

AQUARIUM

Characters

Conrad, 58
Damien, 23
Matthew, 38
Catherine, 48
Matilda, 23
Radivoy, 58
Lucy, 42

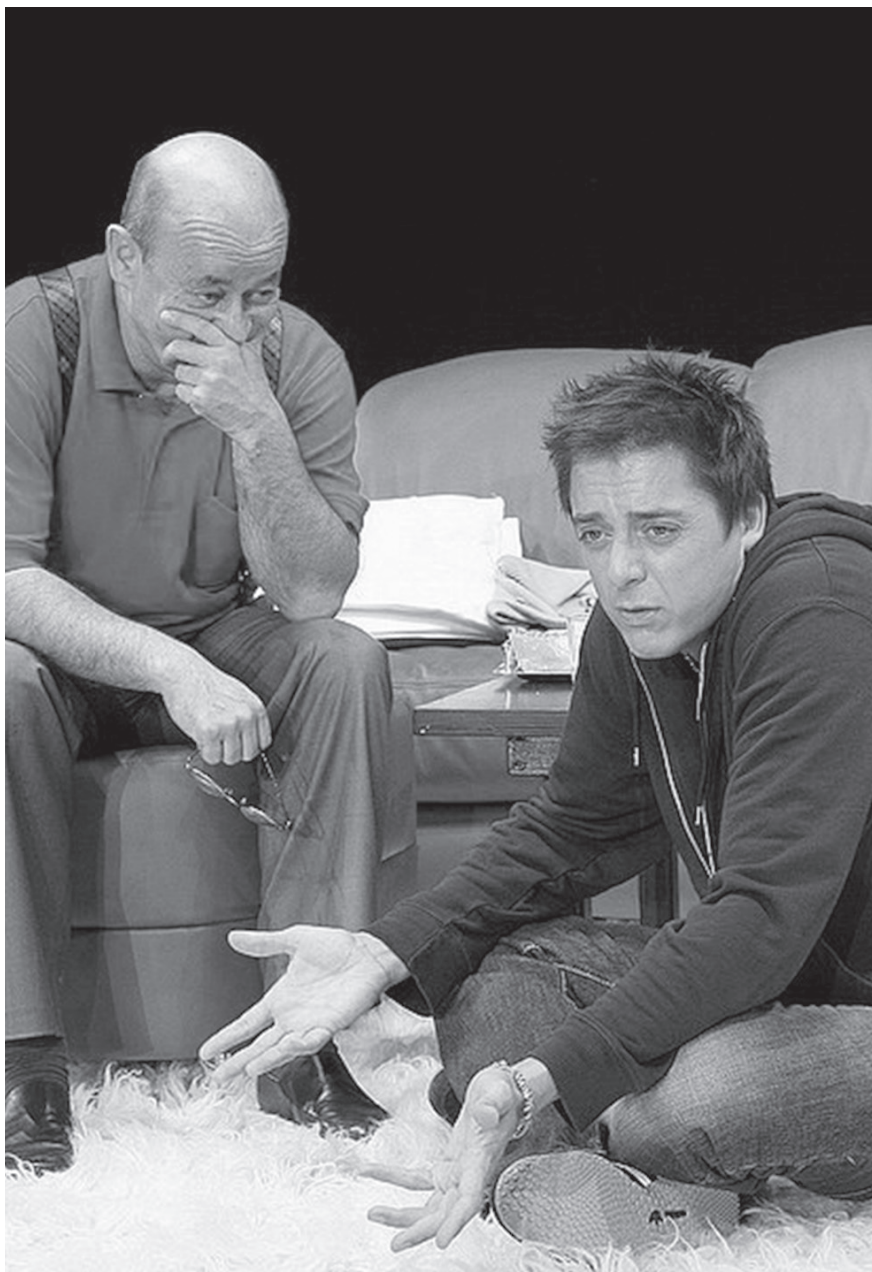
Aquarium was first produced by Prešeren Theatre Kranj, Slovenia, opening on 20. 9. 2007. It was directed by Dušan Mlakar with the following cast:

Conrad
Damien
Matthew
Catherine
Matilda
Radivoy
Lucy

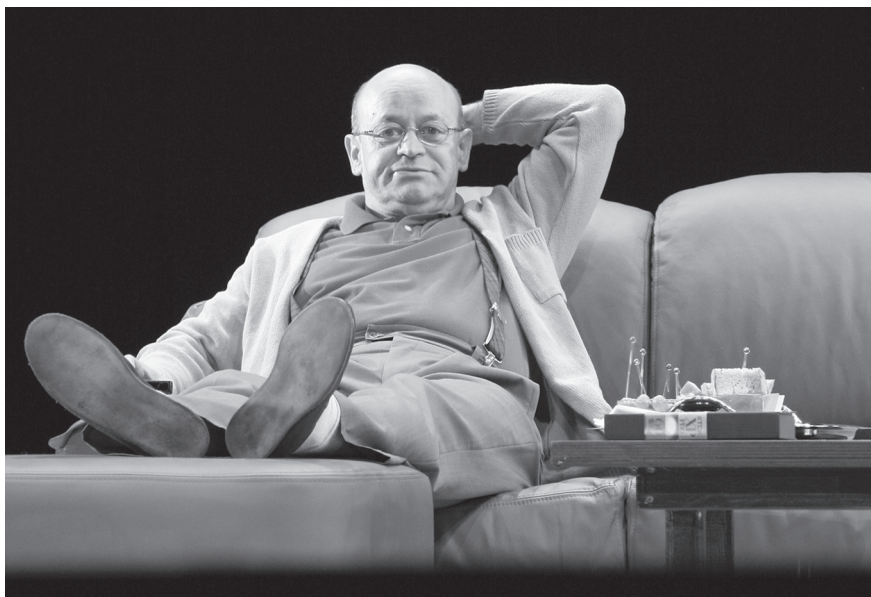
Vlado Novak
Igor Štamulak
Peter Musevski
Vesna Jevnikar
Vesna Pernarčič – Žunić
Tine Oman
Darja Reichman



Vlado Novak, Vesna Pernarčič – Žunić
Aquarium, Prešeren Theatre Kranj, Slovenia, 2007



Vlado Novak, Igor Štamulak
Aquarium, Prešeren Theatre Kranj, Slovenia, 2007



Vlado Novak
Aquarium, Prešeren Theatre Kranj, Slovenia, 2007



Vlado Novak, Igor Štamulak
Aquarium, Prešeren Theatre Kranj, Slovenia, 2007



Vlado Novak, Vesna Jevnikar
Aquarium, Prešeren Theatre Kranj, Slovenia, 2007



Vlado Novak, Peter Musevski
Aquarium, Prešeren Theatre Kranj, Slovenia, 2007



Vlado Novak, Darja Reichman
Aquarium, Prešeren Theatre Kranj, Slovenia, 2007

The action takes place in a tastefully furnished living room of a suburban house. The door on the left leads to the kitchen, the door on the right to the hall. Behind this door there is an entrance hall, which we don't see, and a flight of stairs leading to the attic. In front of the sofa, two armchairs and a coffee table. The TV set has its back turned to the audience. A drinks table with an old-fashioned phone set, perhaps a music center. Also crammed bookshelves, paintings and other objects that one usually finds in the house of an educated middle-class couple.

Act One

1.

(As the curtain rises, Conrad comes in from the kitchen with a large tray piled high with Hungarian salami, various kind of cheese, and mini ciabattas. He places the tray on the coffee table, picks up a DVD, inserts it in the player under the TV set. He sits and leans back on the sofa, switches on the DVD with remote control. He attacks the food on the tray while watching the movie. He is disturbed by Damien, who enters from the hall.)

DAMIEN *(looks at TV screen)*: Casa – blanca?

CONRAD: Don't you like it?

DAMIEN: Sentimental shit that was made in the Middle Ages? I've already seen it five times.

CONRAD: Even though you don't like it?

DAMIEN: I had to figure out *why* I don't like it.

CONRAD: Have a slice of salami. Or would you prefer some cheese?

DAMIEN (*puts a slice of salami and a piece of cheese in his mouth*): Is this what you call healthy eating? And when have you last left the house? It's not far to the video shop; you could watch a different piece of shit every day. Tell me what you want; I'll get it for you.

CONRAD: I have what I need.

DAMIEN: Why don't you want to live in the present?

CONRAD (*looks at his watch*): I live in the present. Today is the twentieth of November. If I lived in the past it would still be the twentieth of August. Where do you live?

DAMIEN: In the future.

CONRAD: But Damien, then you must surely be in a hurry, you know how slippery the future can be, you have to pursue it relentlessly and with grim determination. Don't you have urgent business to attend to? (*Pointedly looks at his watch again.*)

DAMIEN (*takes more salami and cheese*): What I mean is that instead of ancient movies you could sometimes watch CNN. Don't you want to know what's happening in the world, now that you can no longer influence the events?

CONRAD: No.

DAMIEN: You'll go potty if you keep watching the same film all the time.

CONRAD (*slightly raising his voice*): The reason I keep watching it is because I never get the chance to watch it to the end.

DAMIEN: I won't disturb you.

CONRAD: Thank you.

DAMIEN: What puzzles me, though, is that you never find the time to watch my TV show.

CONRAD: Since when do you have your own TV show?

DAMIEN: Since I placed a formal invitation on your desk and you chucked it away with the rest of your post.

CONRAD: Sorry...

DAMIEN: I'm your wife's nephew. I live in the attic of your house. I'm practically a family member, yet you don't as much as stir a finger to find out how I feel, what I think about, what interests me...

CONRAD: Everything all right in the attic? Need anything? A new stereo, a Kashmiri carpet, Jacuzzi? No, Jacuzzi was put in three weeks ago. Perhaps you need a balcony, for a better view.

DAMIEN: Where is Lucy, by the way?

CONRAD: Attending an international conference of psychologists in Budapest.

- DAMIEN: Again? Wasn't she there last month?
- CONRAD: No, last month she was in Prague.
- DAMIEN: She never told me she was going to Budapest.
- CONRAD: That's women for you. They don't even think of informing nephews, nieces and distant cousins of their daily plans.
- DAMIEN: The trouble is I'm having someone for dinner tonight.
- CONRAD: Excellent. Who is coming, the director of the TV company?
- DAMIEN: No, his young secretary.
- CONRAD: Congratulations, much better than the director, with whom you wouldn't know what to do anyway, if I know you.
- DAMIEN: You don't know me at all.
- CONRAD: Are you saying that you'd prefer the director, and that his secretary is merely a poor replacement?
- DAMIEN: I was hoping Lucy would cook some Indonesian, Japanese or some other exotic stuff. What on earth can I offer Matilda now?
- CONRAD: The director's secretary is called Matilda?
- DAMIEN: That's beside the point. I have nothing to offer her, and if there is no sumptuous dinner that would last into the night she might decide to leave early.
- CONRAD: But aren't you going to discuss the script for your next TV show? Or did you have in mind something else?
- DAMIEN: I promised her a gourmet evening.
- CONRAD (*pushes the tray across the table toward Damien*): I'm quite happy to contribute the remains of my breakfast. For two modest people this could be more than enough. Especially if the food is only a pretext...
- DAMIEN: For what?
- CONRAD: I don't know, for a scintillating debate about the problems of contemporary society inside the Jacuzzi, for example.
- DAMIEN: The major problem of contemporary society is that nobody ever taught me to cook. That means I may remain without something to which I'm fully entitled.
- CONRAD: Entitled?
- DAMIEN: Yes. For the privilege of moving from a secretarial position to a small part in front of the camera she must be prepared to bite into something hard.
- CONRAD: Then you really shouldn't waste any more time for that sort of thing. You have to harden yourself as much as you can, otherwise the bite you are hoping for might be very painful indeed.

DAMIEN: Why did she have to go to Budapest today of all days? Don't you mind her going to all these conferences?

CONRAD (*pulls the tray back*): On the contrary, I only wish they would last longer than a few days.

DAMIEN: Aren't you curious about what she's doing?

CONRAD: Damien, your aunt is grown woman who knows what she is doing. And whatever that is, she has as much right to it as I have to this delicious salami. (*Chews.*)

DAMIEN: Can't say you aren't generous.

CONRAD: A respect for privacy, if you happen to know what that is.

DAMIEN: No it's not. It's something else. You simply don't give a damn. You've cut yourself off the way a prick is cut off a eunuch. But you're not the eunuch; you're the prick that's been cut off. A small, gnarled knob of something that used to stand up straight and now can't even hang with dignity.

CONRAD: If you use such metaphors in your show it must be highly popular.

DAMIEN: My show interests you as much as a run-over cat on a country road in Malaysia.

CONRAD: That's not fair.

DAMIEN: No?

CONRAD: You're accusing me of being indifferent to cats that have been run over on village roads, which isn't true.

DAMIEN (*turns*): I'm going.

CONRAD: Won't you take the leftovers? (*Pushes the tray across the table.*) For Matilda. For dessert you can offer her some pickled cucumbers.

DAMIEN: You could at least congratulate me. How many people do you know who have their own TV show?

CONRAD: I presume it's a controversial show successfully balancing elite intellectual stuff with cheap entertainment for the masses.

DAMIEN (*looking at Conrad for some time*): I often ask myself how you'd react if I hit you.

CONRAD: And how would *you* react, if I didn't react the way you expect me to?

DAMIEN: You're lucky I'm only a guest in this house. Thanks to your wife. You'd have gotten rid of me a long time ago.

CONRAD: Not only would I not, I'd be dreadfully unhappy if you decided to leave.

(*There is a knock at the door.*)

DAMIEN: When are you going to fix that doorbell? (*Goes toward the entrance.*) I'll open it.

CONRAD (*terrified, half-rising*): What, the door?

DAMIEN: Someone's knocking.

CONRAD: Why should that be our problem?

DAMIEN: It could be anybody.

CONRAD: That's the point. In my experience the worst trouble in life always enters through the front door. (*Damien continues on his way.*) Damien, I forbid you...

2.

(*Matthew enters, and hears the last words.*)

MATTHEW: Anything wrong?

CONRAD (*ill-willed*): I wanted to watch *Casablanca*. But since you're here... Come, sit down. (*Matthew looks at Damien.*) You know each other, don't you?

MATTHEW: The face is familiar.

CONRAD: Damien is Lucy's nephew. Lives in the attic. (*To Damien.*) My younger brother Matthew.

DAMIEN: Oh yes, I've heard about you.

MATTHEW: In connection with what?

DAMIEN: Aren't you the one who went to America and four years later came back without a dime in his pocket?

MATTHEW: That was our grandfather. (*Looks at Conrad.*) What do you talk about in this house?

DAMIEN: Don't ask. You don't want to ruin your day.

MATTHEW: I remember now where I saw you. On television. In some... show or other. What is it called?

DAMIEN: Damien's show.

MATTHEW: Exactly. And who is this Damien?

DAMIEN: The presenter.

MATTHEW: Well, you must've had a reason to appear in this piece of crap, but to suffer the imbecile who presents it must've been painful indeed. I couldn't do it. I would have thrown a rotten egg in his face right at the beginning.

DAMIEN: You can still do that. (*To Conrad.*) Have we got any rotten eggs?

(*Leaves and slams the door behind him.*)

MATTHEW: I don't understand.

CONRAD: You've just mortally offended your sister-in-law's nephew.
Didn't you hear the name when I introduced you?

MATTHEW: Wait a minute... (*Realizing.*) Him?

CONRAD: It doesn't matter.

MATTHEW: It does. If I'd known it was him I would have told him straight to his face what I think of his show. I had never seen such vacuous nonsense in my life. I'd like to meet the idiots who put their money into shows like that. And the even greater idiots who watch them.

CONRAD: You watched it.

MATTHEW: By accident. You know perfectly well one sees things like that on TV by accident.

CONRAD: I don't watch television.

MATTHEW (*gestures at the TV set*): What's that, then?

CONRAD: *Casablanca*. For once in my life, I was hoping to see it to the end without interruption. Will you have a drink?

MATTHEW (*looks toward the drinks table*): Is that Canadian Club? (*Conrad goes to pour whiskey.*) Anyway, do you know what he does in this show? He walks around the courtyard of a country inn, among an audience of people as grotesque as you can imagine. You know the type: men staring into the camera like slaughtered cattle, and women as if they had just swallowed a goldfish.

CONRAD: That's the type of audience they have in every TV show.

MATTHEW: Wait. Your Damien walks among them, mike in hand, joins this table and that, and asks a man: "Can you still get it up?" Then he says to the man's wife: "Show us your boobs, so I can see if it's worth my while reserving a room at the motel."

CONRAD (*hands Matthew a glass of whiskey*): You're talking about The Jerry Springer Show.

MATTHEW: Didn't you say you never watch television?

CONRAD: All I watch are great movie classics, if you want to know. TV shows appear on the screen by themselves while I change DVDs. No idea why, something must be wrong with the set.

MATTHEW: Anyway, for his next show your nephew has promised a special treat: a young lady who will take off her clothes and “do it” with him in front of the camera.

CONRAD: He’s not my nephew.

MATTHEW (*staring*): What?

CONRAD (*slightly raising his voice*): Considering that you’re my brother he would have to be yours as well, wouldn’t he? In which case you would at least have heard of him, although you spend most of your time on Mars, or Jupiter, or wherever you happen to be when you’re not here.

MATTHEW: I meant of course Lucy’s nephew. Don’t look at me as if I were senile. What I wanted to say is that I don’t understand how Lucy, who is, after all, an intelligent woman, how she can have such a – forgive me, but I really can’t find a milder expression – such a boorish nephew.

CONRAD: What about you?

MATTHEW: Me?

CONRAD: Considering that you made an effort to visit your brother, which doesn’t happen all that often, you’ll probably tell me something about yourself, which is what you normally do, when you make an effort to visit me.

MATTHEW: Lately you’ve been very sarcastic, even more so than you were in your most sarcastic days.

CONRAD (*waves at the tray*): A slice of salami? Smoked cheese?

MATTHEW (*tries a slice of salami*): Lucy not here?

CONRAD: She’s attending a conference in Bucharest.

MATTHEW (*tries a piece of cheese*): Wasn’t she there last month?

CONRAD: No, last month she was in Helsinki.

MATTHEW: Doesn’t it bother you that she is away so much?

CONRAD: The only thing that bothers me is the fact that I can’t watch my favorite movie without being interrupted all the time.

MATTHEW: I won’t stand in your way. But I feel rather unwell today. I need advice.

CONRAD: I must warn you that seeking advice from a brother may not be the best idea.

MATTHEW: It’s a serious matter.

CONRAD: You will be brief, won’t you?

MATTHEW (*sits and twirls the glass of whiskey in his hand*): Yesterday I was called in for a chat.

CONRAD: By the police, or the Inland Revenue?

MATTHEW: In connection with my job application.

CONRAD: Bravo. As a globetrotter you'll make an excellent tourist guide.

MATTHEW: For the post of foreign correspondent with your newspaper!

CONRAD: What my newspaper?

MATTHEW: Oh for God's sake. The newspaper where you were editor
and director. You wrote me a recommendation. Don't tell me you
don't remember.

CONRAD: Can't think of a reason why I should. But yes, I do remember,
vaguely, having signed something. And how did it go?

MATTHEW: Badly.

CONRAD: You got the job.

MATTHEW: No.

CONRAD: Why not?

MATTHEW: Because they offered it to someone else, that's why.

CONRAD: But I never recommended anyone else. (*Pause.*) Besides, who
could have better qualifications? You've traveled in more than half
the world, you've seen political problems first-hand, experienced
them personally. You caught malaria, three times if I remember; you
caught typhoid, pneumonia, yellow fever, legionella...

MATTHEW: What's that got to do with politics?

CONRAD: Not much, but after all you've been through you simply de-
serve the post of a foreign correspondent. They should consider it
an honor that you applied.

MATTHEW: They didn't.

CONRAD: So what did they say?

MATTHEW: Nothing concrete, but in a roundabout way they indicated
that the main problem was your recommendation.

CONRAD (*after slight pause*): Grammatical errors? Probably too many
commas, or too few. Exclamation marks instead of question marks,
that sort of thing. I do have my failings. In fact, as you must know,
I am practically dyslexic, just like Hemingway.

MATTHEW: Hemingway was dyslexic?

CONRAD: Absolutely. In most of his words at least one letter was either
missing, or superfluous.

MATTHEW: I had no idea.

CONRAD: But that did not prevent him from getting the Nobel Prize for
Literature! Why then should *my* dyslexia prevent *you* from getting
the post of a journalist for an unimportant provincial newspaper
that nobody reads?

MATTHEW: There was nothing wrong with the grammar. On the contrary. Members of the board couldn't believe all punctuation marks were in the right places.

CONRAD: I did show the text to Lucy, who suggested minor improvements, but I still don't understand how a recommendation from their former boss, with or without errors, could have so disastrously influenced members of the board regarding your suitability for the advertised post. Evidently in their eyes it didn't have enough weight.

MATTHEW: Too much weight. In a negative sense.

CONRAD: I do wish you'd scrape together all the courage you're capable of, if you are capable of any at all, and tell me straight to my face what is bothering you.

MATTHEW: What is bothering me is the fact that with your behavior as editor-in-chief you made it impossible for me to get the first job in my life I really want! Sorry. You wanted the truth.

CONRAD: And I'm glad I finally got it. Truth among brothers should be a model for human relationships. So you won't mind if I answer in the same vein. In the first place, this wouldn't be the first job in life you really want, but the first job in your life. Second, my behavior as editor-in-chief should interest you no more than I am interested in the color of dog shit you accidentally stepped on during your travels in that part of the world where people believe Hygiene is a heroine in one of Andersen's fairy tales. In the third place, the members of the board who considered your application are, from the first to the last one, ungrateful cads for whom I did more favors in the space of six months than they will do for their mothers in a thousand years. In the fourth and fifth place, there is no point in telling you what I could have told you in the sixth and seventh place. And finally, in the eighth place: please don't think that you can come here and put all responsibility for the unending series of your professional failures on the shoulders of your elder brother. After getting rid of the burden of my own psychological rubbish I have no intention of replacing it with the much bigger burden of ego-trash of my distant relatives.

MATTHEW (*rising*): I think it's time for your distant relative to leave.

CONRAD: Well, you've proved exactly what I knew you were going to prove.

MATTHEW: And what is that?

CONRAD: That you reserve the right to deliver punches below the belt, but withdraw sulkily as soon as a well-aimed fist strikes you on the chin within permissible rules. Actually you haven't changed since your teens, when you threw a glass of whiskey in my face just because I dared suggest that you stop writing poetry since all your poems have already been written by others, and with far greater success.

MATTHEW (*puts the glass on the coffee table, sits*): You're right, I haven't changed. I was again on the point of throwing whiskey in your face.

CONRAD: Fortunately you realized that the glass was empty. (*Replenishes Matthew's glass.*) Try now.

MATTHEW (*raising his glass*): Cheers.

CONRAD: Have we ever been able to talk to each other as brothers?

MATTHEW: Our age difference may be too great.

CONRAD: Merely twenty years.

MATTHEW: Do you realize that you used to be my idol?

CONRAD: Probably when you were ten, and you suddenly realized that the world does not exist because of you, but largely because of others. Suddenly you realized you had a brother who was three times bigger than you and walked around with a large hat on his head and with beautiful women who were also three times bigger than you and therefore unavailable. Another thing you realized was the fact that there are people in this world who will always be ten steps ahead of you, among them your elder brother. Hardly surprising that you needed an idol, and even less surprising that in a hurry, for which you are known, and without any consideration, for which you are also known, you found the nearest equivalent in your brother.

MATTHEW: It wasn't like that. When I was ten I hated you.

CONRAD: I know. And I know why. Because you realized that in most things you felt you were entitled to I was twenty years ahead of you, and that in twenty years time it wouldn't be any different.

MATTHEW: Not at all. The reason I hated you was because you were convinced, already when I was ten, that you knew what I thought, how I felt, what I wanted. And you were wrong, just as you have always been.

CONRAD: In other words, you hated me so much that you turned me into an idol.

MATTHEW: You became my idol when I stopped hating you. Because I realized that you might be different.

CONRAD: And how did you realize that?

MATTHEW: Someone told me that at the age of twenty you were an industrial spy. In Germany you were stealing designs for hydroelectric plants, because after the war we didn't have any experts to design our own.

CONRAD: Are you accusing your own brother of being a thief?

MATTHEW: Once, in the middle of winter, as you were crossing the mountain border, the Austrian guards shot at you, and caught you. To prevent the stolen designs from being found, you swallowed them before they reached you. So your only offence was illegal border crossing.

CONRAD (*after pause*): That is the reason I became your idol?

MATTHEW: I didn't admire you because of your courage. I admired you because of the incredible capacity of your stomach. A design for a hydroelectric plant, even a small one, must comprise at least one hundred sheets of drawing paper. How did you manage to swallow all that without getting sick?

CONRAD: So it wasn't I who was your idol, it was my stomach.

MATTHEW: Everything connected with you. Especially your discretion: you never bragged about this chapter of your life. Completely unlike you.

CONRAD: Well, how nice that I ceased to be your idol before this obsession of yours turned into a burden for both of us.

MATTHEW: That happened when I learned the details of your retirement.

CONRAD: Wait a minute. Not only do you accuse me of stealing intellectual property in Germany, you also spy on me, poke your nose into my past and personal matters, on top of which you're impertinent enough to come here and try to blame me for your chronic failure to find work.

MATTHEW: That's not true.

CONRAD: Don't tell me what's true, because with the twenty-year headway I have in all respects, except perhaps in the quality of erection, but even that is debatable, I still *know* what is true.

MATTHEW: You're lying to yourself. That's why I came. To tell you.

CONRAD: Didn't you say you were in serious trouble and needed advice?

MATTHEW: I am in trouble. Because of you. And I expect you to give me advice on how I can convince you of that.

CONRAD (*after pause*): Write me a letter and give all the details. I promise I'll read it as soon as time allows. Definitely by the end of the year. Anything else?

MATTHEW: When I was a little boy you could make me cry just by looking at me.

CONRAD: I don't want to make you cry, I just want to get you as far as the door, and out on to the street.

MATTHEW: Why don't you admit you're suffering?

CONRAD: Wouldn't *you* suffer if you were denied the right to watch your favorite movie in your own house?

MATTHEW: As a freelance journalist you were soaring above the world like an eagle. You were widely popular, even admired. Why did you accept the post of editor-in-chief and director? (*Conrad is silent.*) Why did the eagle turn into a chicken?

CONRAD: Actually it's good for the newspaper you didn't get the job: your ornithological metaphors would quickly drive away even those few who still bother to read it.

MATTHEW: What was good for the newspaper was the fact that you realized your mistake and quickly found a face-saving exit.

CONRAD: I didn't realize there was any other.

MATTHEW: Of course you did. The other exit was to be chucked out on the street. Because you refused to compromise, the owners would have no other choice. For you to resign was unthinkable, that would have meant defeat and dishonor.

CONRAD: So?

MATTHEW: So, just at an appropriate moment, you damaged a vertebra in your neck, your left arm started to shrink and go numb, your doctor told you that you could retire on full disability pension, you grabbed the opportunity with both arms, with the sick one as firmly as with the healthy one, and you left. And turned into a professional invalid.

CONRAD: Professional?

MATTHEW: Yes. To avoid any suspicions, you had to nurse your invalid pose even after your health very quickly improved. You nursed it so diligently that it turned into a habit. And so you became what you are.

CONRAD: And what am I?

MATTHEW: A man who has succeeded in turning the greatest mistake in his life into his greatest success. A man who has nothing better to do than stuff himself with unhealthy food and watch *Casablanca*.

CONRAD (*after pause*): Now why do I get the feeling that you envy me?

MATTHEW: I want to help you.

CONRAD: *Et tu*, brother, have become part of the world that has decided to deprive me of peace.

MATTHEW: When I saw how much bitterness you left in the hearts of people whose boss you were for less than six months, a feeling of bitterness overcame me as well. And I said to myself: I can't allow my brother to punish himself for a mistake he made because he did not realize that next to things he is good at there are also things at which he is useless.

CONRAD: But you said you hated me; why can't you be consistent and go on hating me? Why must you, for perfidious selfish reasons, play the Good Samaritan and frighten me with the thought that I will never escape the sharp claws of your benevolence?

MATTHEW: Do you know why I hated you most?

CONRAD: I don't, nor do I want to know – isn't that a reason for hating me even more?

MATTHEW: When I was ten, and you were going out, as you said, with beautiful women three times bigger than me, you were thirty years old.

CONRAD: So?

MATTHEW: Already married. To Lucy.

CONRAD: And?

MATTHEW: Yet you continued going out with other women. Poor Lucy, I often said to myself –

CONRAD: Poor little Matthew, I'll say only once, don't you see that moralizing suits you about as much as the bacillus of tuberculosis can be given the title of an honorary doctor of medicine? You who changed women more frequently than your underwear, who drove some to suicide, who –

MATTHEW: That's not true.

CONRAD: Nothing is true in this world, you are innocent, I am innocent, hell is an invention of a rejected God, suffering is an autoimmune disease, fresh air is something you find out there, not in this house, in which your brother has sentenced himself to suicide by installments, so there is no reason why you should insist on staying any longer when you've overstayed your welcome as soon as you arrived – (*propels him toward the door*) – good-bye, auf wiedersehen, au revoir, arrivederci, or, as they say in the village where we were born: off with you.

MATTHEW: You'll be sorry.

CONRAD: I already am, for not locking the door – (*There is a knock at the door.*) Quickly, tell them, whoever they are, that I'm not at home.

MATTHEW: Tell them yourself.

CONRAD: Thank you, brother, for one of those favors that define your character.

3.

(*Enter Catherine, surprised to see Matthew.*)

CATHERINE: What are *you* doing here? Actually it suits me to find you both together, at least I won't have to pursue you separately. Sit down, both of you. (*To Conrad.*) Don't look at me as if I have no right to visit you.

CONRAD: One of the great achievements of our technological civilization is the telephone, which enables people, at least those from better families, to announce themselves.

CATHERINE: Another great achievement is civilized behavior, something completely unknown to you, otherwise you would answer the first great achievement when it rings.

CONRAD: It never rings.

CATHERINE: Because you've unplugged it. I've been trying to reach you for two weeks. I could be dead, and you wouldn't know. Or care, for that matter.

MATTHEW: Well, I must be off –

CATHERINE: Matthew, I asked you to sit down. Why can't we be a normal family?

CONRAD: A much bigger problem is that we *are* a normal family.

CATHERINE: Oh really? A sister comes to visit you, a sister you never see because you choose to avoid her, and you don't even offer her a drink, let alone ask her to sit down.

CONRAD: That would be rather offensive, wouldn't it, after you ordered *us* to sit down, immediately after you entered the house completely uninvited. As for a drink, you have a choice of liqueurs, whiskies, wines and spirits that would fill the most determined of alcoholics with envy. Your husband, for example.

CATHERINE: My husband is not an alcoholic.

CONRAD: So what will it be? Campari? Martini? Gin and tonic? (*Goes to the drinks table.*)

CATHERINE: Nothing for the moment. (*Suddenly remembers.*) Where is Lucy?

MATTHEW: In Madrid. No, she was there last time. In Cairo.

CATHERINE: Well... (*Conrad offers her a drink.*) What is it?

CONRAD: Hemlock. Used to be a popular drink at the time of Socrates. In ancient Greece, in case you don't know.

CATHERINE: Who do you take me for? (*Takes a sip.*) Not bad. Anyway. Let's discuss things like brothers and sisters. Sit down. (*Conrad and Matthew sit down. She sits down as well. Looks at Matthew.*) When was the last time you visited your grandparents' grave? (*Matthew freezes.*) It's not a reproach, I just need the information.

MATTHEW: What about you?

CATHERINE: Okay, let's ask our elder brother.

CONRAD: I think that visiting graves is an extraordinary form of violence. The dead have no say in the matter. Haven't we walked on their heads enough while they were alive? Let them have some rest at least now they're dead.

CATHERINE: In other words: if there is no point in visiting graves, there is even less point in maintaining them. Right?

CONRAD: But haven't we solved that problem? Are we not giving some neighbor or other a small amount of money to loosen the soil and plant some flowers on the grave once a year?

CATHERINE: It wasn't a small amount, and I've been the one paying it. From now on we'll have to pay ground rent for the grave as well. I haven't the slightest intention of doing that, and neither have you.

CONRAD: What do you suggest?

CATHERINE: To give up the grave of our grandparents, and let someone else be buried there.

CONRAD: Good idea. No one should have the right to a resting place for all eternity. And to be able to buy that right wouldn't be fair to the less well-off. After death we should all be equal. I am for it.

MATTHEW: I am against.

CATHERINE: I knew there'd be a problem with you.

MATTHEW (*rising*): How can you even think of something like that? The bones of our ancestors lie in that grave. If we cease to have respect for the past we shall remain without future. Where is it going to end,

if every few years we throw fresh corpses on top of those that still haven't decomposed? Sooner or later we will all be buried in mass graves, like the internees at Auschwitz. Is there nothing human left in our hearts?

CATHERINE: You can keep the grave of our grandparents if you pay for it, I have plenty of other costs.

MATTHEW: So have I. But first I'll take care of the dead. (*Puts down the glass, leaves.*)

CONRAD (*to Catherine*): I think you should follow him. You know his suicidal tendencies.

CATHERINE (*takes a slice of salami and chews*): No I don't, but yours are certainly obvious. How many such trays a day do you put away?

CONRAD (*reaches for the remote control*): In that case you don't mind if I rewind *Casablanca* back to the beginning. If you want, we can watch this unforgettable movie together.

CATHERINE: You can watch movies when I'm gone. First we have to have a serious talk.

CONRAD: But I thought we had just finished it.

CATHERINE: I need help. You have connections. It's been said that they reach as far as Lucifer, who will lower the temperature in hell especially for you when you arrive.

CONRAD: He won't. He knows I like the tropics.

CATHERINE: I hate asking favors, but I have no choice. So I won't leave here until I get your word of honor that you'll do something for me at least once in your life.

CONRAD: In my experience word and honor are highly infrequent bed-fellows.

CATHERINE: Stop interrupting me with your campy humor. It's highly inappropriate for a gentleman of your age. Now listen to me the way a normal brother listens to a normal sister.

CONRAD: On one condition: that you'll be brief.

CATHERINE: Remember Johnny?

CONRAD: No. Should I?

CATHERINE: For God's sake. You must've met him at least a hundred times.

CONRAD: I've met so many Johnnys in my life that you must forgive me if I don't know which particular one you have in mind. Especially since – thankfully – I don't remember any of them. Except, very vaguely, somewhere at the back of my mind, your son.

CATHERINE: That's the one.

CONRAD: I always thought his name was Nigel.

CATHERINE: That's the younger one. Johnny's the elder. I'm actually talking, in case you don't know, about your two nephews.

CONRAD: As I said, I vaguely remember the elder one, but the younger I've never heard of.

CATHERINE: You're his godfather.

CONRAD: Whose, Johnny's?

CATHERINE: Nigel's.

CONRAD: You were talking about Johnny, they are both your sons, you claim they are both my nephews as well, how can I know? In any case I have a rotten memory for names.

CATHERINE: But you do remember Johnny, probably because you had a little... misunderstanding?

CONRAD: On the contrary, our decision to avoid each other was a matter of agreement. The reason I remember him is because he failed to respect our decision and kept coming to hurl abuse at me in my own house, until I was forced to hire two retired boxers to reduce his enthusiasm.

CATHERINE: It wasn't all his fault.

CONRAD: No, it was entirely my fault that I commissioned him to produce a design for our weekly supplement, which was so atrocious that I couldn't accept it, while he was too much of a genius to make improvements. It was my fault that I didn't give in to his blackmail, and finally his threats to sue me unless I pay him the fee he had found expedient to set himself. It was my fault that I wasn't sufficiently insulted when he threw into my face the worst a mortally wounded egomaniac could think of. In a nutshell, from beginning to end it was all my fault. And you've come, after all these years, to ask me to apologize to him?

CATHERINE: He apologized to you, don't you remember?

CONRAD: He sent me a piece of paper on which he had scrawled: I apologize, but that doesn't mean I've changed my opinion of you.

CATHERINE: Well, that's what he's like.

CONRAD: He could hardly be different, having been brought up by you.

CATHERINE: Still, you could've paid him at least something for his work. But never mind, you can do the right thing now: he is in trouble.

CONRAD: I can't imagine how a genius could get into trouble that the same genius couldn't get out of.

CATHERINE: It's his wife who's in trouble. She's lost her job. They have a three-year old baby. A boy. Have you ever come to see him?

CONRAD: No, I'm neither the pope nor a politician to go around kissing and patting babies. Bring him here, I'm sure I'll find a minute to tweak his rosy cheek and produce appropriate gurgling noises. Would you care for another drink?

CATHERINE: (*rising*) I'm afraid I would. But not in your company. (*Reaching for her handbag.*) I must say that I didn't expect this.

CONRAD (*sighing*): Oh for God's sake... tell me what you want me to do, and I'll do it.

CATHERINE: Promise?

CONRAD: I have no choice, have I?

CATHERINE: Make a few phone calls. Call in alphabetical order those of your many acquaintances who are primary school principals. Tell them you have a relative who is looking for work as a teacher of housekeeping. Add that she is honest, capable and dependable. If there is no other way, bend the facts a little and tell them she is a single mother.

CONRAD: Bend the facts? Is that the expression that's in use now?

CATHERINE: You wouldn't be bending them for the first time in your life.

CONRAD: Where did you get the idea that I know primary school principals? You are a teacher; I haven't been near a primary school since I finished the last grade.

CATHERINE: Which is all that you finished, as far as I know. You were a man of many connections. You must know people who know people who *know* primary school principals.

CONRAD: Well I don't. Sorry. I have no connections because I don't want any. Your son the genius would say that I am disconnected. And even if I did have any, what makes you think I would abuse them for such transparent nepotism? Housekeeping, for God's sake! Is that what they teach at school these days?

CATHERINE: You could at least write her a recommendation.

CONRAD: Hardly a good idea, since I'm dyslexic. Primary school principals are especially allergic to faulty grammar. I wouldn't like to ruin the chances she has because of her merit and other things, such as attractive bosom, perhaps.

CATHERINE: You know perfectly well she has no chances, like everybody else who chooses the legal way.

CONRAD (*faked surprise*): Things have gone so far? My, my...

CATHERINE: You've come very far yourself. You have become nothing.

CONRAD (*becomes animated*): Absolutely. You should congratulate me, for surely this is my greatest success so far. To become nothing after you have been something, or at least entertained an illusion that you are something, an illusion kept alive not so much by yourself as by those around you who were hoping to accrue personal gains from the fact that you're something, and were themselves something, less of a something than you but something nevertheless, only as long as they kept you alive in your faith that you are something more – to become nothing after such a parade of the emperor's new clothes, and not even because of a mistake or ineptitude or an accidental slip, but deliberately, fully conscious and of sound mind, knowing perfectly well that most people won't believe that and will prefer the theory of an accidental slip, for the higher you fly the lower you fall, right? – for such a descent from the stage of importance into the benedict silence of solitude I most definitely deserve any thing but disrespect, do I not? Becoming nothing and then defending this newly gained status with all the wit still available to an ageing mind, that, dear sister, is surely more than an average person can understand. So how can a nothing that wants to remain nothing, because anything else would amount to no more than farting against the wind, intervene on behalf of your daughter-in-law on the stage from which he had swept himself because he could no longer pretend, but wanted, even at the cost of derision, to be real for a change?

CATHERINE: If that was a confession it has fallen on deaf ears.

CONRAD: It's not the ears that are deaf; deaf is the mind, deaf and blind.

CATHERINE: You're drunk. (*Rises.*)

CONRAD: Drunk from a dizzy hope that, in a few moments, silence will envelop this space and we shall be alone, finally alone, *Casablanca* and I.

(We hear the opening of the main door. Matilda enters. She stares at Catherine. A pause.)

MATILDA: I didn't expect there'd be someone else here as well.

CATHERINE: I'm leaving. (*To Conrad.*) Where did you say Lucy went? Madrid?

CONRAD: Athens. In Madrid she was last time. And your husband, where did he go?

CATHERINE (*looks at Matilda, shakes her head*): Aren't you a little too old? Or at least afraid that, with all that salami and cheese, any exertion might be dangerous for your heart?

(*She leaves.*)

4.

MATILDA (*looking around*): Where is Dinky?

CONRAD: That's what I keep asking myself. Where is Dinky? Actually I'm asking myself something else: *who the hell is Dinky, and who the hell are you?*

MATILDA: Don't you know Dinky? (*Pulls a piece of paper from her bag.*) He gave me this address.

CONRAD: Do you like *Casablanca*?

MATILDA: You mean the restaurant by that name, or the city in Morocco?

CONRAD: A movie. Film. Ingrid Bergman, Humphrey Bogart, don't these names mean anything to you?

MATILDA: No. But Dinky would know, he knows a lot of things.

CONRAD: If we knew who Dinky was, and if we knew where Dinky was, we could ask him, could we not? But because there is no Dinky, we are going to do something far better. We are going to sit on this sofa, we shall imagine it's a magic carpet, and we shall fly off to Casablanca. The journey will be unforgettable. Sit down.

MATILDA: I'd rather not.

CONRAD: You can't watch a movie standing up.

MATILDA: I'm not sure what Dinky would say.

CONRAD: You'll forget Dinky in a minute. Whiskey? Bacardi? Martini? (*Goes to the drinks table.*)

MATILDA (*types a number into the mobile phone, waits, puts it away*): Engaged.

CONRAD: Waiting for Dinky, we can call this blessed hour that's before us.

MATILDA: I think I'll go.

CONRAD: You don't know what you're going to miss. This time I'm definitely going to lock the door. You won't be able to get back in.

MATILDA: I don't know who you are.

CONRAD: If it's any consolation, I don't know *you* are. How does it go, that song by Sinatra? "Strangers in the night..." Come on. After all these relatives of mine I would find it rewarding to watch my favorite movie in the company of a beautiful young girl. The worst that can happen to you is that you'll cry at the end.

MATILDA: I don't like sad movies.

CONRAD: It's not a sad movie. You'll cry out of joy.

MATILDA (*takes a step toward the sofa*): Maybe for five minutes. Then I have to call Dinky. He must've given me the wrong address.

CONRAD (*offers her a drink*): Here you are. Martini, a drink for ladies.

MATILDA (*takes the glass, sits on the sofa*): No one's ever called me a lady.

CONRAD: Oh... Not even Dinky? (*Sits next to her, fiddles with the remote control, starts the movie. Damien enters.*)

MATILDA (*springs to her feet*): Dinky!

CONRAD: Of course! I should have known that Dinky was living here under an assumed name. Maybe we should hang a sign above the door: "The Dinky House."

DAMIEN (*to Matilda*): Didn't we agree you'd come in the evening?

MATILDA: I can't in the evening. Are you angry?

DAMIEN: No, I'm not angry. I'm mad. The house is untidy, there is dirty washing lying all over, the cleaning lady has come down with flu, the cook has unexpectedly left for Tel Aviv, I have an uncle here who's been let out of the madhouse for a few days, any moment now he'll come out with the crazy idea that this is his house –

CONRAD: Oh no, the uncle is well aware in which direction the wind is blowing, in a thousand years he wouldn't dare to suggest that this was his house; who would believe anything so ridiculous anyway?

MATILDA (*moving away*): He did seem a little unusual.

DAMIEN: He isn't dangerous; it's just that he has crazy ideas.

CONRAD: I must tell you... My nephew Dinky has a heart of gold. Whenever I'm let out for a few days he allows me to spend the nights here, and he doesn't even charge me for that, can you believe it? And his cook, whom in my worst moments of mental derangement I take for my wife, cooks for me and serves me, although I behave like a pig, throwing food all over the floor, and although I turn into a pigsty even the attic, where Dinky, who, naturally, would like to create

a good impression, cannot invite you because of my disgusting lack of feeling for hygiene...

DAMIEN: That'll do, Uncle.

CONRAD: Well, I'm glad I can help at least one of my relatives in trouble.

DAMIEN (*to Matilda*): Why can't you come in the evening?

MATILDA: Because I can't.

DAMIEN: We made a deal. I was going to prepare a gourmet dinner.

Candles, music, incense sticks, the lot.

MATILDA: You said I should come for an audition.

DAMIEN: Don't you know what that is?

MATILDA: I must show what I can do.

DAMIEN: That for sure, but also what you have, considering the part you'd like to play. You won't play Desdemona at the National Theater, you'll play a little slut who will fornicate in front of the camera with the presenter of the highest-rated show on the highest-rated private TV.

MATILDA: It isn't the highest rated.

DAMIEN: One of the highest rated. What's that got to do with the part you'd like to play?

MATILDA: But you said it wouldn't be for real, it would be simulated.

DAMIEN: Sure, but the simulation must be so convincing that no one will suspect it *is* simulation. We need at least three rehearsals. From the unbuttoned blouse to the final scream.

MATILDA: Okay, let's go.

DAMIEN: That's the problem. The attic is a pigsty, a real pigsty.

CONRAD: Oh, please, don't pay any attention to me, who in any case feel as though I were dreaming. How the world has changed in only a few short years. Isn't that amazing? Private TV stations, taking such exemplary care of national culture – who would have thought our prospects would become so bright? You just go ahead with your simulations here on the sofa. I'll be watching *Casablanca* and won't disturb your "audition". And if I accidentally turn around, I won't suffer a heart attack, at the madhouse I'm used to naked women who rush up and down the corridor, screaming as though they were having five orgasms simultaneously.

MATILDA: Can we go somewhere else?

DAMIEN: All right, but it really is messy upstairs.

MATILDA: Can't be worse than at home. Can I have a drink, something strong?

(She hands him her glass. Damien puts it on the drinks table and takes a bottle of whiskey.)

DAMIEN: We don't want to run short in the heat of battle.

CONRAD: God forbid, dehydrated organs can start scraping against each other like iron against stone, a very unpleasant noise, it wouldn't take long for suspicions to arise that the whole sweaty business is a mere simulation.

MATILDA *(to Damien)*: It'll just be a rehearsal, right?

DAMIEN: Thank you, Uncle. Keep your fingers crossed. And I'll keep them crossed for you, so that finally you can watch *Casablanca* to the end.

CONRAD: Right. Life is a rehearsal for the next life, according to a wise man who never lived. And because he didn't, we have to utter his wise remarks instead of him. Why not? Why not surrogate wisdom in the time which is so generously inclined to surrogates of all sorts that it is itself a surrogate for some other time?

MATILDA: Thank you for being kind to me.

CONRAD: I haven't had so much fun in years. You know how it is in a madhouse: everyone's deadly serious.

DAMIEN: Come, I'll show you the Jacuzzi.

(Pushes Matilda through the door, turns, winks at Conrad, goes, closes door.)

CONRAD *(crossing himself)*: Forgive me, God, for making a gesture that you might mistakenly take for a sign of gratitude. Don't punish an infidel for his sudden conversion, which probably won't last longer than twenty seconds, but which, at this moment, is more genuine than any of my many conversions in the past. The next thing. A glass of whiskey, bottoms up. *(Pours himself a drink, empties the glass.)* The next thing. Lock the door. *(Goes out, we can hear he is locking the outside door. Returns.)* The next thing. *(Crosses himself again.)* It's a miracle, the conversion lasts! Thank you, God, for the peace I'm going to enjoy for the next two hours. The next thing. The great event.

(Conrad sits on the sofa, stuffs his mouth with the remains of salami and cheese, starts the video, watches. An expression of bliss on his face.)

5.

(There is a noise on the stairs. Matilda staggers into the room in her underwear, holding the handbag in her left hand and pressing the skirt and the blouse to her with the right one.)

CONRAD *(suppressing anger)*: Wasn't that a rather short rehearsal?

MATILDA: I know he is your nephew, but this jerk is totally useless.

(Throws handbag and blouse on the sofa, starts putting on her skirt.)

CONRAD: Impossible. You know what they say of Dinky? That his connections reach all the way to Lucifer, who will lower the temperature in hell especially for him, when he arrives.

MATILDA: As far as I'm concerned he can roast on the spit until he loses the whole inch of that miserably folded prick of his.

CONRAD: After this graphic description it would be useless to pretend I don't understand the essence of the tragedy you had to live through in the attic.

MATILDA: An ordinary nobody, that's what he is, in every respect. *(Pushes away blouse and handbag and sits on the sofa.)*

CONRAD: But a while ago you gave the impression that you admired him.

MATILDA: I was trying to crawl up his ass, to get the part. What's bad about that? *(Goes to the drinks table.)* Now I really don't care what I pour down my throat. Actually, I wouldn't mind pouring all this stuff down the toilet.

CONRAD *(agitated)*: Please don't! Every honest intellectual would suffer less if you flushed his favorite books down the drain.

MATILDA: Books belong in a rubbish bin. As for intellectuals, you know what I think? They are pests supported by the poor. But soon there won't be any left. They'll die out, like dinosaurs.

CONRAD: Yes, the times do not favor them. However, there is a great proliferation of Dinkies, who will soon take over the world. It may not be a bad idea, trying to crawl up their asses before it gets too crowded.

(He watches as Matilda pours some whiskey, some vodka, some Tia Maria and some Bacardi into a glass.)

MATILDA: And what would you call this?

CONRAD: Cocktail *Despair*. *Desperation*. *Desperado*.

MATILDA (*sits back on the sofa and sips*): Did you go crazy because you were too clever, or did you become clever after you'd gone crazy?

CONRAD: Oh, I just got dizzy. On the merry-go-round known as Change, in the theme park known as History. This merry-go-round suddenly picked up speed so sharply that I got sick, lost my balance and got tossed off. Mind you, I'm not the only one. There are a number of us who were not skillful enough to cling to the whirling monster. Except that I – but never mind, I'm boring you, tell me a few things about yourself.

MATILDA: I hate losers, that's all I can say about myself. That's my entire story.

CONRAD: Very succinct.

MATILDA: I will, of course, cooperate with losers, but only if I stand to gain something. Other than that life is simply too short to be wasted on nonsense. I know what I want, but I can't find a man who would make it all possible.

CONRAD: Well, that's men for you.

MATILDA: I was born under a rotten star.

CONRAD: In other words, Dinky –

MATILDA: Don't even mention him. Just thinking of how naïve I was makes me want to go upstairs and cut off that miserable pecker of his. And the rumors one hears about him! He's probably spreading them himself.

CONRAD: He does appear to be a master of self-promotion.

MATILDA: That he has to rub some tranquilizing gel on his knob, so it doesn't bulge in his trousers. And women believe that! Well, they won't anymore, I'll make sure of that.

CONRAD: But if I understood you correctly, the scene that would catapult you into the orbit of movie stardom should be a simulation; where, then, is the problem?

MATILDA: It would have to *appear* to be stimulated. There is such a thing as law. But it wouldn't be, would it. He knows that, I know that, we all know that. But there is one thing he doesn't know. We would simulate the whole thing for the TV, but the rehearsal would be "no holds barred." And it would be secretly recorded by my friends.

CONRAD: For your personal collection of video spots?

MATILDA: You really are crazy, aren't you? My friends would make copies and sell them. I would get ten percent.

CONRAD: And how many percent would Dinky get?

MATILDA: Nothing, he would have to pay. My friends would blackmail him with a promise they wouldn't start selling the DVD until he paid them a certain sum of money a month, from which I would get fifteen percent. But they would market the DVD in spite of that. Isn't that a great plan?

CONRAD: Perfect. I can see that the art of film-making has progressed considerably since they made *Casablanca*.

MATILDA: Except it hasn't worked out.

CONRAD: Not necessarily. You can still record the simulated version with Dinky for the TV. And you record the other one for general distribution with some other Dinky, whose dinky, in the words of Casanova before he died of syphilis, still "marches unflinchingly into the thick of battle."

MATILDA: I'm beginning to see why they locked you up in a madhouse. You really don't understand, do you? Who is going to buy a porno film featuring just anybody, if they can get one featuring a Hollywood star?

CONRAD: But surely Dinky is far from being a Hollywood star, or do you know something I don't?

MATILDA: Dinky is the star of a very popular TV show, however stupid it is. Wouldn't you buy a DVD on which you could watch him grind and pump away without any shame?

CONRAD: I doubt it. What I wouldn't mind watching is *you* grinding and pumping away.

MATILDA: Oh yeah? And how old are you?

CONRAD: I'm not entirely sure – thirty-two?

MATILDA: Yes, I can see that. But you have no money.

CONRAD: Not a penny. And – more tragic still – no inclination.

MATILDA: That means you can't anymore.

CONRAD: That means that I haven't the slightest desire to pump and grind away.

MATILDA: Don't you like my tits?

CONRAD: Difficult to say, since I can't see them.

MATILDA: Come closer and have a look.

CONRAD (*leans over and stares at her breasts from a distance of 30 cm, straightens up*): Yes, I can say now without hesitation that they have a certain consistency I not only appreciate but wouldn't mind putting to the test. Unfortunately tits do not float in the air, they

are part of a person who has a number of other qualities. Such as personality, character, integrity, and some other things you probably think are slang expressions I picked up in the madhouse.

MATILDA: And what's wrong with my personality?

CONRAD: Nothing, because you haven't got any. Or any character either, for that matter. As for integrity, it's no more than a ploy to camouflage your determination to exploit others all the while complaining that others keep exploiting you. So you're, after all, not quite as stupid as you appear to be at first sight. On the contrary, you are a real snake with the teeth of a starved hyena. Would you care for another drink?

MATILDA (*puts the glass on the coffee table, puts on her blouse*): High time you returned to where you belong. You should be locked up.

CONRAD: I should indeed; I must take better care of myself. I'll certainly lock the door when you leave, and turn the key at least a dozen times.

MATILDA: Fuck yourself.

CONRAD: I'll try, although I'm no longer as supple as I was at the age of fifteen, when this sort of acrobatics might still interest me. But tell me, would such a solo performance, if I somehow managed it, be of any interest to your friends with a digital camera?

MATILDA (*near the door*): You're disgusting.

CONRAD: Oh yes, no doubt about that. My soul resembles, if anything at all, that disappointing inch of foreskin you saw ten minutes ago. . Can't really help it. Once we come face to face with the mirror of truth, we collapse and shrink. Still, there *is* a question with which I'd like to excite your clitoral region before you go. Isn't it possible to survive in a slightly less smutty way?

MATILDA: What did *you* do before they locked you up in the madhouse? Sell your brains? Is there a difference between brains and body?

CONRAD: Then, perhaps, the answer is that we shouldn't sell ourselves.

MATILDA: Lucky you. I wasn't born with philosophy in my pocket and a silver spoon in my mouth.

CONRAD: But you are a secretary of the director of a TV company.

MATILDA: Who told you that? Dinky? That's just like him. I work as a courier delivery girl, although I finished grammar school.

CONRAD: That's terrible. Can I help you in any way?

MATILDA: You can. First cut off your long tongue, and then your prick, which I'm sure is ten times shorter, and stuff both at the same time up your arse.

(She turns and, head high, walks out, unlocks the main door, slams it behind her.)

CONRAD *(bends his head)*: Soon there won't be any of us left. We'll die out like dinosaurs.

6.

(Damien slinks in, wearing pajamas.)

DAMIEN: Has she gone?

CONRAD *(takes two deep breaths)*: The air is relatively clean, so I imagine that she has.

DAMIEN: Stupid cow.

CONRAD: I would classify her as a bitch. One of those tame dachshunds that give you a melting look and wag their tail, but as soon as they get their piece of meat they sink their teeth in your balls.

DAMIEN: Sorry about that madhouse, and all the rest.

CONRAD: I hope I wasn't entirely unconvincing.

DAMIEN: You were perfect. Did she say anything?

CONRAD: Nothing concrete, she just blabbered on about this and that, how she is a victim of great injustice, and similar stuff that you hear from women deprived of regular orgasms.

DAMIEN: About me, did she say anything about me?

CONRAD: Nothing bad, as far as I remember.

DAMIEN: Why are you like that? You want to protect me from truth at any cost. Don't you realize how humiliating that is? Why can't you tell me openly what you think about me?

CONRAD: Because – regardless of the fact that you're one of the most obnoxious individuals I have met in my life – I think nothing essentially bad about you. Except perhaps that you're an ordinary cunt, an expression you will no doubt understand, and that you are a narcissistic loudmouth egomaniac of the heavy-duty category, which our brave new world has sucked into its lowest depths in the nastiest possible way, right to the bottom of the cesspit, from which you couldn't save yourself even if you wanted to, because the filth has totally decomposed you. Actually I feel sorry for you, and because nobody else feels even remotely sorry for you, you should be grateful

to me. Besides which you are – in your complete self-absorption – so terribly naïve that you don't even think how you could be of interest to the victims of your supposed charisma for reasons that have more to do with their plans than your charisma. In other words –

DAMIEN: In other words, fuck yourself.

CONRAD: I'll try, although I'm no longer as supple as I used to be at the age of fifteen, when this sort of thing might still interest me –

DAMIEN: Don't repeat yourself, you've already said that.

CONRAD: I don't understand...

DAMIEN: I was listening on the stairs. I know what she said about me.

CONRAD: Well, in that case I don't have to emphasize that you have escaped a very unpleasant fate. Imagine that one day you might be tempted to walk down to the video shop to borrow *Casablanca*, or some similar example of cinematic Art with a capital A. And that, instead of Art, you might on the spur of the moment borrow a homemade porno movie. So you could practice moves which, as evidence shows, lately haven't really been up to scratch. And that, while watching it, you would suddenly see on the monitor a familiar thrusting ass, an ordinary male ass that you see every morning in the mirror in your Jacuzzi bathroom.

DAMIEN: I'm going to kill her.

CONRAD: I'd do something more radical. Something that'll kill her more efficiently than a knife in the heart. I'd leave her alone.

DAMIEN: She doesn't deserve to be left alone. But even less she deserves to be touched by a man like me. Do you know what I'm going to do? I'll start spreading the rumor that she's a lesbian.

CONRAD: Considering how you feel, this is almost an expression of love. Although of course infantile and utterly vile, unworthy of someone who considers himself a man.

DAMIEN: Why couldn't she wait a few minutes? We're not machines.

CONRAD: Do you know what you need? (*Goes to the drinks table and offers him a bottle.*) Malibu. That's the name of a famous Californian beach. A few gulps, and the rays of the setting sun will gently rock you into the sweetest of dreams and into an armistice with the evil world.

DAMIEN (*takes the bottle, goes to the door, turn back*): Has it ever happened to you that...

CONRAD: Not all that often. Altogether maybe... a thousand times.

DAMIEN (*relieved*): Is that a joke?

CONRAD: No. We're not machines, as you said, and once the woman robs you of the initiative she has practically castrated you...

DAMIEN: Exactly. That slut. So why am I getting upset about it?

CONRAD: Why indeed? But if you have to do that, I'd suggest you do it up in the attic, where you can assault a pillow or bang your head against the wall. Not too hard, of course, we don't want to end up under a mountain of bricks and mortar.

DAMIEN: I'll wait until you finish watching *Casablanca*.

CONRAD (*reaches for the tray*): Actually, after all these barbarian invasions, I feel incredibly hungry. First I'll make myself another assortment of goodies, if you'll be kind enough to lock the entrance door, twice, won't you?

DAMIEN: I will, Uncle.

CONRAD: Thank you, Dinky. Don't forget, *twice*.

DAMIEN: You can rely on me.

(Damien turns and goes upstairs to his attic. Conrad takes the tray into the kitchen, from where we hear various noises as he prepares more food. Radivoy enters from the hall and looks around.)

RADIVOY: Hullo... Anybody home? (*The noise in the kitchen continues.*)
Your doorbell doesn't seem to be working, so I just ...

(He walks to the kitchen door, raises his hand to knock, changes his mind, decides to wait. Goes to the drinks table and pours himself a glass of whiskey. Sits down on the sofa, takes off his hat and places it on the coffee table. He sips whiskey. Notices the TV set. Assumes a comfortable position and starts watching Casablanca.)

(Conrad enters from the kitchen with a tray full of bread, cheese and Hungarian salami. He stops and stares at Radivoy.)

RADIVOY: Do you know that this used to be my favorite movie?

(Blackout, curtain.)

Act Two

1.

(Lights. The action continues where it stopped before the blackout, with Conrad and Radivoy in exactly the same positions.)

RADIVOY: Do you know that this used to be my favorite movie?

CONRAD: Then we have a lot in common. Would you like a drink? Whiskey, maybe? And do, please, sit down. Your hat, as I can see, is already on the table, but why not put up your feet as well? I can't offer you lunch, my wife is away, but I did prepare a tray of cold cuts.

RADIVOY: Your doorbell's not working, so I just entered. *(Puts the glass on the table and rises.)* Perhaps *I am* being a little too familiar.

CONRAD: That's how people behave in this neighborhood. At this rate, passersby will start using my toilet soon. *(Places the tray on the coffee table.)*

RADIVOY: Don't you remember me? My name is Radivoy Vuk.

CONRAD: Vuk... I'm not sure, but a few years ago a certain Vuk crashed into my car, completely demolished it, and hastily left the scene of the accident.

RADIVOY: That's not my style. Although we did have one bad collision. We came to blows over a 16-year old girl.

CONRAD: And how did that end?

RADIVOY: I got a black eye and you got the girl.

CONRAD: And thirty years later you came to reverse the result?

RADIVOY: The girl eventually ended up as your wife.

CONRAD: I see. So you came to suggest that we fight for her once more, in the hope that this time I will end up with a black eye, and you will get her. My dear Vuk, you can take her away without a fight.

RADIVOY: Don't call me Vuk. We went to school together.

CONRAD: Oh... Don't tell me you're that Vuk who stood out as the greatest nerd in grammar school?

RADIVOY: I am. And you wrote a little ditty that went like this: "Vuk is not a crooky, he's just a little clever; he will stay a nerd forever, but will never know what's nooky."

CONRAD: And what made *me* stand out, if anything?

RADIVOY: Your rhetorical gifts. Even the teachers were afraid of you.

CONRAD: Pity, I didn't know that at the time.

RADIVOY: And in their fear, the teachers came up with a special nickname for you. They called you Babblor, don't you remember?

CONRAD: So much has happened in my life that many things have simply automatically deleted themselves.

RADIVOY: Automatically or self-defensively?

CONRAD: What are you hinting at?

RADIVOY: We often subconsciously forget things that could endanger our self-image.

CONRAD: Oh? Don't tell me you're a psychiatrist.

RADIVOY: Spot on.

CONRAD: And you were sent to me by my relatives who would like to drag me out of the house back into the swamp they call "the world" and "life." They simply can't realize that living among four walls is the only genuine blessing that God had granted us outside heaven.

RADIVOY: I've come to find out why you never attended any of our class reunions.

CONRAD: I hate anniversaries. I am an emphatically anti-ritualistic type of man, even birthdays irritate me; I instantly grind to dust all the presents given me by uninformed people, while the hardest I destroy with chemical agents.

RADIVOY: Is it true that, next to everything else, you were also a spy?

CONRAD (*consults his watch*): Next question.

RADIVOY: Evil tongues would have it that you launched this story yourself, in order to further enhance your image.

CONRAD (*munching a piece of cheese*): I have no image, I have never in my life tried to enhance what doesn't exist, evil tongues have much to say about me, but what connection does that have with me? Actually I remember you now: you were not only the most pathetic nerd, you were known chiefly for your awkward ability to beat about the bush. A character trait which has evidently worsened over the years.

RADIVOY: In other words, you'd like me to speak plainly.

CONRAD: For God's sake, Vuk, you have had more than thirty years to become at least a reasonably grown-up person; what has gone wrong?

RADIVOY: It's hard to get to you, but conscience commands me to persist.

CONRAD: *Conscience?*

RADIVOY: Conscience, and my promise to bring you to the class reunion we are celebrating in ten days' time. Aware as we are of your self-imprisonment, we are organizing the meeting at a restaurant you can reach in five minutes. Round the corner, to be precise.

CONRAD: "Aware of my self-imprisonment"? Dear Vuk, did they send you to me in the hope that I would capitulate in the face of your old-fashioned phrases? And who says I'm imprisoned here? It's true that for some time I had problems with my arm and spinal vertebrae, but that's over. I could travel to the South Pole, if I wanted to.

RADIVOY: But you don't want to.

CONRAD: Certainly not to the South Pole.

RADIVOY: Anywhere. You haven't left the house for a year.

CONRAD: I may have become a vampire and stalk the streets under the cover of darkness. And if I haven't: which particular law am I breaking if I refuse to join the shopping crowds?

RADIVOY: It saddens us to see you destroying yourself like that.

CONRAD: I assure you that I am being destroyed solely by the unnecessary concern for my health.

RADIVOY: Man is a social and a sociable animal.

CONRAD: Highly original, what you've just said.

RADIVOY: It's true that you are retired, twenty years too early if you ask me, but that doesn't mean there is no theater out there anymore, and art, and sports –

CONRAD: Theater? Should I really devote three hours of my life to something that I know in advance is not going to be of any use? Art? I haven't the faintest idea what that is, and have absolutely no desire to find out. I am much more interested in how fish die; can you tell me? I don't mean those on fishermen's hooks, or in aquariums, I mean fish that die naturally in rivers and seas. What do they die of, those that are not eaten by bigger fish? What illnesses are they prone to, where is their final resting place? Do they simply dissolve in water? These are the questions to which I want to have answers. And you're talking to me about sports, theater, socializing? I beg you.

RADIVOY (*rises*): Actually I had the premonition that I would walk away empty-handed.

CONRAD: I can prepare you a little sandwich, wrap it in a napkin. The Hungarian salami is really quite tasty.

RADIVOY (*reaches for his hat and puts it on*): I did my best. I hope they'll believe me. (*Moves toward the door.*)

CONRAD: Listen, Vuk, you're not a servant of a band of elderly school-mates, don't let them misuse you like that. There is nothing to understand, except the simple fact that a man's privacy is the only sacred thing the pigs still haven't trampled in their rush from one trough to another.

RADIVOY: Actually I feel sorry for you.

CONRAD: There's nothing I can do about that, but I can give you a thousand reasons why you have a million reasons to feel sorry for yourself. Sit down, Vuk, I want to tell you something.

RADIVOY (*sits on the sofa, feeling awkward*): I feel as if I had been mauled by three German shepherds.

CONRAD (*pouring whiskey for both*): I will allow myself something that's strictly against my rules. On the condition that this stays between you and me, I will tell you something about myself. Here. (*Puts a glass of whiskey on the table and raises his.*) Cheers.

RADIVOY: Cheers.

CONRAD: At the Singapore General Hospital they have just installed an automated decontamination chamber which is big enough for seven people and can remove all the filth off them in five minutes. In one hour it can cleanse seventy people.

RADIVOY: Cleanse of what?

CONRAD: Biochemical poisons.

RADIVOY: Well, these, surely, are extreme situations.

CONRAD: No, Vuk, this is the time we live in. What's happening out there is an ecological biochemical terrorism. Psychological, political, legal, religious, scientific terrorism. Millions of victims, but not a single one among them has the courage to withdraw.

RADIVOY: Except you.

CONRAD: Except me.

RADIVOY: Wouldn't civilization collapse if everybody withdrew?

CONRAD: Come on, Vuk, civilization collapsed two thousand years ago. Since then all we do is crawl over each other like scorpions waiting for the opportunity to launch our deadly sting.

RADIVOY: We all look for shelter from the filth of the world. But not everyone gets a chance to find it. At least not as comfortably as you.

CONRAD: Part of the filth of the world is also the touch of envy which colors your reproach that I have advantages others do not.

RADIVOY: Even so, your decontamination chamber is rather more comfortable than a bench in the park on which someone homeless would have to undergo decontamination if he felt that the filth of the world was starting to suffocate him.

CONRAD: How can a psychiatrist, who in his profession should at least occasionally come face to face with logic, fall victim to such an elementary error? Would a homeless man, if I gave him my house, cleanse himself faster than he would on a bench in the park, which is his natural home?

RADIVOY: And where is the shower that is supposed to cleanse you of filth?

CONRAD: Talking to you requires extraordinary effort. You take things literally.

RADIVOY: Not at all, I realize that we're using metaphors. But each metaphor is a sign pointing at something concrete. How are you cleansing yourself? Evidently not by asceticism (*looks at the tray of food*), and *Casablanca* is a poor substitute for spirituality without which no cleansing ever succeeds. The only proof that the accumulated poisons are breaking out through the pores of your skin is your cynicism. Which, unfortunately, doesn't cleanse the air in your chamber, but makes it even more poisonous. And so this cleansing project of yours, no offence, reminds me less of a shower than a tub in which you're splashing about in your own filth.

CONRAD (*after a pause*): Bravo. Slowly we're nearing the point at which I may find that talking to you is not a complete waste of time.

RADIVOY: Have you cleaned after yourself, before you crawled into your den? Have you removed the traces of your filthy boots?

CONRAD: Careful, Vuk, otherwise you'll end up as a preacher in a remote mountain village.

RADIVOY: Do you remember the young lady you employed when for a short time you became director and chief editor of the leading newspaper?

CONRAD: I don't remember anything from that period; deliberately or by mistake I had pressed "Delete."

RADIVOY: She visited you at the office to tell you how she admired your columns, your sharpness and wit, and how she always wanted to write in a similar vein.

CONRAD: Listen, Vuk, your prodding reminds me more and more of the interrogation technique of SS Officer Strasser in *Casablanca*. Tell me exactly why you've inflicted your presence on me; I don't care about your time, but mine is precious.

RADIVOY: Did you ever betray your wife?

CONRAD: Yes. I promised her that in her absence I would drink no more than a glass of wine a day. I kept the promise. But next to the glass of wine I drank a liter of whiskey. And not only once. So we could say that I'm a worthless cad who betrays his wife whenever he gets a chance.

RADIVOY: You know what I mean.

CONRAD: If you mean what I think you mean I have to disappoint you and shamefully admit that I haven't touched another woman since Pupka – shortly after I dispatched the competitor with a black eye – became my wife.

RADIVOY: Pupka?

CONRAD: Didn't she tell you that I was calling her Pupka? Then you can't have been a serious rival, and that brawl of ours was a waste of time.

RADIVOY: And what would Pupka say if she found out that your cheating did not always stop at the bottle of whiskey?

CONRAD: She would say nothing, because there is nothing to be found out, unless you came with the intention to repay me for that black eye with God knows what fabrication. But that would really be infantile, even for a man like you.

RADIVOY: And if I presented evidence for this so-called fabrication?

CONRAD: A used condom, which you fished out of a rubbish bin on your way here? But for you that wouldn't be sufficiently vulgar. You would much sooner as proof of my sexual escapade bring a smear of spittle from your mouth, claiming it was my sperm.

RADIVOY: I admire the aestheticism of your expressions.

CONRAD: Don't take that personally; I simply don't know any more how to secure some peace for myself in my own house.

RADIVOY: With Pupka, as you claim to have called her, you evidently didn't have any children.

CONRAD: Evidently not, otherwise at least one of us would know about it. No, there were no children. Reliable doctors have assured me that I am infertile. What a blessing that is we found out a while ago when

we let the attic to Pupka's nephew, who is the same generation our son would have been if we had one. No doubt he, too, would have called himself Dinky, because all these young people are made, just like Coke, from the same ingredients.

RADIVOY: Maybe not all of them.

CONRAD: Show me one that isn't, and I will forgive you even the fact that you make a living as a psychiatrist.

RADIVOY: Then I'm already forgiven.

CONRAD: Oh yes, I forgot to ask you. Married? Three children? A grandson, maybe? That's always been expected of nerds.

RADIVOY: I am married. Happily. I don't have three children, I have a daughter. And yes, I have a grandson.

CONRAD: Congratulations.

RADIVOY: And you're his father.

CONRAD (*after a pause*): Listen, did you really say you were a psychiatrist, or did I misunderstand you and you said "psychopath"?

RADIVOY: If you'll allow me to tell you a little story you will discover something new in your life. The story is not as nice as the one in *Casablanca*, but it can, depending on your next move, have a happy ending.

CONRAD (*goes to the drinks table*): Another drink?

RADIVOY: Not for me. (*Conrad pours himself whiskey.*) Shortly after you became director of the newspaper company you were visited by a young girl who hadn't yet completed her studies, but was already writing articles and columns which impressed you so highly that you gave her a job although she did not have a degree.

CONRAD: You know what, insisting on a piece of paper, which in many cases isn't a sign of ability but of a nerdy disposition –

RADIVOY: I agree. But according to the law, she was not entitled to full employment.

CONRAD: Well, did she prove herself, or did I make a mistake?

RADIVOY: Oh, she proved herself all right. Many people said that in some ways her columns were even better than yours.

CONRAD: In other words, I had done something good; who would have thought?

RADIVOY: But her employment was on a trial basis, for a period of one year. When she applied for a permanent job, a problem cropped up.

CONRAD: Unreasonable laws again.

RADIVOY: No, in the meantime she had obtained her degree. The problem was the unreasonable director. Suddenly and quite unexpectedly he demanded a reward for a permanent job.

CONRAD: That's her side of the story.

RADIVOY: The other side I don't know, because the director still claims not to know anything about it.

CONRAD: The director could tell you that his side of the story is completely different. But let's finish hearing her side.

RADIVOY: The girl was young, inexperienced. Her talent had already brought her a reputation she could not simply ignore. She thought the whole thing would be quick and painless... and soon forgotten. She gave in.

CONRAD: There you are, the youth of today.

RADIVOY: Unfortunately the consequences were highly unpleasant, not only for her, but also for the director. Pregnancy, which had to be terminated quickly and secretly, so that the director wouldn't have any problems at work, let alone at home, with his Pupka.

CONRAD: A wise decision, don't you think, considering that the girl was very young and at the start of a promising career.

RADIVOY: Which never materialized. At about the same time the entire workforce went on strike against the director, refusing to work with him. There were many rumors, also about other blackmails, but God in his infinite wisdom decided to grant the director a chance to withdraw without disgrace.

CONRAD: A splendid solution for the young lady, who then got a regular job without any problems.

RADIVOY: All she got was a child. It was too late for abortion.

CONRAD: Look, Vuk... What can I say?... If I allow myself a little quote from *Casablanca*: "Each of us has a destiny."

RADIVOY (*looking at the TV*): And if I allow myself another, which just appeared on the screen: "It seems that destiny has taken a hand."

CONRAD: Why on earth didn't she mention she was the daughter of someone I went to school with?

RADIVOY: She wanted to be hired because of her abilities. Do you find that unusual?

CONRAD: Less unusual than the fact that she never told me about the child.

RADIVOY: You had a life of your own. And she was grateful to you. She learned a lot from you, she said. In spite of everything she felt affection for you. She was very young, and you made quite an impression.

CONRAD: That's all very well, but the problem, Vuk, is that the child can't be mine. Medical science has confirmed beyond any doubt that I'm infertile. Which can be reconfirmed by Pupka, who had to come to terms with the fact that ours will remain a childless marriage.

RADIVOY: Then I'm a bringer of happy news.

CONRAD: Anybody could be the father. I even warned her when she came for her trial period: "Be on guard. This place is full of vultures." There you are, another quote from *Casablanca*.

RADIVOY: She knew how to avoid them. Except the biggest among them. But to this one, strangely perhaps, she remained faithful. She never married and she never had another relationship.

CONRAD: Then why, for heaven's sake, have you not come to me earlier?

RADIVOY: She refused to say who the father was. But now it is the boy who wants to meet him. Although he is only eight, he insists that we present his father to him as a birthday present.

CONRAD: That's why you came.

RADIVOY: Actually, I came with the intention of killing you. (*He pulls a pistol from the inside pocket of his jacket. Conrad freezes.*) I imagined I would aim at you, like this (*aims the pistol at Conrad*), and say (*reads from the TV screen*): "And remember, this gun's pointed right at your heart." And you would say –

CONRAD: And I would say –

RADIVOY, CONRAD (*reading from the screen*): "That is my least vulnerable spot."

CONRAD: In actual fact quite a bit more than I thought.

RADIVOY: That's what I was counting on. (*Puts the gun back in his pocket.*) It was not easy for me to come here, but finally I had to admit to myself that I was probably the only one who could persuade you to meet Mark.

CONRAD: Is that his name?

RADIVOY: Marcus Aurelius. A highly intelligent child.

CONRAD: Genes are genes.

RADIVOY: And father's pride is father's pride.

CONRAD: So that anniversary, then...

RADIVOY: ...was just an excuse. I was hoping that you'd fall for it and come to the restaurant round the corner. Where, instead of thirty schoolmates, you would find only me. And my daughter. And my grandson. Now it's up to you to decide the time and place of the meeting.

CONRAD (*goes to the drinks table and pours himself another whiskey*): I'd like you to understand one thing. That affection you mentioned earlier... it wasn't just... it was something more. And it was mutual.

RADIVOY: I'm prepared to believe that.

CONRAD: In spite of that you probably despise me.

RADIOVOY (*sour smile*): "If I gave you any little thought, I probably would."

CONRAD (*reading from the screen*): "I have many schoolmates, but you're the only one who despises me, so I'm going to tell you something in confidence." This is of course a paraphrase, but isn't it interesting how our stories are woven into one, and how apt for us are the dialogues in the film that was made before you and I could walk? Have you also seen it so many times that you know the words by heart?

RADIOVOY: No, I watched it for the first time a few days ago, when my daughter told me you used to watch it together in your office.

CONRAD: Listen, Vuk, in fact we have so much in common that we could switch to first names, what do you say? That could be (*reads from the screen*) "the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

RADIOVOY: Depends on what'll happen when you meet Marcus Aurelius.

CONRAD: Well, it's precisely that I wanted to tell you something about, Radivoy. You are Radivoy, aren't you? It seems to me that you have been rather spoiling your little grandson: what Marcus wants, Aurelius gets. This year the chance to meet his Dad, next year another computer game, and so on. Didn't you think that fathers also have wishes, not to mention rights? If I knew I had a son I might have wanted to meet him and take care of him eight years ago. Why have I become interesting only now, when the little prince got it into his head that he wants to add a father to his collection of toys?

RADIOVOY: Wouldn't meeting your son be an excellent part of the cleansing process of which you spoke with such pride a little earlier?

CONRAD: On the contrary: the process of decontamination would be cut short at the very moment it has the greatest chance of success. I'm sorry, Vuk, we did go to school together, and your daughter did write first-rate columns, but that doesn't give you the right to wrap me up in floral paper and hand me as a present to a spoilt child I don't even know.

RADIOVOY: In your selfishness you can be frightfully cruel.

CONRAD: These are mere words, Vuk; cruelty is defined by deeds.

RADIOVOY: What you're doing is the cruelest deed one can imagine. You're refusing the hand offered you by a being of perfect innocence.

CONRAD: And how long would it remain innocent if I grabbed the hand?

RADIOVOY: Selfishness for noble reasons; typically your invention.

CONRAD: Do you know, Vuk – allow me to call you by your surname again, because obviously it was an illusion to think that this could

be the beginning of a beautiful friendship – do you know that I have secretly longed for such a decontamination chamber all my life? That the deceptions and filthy maneuvers of this stupid world have suffocated me already when I still thought I had to take part in them simply because I had no choice?

RADIVOY: Perhaps you'd like to cleanse yourself of yourself.

CONRAD: Possibly.

RADIVOY: Although the greatest impurity could be the desire to be purer than everyone else.

CONRAD: Lucky you. As a psychiatrist you can filter your dirt in the cheapest possible way: through handy psychoanalytical babble. Because you're used to making compromises you think that we should all make them. As soon as you encounter someone who simply will not compromise you make the charmless display of being offended that I have been forced to watch on your face for some time.

RADIVOY: Rather an expression of shock in the face of unbearable haughtiness emanating from you.

CONRAD: And what emanates from you? A stink of righteous goodwill with which you want to batter into submission all who refuse to subscribe to your trivialized vision of human values.

RADIVOY (*rising*): The moment has come for me to acknowledge defeat. Even so, I'd like to ask you one more thing. If you refuse to meet your son, at least make it possible for him to call you over the phone. Just so he can hear your voice. And you his.

CONRAD: My number is listed.

RADIVOY: It's not the number. You have to plug in the phone. I have been trying to call you for ten days. Please. At least today, for a few hours. I wouldn't like to disappoint the boy.

CONRAD: I'll think about it.

2.

(We can hear the front door. Matthew enters. He sees Vuk, comes to a halt.)

MATTHEW: The bell's still out of order.

RADIVOY: That's not my fault. I've come to fix the phone. I think it's going to work now. At least for a while. (*Leaves.*)

MATTHEW: What's wrong with the phone?

CONRAD: I forgot to plug it in.

MATTHEW: Most people have cell phones, in case you haven't heard.

CONRAD: Do you have other important news, besides the one you just told me?

MATTHEW: Yes. I got the job.

CONRAD (*lost in thought*): Oh...

MATTHEW: You could at least show some...

CONRAD: Am I not showing enough of it? Maybe I'm tired. Congratulations. In any case I never doubted that you'd get it. You were the one who doubted. In spite of my recommendation.

MATTHEW: Precisely. I got the job in spite of your recommendation. They didn't fail to emphasize that. On reflection the panel concluded that it wasn't my fault you were my brother.

CONRAD: Are you not in a hurry to write your first article? Now that you will finally become one of the leading political commentators of our time?

MATTHEW: I forgot to tell you.

CONRAD: What?

MATTHEW: I won't be doing foreign policy. I'll be covering traffic accidents.

CONRAD (*brief pause*): Well, you'll still be writing about wreckages, smaller ones instead of big ones, about drunks smashing their cars into roadside lamps instead of genocides.

MATTHEW: Actually you're quite glad your former colleagues have so shamelessly humiliated me.

CONRAD: Neither glad nor sad, dear brother, because fortunately I no longer feel any difference between the two.

MATTHEW: It doesn't matter to you.

CONRAD: It doesn't matter whether or not it doesn't matter to me. Why don't you become responsible for your life and stop valuing it through the eyes of other people? You looked for a job, you got the job, you won't be doing what you had hoped you would, you'll be doing something else, but because of that your miserable pay will not be any less miserable, so why this feeling that you can heal your injured ego only if you get the whole world on your side?

MATTHEW: Not the whole world. Just, once in a lifetime, my brother.

CONRAD: You see? Again it's me who should be responsible for your expectations. And the fact that I don't want to be has again to do with you, not with me. Have I no right to be what I am?

MATTHEW: No, you have not.

CONRAD (*deep sigh*): Listen...

MATTHEW: You have no such right because there exists a generally accepted pattern of normalcy to which we all must, regardless of personal wishes, adapt to the best of our ability. To lock oneself into a safe box and spit at anyone who comes by is *not* splendid isolation; it is a flight from the responsibility for the world.

CONRAD: I hate everything that has to do with the world such as it has become while I was paying attention to other things. Little pleasures and tiny sorrows of my relatives bore me to the bottom of my heart. What bores me even more is the kind of conversation, such as this one with you, that robs my thoughts of any truth and meaning.

MATTHEW: Your thoughts.

CONRAD: They just happen to be dearer to me than yours, I'm sorry. Just as yours are dearer to you than mine. So why this useless effort to communicate?

MATTHEW: You probably don't even know how I suffer when I see you as you are now. And our family. What has become of it.

CONRAD (*confidentially*): Can you tell me something? What kind of feeling is this? Suffering. Describe it to me.

MATTHEW: Are you poking fun at me?

CONRAD: Why can't you see in my words only what they contain? You told me, sincerely, that you suffer. And I asked you, no less sincerely, to describe to me something I no longer feel. Not for some years. I've given up suffering. In the same way I gave up smoking.

MATTHEW: Don't you miss it?

CONRAD: Smoking no, suffering yes, frequently. Not because of suffering itself, mind you, but because of laughter. When I could still suffer I was able to laugh more often, openly, from the heart. Now my laughter, rare as it is, sounds somehow...

MATTHEW: Hollow?

CONRAD: In a way.

MATTHEW: And that bothers you.

CONRAD: It does, somewhat. I don't see why I should laugh at all any more. And if I can't laugh, what else is there to do?

MATTHEW: If you want to suffer again, and so have a reason for laughter, I can help you. I can tell you something you don't know.

CONRAD: I absolutely forbid you. I know you're full of unrealized terrorist tendencies. But don't please, break my ignorance with information which is of greater interest to you than to me.

MATTHEW: I have information which would make your corpse at least twitch, if not come alive.

CONRAD: And you would convey it to me with the greatest of pleasures, as I can judge by the malicious smirk on your face. Keep it, I've had enough for today. (*Looks at his watch.*) "Four watch? Impossible. Such much?" A quote from *Casablanca*.

MATTHEW: I will tell you anyway...

3.

(*Enter Damien.*)

DAMIEN: Sorry, I didn't know you had a visitor.

CONRAD (*visibly glad to see him*): Damien, or should I say Dinky, where have you been so long? Have you forgotten about our meeting? My brother is just leaving.

MATTHEW (*walking toward the door, pauses beside Damien*): I'm looking forward to your next show.

DAMIEN: Oh yes, I forgot to bring a rotten egg. But you can throw something else in my face, some intellectual insult, perhaps?

MATTHEW: No, I mean it. It's rare these days to find a TV show that so bravely resists the dominant trend. Your high-minded debates about values in today's world are a real balm for the soul.

DAMIEN: Values in today's world are worth only as much as they can fetch on the market. Why are you pretending not to know that?

MATTHEW: You surprise me; I thought you were a complete idiot.

DAMIEN: Fuck yourself. If you weren't his brother, I'd knock your teeth straight out of your mouth. What is it that you do? Oh yes, you write shitty books that no one reads. Culture! I'm already on my knees; I'm licking dirt off your shoes!

(*Matthew leaves.*)

CONRAD: That was a little too harsh.

DAMIEN: I'm fed up with people who see me as vermin without being any better themselves.

CONRAD: And what special needs have brought you downstairs this time? At the very moment I was hoping to be able to devote my time to *Casablanca*.

DAMIEN: She's come back.

CONRAD: Who?

DAMIEN: The slut who showed you her boobs.

CONRAD: If you're talking about Matilda, who wanted to make a mockery of you, I must warn you that this time her intentions may be even less noble. I suggest that you instantly throw her out.

DAMIEN: She'd like to move in with me. She says the attic is big enough for two. Most of all she likes the Jacuzzi. She says we could make movies here.

CONRAD: Waste of time – *Casablanca's* already been made.

DAMIEN: Movies, Uncle, movies. Do you know what movies are?

CONRAD: You mean car chases, dinosaurs, Superman in through the window and out through the chimney? Sorry. I wouldn't mind, but what would the neighbors say? This is, after all, a decent part of the town.

DAMIEN: In other words, you're not exactly in favor of the idea.

CONRAD: Not exactly, no. To shoot porno movies in my attic, which I furnished with my money – even your aunt would have a thing or two to say if she wasn't at this very moment lecturing in Tbilisi.

DAMIEN: Tbilisi?

CONRAD: Reykjavik. In Tbilisi she was the last time.

DAMIEN: You really are an ideal couple. In the time she has lectures in half of Europe, you manage to make five steps round your house. You're ripe for the Guinness Book of Records.

CONRAD: So are you, my dear Dinky, considering the speed with which your brains slip into that inch of miserable foreskin of yours. Is your show not enough, do you really *must* take on even greater filth?

DAMIEN: There is no show anymore. I got a call from the director. (*Goes to the drinks table, pours a glass of whiskey.*) That I went too far, and similar nonsense. He must have sold himself to the Church.

CONRAD: Wait a minute... Are you trying to tell me...

DAMIEN: Yes, that's what I'm trying to tell you. They cut the show, fucking miserable pricks. I lift their ratings, and what do they do? Knife in the back. Such is the world that you're avoiding. And I must say I'm beginning to understand why.

CONRAD: Don't make too much of this. After all this was only an insignificant private company. There are millions out there. Why don't you offer your show to the national TV? You never know. They, too, are looking for ways to gain extra viewers.

DAMIEN: In short, I have made up my mind. Matilda is moving in with me and tomorrow we'll start. It may be a little noisy, all that faked moaning, you know, but you can always turn up the sound of *Casablanca*. (*Puts down the empty glass and walks to the door.*)

CONRAD: Didn't you come because you wanted advice?

DAMIEN: I've just read it on the screen. "Suppose you run your business and let me run mine." (*Leaves.*)

CONRAD (*staring at the floor*): But that's... that can't be true. After all I... I live here.

DAMIEN (*returns*): And another thing. Your lack of respect for my privacy irritates me. Do I ever tell you not to watch old movies? Do I forbid you to do that? No. But you simply jump on me. As if I were your underage son that has to be brought up according to some antediluvian moral precepts.

CONRAD: I'm not invading your privacy, I'm simply defending myself before your invasions of mine. And my privacy reaches, at least in the legal sense, as far as the attic, of which I'm the owner, while you're merely a lodger without a contract who doesn't pay even the running costs, let alone any rent.

DAMIEN: I rented the attic from Lucy, my aunt, not from you. I pay her the rent, or rather would if she demanded it, and if I found her demand reasonable. It's perfectly obvious that I would not, which she knows, so no such demand has ever been made. The attic belongs to me by the goodwill of my aunt, and as a tenant I am protected with all the details of the relevant law. And in my property I can do what I want. Get that? The only reason I came to inform you of my plans was my excessive politeness.

CONRAD: It's not my intention to forbid you anything. Least of all shooting pornographic movies. Since the whole world has become one great pornography it would be futile to expect that sooner or later at least a couple of waves wouldn't splash into my house. It's you I worry about, Dinky. Your reputation. We live in a small town, and we all more or less know one another. Will you be able to live with the derision that will inevitably follow your latest business venture?

DAMIEN: I won't appear in the movies. Matilda will. And a number of sex-starved guys we're going to hire.

CONRAD: A sensible decision. So what will you do? Record the steamy scenes?

DAMIEN: That'll be done by a professional cameraman. I'll write the scripts. And direct.

CONRAD: I had no idea movies like that needed direction.

DAMIEN: We'll be producing artistic erotic movies for the most demanding international markets. Matilda is hoping this will secure her an audition in Hollywood.

CONRAD: Really? Are you quite normal, all of you? I mean normal in terms of being realistic?

DAMIEN: Actually, my screenplays will be poetic rather than realistic.

CONRAD: I meant something else, but never mind. One more question. I personally would much rather watch scenes like that outside, in natural surroundings, in the middle of a forest, for example, or on the bank of a fast-flowing river. Even on a bench in a park, or on a yacht swaying in a solitary bay in the rhythm of... you know what I mean...

DAMIEN: No, we need a large bed. And Jacuzzi. And a ceiling mirror. To sum it up: if you have any other objections and/or suggestions, put them in writing and send them to me by registered post through your lawyer. Get it?

CONRAD: Interesting what can happen in a good hour and a half. From the moment you came to remind me that I don't watch your superior cultural show on a barely known private TV, you slipped not only to the level of a fake Casanova who is having problems with extending his inch of tight foreskin, but into the role of a humiliated wise-guy whose unimportant program was cut by the least important TV in the world, all the way to the level of the loser who has to write screenplays for vulgar copulations, and even that only because he can offer a group of corrupt upstarts a Jacuzzi and a French bed, the possession of which he obtained only because of my hope that by putting such things in the attic I would buy myself a few moments of peace.

DAMIEN (*threateningly approaches Conrad*): Shall I tell you what I think of you?

CONRAD: By all means.

DAMIEN: Fuck you, that's what I think of you. Fuck you. (*He turns and walks to the door, nearly bumping into Matthew who has just entered.*) And fuck you, too. (*Damien leaves, slams the door.*)

4.

MATTHEW: What happened?

CONRAD: Oh, just a moment of despair at the realization that he will never occupy a lead position in his life.

MATTHEW: Just like me, you mean. As opposed to you, who did occupy one, at least one, at least for six months. Do you know why I have come back? Because I simply have to tell you what I wanted to tell you.

CONRAD: Can I first ask you for advice about a relatively important matter?

MATTHEW: Advice? You? Me?

CONRAD: You have seen half the world, written at least ten books, read more than five thousand no doubt, you'll be reporting on traffic accidents one of which has just happened to me, who else should I ask if not you? Sit down, please, let's drink a toast to our brotherly reconciliation.

MATTHEW (*rigidly*): I won't sit, and I won't drink.

CONRAD: Look, you have been married three times although you're twenty years younger than I am, you have traveled in more countries than we could find in the latest Atlas of the World, you have slept with women of at least a hundred different nationalities, which I can only envy you, because in this respect I have been exceptionally modest – how would you react if you were suddenly informed that somewhere in the world, on the islands of Tonga, or in Botswana, or in Trinidad and Tobago, you have an eight-year-old son?

MATTHEW (*after a pause*): And how would you react in my place?

CONRAD: I don't know. That's why I would like to know what you would do in your place.

MATTHEW: Probably something similar to what you would do if you knew what you would do in my place.

CONRAD: Let's start again. Do you think it's important to have children in this world, secure immortality for one's genes, make sure that the world contains more and more Dinkies for a decreasing number of people who'd want to watch them on TV?

MATTHEW: I think children are a serious obstacle if you want to achieve anything.

CONRAD: That means, if I understand you correctly, a consistent practice of celibacy. And if you fail, a steadfast denial of fatherhood.

MATTHEW: Depends on the case.

CONRAD: Look... What I need to know is why you, as the sort of man you are, would want to meet a little boy who, according to reliable claims, is supposed to be your son?

MATTHEW: Curiosity?

CONRAD: Is that all?

MATTHEW: Are you having problems? Has one of your former employees decided to make your life a little bitter?

CONRAD: No one can embitter my life, because it's just bitter enough so as not to be too sweet, which means that it's exactly the sort of life I want.

(Conrad goes on his knees on crawls under the drinks table.)

MATTHEW: What are you doing?

CONRAD *(re-emerging from under the table, standing up)*: Renewing a possible connection with a possible world. Any objections?

MATTHEW: Do you know what I most dislike about you? You don't know how to be sincere. Why don't you tell me straight to my face?

CONRAD: What?

MATTHEW: That I haven't achieved anything in my life, at least nothing you could respect.

CONRAD: For God's sake: you have written ten books!

MATTHEW: You haven't read any. Not one.

CONRAD: Most people in the world haven't read any of your books. Most people don't read. Why, among the billions of your non-readers, you have chosen *me* to settle accounts with the indifferent world?

MATTHEW: Because it hurts. It hurts that you deliberately ignore my work.

CONRAD: I promise to be a regular reader of your reports about traffic accidents.

MATTHEW: Remember what you told me when I asked you for advice before my first marriage? That I had chosen well. That you liked the girl, because she was well-read, tidy, balanced, a proper companion for me.

CONRAD: I thought you needed moral support.

MATTHEW: You lied just to get rid of me. You knew perfectly well that she was lazy, spoilt, ignorant, selfish and dishonest. It took me five years to discover that. And you? Nothing. As if the whole thing wasn't your business.

CONRAD: It wasn't. Not then, and not now. Who am I to give you advice on who you should marry. If you want to ruin your life by marrying a stupid woman, do it. We all have a right to make mistakes and to pay for them dearly.

MATTHEW: So you admit, then?

CONRAD: What?

MATTHEW: That your marriage to Lucy was a mistake?

CONRAD: I'm completely deaf to anything you intend to tell me about that.

MATTHEW: Even if I tell you something that should interest you?

CONRAD: Nothing in the world *should* interest me, and there is nothing I *should* know.

MATTHEW: Why didn't Lucy and you have any children?

CONRAD: Because I'm infertile. Will that do, Inspector?

MATTHEW: And how did Lucy come to terms with that?

CONRAD: With resignation and wisdom, as she comes to terms with everything that life washes onto her shore. For a while we considered adoption, but finally we both realized that we don't really like children. Not only because they're a perpetual source of noise and keep bothering you with questions that have no answers, but also because when they grow up they become caricatures of their parents.

MATTHEW: But Lucy did not come to terms with it. On the contrary, she decided to try her luck with someone else, wasn't that so?

CONRAD: If you don't stop, I'll have to hit you.

MATTHEW: However, being a woman of integrity she wanted to keep everything inside the family circle.

CONRAD: Final warning.

MATTHEW: Her discreet offer fell on my deaf ears, of course. My excuse was that you used to be my idol and that, although you ceased to be that a long time ago, I must remain faithful at least to my belief in your exception. Then – and don't please tell me you don't know that – she tried her luck with our sister's husband. I have information that he, too, initially rejected the possibility of replicating his genes for noble reasons. What finally made him change his mind is anyone's guess. It can't have been Lucy's charms, because she is, let's not pretend, at an age very young men would call "advanced." He probably wanted to take revenge on our sister, who has always treated our esteemed brother-in-law like a doormat.

CONRAD (*throws whiskey into Matthew's face*): I did warn you.

MATTHEW (*rubbing his eyes*): Shit!... I can't see anything.

CONRAD: Blindness, dear brother, has many forms. The worst of all is the presumption that you see everything.

MATTHEW: The birds are singing about it, yet you still pretend in the most cowardly fashion that you know nothing about it. Have you no self-respect?

CONRAD: Just enough to shave every morning without an excessive desire to cut my throat with the razor. As for you, you cut yours at least three times a day with your tongue.

5.

(*Enter Lucy with a travel bag.*)

LUCY: Door still unlocked, the bell still not working?

CONRAD: Convenient, if you return unexpectedly a day earlier than you should have.

LUCY: The conference ended early. I got a spare seat on the plane. I had no desire to traipse around Naples.

MATTHEW: I thought you were in Lisbon.

LUCY: I was in Lisbon the last time. Why?

CONRAD: My dear brother is just leaving. We celebrated a great event in his life: he has become a journalist, he will report on traffic accidents.

LUCY: Congratulations. I thought you were applying for the post of a foreign correspondent.

CONRAD: There isn't enough blood for a vampire; we live in a time when more people die on the roads than in wars.

LUCY: Neither of you is in a very good mood; did you quarrel?

CONRAD: My brother and I? Never. You wouldn't find more brotherly brothers anywhere. In our boisterous mood we merely tripped a couple of times and splashed some whiskey over each other.

MATTHEW: Must be going. Nice to see you, Lucy. You don't look a day older.

LUCY: But you do, if I may say so. You look as if you have just been in a traffic accident yourself.

MATTHEW (*to Conrad*): I may have gone too far. And lied about a few things.

CONRAD: You're a writer, for God's sake, where would you be without imagination? All you have to do is cure it, because obviously it's rather sick.

MATTHEW (*at the door*): Have a nice day. (*Quickly leaves.*)

LUCY: And what were those things he lied about?

CONRAD: Oh, a range of stupidities. How I used to be his idol, because apparently I stole plans for hydroelectric plants in Germany, and similar childish things, well, you know him.

(*Conrad climbs under the drinks table.*)

LUCY: What are you doing?

CONRAD: I'd like to unplug the phone.

LUCY: It was unplugged; did you plug it in while I was away?

CONRAD (*standing up*): Most likely.

LUCY: Why?

CONRAD: I'm expecting an invitation to a class reunion.

LUCY: You never go.

CONRAD: That's a different matter. But I can decide not to go only after I'm invited.

LUCY: Then why did you unplug the phone?

CONRAD: Because I can't decide whether to decide to make it impossible for them to invite me, which would make a decision not to go unnecessary, or to decide not to go only after I have made it possible for them to give me the chance to decline their invitation.

LUCY: You haven't changed much while I was away.

CONRAD (*tries to sing*): "While I was away... While I was away..." And the seminar, was it all right? The plane comfortable? Did you fly high?

LUCY: And *Casablanca*? Did you manage to watch it to the end?

CONRAD: Some things take time. Which is good. Maybe, if I ever managed to watch it to the end, I could no longer be what I am.

LUCY: And what are you?

CONRAD: You know what; you have described me often enough. Perhaps not with the words I would use, but describe me you have. I am a poisonous, yet unbearably soft-hearted former quasi-intellectual who allows things and people to breathe with their own lungs, in the naïve hope that he'll be allowed to do the same among the four

walls of his home. For which he has three months ago made the last mortgage payment.

LUCY: I didn't know that. Congratulations.

CONRAD: Would that be a good enough reason to celebrate with a tray of Hungarian salami and a glass of wine? Or would you prefer to take a bath first?

LUCY: Why should I take a bath first?

CONRAD: Air pollution in Beirut must be atrocious.

LUCY: Naples.

CONRAD: Even worse. In any case it's your habit to first take a bath when you return from your conferences; there is no reason why you should deny yourself this pleasure today, when I'm waiting to be invited to a class reunion. While I'm waiting for that call, you can cleanse yourself for five seminars in advance.

LUCY: But since you're not waiting for that call, as you have unplugged the phone, there is no need for me to take a bath. For which there is no need in any case, because I don't feel dirty.

CONRAD: I think I'll plug the phone in again, not because I'd like to give you an opportunity to take a bath although you don't feel dirty, but because I would feel rather dirty myself if I didn't give people a chance to let me know something important.

LUCY: *Is* there anything that's important for you?

CONRAD: Important for them, not for me.

LUCY: In other words, there is nothing that is important for you.

CONRAD: Only the status quo. Which is suffering attacks from all sides. Even from your nephew, who intends to do things directly above our bedroom that will definitely arouse you. However, I shall leave it to him to tell you.

LUCY: But the status quo cannot last forever.

CONRAD: It can, if we all make an effort.

LUCY: Some of us can't. And you, too, can't really pretend that you are indifferent to what you were told by your younger brother.

CONRAD: What could he possibly tell me that I wouldn't already know?

LUCY: So you know.

CONRAD: Only if you insist that we have to talk about it; if you don't, I haven't the faintest idea what all this is about. Haven't we, in our marriage, played enough games that we could not, for the sake of peace, play just one more?

LUCY: "Let's pretend that nothing is happening?"

CONRAD: Isn't that the widely accepted motto of the world in which we'll have to spend the remainder of our years? Hasn't the world in which long ago only megalomaniacs and criminals could make history, changed so much that small crooks like you and I can also find a place in it?

LUCY: But pretense is a lie, isn't it? Although, as you once said, there is so little truth in the world that one has to be very economical with it, some of us, sooner or later, want to *spend* some of this precious treasure. Just to clear the air.

CONRAD: Perhaps I should plug that phone in after all.

(He climbs under the drinks table.)

LUCY: You have become unusually decisive.

CONRAD *(stands up, pours a glass of whiskey)*: Are you sure you don't want us to raise glasses to your happy return?

LUCY: The return is not happy, and it's not a return; it's temporary. Won't you tell me how long you've known?

CONRAD: Oh, if you insist, and I can see you have no intention of giving up, approximately since the whole thing began.

LUCY: What thing?

CONRAD: Considering that we both know what we're talking about, it would be pointless to name it; that would give it a whiff of banality.

LUCY: Your tactfulness is sheer pretense; what you'd really like to do is smack me in the mouth, so why don't you do it?

CONRAD: Because I don't want to punish you for something that is, from an objective point of view, my fault.

LUCY: Yours?

CONRAD: I never expected you would, because of my infertility, deny yourself the pleasures of motherhood, the only true blessing in the life of an average woman. It seemed quite natural to me that, as soon as the clock began to tick louder, you would try to look for a solution elsewhere. I would have done the same. The only thing...

LUCY: The only thing?

CONRAD: The only thing that surprised me was your choice. Pretty tasteless, if you ask me.

LUCY: Tasteless? In what sense?

CONRAD: In all senses. I knew you wouldn't agree to artificial insemination using the sperm of an unknown donor, so I never suggested

that possibility. I did, however, expect you to get suitable seed from a man who could contribute at least average, if not exceptional, genes.

LUCY: And you think that I didn't do that.

CONRAD: I don't know, do you think you did?

LUCY: How can you so irrationally despise your own brother?

CONRAD (*visibly startled*): Brother? Sister's husband is usually referred to as brother-in-law. (*Brief pause.*) Or am I wrong, and he should indeed be called brother?

LUCY (*confused*): You're right, of course, sister's husband is usually referred to as brother-in-law. I have never quite got the hang of who should be called what. Brother-in-law, father-in-law, daughter-in-law; far too much to remember. So it was your brother, not your brother-in-law, but your brother who told you that I tried to obtain, as you called it, "suitable seed" from your brother-in-law.

CONRAD: Yes.

LUCY: And you believed him.

CONRAD: It took quite a bit of effort. You are, after all, an elegant and highly educated lady who would not stoop to having sex with an idiot, not even if he was the only man in the world.

LUCY: For me he *was* the only man in the world, at least for a while. And still is, as a matter of fact. And what is it that, in your opinion, makes him an idiot?

CONRAD: Not only does he drink too much and babbles incessantly without letting anyone get a word in, he also has the unpleasant habit of farting. Not occasionally, which we all do, but with incredible frequency, usually at a table close to other people, during business meetings, in restaurants, even in church, I hear, although he doesn't attend Mass all that often. I will allow that he may not have much control over it, although a significant improvement could be achieved if he stopped eating beans. But why does he have to accompany each of these gaseous explosions with idiotic grinning and remarks such as, "Have you heard that Americans have recently tested a new long-range missile?"

LUCY: In other words, he is an idiot because he has no control over his wind.

CONRAD: I personally am not in the least perturbed by it. Thankfully our meetings are very rare. But when I think of you... when I think that he may let off a loud bang just as one of his tadpoles penetrates the outer layer of your freshly ovulated egg... grrrrhhhh! I really am

sorry I can't summon more enthusiasm for your choice of potential father to my child, but why didn't you consult me before you undertook this daring enterprise? I would definitely have found you a better partner.

LUCY: Do you realize how insulting you are? (*Produces a tissue.*)

CONRAD: Don't forget that I didn't want to talk about this.

LUCY: Things can't be left hanging in the air forever.

CONRAD: In my experience it's far worse when they crash to the ground.

LUCY: I want to know how and when you found out.

CONRAD: Must we really waste time on details? Any time now they will call me about the reunion; besides, *Casablanca* is waiting for me...

LUCY: I want to know.

CONRAD: All right. Once, when you left for a seminar in Bratislava, or Warsaw, or Vilnius, or some other such place, you forgot to take your mobile phone. You left it lying on the coffee table. Because I had nothing to do, I decided to use the opportunity to familiarize myself with the cumbersome gadget, which, as you know, I have never regarded with much respect, mostly, I suppose, because it has tiny buttons while my fingers are very big. Your nephew Dinky, Damien, I beg your pardon, showed me the basics, and the rest turned out to be surprisingly simple. And so I discovered messages. Sent and received. You can't imagine how amusing I found them. I even thought: what a brilliant invention, the cell phone.

LUCY: Then you also know what you haven't yet told me.

CONRAD: I don't know. You must know if I do.

LUCY: In other words, the man who didn't think it was vile to accuse your common brother-in-law, had decided, out of consideration for you, not to accuse himself.

CONRAD: Hardly out of consideration for me; more for himself, I dare say. But now that I know why he excluded himself from the story, I am grateful to him. If it wasn't for your slip of the tongue a little earlier, I would never have known that no fewer than two men were sacrificing themselves – and no doubt labored at it, if I know you – so I could become the happy father. But how did the whole thing work – simultaneously, successively, in alphabetical order?

LUCY: You're disgusting.

CONRAD: Thank God it's nothing worse; I can live with that.

LUCY: You can obviously live with everything and everybody, even with the wife who is cheating on you. Don't you realize you're not normal?

What happened to you? Is it really of no importance to you that I screwed your brother?

CONRAD: At least he doesn't fart. He is also, in spite of his depressive self-love, capable of producing a moderately witty remark at least once a year. It's true that in many ways he is a total loser, a vengeful little asshole, the bedbug of our family, but he *is* twenty years younger than me, on top of which he may be familiar with a few exciting oriental copulation techniques, which may be a good enough trade-off for his average looks. The only question is the concentration of spermatozoa in his ejaculate. If it isn't higher than mine, all the effort and sweat were in vain and you'll have to rely on a less tasty but possibly a more fertile farter. Any prospects of offspring anytime soon? I can hardly wait to wash dirty nappies in my old age.

LUCY: I hate you. I never have, but now I really do.

CONRAD: Men who understand women are obviously not in vogue anymore. But I can't help it, that's what I'm like. That's what I've become. I, too, have a life of my own, although it may seem dead to you. Let things be what they are, allow events to take place; what's wrong with that? I always thought that this was something higher, some kind of wisdom.

(The phone rings. Conrad reacts, turns, stares at the set. Then he slowly walks to the drinks table, picks up the receiver, puts it to his ear and immediately replaces it.)

Where were we?

LUCY: Let the phone ring, let the receiver fall before the person on the other side gets the chance to speak, remain tolerant of everybody and everything. The only problem is that this isn't tolerance but indifference which has turned into apathy. Are you not aware of the smell of decay spreading from you? You don't care what is happening as long as you can pretend that nothing is happening; the only time you are at a loss is when you're required to take a stand. And if I had any feelings of guilt it would be you who'd try to persuade me that I don't need to have any. And if I did succeed in getting pregnant you'd bring the child up as your own.

CONRAD: Would that be a sin?

LUCY: What matters is that I experience your exemplary sacrifice as the worst kind of humiliation. Can't you realize how difficult it is for a

woman to share home and bed with someone who cannot or doesn't want to or doesn't dare react to insults as a normal man would?

CONRAD (*quietly*): Is that all?

LUCY: No. You knew something else you didn't tell me. I could've forgiven you everything, but this I can't and never will. After three years of exhausting attempts to get pregnant by at least one of the two men you so despise I finally gathered enough courage and money to see a specialist. And do you know what he told me? Of course you do. That I will never conceive. That I'm barren. Which you knew all the time. In spite of that you found it necessary, prince on a white horse that you are, to protect me from the truth and ascribe the guilt to yourself, on the basis of an examination you never had. Bravo!

CONRAD: Well, that really...

LUCY: Don't you realize what you've done? You forced me to cheat on you, and then you accompanied my cheating with a smirk of moral superiority, knowing my efforts are in vain, which made your selfish pleasure even greater. Is that normal?

CONRAD: Yes. My desire to protect you from a very unpleasant truth seemed, at least to me, the normal reaction of a man who doesn't want his wife to live without hope. In this context a little lie that doctors confirmed my infertility doesn't seem as despicable as you'd like to present it. The same goes for your extramarital exertions; in the circumstances you behaved no differently than I expected. Although I didn't count on two helpers, but only on one, and none from my immediate family. Pity you went to see that specialist. Now your hope has been shattered. And without hope your life will soon start resembling mine.

LUCY: Who gave you the right to take care of me as if I couldn't take care of myself?

CONRAD: I may have been prompted by the dialogue in *Casablanca* during which Ilsa Lund says to Rick: "I don't know what's right any longer. You'll have to think for both of us."

LUCY: To hell with your *Casablanca*. You have prevented me from having authentic life, do you realize that? You wanted it to become a lie, no lesser than yours.

CONRAD: But isn't everyone's life a lie? Compiled as it is of stubborn illusions about one's importance and of miniscule untruths we tell ourselves to avoid, like the sphinx faced with the right answer, throwing ourselves into the abyss?

LUCY: Go on, watch your *Casablanca*.

CONRAD: I really do wish we could watch it together. Unless, of course, you're in a hurry.

LUCY: What do you mean by that?

CONRAD: Oh, I don't know, in a hurry to get to some conference in Copenhagen or Hamburg probably not, unless you're still caught up in the force of the flight and consider early landing too risky. I'm also aware of the possibility that you may want to continue for want of anything better to do, to fill the time which you'd otherwise have to fill with something else, but don't know with what.

LUCY: Have you failed to register important information that I conveyed to you? Or are you incapable of incorporating it into your comfy little world? I told you that your brother-in-law, although he farts in public places, used to be the only man in the world for me. And still is. And will remain so. Although I don't know for how long, but definitely until your beloved sister kills him.

CONRAD: I'm not going to tell her. At least I hope you know me better than that.

LUCY: I assume you'll take this in your stride, considering that you'll be only accompanying something you have accompanied without any objection so far.

CONRAD: No, that won't bother me; the only thing that bothers me is the aggressive aroma of his farts. Still, there's one thing that's not entirely clear to me. If so far you carried on with two, why do you want to continue with only one, and why with him? Why not my brother? I can't imagine that my sister could find a husband that would also be of interest to my wife.

LUCY: Can you imagine having a brother who is even more boring than you?

CONRAD: That I can imagine.

(The phone rings. Conrad keeps looking at it. Then he lifts the receiver and lets it drop again.)

LUCY: Evidently you don't want to attend that reunion.

CONRAD: I need time to think. After all, this isn't a decision one has to make every day. Just as you don't decide every day that for you living with me in this house is the most comfortable option of all. And that you can do all other things you feel like doing along the way, no differently than filling your tank at a petrol station.

7.

(Enter Damien.)

DAMIEN: Oh, Auntie. You're back. Will you cook something exotic, Indonesian perhaps?

LUCY: Not today. *(Looking at Conrad.)* I desperately need a good bath.

(Lucy picks up the travel bag and leaves the stage. Conrad is staring at the phone. Damien comes closer.)

DAMIEN: Did you quarrel?

CONRAD: Pupka and I? You know that's impossible.

DAMIEN: In other words, you'll be glad to hear that Matilda is not moving in with me and that we won't be making porno movies.

CONRAD: Oh... What happened? Don't tell me you lit an incense stick and achieved enlightenment?

DAMIEN: I was looking for the right word and you gave it to me. Enlightenment. Although it's not my first one, it's definitely the most orgasmic. I feel as if I were floating – can you imagine?

CONRAD: No, because at the moment I feel like a turtle desperately trying to climb out of water for a breath of fresh air.

DAMIEN: Not very comfortable.

CONRAD: No.

DAMIEN: Anyway, as I was saying, this morning I asked myself: what the fuck am I doing in this world? Suppose I die tomorrow? What will I leave to posterity? One fucking TV show which was cancelled before it got the chance to imprint itself in the nation's memory. On a private TV station which has a dog's chance to imprint anything in the nation's memory. And maybe a porn flick or two, where I'll be mentioned as the author of immortal dialogues in the style of: "My God, it's really huge!" or "Faster, faster!" or "Swallow it, slut!"

CONRAD: Well, these are quite interesting dialogues, I never thought...

DAMIEN: Do you know what suddenly dropped out of the sky into my undergraduate brain? That it's possible to do something useful in this world. I don't mean useful for oneself, but useful for others. You look amazed.

CONRAD: Astonished, would be a better word. I never thought I would live to see a miracle.

DAMIEN: It's not a miracle. I have simply decided to dedicate my miserable life to others. Now you're neither amazed nor astonished, now you're skeptical.

CONRAD: No, now I'm astonished *and* amazed. I can't imagine what could have caused such a change in your outlook.

DAMIEN: I decided to watch a pornographic movie.

CONRAD: Surely not for the first time in your life.

DAMIEN: No, but for the first time in such a way that I actually saw what it is. And do you know what it is? Plain pornography. Mechanical pumping, boring beyond belief. And I looked out of the window across the city. And do you know what I said to myself? This world out there is nothing more than a cesspit. How could I have fallen under the influence of these soft-pricked frauds and overused cunts who have no idea how beautiful a sunset is? Have you ever watched the sunset from the attic? You must. If you don't believe in God you'll have second thoughts when you see it.

CONRAD: Thank you.

DAMIEN: I'm sorry about all the filthy words, I know that's not the language of your generation...

CONRAD: You'd be surprised.

DAMIEN: Let me tell you. I have realized that there is only one solution: kill myself or become an artist. I'm too young to kill myself, so my fate is more or less sealed.

CONRAD (*a slight cough*): Bravo, Dinky.

DAMIEN: But what sort of artist, that is the question. A painter I'm not, all my horses resemble rabbits, and vice versa. A sculptor? I'd quickly turn my fingers into mush. Writing I can't do, because I get fidgety after a couple of minutes. Music is out, because the last time I managed to get a sound out of the piano, a swarm of flies rushed against the window pane and committed mass suicide. As for ballet, it can badly damage your toes. So what is left? I'm going to make movies.

CONRAD: Pornographic?

DAMIEN: No way. Artistic, like *Casablanca*.

CONRAD: Movies like that can't be made twice; you were born half a century too late.

DAMIEN: I know. I, too, have seen *Casablanca* five times at least. And I know that I condemned it as sentimental shit. But now something

isn't quite right. Now I think there is something in this movie that I missed. Some secret that I hope you won't keep to yourself.

CONRAD: I doubt that my opinion will be of use to you. These things are very personal.

DAMIEN: Never mind.

CONRAD: All right, then. Casablanca represents some sort of in-between space, a waiting room, a purgatory. Fugitives from the parts of Europe that have been occupied by the Nazis, come there in the hope of getting a permit to allow them to fly to Lisbon, from where they could continue to America, in those days still the land of hope and freedom.

DAMIEN: I get it.

CONRAD: But it's easier to get to Casablanca than to leave it. The optimists dream: "Maybe tomorrow we'll be on the plane." And the pessimists complain: "I will never get away. I will die in Casablanca." To which the realists add: "Not a bad place to die."

DAMIEN: And?

CONRAD: Depending on who you are, you'll try to secure a permission to leave. Either by a trick, threat, barter, fraud or prostitution. Under such pressures some people completely change. The proximity of evil enlightens them. But many remain what they are. For them it is too late.

DAMIEN: And what are you, under this definition?

CONRAD: A realist, I'm afraid.

DAMIEN: Are you unhappy about that?

CONRAD: Not at all. Part of the realism is the ability not to entertain any illusions about why you are in Casablanca. And why you have nothing you could sell for the permission to leave. And finally you understand even the answer to the question why you came to Casablanca. "Because of health." Because of health, Dinky.

DAMIEN: Let me tell you how I understand this. The only way I'll find out how to make a good movie is by making a good movie.

CONRAD (*with a smile*): Today is definitely a day of surprises.

(The phone rings. Conrad looks at it, does not move.)

DAMIEN: Won't you answer?

CONRAD: I have switched on the answering machine.

(Lucy comes rushing in, wearing a bathrobe.)

AQUARIUM

LUCY: Is it for me by any chance? The battery's gone on my cell phone.

CONRAD: Maybe it's not only for you. Maybe it's for all of us.

(The answering machine kicks in, we can hear the recording.)

VOICE OF AN 8-YEAR-OLD BOY: Hello, Daddy. Marcus Aurelius here.

Grandpa gave me your number. He said I may call you. Apparently you asked him if he knew how fish die. I don't know how they die in the sea, but I know how they die in an aquarium. The fish die the moment they stop swimming. Then they just hang in the water, because they are no longer tasty. Fish do not eat dead fish. Grandpa says you're alive only as long as others can eat you or hurt you. But I think you're alive only as long as somebody loves you. I do love you, Dad, although I have never met you. I hope I will. Soon. Call me, please. I'm waiting.

(A moment of silence. Conrad shrugs and waves his hand as if to say, well...)

CONRAD: Child...

(Curtain.)

Casa-blanca?

Conrad, a master of verbal aggression and a former opportunist with autocratic leanings that were not to his benefit (or rather they did not serve him sufficiently because he was, as he himself admits, not nimble enough), finds himself in the new world of market mentality without reliable political support. The merry-go-round of change suddenly “starts moving with such speed” that – as he admits to Matilda (only because he is certain she is the only one who doesn’t know what he is talking about) – he begins to feel nauseous and falls off. He retreats to exile in his own house in which he appears to want to be alone and undisturbed, but in fact leaves the front door unlocked because (irrespective of the verbal abuse with which he tries to get rid of visitors) he needs company and hopes that something will pull him back into the center of events, into life itself, back from the aquarium into the open sea, where you may well get eaten by a fish. In this self-created chamber he would like to rid himself of himself or, rather, of the self he does not like because his loss of stature in society has forced him to see himself in a more realistic light and he now realizes that he cannot be proud of everything he has done in the past.

He is far from being ready to admit this – except between the lines, in a non-binding humorous form. His verbal aggression (with which in the past, from a position of power, he proved to himself the impact of his influence and his exceptionality) is now really just a defense used to camouflage the fragility and vulnerability that are both quite new to him. Not something he could not live with – in fact, the opposite: in front of our eyes he realizes (somewhat belatedly) that compromise brings relief and that by granting more freedom to others than they allow him, he is liberating himself. He has always considered it essential to control everything, either directly or through cunning, even – if that was the only way – through feigning ignorance, as in his relationship with his

wife and, to a lesser extent, with others whom he keeps reproaching that they are disturbing him.

His obsession with *Casablanca* originates in the feeling (perhaps not just a feeling but a full awareness) that in the movie the city of Casablanca (he describes it as a waiting room, a purgatory) resembles his aquarium, in which as a slowly rotting fish he has nothing he could exchange for a pass that would give him access to the open sea. He cannot get a pass through ruses, threats, deals, tricks or prostitution (because all of these got him to the place from where he now wishes to escape). During his “orchestrated descent from the stage of importance into the benevolent silence of solitude,” as he describes his withdrawal from the world, Conrad realizes that the easiest way to avoid pain is by pretending to be ignorant (it is not sensible to talk about anything that could cause hurt, becomes his motto). Not only that, it is necessary to pretend that something obviously true never happened at all. Confrontations that demand action and a change in the status quo must be avoided. Hence the protective consideration he shows toward his wife’s transgressions and the benevolent patience with which he follows what happens to his tenant, Damien, as well as his patronizing understanding for the failures of his younger brother are not so much the indicators of a higher wisdom as a calculated maneuver with which he ensures his own peace and sense of superiority: because he knows and sees what others are doing, while others have no idea that he knows and sees, he can imagine he is a step ahead and still in control.

The feeling that he is controlling things eludes him only with the arrival of a former school friend who comes to tell Conrad that he is the father of the man’s grandson and that the grandson would like to meet his father for his birthday. In this unexpected news Conrad sees an opportunity to return to the world. The child’s sincerity and the promise of pure innocence seduce him into hoping he can leave Casablanca after all. The fact that in the end he turns on the answering machine so that the child’s call can be heard by all proves that after much hesitation he has decided to return to life, irrespective of the consequences. Within this context it is also possible to understand his altered attitude to the unpleasant Damien: when, after a series of failures, this would-be pornographer experiences the beauty of a sunset and realizes that it is possible and perhaps even not wrong to do something for others, Conrad sees in this metamorphosis a reflection of his own journey. The message of the drama is thus positive: *a genuine life is possible*.

Evald Flisar

Everybody Comes to Conrad's

It is by no means a coincidence that Flisar's play *Aquarium* begins with the title of the cult movie *Casablanca*. This involves a deliberate play on words by the author, just as with the title of the play *Nora Nora* (in addition to the woman's name, the word means "crazy" in Slovene), only this time it is in the form of a question emphasizing multiple meanings. Most of the dialogues in the play continue in this fashion (and this has become Flisar's recognizable style). And not just in this particular drama. Words and their various meanings are carefully chosen tools or weapons with which the characters operate on themselves and each other or fight, as well as deriving pleasure from doing this. The words are there to be exploited for hinting, testing, probing and playing, as well as wounding or teasing. Words are also a source of comedy, since they can remove the charge from a theme or a situation, however tense it may be, and ennoble it through distance and humor.

This is why the very first question in the play (Casa – *blanca?*), uttered by Damien, functions not only as information about what the main character Conrad likes to watch on video, but it also implies that there is something wrong with Conrad's gawping at the television. His obsessive watching of *Casablanca* has grown into the eccentric ritual of an oddball who spends his time in front of the screen, devouring salami and smoked cheese. Damien immediately accuses him of resorting to this "sentimental shit" because he does not wish to have any contact with reality, but Conrad, adept in verbal cynicism, easily squashes him. However, it soon transpires that his dumb, pesky nephew is very much right. Conrad has consciously isolated himself from the outside world and no longer wishes to have any contact with it (or so he says). But he is not really succeeding, or at least not as radically as he had originally intended. Conrad is not a real loner, since he clearly still needs an

audience for his conflict with the world. In addition, he is still living in the house together with his forever absent wife Lucy and her forever present nephew Damien. Moreover, he has left the door unlocked so that the world can always drop in for a chat.

Another association triggered by Damien's question is, of course, that of an empty home. And it is precisely this *casa blanca* that conceals or rather reveals the theme of Flisar's individual and family tragicomedy. Through Damien's simple, naïve mouth the author establishes the initial situation that he wants to confront us with – the deliberate isolation of a sensitive and contemplative individual from the profane and banal world, which has in his opinion become "a simple cesspit and nothing but pornography." And why does Conrad choose "sentimental shit," a description by the most typical representative of the present day – Damien – as an orientation point for a counterweight to such a world? Let us mention in passing that something similar was said about *Casablanca* by the producer Hal Wallis: according to him, the movie was a hit, although it remained "shit."

One of the most obvious parallels is of course the character of the cynical, sarcastic and charming Rick, portrayed by Humphrey Bogart who, like Conrad in his disappointment, withdrew to *Casablanca*. This is how Rick is described by Matjaž Klopčič in his essay on *Casablanca* (Ekran, 1996, pp. 1/2). "Life has already changed and impoverished him: his world is already beginning to crumble and fall apart, in the psychological sense it is possible to see in this the experience of life. [...] Rick Blaine, a displaced hero of lost ideals who took shelter in the exciting peace of Vichy *Casablanca*." All of this could also apply to Conrad. Above all, Rick and Conrad are comparable in their eloquence. They are both good at word play and verbal jousting. They display a wonderful sense of irony and cynicism, which they use to save themselves, and sarcasm behind which they hide their vulnerability, embitterment and deeply concealed sentimentality.

During Conrad's watching of the movie, by a strange – even fateful – coincidence, dialogues from *Casablanca* begin increasingly to correspond with situations in Conrad's life. And suddenly we are, together with Conrad, witnesses to a strange merging of the fiction of the movie and the reality of the play. And not just that: the dialogues in the movie correspond to the situations arising among the characters in *Aquarium* so much that the latter can simply quote them direct. We are only slightly more confused when trying to draw a comparison at the level

of the romantic story that develops in the movie between Rick and Ilse, but toward the end of *Aquarium*, in the scenes with Conrad's wife Lucy, it transpires that even at that level there are parallels that cannot be overlooked.

It is Conrad himself who at the end of the play, in a dialogue with Damien, reveals to us the main reason why he is constantly watching *Casablanca*. It is related to the ontological question that both Rick and Conrad ask: "Why did we come to Casablanca?" and the response to it. When Rick is asked why he has withdrawn to Casablanca, he replies ironically: "My health. I came to Casablanca for the waters." – "What waters? We're in the desert." – "I was misinformed." Conrad also offers his response to the metaphorical question of why he has come to Casablanca. His reply is in line with the realism he has found his way to in his "desert": the recognition that he has no illusions left about why he came to Casablanca and that "you have nothing you could sell for a pass," but that only someone who loves you can give you a pass from purgatory and that in the end you yourself create the pass that enables your liberty.

Flisar confronts us with the situation of a disappointed, searching individual who has consciously withdrawn from the vapid, banal and pornographic world, a world that has gone off the rails. One of his tasks is the persistent search for an answer to the question that all Flisar's characters are constantly asking, that is, the meaning of life. An identical question is also posed by the main character in *Nora Nora*: "The meaning of life is still very important even though philosophers no longer deal with it, only fools." And Conrad in *Aquarium* is precisely such a fool. He no longer wishes to agree to the world's rules that are based on illusions and emptiness and, considering the situation the world is in, we can only agree with him. In isolation, in his decontamination chamber, he wants to cleanse himself of his last illusions and resign himself to nothingness as his fundamental philosophical stance. Conrad has arrived at a point in his life where he deliberately rejects any illusions about his social importance. He recognizes the deceptiveness of all titles, functions and fantasies, while those around him draw precisely upon the illusions that he has rejected. And this is why he initially justifiably despises them. Or as he himself says in his brilliant monologue:

"Becoming nothing after you have been something or you have at least lived in the illusion that you are something, in an illusion that was maintained by those around you even more than by you [...],

becoming nothing after such a parade of the emperor's clothes, not because of a mistake or ineptitude or an accidental slip, but deliberately and fully consciously [...] for such a descent from the stage of importance into the benevolent silence of solitude I most definitely deserve anything but disrespect."

In spite of this, disrespect is exactly what he gets. For Conrad and his attitude to the world, from which he has withdrawn because of his disdain for it, the play could have ended at the very beginning simply on the basis of this conclusion, if he did not allow the world he despises to come to him without any obstacles, intruding its wishes, demands and, of course, disrespect. And thus Conrad, willingly or not, finds himself in an absurd situation that can end with nothing but yet another conflict with the world and the revelation of his sins. Moreover, it appears that the world Conrad despises in principle consists mainly of his nearest and dearest. The microcosm of his home and of those closest to him is the one that Conrad must (as we soon discover) deal and be reconciled with in order to be able to justifiably despise and detest the world's depravity. And most of all, he has to deal with himself, but clearly not in the way he had originally imagined.

Like Molière's *Misanthrope* and Bernhard's *The World-Fixer*, Conrad is tied to the world by binds that are stronger than he initially believes, and which he is unable to and does not wish to sever. His withdrawal from the world is therefore more of a sign of an embittered cynical observer who criticizes the world but can do nothing to change it. If *Alceste* and the *World-Fixer* saw the world as a cesspit of sin, their vice is in no way negligible, on the contrary, sooner or later it becomes more than obvious. This is exactly what happens to Conrad and this is precisely what makes him a tragicomic figure.

Of course, at the beginning we are completely on Conrad's side – as well as *Alceste's* and the *World-Fixer's* – until we get to know him better. The embittered formerly successful newspaper editor deliberately decides to withdraw and isolate himself from a world that he disdains, and he does so with good reason. But the world he despises so much refuses to leave him alone and vice versa. We then meet a variety of the representatives of the modern world in all their misery and Flisar's *Aquarium* could justifiably also parody the title of the theatrical text which the script for *Casablanca* was based on: *Everybody Comes to Conrad's*. It transpires that the empty house is more Conrad's or Damien's wish than

the actual state of affairs. In Conrad's seemingly hermetically sealed aquarium, a series of visitors appear with whom Conrad has unresolved relationships and these are what he has to deal with. If he really wants to be transformed, he must take the arduous path of dealing with the world and particularly with his past, not just in principle but in a very real manner – by dealing with those closest to him.

Conrad's ritual of watching *Casablanca* is first interrupted by his excessively intense and ruthless nephew, followed by a procession of individuals, all of whom are constantly demanding and wanting something from him. His younger brother blames him for his own professional failure, his sister pesters him about the maintenance of their grandparents' grave, his nephew's young colleague unsettles him with her intellectual simplicity and intrusive sexuality, his former school friend bothers him about a school reunion, while his wife is never there, always away on business. But it is gradually revealed that the situations (like words) are not quite as unambiguous as they seem at first, and therein lies the charm of Flisar's play.

Conrad's bizarre nephew Damien is the most obvious specimen of the world that Conrad justifiably despises but cannot avoid. The conceited, vacuous, stupid and career-minded Damien is also a model specimen of the young generation that craves rapid success and, above all, fame. Damien is a very good example of the model TV personality, who can easily be recognized and who is all too common in the world of television these days. Faced with Damien's complacent emptiness, which is comical in its absurd stupidity, Conrad's cynicism and sarcastic attitude toward the world can only grow, and with good reason. It is also interesting that in the end it is Damien, alongside Conrad, who makes the greatest conceptual leap – within his limited capabilities, of course. When Damien finally realizes that the pornographic movie with which he wants to launch his career at the start of the play is in fact pornography and he then describes the situation in the world with the same term, he becomes likeable in his naïve simplicity – both to Conrad and to us.

The story takes a slightly different turn with regard to Matilda, the second most explicit representative of the world that Conrad is unable to stomach. If Damien can still be salvaged by his simplicity and sobering up upon recognizing what pornography really is, and in the end, of course, by his desire to make an artistic *hit* or *shit* à la *Casablanca*, we can certainly not say the same about the vulgar career-driven Matilda. In her straight, narrow pragmatic stance that takes no account of anything or anybody, she is a typical representative of the young generation

to whom any questions about the meaning of life, not to mention ethical values and education, are anathema. This is why it is no surprise that it is alongside her that Conrad plays an out-and-out weirdo, as in her eyes that is precisely what he is – an utter fool. Once he realizes that she is not just a naïve “floozy,” but deliberately and banally evil, all he can do is classify her as “a bitch who wags her tail, and then suddenly bites you.”

Conrad has a much more complex relationship (it transpires later) with his younger brother Matthew. As is customary between brothers, it is full of unresolved frustrations, old grudges and unspoken resentments. And if it initially seems that Matthew has only come to blame his older brother for his professional failure, we soon realize that there is a great deal more behind this: old grudges and a feeling that Conrad has never loved him or has at least not accepted him as he is, has never respected him and never noticed his admiration. This can only be followed by the sweet revenge of a disappointed and frustrated younger brother, who can finally take it out on his older idol in the most stereotypical fashion: by seducing his wife. Matthew wants to hint at this to his brother during his two visits in an extremely perfidious manner: he accuses his brother-in-law, but keeps quiet about himself.

Equally unresolved is Conrad's relationship with his sister Catherine and, of course, vice versa. It soon emerges that she also has not come only to clarify the situation regarding the neglected grave of their grandparents, but wants – or demands – a favor from her brother. Behind these two issues is concealed the main question of where her husband is and whether Conrad knows that he is sleeping with his wife, Lucy, although Catherine never spells this out. Conrad's concept of isolation well and truly fails during a visit by his former school friend Radivoy. We find out that in this case the relationship is once again not as simple as it initially seems. Radivoy's invitation to a school reunion is really just an excuse for another, more serious invitation – an invitation to Conrad to recognize and accept the responsibility for his illegitimate son, to turn on his phone and answer the boy's call.

Alongside all these traumatic and complex liaisons there is the painfully traumatic relationship Conrad has with his wife. The frequent business trips that Conrad tolerates so stoically and comments on so cynically are for an important reason well-known to both of them. When we find out that Conrad has been lying about his infertility and thus misleading his wife (or, in his words, allowing her to hope, but in doing so he has consciously pushed her into the arms of his brother and

brother-in-law), we learn about Conrad's ultimate sin. In front of us now stands not only an embittered and tragicomic victim of the crazy and perverted world we can easily agree with, but someone who is a part of that dirty and tainted world. His sins are no smaller than the sins of the others he despises and for which he feels only indignation. His relationship with Lucy finally reveals the last parallel with *Casablanca* in the hint of cruelty with which Rick first pushes Ilse Lund into emotional distress, which forces her to admit her love for him, and then finally returns her to Laszlo. This cruelty can also be seen in Conrad with regard to all his relationships, not just with Lucy, whom in a way he himself led into infidelity while pretending to be not there and, after her confession, reproaching her with cynical malice that she has betrayed him. And not just with anyone, but with the wrong men, who were in his opinion unworthy of his wife. What superior sarcasm! But Conrad knows very well that he himself is not innocent and that years ago he was unfaithful to her with a naïve girl whom he in passing left with a son, making her unhappy for the rest of her life, and with whom years ago he watched that romantic "shit" *Casablanca*.

And so Conrad's sins, together with *Alceste's* and *The World-Fixer's*, are more than obvious. Like Moliere and Bernhard, Flisar is unforgiving to his characters. He is merciless toward Conrad just as Conrad is merciless in his justified criticism of the world. And that is precisely what makes Flisar's play so thrilling and, above all, touching and true to life. In the end, Flisar's Conrad decides to switch on his phone, thus allowing his child to call him. He decides to re-enter the world for cleansing and re-birth with the son who needs him so very much and whom Conrad also needs. He decides for life instead of slow suicide in the aquarium. He decides for the inward path offered by Marcus Aurelius. And this path, like the path to others, will be difficult and steep.

Marinka Poštrak