just do that some time . . . I may just give it a try! (*They stop and stare at each other. JOEY keeps a tight grip on her arm. Then he begins to shake it lightly up and down*) All I wanted, miss . . . all I want now . . . is to . . . fuck you . . . YEAH! (*He glances quickly around them*) How about that now? Do you like that kind of language, huh? Yeah, yeah: I guess you kinda do. You're that different type of girl. I don't ever meet them much: real modern, huh? Maybe, maybe, I should have just said that to you in the first place, right? That's all I want: to get to fuck you. I've made a fool of myself, haven't I? Talking and talking, a mile a minute. About myself, about everything . . . and all because I just wanted to get to fuck you . . . *do you understand?*

GIRL (*After a moment*) I . . . I . . . where are you going?

JOEY Shut up for a minute! (*He eases his grip on her arm*) I'm lonely, baby, but you're even lonelier . . . you sat there, miss, you sat there, and you listened to everything I said. You never made even one try at getting away from me, did you?

(THE GIRL doesn't reply. We hear the roar of the waves outside and the ferryboat pulling in at the docks, hitting and splashing against the wooden barriers)

GIRL (*After a long moment*) Where are you going . . . in Saint George, that is?

(JOEY begins to smile a little)

JOEY I live alone. On Chapin Avenue.

GIRL I know where it is.

JOEY C'mon. Let's go out on deck. Let's go out and look at the crazy white foam that the water makes . . . (*He takes her by the arm as she steps down off the edge of the stage*) What do you do? Better yet: what's your name?

(THE GIRL stops and turns to face him)

GIRL My name is Eleanor. I go to school – college – majoring in English Literature . . . (*The lights begin to fade*) minoring in philosophy . . . and the Social Patterns of Urban Love . . . Sarah Lawrence . . .

(*She turns and begins to walk though the audience*)

JOEY Cosa?

(LA RAGAZZA *si alza e inizia a infilare le riviste e i libri nella sua ampia borsa*)

RAGAZZA (*In tono esplicito*) Se ti piace così tanto tutta quella schiuma bianca e pazzesca che fa l'acqua perché allora non ti ci butti una volta o l'altra?

(LA RAGAZZA *si volta per allontanarsi da JOEY, ma lui la prende subito per il braccio, poi la trattiene con grande fermezza. LA RAGAZZA rimane lì, pressoché immobile, si limita a fissarlo. L'accenno di un leggero sorriso si fa spazio sulle sue labbra*)

JOEY (*Finalmente*) Eh già . . . signorina . . . ! (*La sua voce è sul punto di spezzarsi*) Sì . . . ! Potrei proprio farlo una volta o l'altra . . . potrei fare un tentativo! (*Si fermano e si fissano l'un l'altro. JOEY mantiene stretta la presa al suo braccio. Poi inizia a muoverlo leggermente su e giù*) Tutto quello che volevo, signorina . . . tutto quello che voglio adesso . . . è . . . scoparla . . . GIÀ! (*Da un'occhiata veloce attorno*) Allora cosa ne dici? Ti piace questo modo di parlare, eh? Eh sì, certo: credo proprio che ti piaccia. Tu sei quel tipo diverso di ragazza. Non ne incontro mai molte: davvero moderna, eh? Ecco cosa voglio: riuscire a scoparti. Ho fatto la figura del cretino, o no? Parlare e parlare, a tutto spiano. Di me stesso, di qualsiasi cosa . . . e tutto soltanto perché volevo riuscire a scoparti . . . *capisci?*

RAGAZZA (*Dopo un attimo*) Io . . . Io . . . dove stai andando?

JOEY Taci un attimo! (*Allenta la presa al braccio*) Io sono solo, cara, ma tu sei ancora più sola . . . se ne stava là seduta, signorina, era seduta lì e ha ascoltato tutto quello che dicevo. Non ha fatto neanche il minimo tentativo di allontanarsi da me, o no?

(LA RAGAZZA *non risponde. Si sentono il fragore delle onde all'esterno e del ferry-boat che attracca alla banchina, va a sbattere ripetutamente contro i pali in legno e solleva degli spruzzi*)

RAGAZZA (*Indugia un momento*) Dove stai andando . . . a Saint George, giusto?

(JOEY *inizia a sorridere leggermente*)

JOEY Vivo da solo. Sulla Chapin Avenue.

RAGAZZA Ho presente dov'è.

JOEY Vieni, dai. Andiamo fuori sul ponte. Andiamo fuori a guardare tutta quella schiuma bianca e pazzesca che fa l'acqua . . . (*La prende per il braccio mentre scende dall'estremità del palcoscenico*) Che fai? Anzi: come ti chiami?

(LA RAGAZZA *si ferma e si gira verso di lui per guardarlo*)

RAGAZZA Mi chiamo Eleanor. Vado a scuola – al college – studio letteratura inglese . . . (*Le luci iniziano ad abbassarsi*) filosofia¹⁶. . . e sociologia dell'amore negli spazi urbani . . . Sarah Lawrence¹⁷. . .

(*Si volta e inizia a camminare in mezzo al pubblico*)

JOEY I thought you said it was Eleanor . . .

(He follows after her. The lights are fully out now. We hear the rumbling of the ferryboat and the splashing of the water, and the rocking of the creaking wooden beams. Then there are just the cries of sea gulls announcing the arrival of the ferryboat)

JOEY Pensavo avessi detto Eleanor . . .

(Lui le va dietro. Adesso le luci sono completamente spente. Si sentono il rumore del ferry-boat, lo sciabordare dell'acqua e il dondolio dei pali in legno che cigolano. Poi solo le strida dei gabbiani che annunciano l'arrivo del ferry-boat)

Note al testo

¹ Il fatto che un caffè con latte e zucchero venga considerato «regular», cioè normale, è tipicamente newyorkese. Di norma a New York il caffè viene servito con l'aggiunta di questi due ingredienti; se invece lo si vuole liscio bisogna specificare «only black». Questa distinzione, che a prima vista può risultare insolita ad un lettore italiano, è proprio ciò che viene a delinearsi nello scambio di battute iniziale tra i due protagonisti.

² Saint George è uno dei quartieri del distretto di Staten Island; è situato nella sua estremità nordorientale e ha un affaccio diretto sull'Upper Bay. Proprio in quest'area si trova il terminal dello Staten Island Ferry, il traghetto che collega Manhattan a Staten Island e a bordo del quale si svolge l'intera azione.

³ «Greyhound bus» indica uno degli autobus della Greyhound Lines, gli autobus di linea che collegano le maggiori città degli Stati Uniti. Il nome dell'azienda, così come il suo logo, fanno riferimento al *greyhound* – il levriero, cane noto per la sua velocità.

⁴ In questo contesto il termine «wolf» indica il donnaio; il sostantivo del testo in inglese ha una forte connotazione animale che viene soltanto in parte restituita dall'italiano «galletto».

⁵ «Phony» è un termine fortemente connotativo, l'italiano «falso» gli rende solo in parte giustizia. La parola fa parte del gergo americano ed è entrata in uso corrente a partire dagli inizi del novecento per affermarsi definitivamente nel dopoguerra – il suo uso più significativo in ambito letterario è senz'altro costituito dal romanzo di J. D. Salinger *The Catcher in the Rye/Il giovane Holden* (1951). L'origine del termine è incerta, esso potrebbe derivare dal «telefono/telephone» o molto più probabilmente dall'inglese «fawney», un'espressione usata da falsari e truffatori per riferirsi agli anelli dorati soltanto in superficie (Webster's New World College Dictionary)

⁶ Negli Stati Uniti il termine «relish» indica una salsa a base di cetriolini che molto spesso viene usata come *hot dog topping*. Non essendoci un esatto corrispondente in italiano, ciò che più si avvicina all'idea di *relish* è la «salsa verde», se non altro per il colore.

⁷ Con «Air Borne» si fa riferimento alle truppe aviotrasportate; nella storia dell'esercito statunitense vi sono state varie divisioni di aviotrasportati, alcune delle quali hanno combattuto in Corea.

⁸ Il Roseland Ballroom è stato uno storico locale di Manhattan; la sala da ballo venne aperta nel 1919 e si trovava inizialmente sulla 51st Street. Nel 1956 venne spostata in uno stabile sulla West 52nd Street e lì vi è rimasta fino alla sua chiusura definitiva nell'aprile 2014 (theguardian.com)

⁹ «Five-and-ten» è una tipologia di negozio che vende prodotti di vario genere il cui prezzo è basso e quindi accessibile ai più. Il *five-and-ten store* è una sorta di magazzino popolare in cui la qualità delle merci è un aspetto secondario rispetto al prezzo; in esso si trovano per lo più prodotti standardizzati, con un assortimento limitato e destinati ad una clientela con minori pretese rispetto a quella del grande magazzino. Col passare del tempo la distinzione tra queste due categorie è venuta meno ed è sopravvissuto soltanto il concetto di grande magazzino (*department store*). Il nome «five-and-ten store» deriva dall'insegna esposta da Frank Winfield Woolworth che nel 1879 a Lancaster ha aperto il primo negozio di questo genere; in esso tutti gli articoli erano in vendita al prezzo fisso di 5 e 10 cents. (Foglio, 42)

¹⁰ Il Socony-Mobil Building è un grattacielo di New York situato nel distretto di Manhattan sulla 150 East 42nd Street. Come testimonia il nome stesso, venne costruito con lo scopo di diventare il quartier generale della multinazionale petrolifera Socony-Mobil. Il palazzo è un tipico esempio di International Style, ha una forma semplice e squadrata e con i suoi 45 piani raggiunge i 174,5 metri. La progettazione del grattacielo venne affidata agli architetti Harrison & Abramovitz, già noti per il loro design all'avanguardia, e la sua costruzione venne ultimata nel 1956. Il tratto distintivo del palazzo sono senza dubbio le sue facciate: ad eccezione dei primi tre piani, l'intero edificio è rivestito da pannelli in acciaio inossidabile lavorato a sbalzo. Il progetto iniziale prevedeva una semplice facciata in mattoni, successivamente si ipotizzò di utilizzare dei pannelli in alluminio ma infine si optò per un materiale più resistente come l'acciaio inossidabile della United States Steel Corporation. Il Socony-Mobil Building si estende sulla superficie di un intero isolato; la base di tre piani comprende vari spazi commerciali ed è più ampia rispetto al resto dell'edificio che si sviluppa verticalmente con una torre centrale di quarantadue piani e due ali laterali di tredici piani ciascuna. (Landmarks Preservation Commission)

¹¹ Il Chrysler Building è un grattacielo di New York che sorge nell'area di Manhattan all'incrocio tra la 42nd Street e la Lexington Avenue. Il palazzo venne costruito tra il 1926 e il 1930 su progetto dell'architetto William van Alen; i lavori iniziarono nel pieno degli Anni ruggenti e vennero portati a termine nel mezzo della crisi più nera degli anni Trenta. L'edificio era originariamente destinato a William H. Reynolds e soltanto in un secondo momento passò nelle mani di Walter P. Chrysler, il fondatore dell'omonima casa automobilistica da cui prese il nome. Il Chrysler Building è un grattacielo di 77 piani, alto 319 metri e in perfetto stile Art déco. La sua forma piramidale è molto particolare, non mancano dettagli architettonici che rimandano al mondo delle automobili, ma l'elemento più caratteristico è senz'altro la guglia che slancia l'edificio e lo fa sembrare ancora più alto. Il Chrysler Building mantenne per un anno il primato di grattacielo più alto del mondo per poi essere superato dall' Empire State Building nel 1931. Vi è un netto contrasto tra i suoi esterni moderni e l'interno tradizionale con svariati richiami al passato, soprattutto all'antico Egitto. (Landmarks Preservation Commission)

¹² L' Empire State Building è uno dei grattacieli simbolo di New York, sorge nel distretto di Manhattan all'angolo tra la 5th Avenue e la West 34th Street. L'edificio venne realizzato tra il 1930 e il 1931 in risposta al Chrysler Building al quale rubò il titolo di palazzo più alto del mondo; mantenne il primato negli Stati Uniti fino al 1973, quando a sua volta fu superato dalle Torri Gemelle del World Trade Center. L'Empire State Building è un palazzo di 103 piani in stile Art déco e grazie all'antenna posizionata sul terrazzo dell'ultimo piano raggiunge i 443,2 metri. Il nome Empire State Building è un omaggio allo Stato di New York, detto anche The Empire State. (esbnyc.com)

¹³ Il Palisades Park era un parco divertimenti situato nell'area metropolitana di New York e più precisamente a nord, nella Contea di Bergen. Sorse negli ultimi anni del 19° secolo per poi svilupparsi nella prima metà del Novecento. Il suo momento di massimo splendore fu tra gli anni Cinquanta e Sessanta per poi essere chiuso nel 1971. Oltre che per il suo luna park, il Palisades Park era famoso per lo spazio concesso agli spettacoli musicali. (palisadespark.com)

¹⁴ Il termine «frug» indica uno stile di ballo molto simile al twist e in voga negli anni Sessanta.

¹⁵ Il Freedomland era un parco divertimenti situato nel Bronx. Fu attivo soltanto dal 1960 al 1964 e molto spesso venne considerato il diretto rivale del Palisades Park. Il Freedomland era suddiviso in sette aree tematiche che ripercorrevano le tappe fondamentali della storia degli Stati Uniti; il «Moon Bowl» era una pista da ballo all'aperto inclusa nella «Satellite City», la sezione dedicata alla recente esplorazione dello spazio. (backinthebronx.com)

¹⁶ I termini «majoring» e «minoring» sono propri del sistema universitario americano e non hanno un vero e proprio equivalente in italiano. Con «majoring» viene indicato l'ambito principale di studio, ovvero qualcosa che si avvicina al «corso di laurea»; «minoring» si riferisce invece al «corso complementare». Quest'ultimo può essere assimilato al cosiddetto «corso a scelta».

¹⁷ Sarah Lawrence è il nome di un prestigioso college di discipline umanistiche e artistiche con sede a Bronxville, nello Stato di New York. Dalla sua istituzione nel 1926, e fino al 1968, fu un college esclusivamente femminile. (sarahlawrence.edu)

PART II

1. Off-Off-Broadway

Off-Off-Broadway had to happen because nothing else was happening. The new anxious American playwrights had no audience to write for; they had no backers to turn to; there was no place to go. You had to be a European (an impossible requirement that was deeply perplexing to a young American playwright) with an established hit somewhere across the ocean – any ocean and in any country rather than our country – in order to have your play presented on Broadway, and even Off-Broadway.

– Leonard Melfi, *Encounters*

Leonard Melfi had the chance to establish himself as a playwright thanks to a phenomenon called Off-Off-Broadway; if it had not taken place, none of the experimental theater of the 1960s would have been possible and probably he would have gone on peddling his full-length autobiographical plays without going anywhere. In the early Sixties Melfi was one of the rising playwrights seeking mainstream success in vain; by capturing the sense of frustration of a whole new generation of writers, his statement above provides a perfect snapshot of New York theater scene in those years.

By the 1960s not only Broadway, but also Off-Broadway had become inaccessible and ceased being a stepping-stone for new artists. What came up in the Fifties as an alternative to the ruthless commercialism of Broadway ended up by being a smaller-scale replica of that very system, was driven by the same logics and had to face the same problems. Soaring costs of production, increasing professionalization as well as the desire to please both the audience and the critics resulted in sacrificing experimentation and turned off-Broadway theater into a commercial product devoid of its original meaning.

This artistic dead end together with the impossibility of accessing official circuits was one of the premises for Off-Off-Broadway, a movement that dismissed financial success in favor of experimentalism and conceived theater as an art that can elicit strong emotions instead of simply pleasing the crowd.

If we stick to the notion of the New York theater system as vertically structured, Broadway occupies the top rung of this ideal ladder, Off-Broadway stands at the second highest rung and Off-Off-Broadway is relegated to the bottom rank. From this perspective, Off-Off-Broadway evolved in

an unconventional way: instead of climbing up the ladder of success, artists climbed it downwards, and they did not simply leave Off-Broadway above them creating its smaller equivalent, they completely distanced themselves from what they perceived as the corrupt Broadway establishment. Their descent was both figurative – going all the way down the conventional theater hierarchy – and literal: the new generation kept heading straight down until they reached the underground level. Besides having a quintessentially underground attitude¹, Off-Off-Broadway was an underground phenomenon even in the most literal sense of the word because many performances were actually staged below the surface of the ground in spaces such as basements and cellars.

The tension between going overground and remaining underground has always played a major role in the history of Off-Off-Broadway. Especially at the beginning, many dramatists and actors used to see Off-Off-Broadway as a platform to showcase their talent and climb up to professional theaters; only when their artistic awareness grew, did artists change their mindset and fully embraced underground productions.

One more factor that led to the development of Off-Off-Broadway was the rising power of the counterculture and its influence on the movements that were dominating other artistic fields such as visual arts, music, poetry and dance. Counterculture relied on the arts to spread its revolutionary ideas and create an alternative to mainstream culture; inevitably, even theater was affected by this tidal wave. The subversion brought about by Off-Off-Broadway in American theater was very much in line with the destabilization prompted by the counterculture; the close connection between these two phenomena is underlined also by their similar evolution and duration: they both exploded in the early Sixties, peaked around the middle of the decade and faded out gradually in the early Seventies.

Although nowadays Off-Off-Broadway is referred to as a movement, this definition – as Bottoms suggests (3) – should be held with a certain degree of skepticism because all movements

¹ Off-Off-Broadway has a quintessentially underground attitude because the term “underground” refers to something that is experimental, unconventional and radical, and all these adjectives are suitable to describe off-off production. Moreover, in the first chapter of his book *Playing Underground*, Stephen J. Bottoms makes a distinction between the “avant-grade” and the “underground”, and claims that Off-Off-Broadway is definitely closer to the latter concept.

normally share a program or have a manifesto, they are characterized by a homogeneous production and are guided by a group of leaders, yet Off-Off-Broadway had none of these things. Other dynamics held together this unconventional group of artists and the most apparent of them was certainly geographical proximity since everything took place within two neighborhoods of Lower Manhattan. Off-Off-Broadway bloomed in Greenwich Village and subsequently extended to the East Village; these bohemian spots became a sort of little world apart in which a new and unconventional lifestyle as well as an alternative to commercial theater were possible. Secondly, off-off-Broadway artists were unified by their negative attitude towards money. Minimizing its presence and its importance in theater activities was seen as the sole possible way out of the vicious circle that was responsible for the deterioration of both Broadway and Off-Broadway. Except for some coffeehouses that embraced the policy of one-dollar minimum purchase from the menu, most of the times attending off-off-Broadway performances was free of charge; donations at the end of each play were meant to cover the costs of production². These daring views on money proved to be both the source of strength and the cause of ruin of Off-Off-Broadway: on the one hand, the movement steered clear of the poison that spoiled the establishment and had instead a genuine approach to theater; on the other hand, the lack of money was the main reason behind the failure of many experimental ventures. Since its dawning Off-Off-Broadway struggled against commercialism and the so-called “selling-out”; nevertheless, these were exactly the reasons that brought the movement to an end. From the late 1960s onwards, more and more off-off artists and venues surrendered to commercial pressure and joined the establishment; this inevitably represented the defeat of the original underground spirit that had kept the group together. In the wake of the 1960s counterculture, a third aspect consolidated the off-off-Broadway circle, namely the will to break away from established rules, traditions and conventions; this emphasis on freedom and change can also provide an explanation to the difficulty

² Most of the time funds were raised by passing a hat around the room; because of this unusual way of collecting money Off-Off-Broadway was unflatteringly referred to as the “pass-the-hat-circuit”. This definition was coined by the *New York Times* journalist Elenore Lester – in 1965 she wrote an article on the Off-Off-Broadway scene entitled *The Pass-the-Hat Theater Circuit*.

in pinning down Off-Off-Broadway using conventional criteria. Eager to provide an alternative to conventional theater, Off-Off-Broadway introduced a new way of both acting and writing. Whereas traditional Method acting was based on emotions, Off-Off-Broadway performances tended to focus on the physical presence on stage³. One-act plays became the trademark of Off-Off-Broadway; unlike dramas that stuck to the traditional three-act structure and staged a complete story, one acts portray just a single dramatic fragment and were thus far more immediate. The use of this stylistic device was dictated also by practical reasons like the fact that more often than not plays were performed in claustrophobic venues in which people would not sit as long as they might in conventional theaters. As for the language, Off-Off-Broadway pushed it to its limits; it became blunter, polemic and sought to destroy all existing taboos.

Finally, the changes brought about by Off-Off-Broadway affected also the conventional hierarchies within theater. The movement promoted an alternative system in which directors, playwrights, actors and all the people involved in the production of a play were on the same level.

1.1 The Premises in the Fifties

Although Off-Off-Broadway exploded in the 1960s and has become a symbol of that decade, its inception can be traced back to the 1950s. In that time span, all the major factors behind the rise of underground theater emerged, paving the way for the upcoming movement.

The most significant step towards Off-Off-Broadway was possibly represented by the Living Theater, an experimental theater company founded in the late forties by Judith Malina and her husband Julian Beck. After the failed attempt to convert a basement into a theater, the Becks decided to use the living room of their Upper West Side apartment as a performance space and mounted their first play there in 1951. In its early phase, which lasted until the mid-1950s, the Living Theater had already developed many of the features that would subsequently characterize Off-Off-Broadway, like

³ This substantial change can be clearly associated with the new importance acquired by the body in various artistic and non-artistic fields in the early 1960s.

a strong emphasis on experimentalism, the use of informal performance spaces, the creation of a heterogeneous group of artists as well as the promotion of collaboration among them. After having been closed down for building violation, the Living Theater came back on scenes in 1959; the restored company settled in a former department store in the Greenwich Village and performed there until it was forced to close down once again in 1963 – this time for nonpayment of taxes. From that moment onwards, the Living Theater ceased to be a permanent theater; the Becks alongside a small group of members of the company left for Europe and set up an itinerant collective. Those who stayed in New York, instead, progressively merged into the rising off-off-Broadway scene and had the chance to play key roles within the movement.⁴

A further contribution to the experimental theater scene of the fifties came from actress Julie Bovasso. Being a former member of the Living Theater, Bovasso was familiar with the New York environment and in 1955 she embarked on her own theater venture: Tempo Theatre. She too rented an apartment, converted it into a performance space and staged innovative plays by French avant-gardists such as Genet and Ionesco. The spirit of the Tempo Theatre was similar to that of the Living, yet Bovasso's enterprise lasted only two years and ended in 1957.

Off-Off-Broadway theater as well as other major American movements could never have developed without the sudden explosion of the coffeehouse scene in the late 1950s. The bohemian atmosphere that had characterized Greenwich Village since the second half of the 19th century combined with the shift of the beatnik movement from San Francisco to New York, helped coffeehouses to establish themselves as important gathering places for nonconformist artists and intellectuals. Very soon, these venues turned out to be a breeding ground for creativity and the free circulation of ideas and inevitably fostered the rise of phenomena like Off-Off-Broadway. The Village coffeehouse scene was constantly changing; opening a café was a simple and fashionable

⁴ The most notable examples in this respect are Lawrence Kornfeld and Joseph Chaikin who became directors of The Judson Poets' Theater and the Open Theater, respectively.

enterprise, but it was also short-lived – most of these venues survived for too short a period to establish themselves and become influential. Caffè Cino was opened in the late 1950s and proved to be an exception to this general trend: it would be active for almost a decade and being the first key venue to step into off-off-Broadway scene it would also provide an inspiration for many other café-theaters.

Finally, one last premise for the innovative approach embraced by Off-Off-Broadway is represented by Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story*. The play was written in 1958 and followed an unusual course: it first premiered in Berlin in 1959 and then, on January 14, 1960 was presented at the Provincetown Playhouse in Greenwich Village. The play enjoyed both critical and commercial success and, above all, it became a source of inspiration for a new generation of rising playwrights. *The Zoo Story* was an unconventional play and had much more in common with forthcoming Off-Off-Broadway than with Off-Broadway⁵ – the portrayal of a trivial everyday situation, the choice of a realistic subject verging on the absurd, the New York setting and the use of the one-act structure as well as of powerful language were all features of Albee's play that would be taken up by the experimental dramatists of the sixties.

1.2 The Movement in and beyond the Sixties.

Despite being rooted in the previous decade, Off-Off-Broadway is generally regarded as a sixties phenomenon; in that decade, the movement came into the limelight, reached the height of its creative power and eventually began to stagger. Although coffeehouses were not the sole off-off venues, they always had a leading role in shaping the history of the movement, especially in its initial stages.

The beginning of Off-Off-Broadway as a conscious theatrical movement is dated to September 27, 1960 when Alfred Jarry's *King Ubu* opened at the Take 3, a coffeehouse on Bleecker Street. The reason for regarding that date as the start of the off-off-Broadway movement is to be found in the awareness of making a different kind of theater; the program that accompanied *King Ubu*

⁵ *The Zoo Story* has many things in common also with the three one-act plays by Leonard Melfi that I have translated and that I will analyze on chapter 3.

described the production as “a return to the original idea of off-Broadway theater, in which imagination is substituted for money, and plays can be presented in a way that would be impossible in commercial theatre” (Smith 159).

The increasing number of plays performed in coffeehouses gave birth to a new genre – the so-called “cafe drama” – and already in 1960, the *Village Voice* had a more or less regular feature devoted to them entitled *Cafe Theatre*. This name was used to distinguish coffeehouse productions both from *Off-Broadway* and from *Theatre Uptown*. Later that year, the theater critic of the *Village Voice* Jerry Tallmer coined the term “Off-Off-Broadway” and from that moment on it appeared as the title of a regular column of the local newspaper.

Off-Off-Broadway has been defined as “theater without theaters” (Smith 159) because performances were held in unusual venues that had nothing to do with established theaters – primarily cafes but also churches, warehouses and private apartments. This underground phenomenon had its initial epicenter in the bohemian Greenwich Village, but soon it spread and took root into the adjoining East Village. Both these neighborhoods could count on their territory two venues that stood out for their “stability and continuity” (Smith 160) and for this very reason made history within the movement. These four off-off-Broadway institutions are Caffe Cino, Café La Mama, Judson Poets’ Theater and Theatre Genesis – two coffeehouses and two churches respectively.

In December 1958, Joe Cino opened his coffeehouse on 31 Cornelia Street and embracing experimental theater was the last thought he had in mind. Caffe Cino began just like many other Village cafes, with the simple aim of providing a hangout for friends and local artists. Since the very beginning, however, Joe Cino gave prominence to the arts and set up painting exhibitions as well as other artistic entertainments such as poetry readings, music and dance performances – in this early stage, theater was the only missing art. To fill this gap, in 1959 the first play-reading sessions began, and gradually evolved into actual theatrical performances giving birth to the prototype of off-off-Broadway theater. Most of the actors who used to take part in the early sessions were drama students who performed their acting exercises and this was possibly the main reason behind the success of

theatrical activities at the Cino. The initial production of the coffeehouse relied on adaptations of famous works as well as on off-Broadway material – especially Tennessee Williams’ one-act plays – and plays by Samuel Becket. From 1961 on, instead, Caffè Cino began to focus on new American playwrights such as Doric Wilson, David Starkweather, Lanford Wilson and H.M. Koutoukas. Joe Cino had a strong flamboyant personality and so did his coffeehouse; nevertheless he never interfered in theatrical productions. Embracing the most genuine off-off-Broadway spirit, Joe Cino never had an authoritative approach: he just chose the plays following his instinct – as Ellen Stewart at Café La Mama did – and provided a space to perform them. He insisted on the vitality of theater – something that had almost completely got lost in commercial productions – and on the fact that a play had to come to life; thanks to this attitude he brought about a new wave of enthusiasm and made Off-Off-Broadway possible. Improvisation and inventiveness were key words at Caffè Cino; the stage, for example, was first an empty square in the middle of the room and then it was improvised out of milk crates covered with carpet remnants. Settings were minimal and most of the props were randomly stolen or simply painted and placed against the wall behind the stage.

Besides laying the foundation for experimental theater, Caffè Cino emerged also as an important point of reference for the pre-Stonewall gay scene. To a large extent, it was as if inside Cino’s coffeehouse two underground transgressive movements were coming together and this played a major role in creating an extremely liberal atmosphere. Caffè Cino supported complete freedom of expression and often pushed this concept to the limits breaking whatever kind of taboo and staging pure provocation.

In March 1965 a fire, probably caused by a gas leak, destroyed the interior of the Cino and this represented a major blow for the venue; subsequently the situation at the coffeehouse never recovered and Joe Cino’s addiction to amphetamines only made things worse. In March 1967, Cino committed suicide; the coffeehouse, deprived of its leader, fell apart and closed the following year.

In the early 1960s Ellen Stewart worked as a fashion designer at Saks Fifth Avenue and had no idea that she was about to change the course of American theater with her forthcoming Café La

Mama. After a serious illness that forced her to quit the job, Ellen Stewart took a fortunate trip overseas that provided her with a flash of inspiration for her future venture:

I went to Tangier with a dear friend, Theresa Klein. We were sitting in the Casbah one afternoon philosophizing, and suddenly she said, ‘Ellen, you gotta have a pushcart out of yourself.’ I remembered all those pushcarts on Orchard Street. I knew I needed a pushcart outside of myself that I could fill with people and interesting things. [...] There was another motivation, too. I was sitting in a cafe in Paris and there was a group of people talking nearby and the French were really giving the Americans a hard way, elucidating how at a cultural level we had absolutely nothing to contribute by European Standards. (Glover, “La Mama Movement Is Getting Around”)

When Ellen came back home she had a mission to fulfill, yet, as in the case of Joe Cino, experimental theater was not one of her immediate priorities. In 1962, she decided to rent a basement in East Village to set up her own boutique; theater became part of her enterprise only when the playwright Paul Foster began to use her basement as a theater after hours. Driven by a strong enthusiasm for those theatrical activities, Ellen did up the basement to recreate a suitable atmosphere for staging plays and introduced a coffee booth: Café La Mama was born. She never wanted to set up a conventional playhouse – all she wanted was a place where people could feel comfortable while enjoying some good theater and coffee drinking was vital gesture in this sense⁶. Unlike Caffè Cino’s gaudiness, Ellen Stewart sought to recreate a neutral space that could fit whatever kind of production; instead of cramming her room with all sorts of paraphernalia, she embraced the less-is-more philosophy and stripped down the walls to red bricks. This solution proved to be so functional that it was taken up again also in the following venues, becoming one of La Mama’s trademarks. As far as her endeavor is concerned, Ellen Stewart can be considered as the female and East Village counterpart to Caffè Cino: she too did her best to help a new generation of playwrights that was being rejected by mainstream theater institutions and left plenty room for experimentalism. Ellen Stewart’s lively personality turned her into the charismatic leader of the East Village scene; she believed in what she was doing and above all, she never gave up on supporting young dramatists – the name La Mama refers precisely to Stewart’s maternal attitude towards her *biddies*⁷.

⁶ In *The Good Scene: Off Off-Broadway* Michael Smith claims that the “café gesture is important since part of the Ellen’s basic idea is to release the audience from the rigidity of numbers and rows and to make them comfortable.” (164) Apart from La Mama, this statement could be used to describe the whole underground theater scene that developed in coffeehouses of the Greenwich Village and East Village.

⁷ Ellen used this endearment to refer to the playwrights that used to perform at La Mama.

La Mama was essentially conceived as a testing ground for the artists and as such, it was not subjected to the same rules as commercial theater. Ellen simply chose the scripts and then gave carte blanche to the playwright who had to choose a director and put a cast together. She was never affected by the so-called Broadway-hit syndrome and her approach to theater had no other purpose than creativity. As Ellen recalled in an interview, her way of selecting material was based much more on her sensations rather than on rational thoughts: “If a script “beeps” to me, I do it. Audiences may hate some of them but I believe in them. The only way I can explain my “beeps” is that I’m no intellectual but my instincts tell me automatically when a playwright has something.”(Glover, “La Mama Movement Is Getting Around”)

In its early phase, Café La Mama produced adaptations of works by authors like O’Neill, Williams and Pinter as well as material coming from Caffè Cino and plays by new playwrights – Leonard Melfi was one of them. He discovered the existence of La Mama by chance, when the day’s barker drew him into the café:

[In late summer 1962] I was walking up my street, when I discovered for the first time a basement coffeehouse which was also a theater doing one-act plays by untried playwrights. A bright, hand-painted sign hung up over the basement window at street level; it spelled out boldly: “Café LaMama Presents.” I met Paul Foster [...] acting more or less as a barker. He was standing out on the sidewalk to get people who passed by to come down to see the show – that day I was one of the people (*Encounters* vi).

In October 1962, Melfi had the chance to present his first one-act play, *Lazy baby Susan*, there; six months later the coffeehouse was closed down because of the joint action of Actors’ Equity and city authorities. Subsequently, La Mama relocated to a loft at 82 Second Avenue and by the end of 1963 its activity started once again. From that moment on, Ellen Stewart decided to focus exclusively on innovative playwrights and made one major change, turning the coffeehouse into a private club: La Mama ETC – Experimental Theatre Club. This step was taken in order to avoid further legal problems, yet, even so La Mama could not escape the clampdown promoted by the city council and was forced to close down once again. After this second eviction, Stewart’s enterprise relocated to another loft at 122 Second Avenue, and remained there for more than three years; activities benefited from this stability and La Mama ETC could establish itself and become an off-off-Broadway

institution. In terms of staged performances, La Mama was a truly prolific venue⁸; among the writers discovered and produced by Ellen Stewart in this period are Paul Foster, Tom Eyen and Jean-Claude van Itallie.

Since the very beginnings, Caffe La Mama had a strong international vocation; Ellen Stewart always set her sights not only on New York but also on the international scene and for example, she had often invited guest-playwrights from all over the world. By the mid-1960s this international approach became even more concrete: in the wake of the success of the Open Theater⁹, Ellen decided to create a travelling ensemble that would expand La Mama's reputation overseas. La Mama Troupe – this was the name of the project – made its first European tour in 1965 and Leonard Melfi's *Birdbath* was one of the plays included in the program.¹⁰ After its return to the US, La Mama Troupe evolved into a permanent workshop guided by Tom O'Horgan and toured Europe again in 1966 and 1967.

At the end of the decade, the tension between commercial theater and underground low-budget productions emerged preponderantly at La Mama as in the rest of the off-off-Broadway scene. In this case, there was no suicide to put an end to the endeavor – La Mama's activity, in fact, never stopped but rather took a mainstream turn. This process of transition was undoubtedly triggered by Tom O'Horgan's decision to take part into the production of Broadway musical *Hair*¹¹; his movement upwards – despite being momentary – was seen as some sort of betrayal and changed the dynamics within La Mama forever. The situation kept deteriorating until O'Horgan decided to quit and set up

⁸ Productions at La Mama opened on Wednesday and run through Sunday, with two performances each on Friday and Sunday nights. Sometimes plays run for more than one week and were revived, too. (See Smith, 166)

⁹ Beside the two coffeehouses and churches, off-off-Broadway scene included also several experimental theater groups, among which the Open Theater was the most prominent. The company was established in 1963 and was one of the direct descents of The Living Theater since its founder, Joseph Chaikin, was a member of the experimental ensemble guided by the Becks. The Open Theater completely devoted to experimentation so much so that at the beginning it did not perform publicly; it was just a permanent workshop and its actors simply joined the productions of the leading off-off venues. Subsequently, it opened up to public performances and throughout the sixties it underwent the same rearrangements as the rest of the underground scene. The Open Theater had such a pivotal role in Off-Off-Broadway that the end of the movement conventionally coincides with the company's voluntary dissolution in 1973.

¹⁰ The rest of the playbill included: *Chicago* by Sam Shepard, *This is the Rill Speaking* by Lanford Wilson, *The Recluse* by Paul Foster, *Thank You Miss Victoria* by William Hoffman, *The Circus* by Gerald Schoenwolf, *War and America Hurrah* by Jean-Claude Van Itallie and *The Circle* by Alex Civallo. The tour reached Denmark and France. (lamama.org)

¹¹ *Hair* was a rock musical by Gerome Ragni and James Rado that focused on the counterculture of the 1960s. It was first produced in Off-Broadway in 1967, and since it turned out to be a hit the following year climbed up to Broadway.

his own troupe in 1970; throughout the rest of the decade even La Mama – which had meanwhile moved to 74A East Fourth Street – surrendered under the relentless commercial pressure and ended up becoming a professional corporation: Theater La Mama Inc.

The Judson Poets' Theater was housed and fostered by Judson Memorial Church, a Baptist church founded in the late 19th century and located on Washington Square. In the early 1960s, Judson Memorial Church started to promote a series of non-ecclesiastical activities to meet the artistic needs of its community: first it established the Judson Gallery for painting and visual arts, then it began to organize dance and poetry workshops, and eventually focused on theater. The turning point in the theater production of Judson Church was marked by the arrival of the assistant minister Al Carmines; he did better than the earlier attempts and brought the church up to the standards of the other rising Off-Off-Broadway venues. In fall 1961, Al Carmines unified the Judson Memorial theater workshop under the name Judson Poets' Theater and embraced the aim of providing a voice for a new generation of experimental playwrights. In addition to dramatists, Judson Poets' Theater included a team of directors, designers and actors – both amateur and professional – as well as volunteers who promoted the shows. Within the group developed a great collaborative spirit and Al Carmines soon realized the potential of the project: what was happening at Judson Memorial Church was more than a simple showcase for the playwrights to climb up to commercial theater – it was an effective alternative to the crowd-pleasing productions of Broadway.

The fact that the Judson Poets' was sponsored by a church did not affect its theater policy; Al Carmines together with the director Robert Nichols established that no religious dramas would be produced and that no censorship would be applied to content or language. This latter aspect was possibly the most controversial point, yet in spite of the initial reluctance of the church, Judson Poets' Theater went on its own way refusing any compromise whatsoever. Performances staged at Judson Church were extremely progressive: theater fused together with visual arts, dance and music to create innovative shows. Music, in particular, always had a crucial role in the history of Judson Poets' Theater; its spiritual leader Al Carmines was a minister, an occasional actor and a successful

composer of experimental crossover music. His musical ambitions shaped the late production of the Judson Poets' Theater that was based almost exclusively on the minister's "large-cast oratorio musicals" (Bottoms, 350). Throughout the sixties and the seventies, the Judson produced works by playwrights such as María Irene Fornés, Diane Di Prima, Rosalyn Drexler, David Epstein, Paul Goodman, and adapted works by Gertrude Stein¹².

Churches and coffeehouses were poles apart, and this aspect clearly affected the staging of the plays. Judson Memorial Church is a three-story church and theater performances were mounted either in the sanctuary or in the choir-loft – the former occupies the second floor while the latter extends across the width of the building and overlooks the worship area.

In the aftermath of the 1960s, the Judson Poets' Theater gradually came apart, however it faced a slightly different fate from La Mama. In 1970 some of the centerpieces of the Judson – among them the resident director Lawrence Kornfeld – decided to quit and the number of theater performances dropped dramatically; Al Carmines became the sole leading figure and made his trademark out of his unconventional *oratorios*. Throughout the seventies, the success of these musicals went beyond the off-off-Broadway scene and some of them entered mainstream productions. In the early eighties, a brain aneurysm forced Al Carmines to resign from the church; as a consequence activities at Judson Poets' Theater suffered a serious setback from which they never recovered.

The other religious institution that promoted experimental theater and became a cornerstone of Off-Off-Broadway was St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery, an Episcopal church located in the East Village. As in the case of Judson Memorial Church, the turning point at St. Mark's was represented by the arrival of a forward-thinking minister, Reverend Michael Allen. He had a progressive approach to religious practices and regarded the arts as a powerful medium to re-establish the dialog between the church and people living in the surrounding area. Theatre Genesis – as well as other artistic

¹² Musicals based on Stein's works and adapted by Al Carmines were *What Happened* (1963), *In Circles* (1963), *Listen to me* (1974) and *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* (1979). (judson.org)

activities held at St. Mark's Church – was exactly the fruit of this desire to reach out to the local community through art.

Right in the middle of a deep existential crisis, the former bit-part Hollywood actor Ralph Cook happened upon St. Mark's Church and was so impressed by Reverend Allen's open-mindedness that he decided to join the minister in his unconventional mission. Cook directed his efforts toward theater activities and in 1963 started his acting workshop in a room of the parish hall. The performance space consisted of a small black-box studio and was much more akin to tiny coffeehouses than to the lofty sanctuary that hosted Judson Poets' Theater.

After the failure of the first production in July 1964¹³, Ralph Cook took over Theatre Genesis and turned it into an effective space where playwrights could experiment as widely and wildly as they wished (Sainer, "Theatre: Study in Color"). A significant step towards experimental theater was represented by the production of a double bill by the then unknown Sam Shepard – he would become a fixture of Theatre Genesis and paved the way for other up-and-coming young playwrights, including Leonard Melfi.

One of the activities that enhanced the reputation of Theatre Genesis as a "home for new playwrights" (Sainer, "Theatre: Study in Color") was the Monday night reading workshop in which original plays selected by Ralph Cook were read by actors. These sessions served as a useful testing-ground for the playwrights and helped to bring out the potential of the text in view of a possible production. In 1965, *Birdbath* and *Ferryboat* premiered at Theatre Genesis on double bills after having gone through the reading workshop, and Melfi turned out to be the most-produced writer of the year. Subsequently, Theatre Genesis embraced a more radical aesthetics that was more in line with the environment surrounding St. Mark's Church and the zeitgeist. In the late 1960s, in particular,

¹³ The first production was *Study in Color*, a "pre-packaged" religious play by Malcom Boyd. It was directed by Woodie King Jr. and performed by a touring company.

this venue stood out for its conspicuous machismo and overtly paraded heterosexuality¹⁴ as well as for his engagement in political issues like the harsh criticism of the Vietnam War.

Theatre Genesis underwent the same destiny as the other off-off venues: already in the late sixties commercial pressures from the outside disrupted its internal balance and in the following decade, the final process of dissolution was completed. The real collapse of Theatre Genesis started in 1970 with the resignation of the resident artistic director Ralph Cook; subsequently the theater was co-run by the playwrights Sam Shepard, Murray Mednick and Walter Hadler, but this was just an expedient to postpone its definite end.

In addition to these four venues, an important contribution to the New York underground theater scene was given by The Playwrights' Unit. The venture was established in 1963 and was guided by the playwright Edward Albee together with the producers Richard Barr and Clinton Wilder; to subsidize their activities they initially used the profits of Albee's hit *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and leased the Village South Theatre in Greenwich Village. The aim of the project was to create a space where emerging playwrights could mount their plays with the support of a team of experts, possibly in view of a climb to professional and established theaters. Although the Unit embraced the free-show policy and people involved in the production of the plays simply volunteered, the pretense of professionalism set it apart from the rest of off-off scene – according to its detractors, the venue was too close to commercial circuits and risked to concentrate just on upward mobility at the expense of innovation and experimentation. The Playwrights Unit produced a wide range of dramatists – from LeRoy Jones to John Guare, to Megan Terry and Adrienne Kennedy, and Melfi too had his *Halloween* put on there in October 1966.

¹⁴ These aspects distinguished Theatre Genesis from the rest of Off-Off-Broadway scene.

2. About the Playwright

There's something about when you put people together and things come out of their mouths one after another, and action happens. And the fact that you think of it coming to life, and there's an audience. This makes me want to write more and more, and the more plays I write the more I dig it. So I can't stop.

Leonard Melfi

Leonard Melfi was one of the most promising writers launched by the off-off-Broadway movement in the sixties; his career was characterized by ups and downs in popularity and prestige, and despite a series of major accomplishments, he never achieved the fame of fellow playwrights such as Sam Shepard, Lanford Wilson or Terrence McNally. Alongside his moderate success that peaked with *Birdbath*, most of the life of the playwright was marked also by discouragement, loneliness and alcoholism – Melfi eventually let alcohol get the better of him and spent his last years drinking alone in a hotel room of the Upper West Side and avoiding any contact with relatives or acquaintances.

Leonard Melfi was a prolific author and throughout his career he wrote more than sixty plays, almost all of which were either produced or simply given stage readings; only a small part of his works, though, was collected and published and this has undoubtedly hindered his widespread popularity. In many respects, Melfi always remained an underground artist and embodied an authentic off-off-Broadway spirit even long after the original phenomenon had collapsed.

With a few exceptions, Melfi's production belongs to a genre that can be defined as tragicomic urban realism. Most of the plays are set in his beloved New York City and involve bizarre, outcast characters trapped in the urban life of an alienating metropolis; the author simply dramatizes their common everyday experiences with a tragicomic attitude. In Melfi's plays, the most tragic human stories are filtered through humor that minimizes negativity and adds a comic slant to the saddest vicissitudes. The playwright was a disillusioned if sentimental observer of New York and in his works he recreated it in its smallest details: from the squawking of seagulls of the Upper Bay to the stifling interior of taxicabs, from the Manhattan skyline and Central Park pathways to the dismal rooms of backstreet hotels.

Melfi once stated that he wrote “plays about my fellow human beings in and out of trouble, like all of us at various times - in other words: celebrating the human condition, the miracle and mystery of life” (qtd. in “A Noted Playwright Is Dead; His Body Cannot Be Traced”, Mel Gussow); against this background, love and human connection assume an important role in the production of the playwright. In many of the plays of Leonard Melfi, the dramatic tension is generated by the absence or the wearing-out of interpersonal relations that represent the very thing that makes life worth living. Most of the time, Melfi’s characters are either desperate to re-establish the missing connection or behave indifferently conveying a sense of existential vacuum. From this perspective, the playwright seems to embrace the idea that no man is an island: individuals cannot stand alone, they need the support of their fellow human beings otherwise they do not thrive, they succumb. These dynamics are perfectly exemplified by Melfi’s *encounters*, the one-act plays that have become his trademark. Melfi was convinced that the first encounter between two or more people had a powerful dramatic potential and in an interview with the Los Angeles Times he stated that his people are always having encounters because “There’s that moment when they meet. What will happen? Who will say what? They’re strangers, so they start spilling everything out. They feel more comfortable with someone they don’t know. It’s one’s longtime intimates which one guards against.” (“Follow That Cab”, Robert Koehler). Melfi managed to publish two collections of encounters, one in the late sixties and one in the early eighties; both of them enhanced his reputation as “the voice of lonely hearts in Gotham” (ibid.).

The language used by Leonard Melfi is extremely vivid and even when the lines are simply read they go beyond the printed word to convey the immediacy of the unfolding dialog. Melfi draws upon different registers to recreate the complexity of contemporary urban speech, the language he uses is almost always realistic, straight and provocative; it can be violent and abusive but at the same time it allows poetic glimpses. An adjective that possibly manages to summarize Melfi’s language is bittersweet since his dialogs present us with the most bleak and shallow aspects of human life, but on the other hand they capture also the most pleasant and profound vitality.

2.1 The Life and His Works

Leonard Melfi was born in Binghamton, New York, on February 21, 1935; he was the eldest child of Leonard John and Louise Marie (Maureen) Melfi, a couple of restaurateurs who run a succession of taverns in or just outside town. Leonard had a brother, John, and a sister, Maureen.

After having spent a few years at St. Bonaventure University and two years in the army, Melfi decided to move to New York to become an actor. In the late 1950s he enrolled in the American Academy of Dramatic Arts but dropped out before graduating; subsequently he attended Uta Hagen-Herbert Berghof Studios and “after a couple of very uncertain years” (Melfi, vi), he decided that he would rather become a playwright and so he started writing his first scenes.

At the very beginning, Melfi sought to achieve mainstream success and wrote four full-length autobiographical plays; his attempt to have his plays produced on commercial circuits got nowhere since in the early sixties Broadway showed no interest in unknown playwrights. A turning point in his career was represented by the explosion of Off-Off-Broadway, the phenomenon that swam against the tide and focused on new experimental material. Melfi’s career started at Café La Mama, the iconic East Village coffeehouse that represented one of the four centerpieces of the underground theater scene – as the author recalls in *Encounters*: “Miss Ellen Stewart happens once in a lifetime, and I am very glad it was during my lifetime” (ibid., iii). After having attended a performance at Stewart’s coffeehouse, Melfi started thinking more seriously about being a playwright and wrote his first one-act play, *Lazy Baby Susan*. On October 26, 1962 the play directed by Gino Ardito opened at Café La Mama and it was “a big smash hit all thirty minutes of it” (ibid., vii). *Lazy Baby Susan* constitutes a premise to the upcoming production of the playwright; the play revolves around a triangle with two women and a man – a young girl becomes infatuated with a married man who lives next door and finds herself competing with the wife.

In spite of the success obtained at Café La Mama, Melfi made a second vain attempt to hit the big time on Broadway; after repeated failure, he fully embraced underground theater for the rest of his career and made just a few occasional incursions into commercial theater and cinema.

Beside La Mama, the other off-off-Broadway venue that supported Melfi was Theatre Genesis. At St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery, the playwright achieved at last the long-awaited success and established himself as one of the new voices of New York experimental theater. *Birdbath* opened at Theatre Genesis on June 11, 1965 and was Melfi's first success. The play centers on the night-encounter between the lonely aspiring poet Frankie Basta and Velma, a fragile and distressed waitress who confesses to him she had killed her mother. *Birdbath* was a great success both with the critics and the public and over the years became Melfi's internationally recognized masterpiece. Ellen Stewart, who was positively impressed by the play, contributed to expand its international fame, including it into the playbill of La Mama Troupe's first European tour. At Theatre Genesis, *Birdbath* premiered in a double bill with *Sunglasses*, a play set in the hereafter following a plane crash. The two protagonists – Miss America and Even Steven – seek salvation and a third character named Boo witnesses their interaction. Melfi's second double bill premiered at the Genesis on September 2, 1965 and included *Pussies and Rookies* and *Ferryboat*. The former centers on the metaphor of a headless mannequin that remains in the middle of the stage throughout the whole performance; the latter is an encounter on board the Staten Island Ferry between a self-confessed lady's man and a young Sarah Lawrence student.

After having been introduced to Theatre Genesis, Leonard Melfi wrote more than twenty one-act plays and almost all of them were given readings at the Monday night workshop held at the parish hall. Having a play read by actors was an invaluable practice; besides testing the potential of the text, it allowed Melfi to establish a special collaboration with some of the participants. The playwright's most notable artistic partnership was with actor Kevin O'Connor, who starred in *Birdbath* as well as in many other of his plays. As was usual among off-off-Broadway playwrights, Melfi not only wrote

for the venue but also created some roles that were tailor-made for specific actors, such as, for example, the character of Frankie Basta that was created with Kevin O'Connor in mind.

In July 1966, *The Shirt* opened at the Eugene O'Neill Memorial Foundation after it had been tested at Theatre Genesis' reading session. In the play, a mentally disturbed Southerner named Clarence invites a mixed-race couple into his hotel room and gets them drunk. Behind the initial over-friendly behavior Clarence conceals the worst intentions: as soon as he puts on his famous white shirt – the focus of the drama – he turns into a ruthless executioner and first slaughters the young man, then rapes the girl and eventually kills her too. Later that same year, *Halloween* premiered at the Playwrights Unit; the subject of this play is the encounter between the young garbage collector Luke and an aging chambermaid named Margaret.

In January 1967, the three-act play *Niagara Falls* was staged at La Mama, which had been meanwhile transformed into a private club; it was the first full-length play by Melfi to be produced. The story is set in a café overlooking the falls; it shows the coming together of eight strangers who shared the same cruel fate and who share the same tragic end: they were abandoned during their honeymoon and will be all killed by an unscrupulous serial killer. According to Ross Wetzsteon of the *Village Voice*, the bizarre plot of *Niagara Falls* does not make up for the immediacy of the one-act play and Melfi's departure from that formula is judged negatively: "I wished that Melfi had written a one-act play, leaving the first pretty much as it is, but reducing the second and third acts to five minutes." ("Theatre: Niagara Falls"). In June, *Times Square* was presented in Frankfurt during the third European tour of La Mama Troupe. Unlike *Niagara Falls*, this play remains faithful to the one-act structure but at the same time it represents a departure from the realistic repertoire of the author – *Times Square* is pure fantasy and can be considered as some sort of oneiric drama. The action takes place in a dreamlike Manhattan, the characters are a group of adults but they behave and react as if they were children; they all have symbolic names and features and can be seen as characters belonging to a modern urban fairy tale. That same year in September, *Stars and Stripes* was included in *The Scenes*, a bill featuring plays by the most brilliant off-off-Broadway playwrights. The show premiered

in Los Angeles and subsequently moved to New York's Cafè Au Go Go; in 1968 the set of plays was published under the title *Collision Course*. As for *Stars and Stripes*, Melfi's play presents six famous American writers – Henry James, Amy Lowell, Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, Emily Dickinson and Edna St. Vincent Millay – enjoying a sunny afternoon in Washington Square. Later that September, *Lunchtime* was produced at La Mama. The one-act play revolves around the encounter of the furniture refinisher Rex with the lonely wife Avis and was partly inspired by the playwright's personal experience – apart from writing Melfi did a series of odd jobs such as bartender, carpenter and furniture refinisher which somehow or other influenced his writing. Late in 1967, *Lunchtime* alongside *Birdbath*, *Halloween*, *Ferryboat*, *The Shirt* and *Times Square* were collected and published under the title *Encounters*. In that year Melfi was also rewarded for his steady commitment to drama and he received his first Rockefeller Foundation Grant for play writing. Finally, in early December 1967, La Mama produced a double bill including *Jack and Jill* and *Stimulation*, two irreverent one-act plays dealing with explicitly sexual themes. *Jack and Jill* displays a rather shocking story that ends with a rape and will feature the forthcoming theater revue *Oh! Calcutta!*; *Stimulation*, instead, dramatizes the sexual fantasies of the two protagonists.

In 1968, Melfi joined the playwrights Israel Horovitz and Terrence McNally – who also appeared in *Collision Course* – and the result was a triple bill: *Morning, Noon and Night*. The three plays are loosely linked to each other; Melfi wrote the concluding chapter, *Night*, an ironic piece that describes a night funeral. The triptych opened at Circle in the Square on Broadway and subsequently moved to Henry Miller's Theater and ran until the following January. In 1968, Melfi was also awarded his second consecutive Rockefeller Grant.

In late March 1969, an Edgar Allan Poe Festival titled *None Sing So Wildly Well*, was held at Nassau Community College and Melfi made his contribution with *The Raven Rock*. The drama was written especially for the occasion and was the playwright's version of Edgar Allan Poe's life¹⁵; the

¹⁵ Edgar Allan Poe was a notable Villager who lived at 85 West Third Street from 1844 to 1846; during his stay in Greenwich Village he revised and published *The Raven*. The production of Off-Off-Broadway tended to focus on the

following April, *The Raven Rock* was staged at La Mama. In that same year, Melfi gained further recognition as a playwright becoming a member of the Dramatists Guild and lecturing at New York University.

Between the late 1960s and the early 1970s, Melfi started to expand his reputation even beyond the off-off-Broadway circuit and first reached television and then cinema. In 1969 he collaborated with a New York broadcasting channel and wrote *Puck! Puck! Puck*, a play dealing with environment pollution; two years later *Birdbath* was made into a television movie starring Patty Duke and James Farentino. As far as the big screen is concerned, one of the greatest accomplishments in Melfi's career was represented by the collaboration with the Italian director Mario Monicelli. The playwright wrote the screenplay for *Lady Liberty*, a movie starring Sophia Loren that premiered in 1972. The story was an absolute Italian-American extravaganza: Maddalena (Sophia Loren) travels to New York with a huge mortadella – which in fact was the original title of the movie – and once she reaches JFK airport she is detained by local authorities because processed meat is not allowed to enter the country. In addition to his contribution to the screenplay, Melfi was also one of the possible actors selected to play opposite Sophia Loren, but he eventually renounced it because he had long given up his acting career. The movie met generally unfavorable reviews and was described for example as “too wan and feeble to be called a mess, but it is neither comedy nor drama nor a good red vino. Sophia looks beautiful but that's the best that can be said for it.” (“Lady Liberty' Lots of Baloney”, Bernard Drew).

By early the 1970s Off-Off-Broadway had already started its reabsorption into mainstream culture and even Melfi – though remaining faithful to his usual style – progressively shifted from the offbeat cafes to more conventional theaters. In 1973 *Eddie and Susanna in Love* was staged by Theatre Strategy and presented at Manhattan Theatre Club during the *New York Theatre Strategy Festival*. Theater Strategy was the result of the co-operation between twenty-three off-off-Broadway

local territory, another successful play about a famous Greenwich Village resident was for example Paul Foster's *Tom Paine*. (eapoe.org)

playwrights; apart from presenting a series of performance by established underground names, the aim of the project was to encourage new writers and provide them with a space. As for *Eddie and Susanna in Love*, the play focuses on the difficult love story between two young people who meet in a cemetery. Another playhouse that emerged in the early seventies as a new home for experimental playwrights and produced several works by Leonard Melfi was Theater for the New City –*Beautiful*, for example, was staged there in May 1974 and was followed by *Sweet Suite* in June 1975. The former is a play in two acts that the Village Voice’s Michael Feingold compares to surrealist painting by Joan Miró (“Fighting the Family Dragons”); the latter is a three-act work that revolves around a group of four rock stars: Sandra-Debbie, Dickie, Freddie and Johnnie. In hindsight, *Sweet Suite* gained importance because of the lines acted by Melfi himself who played the role of the room attendant. The first act of this play simply displays the four musicians killing time in their hotel room before the concert; at a certain point their conversation is interrupted by Room Service¹⁶ who among other things tells the tragicomic story of a forlorn man who dies alone and ends up in a pauper’s grave – the same common grave in which the author will be buried almost thirty years later.

In the early seventies, Melfi also embraced the musical and together with the composer John Braden wrote *Horse Opera*, a work that was described as a celebration of love and life (“Stage: Good-Natured 'Horse Opera'”, Mel Gussow). As the title suggests, the musical belongs to the country-western genre; it centers on a love story spanning two generations and features the classical happy ending: the two couples formed by the cowboy Tom Brown and Abigail Pepper alongside Horace White and Tom’s mother Maude Smith are married by the local officer, Sheriff Sunshine.

In February 1976 Melfi’s comedy-drama *Porno Stars At Home* opened at the Courtyard Playhouse; the play presents a group of skin flick actors attending the thirty-fifth birthday party of their friend and colleague Georgia Lloyd Bernhardt. The subject was intentionally provocative and

¹⁶ The character played by Leonard Melfi is called Room Service: “I applied for a job here at this hotel where the four of you are staying. And they liked me. And so I got the job. And now they call me Room Service. And that’s the end of the story . . .”(hartisland.net)

much of the irony is given by Melfi's attempt to destroy the stereotypes associated with this profession. In November of that same year, *Fantasies At The Frick* (or *The Guard and The Guardess*) was presented at The Open Space in SoHo. The play is divided into two acts and is set at the Frick Museum; the protagonists are an unnamed guard and guardess who cannot help but notice a man and a woman – unnamed too – strolling around the museum and envy their intimacy. Both *Porno Stars At Home* and *Fantasies at the Frick* were published in 1980.

In the second half of the 1970s, Melfi had a very difficult time and suffered major blows like the loss of his father (1977) and sister (1979). Nevertheless, he continued his playwright activity but his production was inevitably affected by his personal life – all the works written in this period are pervaded by a more or less bitter mood and failed to win the favor of critics and audiences. In May 1978, *Rusty and Rico* and *Lena and Louie* opened at the Impossible Ragtime Theater, an off-off-Broadway playhouse. The two plays are complementary and at the time of their first production, they featured the same couple of actors. *Rusty and Rico* are a modern and scruffy version of Romeo and Juliet; in Melfi's play the female protagonist is an idealist hooker while the male character is a young and petty politician. *Lena and Louie*, on the other hand, are a homeless couple that after having wandered around New York, freeze to death in Central Park. Later that year, *Taxi Tales* was presented at the Broadway's Century Theatre. The work originated as a workshop project at the Circle in the Square and is a collection of five one acts set in different New York taxicabs; the five vignettes are *Taffi's Taxi*, *Tripper's Taxi*, *Toddy's Taxi*, *The Teaser's Taxi* and *Mr. Tucker's Taxi*. With *Taxi Tales* Melfi provides a snapshot of urban despair – Taffy is a lesbian cabbie who shares her love frustration with the passengers sitting on the backseat; Tripper is a doped taxi driver who takes a suffocating family to the World Trade Center; the music-loving Toddy picks up a couple of high-class escorts and their drunken customer; Teaser is a good-hearted cabdriver who is tricked by an unusual trio made up of a contessa, a gigolo and a nun; the terminally ill Mr. Tucker is an aged cabbie whose taxi is hijacked by a fugitive bank robber. The show was torn to shreds by the critics and ran for only six performances; part of this failure was possibly due to the fact that stories dealing with such thorny

subjects were definitely out of place on Broadway. In 1980 *Taxi Tales* together with *Rusty and Rico* and *Lena and Louie* was published under the title *Later Encounters*; unlike the early collection, these encounters are more somber and human connection seems to be doomed to failure from the very beginning.

By the end of the 1970s, Melfi had already moved out of his Upper East Side Duplex and alcohol started to tear his life apart; his conditions progressively degenerated throughout the eighties and this decay deeply affected his career as a playwright. In March 1981 *Butterfaces* opened at Theater for the New City; precisely because the play is set in the backstage of an off-off theater the New York Times described it as a “love letter to Off-Off-Broadway, the theatrical arena in which he [Leonard Melfi] has been a faithful participant for almost 20 years.” (“Theater: Leonard Melfi’s ‘Butterfaces’”, Mel Gussow). In May of that same year, the playwright participated in *Amorous Accidents*, a collection of six comic vignettes that also features John Guare, Oliver Hailey, William Hauptman, Paul Minx and Megan Terry; the show was staged in Los Angeles. In 1982, a two-act play entitled *Dispossessed* opened at the Theater for the New City; it is an emblematic piece that partly reflects the abyss of addiction into which the dramatist himself had fallen. The protagonists are Norma and Nicholas Treat, a cocaine addicted writer who is behind in rent payment and is about to be evicted by a city marshal played by Melfi. In April 1983 – eight years after *Horse Opera* – Melfi worked on his second musical comedy, *Rosetti’s Apologetics*, in which he played also the title role. Late in October, *Eve Is Innocent* premiered at the Actors and Directors Lab on Theater Row. The play was commissioned by Roger Trunket, and was written especially for his third wife, the actress Peggy Bruen; *Eve Is Innocent* is a three-character work that focuses on the friendship between two women in their late 20’s with failed marriages behind them, and the effect of a younger man upon their lives. In 1984 *Rent Control* was released, a film by the Italian director Gian Luigi Polidoro that had been shot a couple of years earlier. In this movie Melfi plays the role of the journalist Milton Goeller and his performance was praised by the New York Times: “‘Rent Control’ doesn’t work consistently but it has a lot of nicely oddball moments and it features a number of gifted New York performers. These

include Leonard Melfi, the playwright, who plays Milton Goeller. Mr. Melfi is not on the screen very long but he's extremely funny, creating a character who suggests Joseph Heller as Mr. Heller might be played by Lionel Stander.” (“Film: 'Rent Control' New York Cast”, Vincent Canby).

After his second big-screen venture, Melfi went back to drama and in 1985 *The Little Venice Makes a Good Drink (or the Family that Strays Together)* opened in his hometown Binghamton. The Little Venice was – and still is – a local Italian restaurant the playwright’s mother was particularly fond of; she died exactly the same year and the title of the play was inspired by one of her sayings. In the mid-1990s, the play was re-staged in New York together with *Love is not a Water Solution*. In 1986, Melfi had another of his works produced in Binghamton, *Lily Lake*, and two years later the theater director Angelo Zuccolo established a Binghamton-based company called The Leonard Melfi Repertory Theater. The year 1988 marked also the comeback of the trio made up of Horovitz, McNally and Melfi. The three playwrights reunited to write a second triple bill: *Faith, Hope and Charity*. The reunion was panned by the critics and Melfi’s *Charity* – whose protagonist is a drunken woman who intimidates the passerby with an unloaded gun – was described by the *New York Magazine* as “the most farfetched and worst of the lot” (“Long Island Longueurs”, John Simon).

In the 1990s the playwright’s addiction to alcohol grew worse and any attempt at rehabilitation proved to be ineffective. Around the middle of the decade, Melfi came back to the theater scene with a few works, among which was *Club Hellfire*, a risqué comedy set in a S&M club populated by unlikely characters. The play opened at the Homegrown Theater and in his unfavorable review John Michael Koroly claims that Melfi’s clever and funny lines do not make up for the lack of edge or gravitas of the text.

Leonard Melfi spent the last years of his life in almost complete seclusion, living alone in the room of a welfare hotel, the Narragansett at Broadway and 93rd Street. On October 28, 2001 Melfi was taken to Mount Sinai Hospital after suffering a collapse, and died the same day of congestive heart failure. The sequence of events surrounding his demise was as bizarre as most of the plots of his plays: the hospital failed to notify the family and the body of the dead playwright was used by

college students for embalming practice. Two months later Melfi's corpse was buried in a mass grave on Hart Island. The most unbelievable twist of fate was represented not as much by the playwright's sad end, but by the fact that Melfi himself had described and acted out a similar scenario in his 1975

Sweet Suite:

[...] They all told about the body of a nameless young man that was found lying dead on some quiet subway tracks somewhere in one of the five boroughs of our greatest city. The youth had either fallen or jumped into the path of a speeding subway train one cold calm night. Well, it seems, his body was lying unclaimed in one of the hospital morgues somewhere. It had been there for thirteen days, and they were just about ready to ship it in the routine blue-and-gray truck that carries unclaimed bodies of nameless and unknown people in pine boxes to a pauper's burial in Potter's Field which is the final resting place of all the nameless and unknown people who die all by themselves, alone. (hartisland.net)

A few months later, in 2002, the body of the playwright was claimed by his brother John, exhumed from Potter's Field and brought to Binghamton, where it was buried in the family plot. Subsequently, his relatives settled a lawsuit against Mount Siani Hospital; the legal battle lasted over ten years and the hospital was eventually ordered to pay \$1.25 million to the family of the late playwright (“\$1.25M payout in bungled death, burial of playwright Melfi”, Pedro Oliveira).

3. An Analysis

The three one-act plays *Birdbath*, *Halloween* and *Ferryboat* all belong to the early production of the author and are included in his first collection of encounters, which is possibly the most successful of his published works. I have chosen to translate and analyze these plays because I think that they exemplify the most genuine spirit of *Encounters* and because with their mix of strong, contrasting feelings, originality and a frankness verging on boldness, they provide a significant insight into the inner nature of modern human beings.

All of the three plays portray a serendipitous encounter between two lost individuals; Melfi's characters literally bump into one another when they find themselves in a difficult if not desperate situation, and their coming together proves to be a positive turning point in their lives. Following the author's belief that people are more willing to open up to someone they are not familiar with, the characters more or less consciously start to disclose their problems in front of the person they have just met – from this perspective, Melfi's encounters are not far from the idea of psychotherapy session in which people talk and progressively reveal their truer self. As a matter of fact, revelation plays a major role in the storyline, so much so that plays always culminate with an unexpectedly shocking revelatory moment.

Being encounters, the act of coming together is vital, it both constitutes the focus of the plot and adds depth to otherwise nondescript or incomplete characters. Taken singularly, most of the individuals that populate Melfi's plays would be simply static, trapped in their oppressive routine and with little chance of progression. Interaction with one another makes all the difference and helps them to find some rest – however temporary – from their daily dull or distressed existences.

As is evident in *Halloween* and *Ferryboat*, a typical feature of Melfi's plays is the verbal predominance of one of the characters, especially the male. Nevertheless, this aspect does not imply that the character who talks the most has complete control over the situation and shapes the action

alone. *Birdbath*, by contrast, presents a certain balance between the number of lines acted by the two protagonists.

Already at first glance, these early encounters clearly differentiate themselves from the later ones and this, apart from being associated with the personal problems of the author, can also be ascribed to the period in which they were written. *Encounters* was published in 1967, all of the plays it includes were written at the height of the sixties, coinciding with the height of Off-Off-Broadway and with the countercultural movement. If compared with the historical climate of the late seventies, the sixties were a far more optimistic decade and part of this hopeful atmosphere can be seen in Melfi's plays too. In spite of the misfortune that has characterized their lives, the characters of *Birdbath*, *Halloween* and *Ferryboat* do not surrender all hope and somehow keep searching for the silver lining.

The encounter is such a powerful dramatic device and its protagonists are so deeply human and sincere that the audience is inclined to sympathize with them and support the happy ending of the play. Yet on closer inspection, the playwright's optimism is subtly balanced by disillusionment and skepticism so that the successful conclusion, although hinted at, is not to be taken for granted. All of the three plays I have translated are at once complete and incomplete; when they come to an end there is always something that is left untold hence spectators are left with an open question: what will become of the worn-out Velma who, in spite of everything, committed a ferocious crime? What is going to happen after the half-embrace between Luke and Margaret, and after Joey and Eleanor have left the ferryboat? Ours can be just speculation and perhaps, after all, it is not even important, because the only thing that really matters is the moment of the encounter.

Finally, as I have pointed out in the first chapter, the influence of *The Zoo Story* is clearly visible in all of the three plays. As in Albee's *story*, for example, even in *Ferryboat* a brash young man pesters a perfect stranger pouring out all of his problems; moreover, in both cases the protagonists are sitting on a bench of an iconic public space in New York – Central Park in *The Zoo Story* and the Staten Island Ferry in the case of Melfi. Speech patterns are another interesting detail

to be considered while comparing these encounters to Albee's play; in *Halloween*, even more than in *Ferryboat*, the male character seems overtly to draw on Peter and Jerry's parlance. With *Birdbath* on the other hand, the analogy is much more concrete: although with different outcomes, the two plays can both be considered "knife-stories" since they culminate with a revelatory scene centered on a foreboding knife. As for other literary influences, Velma definitely reminds us of Tennessee Williams' Laura, the fragile protagonist of *The Glass Menagerie* (1944); the dynamics of *Halloween*, instead, partially recall the 1953 play by Robert Anderson *Tea and Sympathy*.

3.1 *Birdbath*: The Crisis of the undisputed Maternal Authority, Marriage and Family.

Birdbath was Melfi's earliest and greatest success, a play that has always won over critics and public alike and that includes all the elements that have become the hallmark of the playwright. As always in the encounters, action is cut down to the barest minimum so that the interior fluctuations of the characters can emerge through the dialog and become the real protagonists of the play. The twenty-six-year-old distressed waitress Velma and the poet-bartender Frankie are skillfully shaped and serve as a perfect foil for one another; they are seemingly poles apart but in fact represent two complementary faces of the same coin. Their late-night encounter occurs immediately after the closure of the cafeteria in which they both work and ends with the shocking confession of the girl who admits to having stabbed her mother to death while they were having their grandiose breakfast.

Given the supremacy of the patriarchal perspective, most of the theatrical and literary production normally focuses on the problematic relationship between father and son, possibly complete with the Oedipus or with other psychological complexes; Melfi on the other hand swims against the tide and presents a drama that has its roots in the conflictual relationship between mother and daughter. In *Birdbath* the situation is clearly taken to the extreme, yet the mother is not the sole figure to be disputed – she is defeated and overthrown alongside the traditional values of marriage and family.

Although the mother is not an actual character, she does constitute a disturbing element within the play; she is constantly present in Velma's thoughts and since the very beginning, her relationship

with the daughter appears to be much more than simply troubled or complicated. As the conversation between the two protagonists unfolds, it is possible to see that Velma is completely dominated by the maternal figure, who instead of being supportive has always despised and exploited her. Velma depends on her mother to such an extent that her own personality and self-perception have been seriously compromised; in a sense she is haunted by her mother's presence and keeps evoking the despising tone with which her mother used to address her.

The tension that originates from the unhealthy relationship between mother and daughter is counterbalanced by the playwright's clever use of irony and although Velma's lines include all the warning signs of the tragedy, only in hindsight it is possible to attach to them their full importance. The girl's sudden trembling, her overwhelming distress and the mixing of past and present tenses while talking about the mother are subtle but meaningful clues that reveal her guilt; nevertheless everyone – even Frankie – simply ignores them until the final outburst. Even more than the two other encounters, *Birdbath* prompts a psychoanalytic approach to the plot; the play not only stages interpersonal and intrapersonal conflict, but also a perfect example of repression: what happened that same morning at breakfast was forced into the character's unconscious to resurface into consciousness only in the final scenes. The half-exposed newspaper and Frankie reading the ruthless headline aloud, eventually conjure up the murderous scene in Velma's mind causing her nervous breakdown.

Above and beyond being a murderer, Velma is a victim and for this very reason, the audience tends to sympathize with her. Throughout her entire life, she has had to cope with humiliation and major disappointments that left an indelible mark on her personality; she is the quintessential underdog and the title of the play perfectly captures the real essence of this character. Whereas the initial *Coffeecake and Caviar* stopped at the surface, *Birdbath* is far more effective a term and adds depth to the entire work. Birdbaths are ornamental basins in which birds can rest and drink safe from

external threats – the analogy with the female protagonist is self-evident: she too is a poor little critter in search of shelter and her surname Sparrow perfectly matches her bird-like fragility.¹⁷

As far as Velma's mother is concerned, it is interesting to notice that her criticism towards the daughter insists on three aspects that are strictly connected with each other, namely outward appearance, the importance of finding the right man and the necessity of getting married. According to the woman, Velma is homely and skinny, she has to take advantage of the free meal but at the same time she has to be careful otherwise she would get real fat. Velma's mother wants a presentable daughter¹⁸ because looking good is the essential prerequisite to finding a nice man, getting married and starting a family¹⁹; she has deceived her daughter into thinking that these are the sole things that really matter in the life of an accomplished woman and whoever does not fit into this pattern is a complete failure. However, if we stick to the actual facts, the mother is the first one to have failed on all fronts and, as if it were not enough, she discourages her daughter in every possible way – men cannot be interested in Velma, they must have eyes only for her because she looks better and younger than the girl.²⁰

Velma's mother is a base individual and her behavior is utterly deplorable – whereas the daughter has two jobs and works night and day to provide for them both, she simply spends her time at the beauty parlor, planning her vacations or searching for a good catch. She has always had excessive demands on Velma and inculcated her with her own vicious ideas; her insistence must have

¹⁷ Ornamental birdbaths visually recall baptismal fonts and given the strong presence of guilt within the plot, I think that this analogy is not that far-fetched. Secondly, the term can refer to “a cursory washing of the body using little water” (see. *The Routledge Dictionary of Modern American Slang and Unconventional English*) which most likely is what Velma did before she left for work.

¹⁸ Presentable according to the dominating standards of beauty.

¹⁹ As I have said at the beginning of this chapter, *Birdbath* has many things in common with Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* and one of the most striking similarities between the two plays is represented by the importance given to marriage. The mothers of the two female protagonists both have failed marriages behind them, nevertheless they insist of the importance of getting married. The only differences between the two women is that unlike Amanda Wingfield, Velma's mother is not an actual character and she does her best not to marry off her daughter but to destroy her image.

²⁰ On more than one occasion, the antagonism between mother and daughter can be clearly associated with a competition over men in which Velma has always to succumb, no matter what.

been truly hammering and akin to the action described by the headline “Mother Used Daughter’s Head For Hammer”.

The frustration generated by the psychological abuses perpetrated by the mother led Velma to take desperate measures and commit matricide; as chance would have it, the killing occurred just while they were having their extravagant breakfast, which was the only thing they seemed to agree on. The outcome of this outrageous gesture is dual and contrasting – if on the one hand the girl is guilty of a brutal crime and is likely to be sent to prison, on the other hand she has eventually broken free from the oppressive maternal tie. Faced with similar circumstances, the response of the characters as well as of the audience is emotional rather than rational, and although conviction is the logical result, it partly fades into the background leaving plenty of room for the irrational and emancipatory aspects of the deed. Velma’s mother clearly prevented her daughter from developing her own identity and kept her in a perpetually infantile stage characterized by dependency, which in the long run became unbearable. When Velma eventually gets rid of the burdensome maternal authority, she is truly free for the first time in her life; at the same time she is also a frightened young woman desperately wanting love and affection and Frankie could be her lifeline.

In *Birdbath* both marriage and family are clearly presented from the critical perspective of the 1960s. Frankie boldly establishes himself as a man allergic to marriage and as someone who is faithful only to his typewriter, but at the same time he does not disdain the idea of a relationship with Velma who could be his missing half. Frankie’s attitude, therefore, perfectly exemplifies the triumph of genuine human connection regardless of conventional ties, which is at the core of great part of the playwright’s production and has become one of his distinctive features. Velma’s family, on the other hand, has completely fallen apart – her father ran off when she was six years old, her brother Herbert disappeared after he got married and her abusive mother irreversibly ruined her life. In this case, though, Melfi not only displays the breakdown of the traditional family, but also the regret and the melancholy caused by the disruption of the household. Besides the long-restrained resentment

towards the maternal figure, Velma's lines are also visibly pervaded by sadness for the absence of the father and the impossibility of having a happy family.

3.2 Halloween: The Drama of Accumulation

Halloween is the longest of the three plays I have translated and it is definitely a work based on strong contrasting forces – it includes the angriest attitude and the most sincere lines on mutual love and understanding, and these can hardly leave people indifferent. In addition to this, *Halloween* is overtly built around another singular aspect, namely accumulation – long lists of objects and whatnot turn up several times throughout the conversation and stand out as a dominant feature of the play.

The opening entirely centers on the principle of accumulation; the jumble of more or less technological paraphernalia mentioned by Luke is possibly the most effective listing of the entire play and constitutes an example of poignant criticism of the mass consumerism that pervades American way of life. Luke has just moved to a residence hotel in the West Eighties to live on his own and in no time at all, his room has been burglarized; he laments the loss of all the things that meant so much to him and mentions them one by one. He begins with a series of technologically advanced gadgets; among them is also the state-of-the-art electric shoe-polisher and the tape recorder, which is the worthy successor of the much-acclaimed wire recorder in *Death of a Salesman*.²¹ Luke roughly proceeds by category and his list of lost properties continues with his clothing accessories – that are exactly the same mentioned in the opening description of Joey in *Ferryboat* – alongside jewels, a few smoking and stationery²² goods and then, finally, the solid gold rubber box. The concept of property is underlined by Luke's insistence on possessive adjectives – what the burglars stole were not simply objects whatever but *his* stuff. Ironically, all the things that meant so much to him are completely devalued by his cumulative attitude; they are reduced to mere insignificant objects, if not garbage. The listing just stresses their uselessness and transience – by presenting them in this way, he

²¹ In the second act of the play by Arthur Miller is the famous scene in which Willy's boss is totally captivated by the prodigious wire recorder and does not even listen to him.

²² The fountain pen is a further element that this play has in common with *Death of a Salesman*. In Miller's drama, Biff steals the fountain pen from the loan officer's desk.

automatically turns them into nothing but cheap mass-produced items devoid of any value. To some extent, this “accumulative beginning” reminds us of the artistic accumulations that became popular in the 1960s²³ – the attitude that underlies Luke’s lines conveys a certain exasperation and the author seems to use them to address a society based on unrestrained consumerism. The not-quite-random assemblage of material goods that belong to the average American’s routine as well as the prominence of the possessive “my” seem to question the very desire to possess them at all costs and prompts a reflection on what is really necessary. As the play develops, one sees that Luke has led a miserable existence and that only when he loses the material things he was so fond of, can he find authentic human connection and real happiness. Even in *Halloween* as in the rest of the encounters, the proverbial twist of fate plays a major role – if his room had not been ransacked, he would never have made the scene that drew Margaret’s attention and most likely, they would never have met.

The second striking accumulation occurs towards the end of the play; but this time the focus is on people, namely on Hollywood stars. Luke, just as Joey in *Ferryboat*, is keen on cinema and displays immense admiration for Hollywood actors and the movie industry in general. Throughout the first half of the 20th century, the ever-increasing importance given to appearances supported by the emergence of visual mass media – chiefly among them cinema – had a strong impact on American culture and lifestyle. Thanks to their image and to the roles they played, Hollywood stars became more and more influential and established themselves as the new icons people could identify with. The choice of Gene Kelly in Luke’s speech is anything but random: besides being an exceptional dancer and singer, he was a charismatic figure, gifted with effortless charm - all these qualities somehow compensate the lack . Secondly, this listing of Hollywood stars works in the same way as the opening catalog of stolen properties – it enhances the consumerist side of cinema and emphasizes the fact that, after all, these actors are nothing but the fruit of consumerism.²⁴

²³ I am referring primarily to the French-American artist Arman, and secondly to Pop Art in general.

²⁴ Actors can be precisely considered “idols of consumption” as opposed to “idols of productions”, namely famous capitalists.

Lastly, the third and final accumulation is that of lies. Although in different ways, deception characterizes the life of both characters – on the one hand Margaret has to cope with the lies that her husband has been telling during their entire marriage; on the other, Luke has been lying to himself for a long time and still does it in front of Margaret. In addition to that, in the first part of the play, they also pretend to ignore their mutual attraction. To put an end to this vicious circle of lies and deceit, the two characters resort to the expedient of the mask, which is perfectly in tune with the pre-Halloween atmosphere surrounding the encounter. As often occurs in Melfi's plays, the title goes beyond the surface of things – in this case, the masquerade that characterizes Halloween constitutes the basis for a reflection on the self beyond whatever social expectation. Throughout the encounter, the protagonists keep trying on the masks Margaret bought for her grandchildren and only when they are wearing them are they able to talk frankly with one another. In *Halloween* the mask is therefore used as a protective device; it helps the two protagonists to overcome shame and reveal their true identity which in both cases is something inconvenient in society's eyes – Margaret is a fifty-year-old deserted wife who has always been faithful to her cheating husband and cannot stand this situation anymore; Luke is an outcast, a thirty-year-old cripple who has always repelled women. At the end of the play, after they have completely opened up, they realize that there is no need to continue to hide behind a mask, keeping up appearances and fostering further deception. They eventually give up whatever form disguise and accept themselves as they really are, regardless of whatever prejudice.

3.3 Ferryboat: The Tension between Appearance and Essence

Unlike the two previous encounters, *Ferryboat* opens with an accurate description of the protagonists, which, from the very beginning, places a great emphasis on the issue of outer appearances. Joey is presented as a twenty-eight-year-old man dressed to the nines: he wears a suit with formal white shirt, silk necktie and perfectly polished shoes; a flashy gold wristwatch, a sparkling ring, matching tie clip and cuff links complete an outfit thought out to the smallest detail. The young girl, on the other hand, is about twenty years old; she is beautiful but reveals a certain shabbiness: she wears a crumpled and smeared trench coat and her face is devoid of make up; black high-heels add the only feminine touch

to her otherwise unremarkable ensemble. Unimportant as it might seem, the opening description represents in fact a relevant element in the dramatic construction of the play – whatever expectation it creates, will be progressively reversed by the dialog so as to highlight the split between appearance and essence that very often occurs in modern society.

Joey is an extremely theatrical character who loves to show off and has a desperate need for attention. He makes his conspicuous entrance through the audience²⁵ and with his exuberant attitude, he immediately places himself in the spotlight – after having approached the girl sitting on one of the benches, he begins to talk and stands out as the undisputed leader of the conversation. Exactly as Luke in *Halloween*, Joey acts as some sort of entertainer and displays at best his dramatic potential through his long revelatory solo performances.

Joey's lines are pervaded by more or less random aspects of daily urban routine as well as by details about his life and personality; one of the first things he says to Eleanor is that as soon as he graduated from high-school, he left for Hollywood to crash the movies and be big-time. The big screen possibly represents the greatest ambition and the highest form of gratification for someone like Joey; he has always felt the need to appear and to play a role, even in his real life – in front of the girl, for instance, he pretends to be a successful store manager, a brilliant dancer and a compulsive womanizer who already at school was voted the Class Wolf. Yet the surface in the case of Joey is absolutely misleading: in reality, he is just an average man who works in a five-and-ten store and is desperately lonely – a lone wolf, to put it in his own words. The fact that Joey is all dressed up from head to toe is just an expedient, a gimmick to prove to himself and to others that he is an accomplished, confident and attractive person, which is precisely what society seems to impose at any cost. Behind his shiny well-constructed façade, though, he conceals fragility and failure; he is affected by a serious malaise that he will progressively unfold throughout the dialog. The ill ego Joey talks about, is nothing

²⁵ Although this scene breaks the theatrical convention, I think that Joey's entrance is more likely to be interpreted as a way to create the illusion of being in a crowded ferryboat rather than as a serious attempt of the author to embrace metatheatre. If we think that *Ferryboat* was presented in the claustrophobic room of Theatre Genesis, such entrance would simply convey the idea that Joey left another compartment of the boat to reach the one where the girl is sitting.

but his own anguished ego and the suicide attempt is most likely the only thing that is truly real about his life.

On the other hand, Eleanor is a laconic girl who finds herself in a subordinate position throughout most of the conversation. In the opening scene she simply appears on the stage, sitting on one of the benches; she certainly displays none of the theatricality of Joey yet this does not minimize her importance to the storyline. Focusing on the evolution of the encounter, it is possible to notice that she is much more than a scruffily-dressed, ingenuous and annoyed girl pestered by a stranger on the ferryboat – she is seemingly pleased at having found a remote area in which to be by herself, but she is twice as pleased as Joey strikes up a conversation; accidentally on purpose, she drops her magazine on the floor and gives Joey a chance to continue to talk and spill his guts. These are just two of the subtle yet meaningful clues indicating that girl is by no means a passive character and that at the end of the play, she overtly takes control over a situation she has dominated since the very beginning.

After having peered beyond Joey's façade and having discovered his true self, the girl finally asks him her first real question – she uses an assertive tone and challenges him with a provocation; he in turn reacts by pulling her by the arm and holding her still. Against all apparent odds, she does not even make an attempt to escape; she simply stays there as she has done from the beginning and stares at him with a slight but suggestive smile that represents the dramatic climax of the play. Subsequently, in the final exchange of cues, the girl reveals who she really is – her name is Eleanor and she attends Sarah Lawrence College where she studies English Literature, Philosophy and the Social Pattern of Urban Love. What she has only hinted at throughout the entire play becomes finally clear: behind an anonymous trench coat and a snow-white face hides a wealthy and smart girl who studies in one of the most prestigious and progressive private colleges of the United States. She is absolutely self-assured and with her understated apparel fools Joey – alongside superficial spectators and readers – into thinking that she is just any ordinary, good-looking, apathetic, shallow girl. Yet

Eleanor is educated and well aware that clothes do not make the man; on the contrary, they can be simply a deceptive device to distract from one's real essence.

Therefore in *Ferryboat*, at one end of the spectrum is the slave-to-appearances Joey who bases his entire life on façade regardless of substance, and at the other end is Eleanor, who does not consider exteriority as her sole *raison d'être*. The most significant passage that helps us to grasp the real nature of the protagonists is possibly the one in which Joey focuses on New York skyscrapers – in those lines he metaphorically compares the girl to the majestic Chrysler Building and by contrast places himself on the ground floor²⁶ of the adjoining Socony-Mobil Building. The image evoked has a strong, precise visual impact since the former building is a streamlined structure that springs up towards the sky while the latter is an anonymous, squared skyscraper clad in a stainless-steel armor. The Chrysler Building perfectly resembles Eleanor because like her it is a symbol of understated elegance; moreover, with its opulent interiors that stand in sharp contrast with the façade, it recreates the same dichotomy that is visible in her character. On the other hand, the Socony-Mobil “shows off” exactly as Joey: its metallic panels gleam and glisten in the sunlight but the skyscraper itself is nothing more than an ordinary building in disguise.

²⁶ He does not explicitly say that he works on the ground floor, but offices and commercial spaces find themselves in the lower floors of the building.

4. About the Translation

Leonard Melfi's *encounters* perfectly exemplify the playwright's ability to dramatize New York idiom as well as his mastery in portraying human beings with all their vices and virtues. His viewpoint is both circumscribed and universal, and I think that universality is exactly one of the qualities that makes these plays suitable for translation.

Birdbath, *Halloween* and *Ferryboat* – just as the rest of the plays by this author – have never been officially translated into Italian and I consider it to be more of an advantage than a disadvantage because it allowed me to have an unbiased approach to the texts. I opted for a facing-page translation because I regard the source text as a touchstone for assessing my work – without it, great part of my efforts would be vain. Moreover, this type of translation conveys to the reader the idea that there is a source text, which is anything but secondary.

One further aspect I would like to highlight, is the reason I did not translate neither the titles nor the names of the characters of the plays. As I have explained in the respective endnote, *Birdbath* is such an eloquent title that it would inevitably get lost in translation – in one single word it summarizes the meaning of the entire drama and possibly any Italian phrase would compromise its strength. As for *Halloween* and *Ferryboat*, both these terms have now entered our vocabulary and have no Italian equivalent, it would be thus useless to translate them just for the sake of Italianizing the titles of the plays. The same applies to the characters – I tend to consider the translation of the first name as a bad habit of the past; fortunately this trend has now gone out of fashion. As far as Melfi's plays are concerned, for example, I think it is basically a matter of coherence: the characters are all New Yorkers and Italianizing their names would be like depriving them of part of their identity.

In the following subchapters, I will discuss some of the features of my translation work – I will focus on the dual nature of dramatic texts, on the lexical gaps that occur between English and Italian and on the importance of the historical context providing some concrete examples.

4.1 The Stage or the Page: That is the Question

The translation of dramatic texts is strongly influenced by their inherent duality – if on the one hand plays can be simply read on the printed page and behave as prose, on the other hand, they were conceived as works to be acted on stage and as such, they are characterized by a strong performing potential. Complementary as they might be, literary and theater translations move in fact towards different directions – the former gives priority to the page whereas the latter concentrates on the stage. In my translations I have tried not to lose sight of this dual nature, yet sometimes the contrast between the two poles was so sharp that I was compelled to make a drastic decision – in all those cases, the stage definitely got the better of the page.

Although they are not subjected to strict rules, both literary and theater translations follow some general conventions and focus on different priorities. Unlike the individual reading process, theater is a collective experience in real time – actors on stage act in front of a live audience, their lines are supposed to reach it and provoke a simultaneous response. A translation that aims at the stage, cannot lose sight of this principle that is at the basis of whatever form of theatrical representation and as a consequence every effort should be made not to betray the dramatic potential of the text.

Among the requirements of theater translations are certainly immediacy and fluency; both these elements are of such vital importance that sometimes they partly overshadow the scrupulous faithfulness to the written source. On the stage, a translation that is too tied to the source text is likely to sound unnatural and constrained and all this would inevitably work against the performance; the one that instead takes into account the rhythm of the drama and aims at recreating natural speech patterns has good chances to appeal to the audience and get close to the playwright's original intent.

As far as Melfi's plays are concerned, some of his characters seem literally to rip the page apart and show an attitude that can be definitely considered theatrical; against this background opting for theater translation was more duty than choice. In addition to that, the playwright is to be seen

within the radical context of Off-Off-Broadway, a subversive movement whose destabilizing attitude cannot easily be constrained within the conventional page.

4.2 Lost (and Found) in Translation

Each language is the mirror of a unique culture and society and as such, it includes a series of terms and expressions that are so specific that cannot be translated without losing part, if not their entire meaning. This cultural-linguistic conundrum – the technical term is “lexical gap” – has nevertheless to be overcome by the translator, who can tackle with the problem in different ways. As far as my translations are concerned, I have opted for different solutions that range from adaptation to paraphrase and borrowing, and I have made extensive use of the so-called translator’s note – all without losing sight of the theatrical function of the text. In the following paragraphs, I will comment some of the most prominent examples in each of the three plays.

In the opening stage directions of *Birdbath*, we are immediately presented with the word «cafereria», which refers to an American concept with no equivalent in Italian. Before opting for «tavola calda», I made the mistake of choosing the word «caffetteria» which has a similar sound but a different meaning – whereas the former gets close to the idea of cafeteria as “a self-service restaurant in which food is displayed on counters” (Webster’s New World College Dictionary, 209)²⁷, the latter refers to a café, that is to say a place where coffee and other refreshments are served. Being in front of a linguistic dead-end, the only possible solution was represented by the adaptation of the term followed by its corresponding endnote. In this specific case, for example, other solutions would sound awkward (the paraphrase) or inappropriate and misleading (the borrowing). In the same play, I opted for two more free translations, namely «Velma the ugly sparrow»/«quella spaventapasseri della Velma» and «Leprechauns»/«Bislacche». The first adaptation is rather “spontaneous” and although it detaches both from the literal meaning and the allusion to the surname of the character, it does not

²⁷ An alternative definition of the Webster Online Dictionary is: “a restaurant in which the customers serve themselves or are served at a counter and take the food to tables to eat”. In addition to this, the term cafeteria might refer also to the Italian «mensa».

subvert the global meaning of the original utterance, it makes it just more acceptable in Italian. The second one, instead, is to be considered against a different and more complex background. Velma first uses the word «fairy» and then the word «leprechauns» - in this context the former does make sense and is a derogatory term to refer to male homosexuals, the latter, instead, is an unintended slip. In translating these terms, I had to pay attention to the dominant mindset of the time, which undoubtedly considered homosexuality as a taboo – after having changed my mind at least five times, I went for «invertito» and «bislacche»:

VELMA [...] My mother didn't want me to work down there at first because she thinks the Village is dangerous. She doesn't like the idea of me being around all those **fairies** and those **leprechauns**. Well, I'm not afraid of the fairies **but those leprechauns** really scare me.

FRANKIE (*Scratching his head*) What do you mean by **leprechauns**?

VELMA You know what I mean: those girls who don't like men; they like to be with women instead.

FRANKIE Uh, Lesbians, Velma, Lesbians. Not leprechauns.

VELMA Oh, that's right, Les-bi-ans.

VELMA [...] All'inizio mia madre non voleva che lavorassi laggiù perché è convinta che il Village sia pericoloso. A lei non le va l'idea che io sia circondata da tutti quegli **invertiti** e da tutte quelle **bislacche**. Beh, io non ho paura degli invertiti, **ma quelle lì tutte bislacche** mi fanno davvero paura.

FRANKIE (*Grattandosi la testa*) Cosa intendi per **bislacche**?

VELMA Lo sai benissimo cosa intendo: sono quelle ragazze che non vogliono gli uomini; preferiscono andare con le donne.

FRANKIE Ah, Lesbiche, Velma, Lesbiche. Non bislacche.

VELMA Ah, giusto, Les-bi-che.

I think that the Italian word «invertito», which has now fallen into disuse, is somehow akin to the English word «fairy» and is plausible in the context of the 1960s. As for «leprechauns», I have understood it as an “assonance-mistake” so I have tried to reproduce the same slip in Italian. Besides, the term «bislacche» is rather uncommon and means «odd» or «weird», which is exactly how female homosexuality was branded in those years.

Just as *Birdbath*, even *Halloween* opens with a translation challenge that has to do with the place where the action is set: “Manhattan: somewhere in the West Eighties off West End Avenue.”. Everyone is familiar with Manhattan and can easily conceive a street called West End Avenue, but what about the West Eighties? The term used by the playwright cannot be translated and is so site specific that possibly only a New Yorker can figure it out. Nevertheless the West Eighties are a block included in the Upper West Side, which is a neighborhood whose name sounds a little more familiar to Italian ears. For this very reason, I decided to deconstruct the sentence included in the source text

and rebuild it as: “Manhattan: un posto come tanti in un isolato dell’Upper West Side, non lontano dalla West End Avenue”. The adverb «somewhere» does not literally mean «un posto come tanti», yet it does convey the idea of vagueness and unspecificity that characterize the grid of streets of every metropolis. A further example of adaptation within my translation of *Halloween* is represented by Margaret’s following sentence:

MARGARET My husband: James Moon. Ever since the day I met him, I would say to him, at least once a day: “**James Moon, you make Margaret swoon.**” It was silly, but it was a nice way, I thought, and he did too for a long time, of saying to him: “I love you.” Then, just these past few months, mind you, I found myself saying something else instead. Never out loud, though; never to him any more, but to myself. (*She smiles wryly*) “**James Moon, you’re such a goon.**” (*She pauses*) My husband, James Moon, is a no-good rotten son of a bitch!

MARGARET Mio marito James, sì. Da quando l’ho conosciuto gli ho sempre detto almeno una volta al giorno: “**James, amore, mi metti di buon’umore.**” Era stupido, ma pensavo – e l’ha pensato che lui per un bel pezzo – che fosse un modo carino per dirgli che lo amavo. Poi in questi ultimi mesi, attento, mi sono trovata a dire qualcos’altro, invece. Ma mai ad alta voce; non più a lui ma a me stessa. (*Con una risata sarcastica*) “**James, bugiardo, sei proprio un bastardo**” (*Fa una pausa*) Mio marito, James Moon, è un grandissimo figlio di puttana!

Margaret’s rage and disillusionment have to stand out clearly alongside the rhyme, which I think is an essential requirement of the stage. I had worked out several solutions, but there was always something wrong with them – assuming that in Italian is impossible to find word rhyming with «moon», substituting that term with another one that allowed the rhyme was the only way I could manage not to betray the immediacy of the lines in English. The word order too, plays a major role and has to be the same in both Italian interjections, otherwise the entire cue would results less effective.²⁸

Finally, *Ferryboat* too presented several semantic gaps that gave me the chance to practice just as many translation strategies. To begin with, Joey uses the word «Greyhound» which is much more than a bus and at the same time is the specific name of a company that does not exist outside the United States. I am sure that almost everyone is visually familiar with these intercity buses that have always been so popular in American movies and series, yet I am equally convinced that opting for a borrowing would have been too estranging. As chance would have it, cinema provided me the

²⁸ Initially I thought that “James Moon, you make Margaret swoon” could be translated with “Caro James ti voglio ricordare che in solluchero mi fai andare”. Yet I realized that it was too long and that the following exclamation could never have resembled the same syntax order compromising the rhythm of the lines.

solution to the problem – Hitchcock’s *North by Northwest* explicitly mentions the Greyhound bus²⁹ and in the Italian-dubbed version the term used is «torpedone». I think this word perfectly fits the context because «torpedone» too is more than a simple bus – it is the American bus. A further reason that made me choose this term is represented by historical contiguity: *North by Northwest* was released in 1959³⁰ and the Italian language used in the dubbing most likely did not change legitimizing the choice of the word in the context of the mid-1960s. Secondly, even the American «five-and-ten» store is a concept that does not have a semantic equivalent in Italian. I tend to regard paraphrase as a risky solution and facing a theater translation it becomes twice as risky because it might hinder the rhythm of the speech; yet in front of Joey’s «five-and ten» I saw no other chance than this. I just tried to understate it as much as I could so that it almost disappears within the lines of the characters:

JOEY [...] (*He sighs*) It’s the same at work. I’m the manager of **a five-and-ten** . . . one of the biggest and newest in New York. Great location. Some people say it’s the best one around. Very good chances for advancing myself. From manager on upward! Who knows, huh? It’s the five-and-ten in the new Socony-Mobil Building. You know the one: all made of bright aluminum, very modern. The first aluminum building ever built. It’s right across the street from the Chrysler Building. Now there’s a building for you! The Chrysler Building! [...]

JOEY [...] (*Sospira*) E lo stesso al lavoro. Sono responsabile in **un grande magazzino, di quelli che vendono cose a buon mercato** . . . uno dei più grandi e nuovi qui a New York. Bel posto. Alcuni dicono che è il migliore della zona. Ci sono anche buone possibilità di far carriera. Da responsabile dritto verso i piani alti. E chi lo sa, eh? È il grande magazzino nel Socony-Mobil. Sai, quello in alluminio tutto brillante, davvero moderno. Il primo palazzo tutto in alluminio. È proprio di fronte al grattacielo della Chrysler. Ecco un palazzo che fa per te! Quello della Chrysler! [...]

The Italian version of *Ferryboat* includes also the one and only English loanword I decided to feature in my translations: «frug». Given the historic context of the sixties, I am not in favor of the use of borrowings yet in this case I maintained the original term just because the frug is a dance craze similar to the twist and this latter term entered Italian language without being translated.

Finally, in her last lines Eleanor says that she is «majoring» in English Literature and «minoring» in Philosophy – the first verb designates the field of studies in which a student specializes while the second one simply refers to academic subjects that are secondary in the study plan. In Italian

²⁹ As soon as Roger Thornhill/George Kaplan (Cary Grant) reaches the Chicago train station, Eve Kendall tells him “ You’re to take the Greyhound bus that leaves Chicago for Indianapolis at two and ask the driver to let you off at the Prairie Stop on Highway 41”.

³⁰ The movie was released in July 1959 in the US and in November of the same year in Italy.

there are just phrases to explain these concepts: «majoring» could be «corso di laurea» or «materia principale» and «minoring» could be the so-called «corso a scelta». All of these solutions would sound just too clumsy in the girl's lines, that is what I decided to use just the verb «study/studiare».

In conclusion, I would like to add a consideration on the so-called translator's notes, which are an integral part of my work. As soon as I have decided to translate Melfi's plays, I have opted for an annotated translation which is not only an "academic exercise" but also a way of making the text completely accessible to the readers. The playwright's style is direct but at the same time is full of cultural and geographical references that require an explanation, especially if the plays are approached from a foreign perspective and almost fifty years after they were written.

4.3 The Two Sides of the Pronoun You³¹

Unlike Italian language, English does not make any distinction between the informal «tu» and the formal «lei» and simply uses the pronoun «you»; while translating a text, this represents a major concern since choosing either one of the two options has a huge impact on the meaning of the message. Although the context provides a key to interpret the real nature of the pronoun, it can be argued that «you» is not subjected to any formal rule and represents thus some sort of wild card; especially when dealing with theater translations, this very aspect can be shaped according to the dramatic tension to convey part of the subtext that underlies the lines and actions of the play.

Halloween and *Ferryboat* provide two perfect examples of the way the translation of the pronoun «you» makes all the difference in the dramatic structure of the play. Assuming that both these pieces are characterized by the continuous swinging between formal and informal tone, I have carefully taken into account the dramatic subtext and the unmistakable humor that pervades all the works by this author to recreate this important feature in my Italian version. At the beginning of Melfi's encounters the two characters are perfect strangers to one another, yet as the dialog develops, they become more and more familiar and they progressively open up in front of the person they have

³¹ This one too is an example of lexical gap, but in the opposite direction.

just met. The playwright perfectly manages to capture the thin line that sometimes separates formality and aloofness from informality; and since his plays are all centered on the importance of breaking down the barriers between human beings, the tension towards casual and confidential tone is only natural. An example of this shifting can be seen in the following passage taken from *Halloween*:

LUKE You're lying to me!
MARGARET You stop that!
LUKE You did open the window, didn't you?
MARGARET What are you implying: that I'm a liar?
LUKE Yes, you're a liar! I can tell!
MARGARET Don't call me a liar, young man! And stop that screaming at me, do you hear? If I get my Irish temper up you'll be sorry!
LUKE Yeah? Well, I already got mine up!
MARGARET You're not Irish. I saw your name. It's Italian.
LUKE You know too much.
MARGARET I happened to see it on one of your suitcases in the closet.
LUKE Like I just said before, miss – you know too much!
MARGARET You have no respect for other people, do you?
LUKE I'm both, miss.
MARGARET You're both what?

LUKE Non mi sta dicendo la verità.
MARGARET Ma la smetta!
LUKE **Si che hai aperto tu la finestra, vuoi dire di no?**
MARGARET **Cosa sta insinuando**, che sono una bugiarda?
LUKE **Si, sei una bugiarda**. Si vede.
MARGARET **Non darmi della bugiarda, giovanotto! E smettila di urlarmi dietro in quel modo, capito?** Se tiro fuori il mio carattere da irlandese te ne pentirai!
LUKE Ah sì? Io ho già tirato fuori il mio!
MARGARET **Tu non sei irlandese. Ho visto come ti chiami**. Sei italiano.
LUKE **Tu sai troppe cose**.
MARGARET L'ho visto per caso, su **una delle valigie che hai in armadio**.
LUKE **Come le ho già detto, signorina – lei sa troppe cose!**
MARGARET **Lei non ha rispetto per le altre persone, o no?**
LUKE Io, signorina, sono tutti e due.
MARGARET **Sei tutti e due cosa?**

This is the first time the two characters talk about lies, which is going to be one of the important themes of their forthcoming conversation. The rhythm of the dialog suddenly changes – “You stop that” is Margaret’s first assertive utterance³² after the compliant attitude she has been displaying since the beginning of the play, and Luke cannot ignore it; in addition to that, the woman knows she is lying because she did open the window. This invisible tension between and within the characters inevitably affects their speech patterns so that a shift from the third person to the second person singular in the Italian version becomes plausible. The pressing rhythm and the fast exchange of cues are all signs that somehow demand for immediacy – the immediacy that just an “informal you” can

³² Even “I’m a maid.”/ “Sono una cameriera ai piani” might be a decisive statement but I think it is not as strong as “You stop that!”

convey. In the quotation, the word «miss» uttered by Luke twice, serves as momentary call to formality.

In *Halloween*, the strain between the two opposing registers is such an important feature that after repeated oscillations Margaret explicitly tells Luke that she wants him to call her with her name; the words she uses clearly equals the Italian «to address someone informally».³³ As a consequence, in the rest of the play I have simply opted for the informal «tu».

As for *Ferryboat*, instead, the brash attitude of Joey together with his snappy patter legitimize his continuous intrusions into the informal register. Unlike *Halloween*, in this play the distance between the two characters is greater and more important, and although the girl deep down inside is pleased by Joey's pestering, she displays an aloof attitude throughout most of the encounter – all of this has to be maintained and can be transferred into the Italian translation thanks to the use of the formal «you». Besides the opening of the play, the following excerpt is useful to clarify this claim:

JOEY [...] (*He stares at her for a moment, awaiting any sort of reaction; she goes on reading*) Hey, miss! (*He snaps his fingers and gets up*) A frank! How about a frank? (*No answer*) Would you like a frank with sauerkraut and mustard? Or would you like one with relish and mustard? Or the whole works? That's even better still: the whole works! Why not live it up a little, huh? Go all the way! You see, they got good franks here, too. Always fresh. You know they have to be since they got such a big . . .

GIRL . . . turnover!

(*There is an uneasy pause*)

JOEY (*Quietly now*) Yeah, that's it. (*A pause*) You sure you don't want one?

GIRL Positive. But why don't you go and have one?

JOEY [...] (*La fissa per un istante in attesa di una qualsiasi reazione; lei continua a leggere*) Ehi, signorina! (*Schiocca le dita e si alza*) Un hot dog! **Che ne dice** di un hot dog? (*Nessuna risposta*) **Le andrebbe** un hot dog con crauti e senape? **O ne preferisce** uno con senape e salsa verde? O facciamo con tutto quello che hanno a disposizione? Così va ancora meglio: ci mettiamo sopra tutto quanto! Perché non trattarsi bene una volta tanto, no? Facciamo le cose fino in fondo! Vedi, qui hanno anche dei buoni hot dog. Sempre fatti al momento. **Sai**, devono esserlo per forza per via del gran . . .

RAGAZZA . . . ricambio!

(*Una pausa di imbarazzo*)

JOEY (*Adesso in tono tranquillo*) Sì, esatto. (*Una pausa*) Sicura di non volerne uno?

RAGAZZA Sicurissima. **Ma perché lei non va a prendersene uno?**

In the following part of the encounter, I have occasionally opted for the use of the “informal you” in the girl's lines; my choices were once again influenced by the rhythm of the dialog: when Joey renounces to his long solos and there is a rapid exchange between the two characters informality

³³ In English there is not even a precise term to refer to the Italian concept of «dare del tu». «Call somebody by his/her first name» might be a possible option.

seemed to be the best solution to keep up with the immediacy of the response.³⁴ Finally, the dramatic climax of *Ferryboat*, which constitutes a turning point in the plot, brings about a decisive shift in tone and marks the triumph of informality.

Irony too, which is a recurring ingredient in the works by Leonard Melfi, can be partly recreated in the Italian translation thanks to the right mix of formal and informal register; in this respect I think that Joey's final infamous outburst is the perfect instance of this attitude.

4.4 Back to the 1960s.

Birdbath, *Halloween* and *Ferryboat* were all written in the height of the sixties and I think that this is a key aspect to keep in mind while translating them. Besides the spatial distance that separates Italy from the United States, there is also a temporal distance that separates 2015 from the mid-1960s and little as it might seem, it includes in fact epoch-making changes in lifestyle and in the way of speaking. Technology is just one glaring example of how much times have changes – all of the gadgets that are mentioned by the characters have ceased to exist and have almost completely disappeared from our daily vocabulary: the phonograph, the typewriter, the tape recorder, the polaroid camera, vinyl records and clock as well as transistor radio. If on one end of the spectrum many terms that were popular in those year progressively ceased to be used, on the other end, by contrast, some of those belonging to contemporary vocabulary were yet to come – this is just a detail, but I think it might make the difference considering the overall consistency of the work.

Although I could not experience the 1960s, I have tried to be as faithful as possible to the spirit of that decade, paying special attention to the language that was spoken in those years. This does not mean that my translations are stuck in the past and that I have put obsolete, mannerist words in the mouth of the characters only for the sake of looking backwards, but for example I have avoided terms that would sound “too modern” such as English borrowings that are so common these days. In order to get closer to the sixties, movies of those years³⁵ proved to be extremely helpful because they

³⁴ For instance when the two characters are talking about Joey's whistling.

³⁵ By movies I mean Italian movies as well as American movies and their Italian dubbed version.

provide the perfect mix of language and cultural background that no other source could exemplify so effectively.

It is a fact that language is vital and keeps changing over the years, so that even translations grow old and become outdated. Nevertheless, I think that each work – for better or for worst – is a child of its time and as such, translation cannot completely cut ties with the historical period that produced it, otherwise it would be just a take on the source text. As far as non-contemporary works are concerned, I like to think of their translation as the makeover of an old piece of furniture – in both cases the aim should be bring them back to life without cancelling the traces of the period in which they were manufactured. Inevitably, their appearance will be different from the original, but the substance hidden behind it is supposed to be the same.

In practical terms, the translation of the word «band», which appears both in *Birdbath* and in *Ferryboat*, can be useful to exemplify the gap between contemporary language and the language that was used in the 1960s. Frankie talks about the “ole hometown band” that used to play the song when he was in high school and in this case I have translated it with the Italian «orchestra» intended as a band that provided entertainment with people dancing. As far as the other possible translations are concerned, I understand «complesso» as something more associated with rock and roll music – but Frankie is talking about a romantic dance hit that has nothing to do with that genre. On the other hand, the word «gruppo» would be rather generic and «band» would be definitely out of place since in the sixties such loanwords were not part of Italian language. In *Ferryboat*, instead, Joey says “a top-name band for dancing” and in my Italian version it became «complesso» because I think it is more in tune with the sixties and the rock-dance type of music that was so popular in that period. The same applies to Luke’s «fan» that I have translated with «patito» because in the sixties the English loanword did not exist in Italian.

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