

**THE LADY MATADOR'S HOTEL**

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By

Cristina García

(Based on her novel)

The Lady Matador's Hotel  
By Cristina García

Premiered at Central Works Theater, Berkeley, CA, October 12,  
2019. Directed by Gary Graves, with the following cast:

Rudy Guerrero, member, AEA  
Sylvia Kratins  
Gabriel Montoya  
Steve Ortiz  
Neiry Rojo  
Erin Mei-Ling Stuart

## CAST

**SUKI PALACIOS**, Mexican-Japanese bullfighter, gorgeous, sleek, fearless, female late 20s

**AURA ESTRADA**, ex-guerrilla, waitress at luxurious Hotel Mirafior, quietly fierce, understatedly sexy, female 20s-30s

**RICARDO MORÁN\***, Cuban poet, romantic, narcissistic, politically conservative, vulnerable, male 40s

**COLONEL MARTÍN ABEL\***, ruthless enforcer, anti-Communist, Lothario, disciplined, fit, handsome, male 40s-50s

**GERTRUDIS STÜBER\***, corrupt adoption lawyer, of German descent, rich, formidable, tall, tailored, female 40s-50s

**JULIO ESTRADA\***, a ghost, Aura's dead brother, both kind and vengeful, barefoot, dresses in white, ageless male

### \*Casting notes

**Ricardo Morán** also plays Pajarita, Male Journalist #1

**Col. Martín Abel** also plays Male Journalist #2, TV Announcer Voice, Bus Passenger, Police Voice

**Gertrudis Stüber** also plays Journalist Victoria Bell

**Julio Estrada** also plays Bartender Miguel, Bellhop, Young Thug,

## SETTING

The posh HOTEL MIRAFLOR in the capital of an unnamed Central American country, which is suffering in the aftermath of a long, brutal civil war. It's a balmy November and the city is gearing up for the first Battle of the Lady Matadors in the Americas. A hemispheric military conference is also underway at the hotel. The atmosphere is tense, incendiary, erotic.

The action mostly takes place in and around the hotel--in its garden restaurant, ballroom, gym, and guest rooms, all minimally suggested. An abstracted bullring--conjured with an ellipsis of light and ambient sounds--serves as the Lady Matador's private realm. The play takes place over five days.

Running time is ninety minutes with an intermission.

## PRODUCTION NOTE

Two types of capes are used in bullfighting:

- 1) **the capote de brega** is a voluminous cape, always fuchsia on one side and with the matadora's choice of color on the other. It's used during the first two-thirds of the fight.
- 2) **the muleta** is a smaller, lightweight red cape attached to a long piece of wood behind which the matadora hides the sword. It's used in the last third of the fight.

## ACT 1

WEDNESDAY

SCENE 1.

LIGHTS UP on Hotel Miraflor, Room 719, morning.  
SOUND of sexy flamenco as the Lady Matador dresses ritualistically before a full-length mirror. Suki Palacios slips into the dazzling short jacket of her yellow traje de luces, poses confidently. Then she holds up an omamori, her Japanese mother's good luck amulet.

SUKI

For you, Mom.

Suki kisses the omamori then slips it into an inside pocket. Lastly, she puts on her montera, adjusts the angle, takes a long look at herself, registers pleasure.

SUKI

Arrogance. Honor. Death.

Suki moves toward the blinding flashes of camera lights. SHIFT TO hotel press conference. Journalists bark rapid-fire questions. Suki expertly fields them.

JOURNALIST VICTORIA BELL

Why do you do it, Suki Palacios? Why do you fight the bulls?

SUKI

To live closer to death.

MALE JOURNALIST #1

This Sunday you'll compete in the first Battle of the Lady Matadors in the Americas. Tell us: what's your strategy?

SUKI

To win.

JOURNALIST VICTORIA BELL

Do you consider yourself a feminist?

SUKI

If that means I get to choose then yes, I'm a feminist.

JOURNALIST VICTORIA BELL

Choose what?

SUKI

Which bulls I kill, which men I fuck, and how I die.

SOUND of wolf whistles.

MALE JOURNALIST #2

Why are you wearing yellow? Isn't that an unlucky color for bullfighters?

SUKI

I like tempting fate.

Suki strikes a photo-worthy pose. More flashing cameras.

JOURNALIST VICTORIA BELL

Tell us about the bulls you inspected this morning.

SUKI

What's there to tell? Your bulls are small, too meek. I hope you can come up with better toros than that.

MALE JOURNALIST #1

Aren't you afraid of death?

SUKI

Tell me how you die and I'll tell you how you've lived.

(Pauses, scans the crowd)

Yes, you.

MALE JOURNALIST #2

What are your weaknesses?

A beat.

SUKI

Silver foxes.

Journalists howl with laughter.

MALE JOURNALIST #1

Do your fans ever give you trouble?

SUKI

Sometimes they lunge at me worse than the bulls.

JOURNALIST VICTORIA BELL

As a lady matador, you're both beloved and despised. How do you account for this?

SUKI

We fear what we love most.

(Removes montera, smooths hair)

And we especially love what we fear.

Audience roars with delight.

MALE JOURNALIST #2

People say you're violent. Is that true?

SUKI

Only when necessary.

Male Journalist #2 EXITS.

JOURNALIST VICTORIA BELL

Aren't you afraid your fans will turn on you if you go too far?

SUKI

My fans are my fans because I go too far. I live too close to death to avoid life.

(Glances at her watch)

I'll take two more questions.

Journalist Victoria Bell waves as she EXITS.

MALE JOURNALIST #1

If you could be any smell in the world, what would it be?

SUKI

(Teases out moment)

The hot charge of a stinking bull.

More wolf whistles.

MALE JOURNALIST #1

Do you have a personal motto?

SUKI

Sí.

(Cocks thumb and forefinger)

If I aim, move. That's all for today. See you Sunday. In the ring.

Suki poses for an extended barrage of flashing cameras.

SCENE 2.

SHIFT TO Hotel Miraflor's garden restaurant, midday. Aura Estrada, in her waitress uniform, hustles through a busy lunchtime. Colonel Martín Abel (pronounced Ah-BELL) wears wraparound sunglasses and peruses a menu. Bartender Miguel shakes cocktails. Nearby is Che, a parrot that Miguel has trained to spout revolutionary poetry. Gertrudis Stüber ENTERS with authority.

GERTRUDIS

(To Audience)

Welcome to the Hotel Miraflor, where our country's elite--its richest, most influential power brokers--conduct their business and their pleasures. Yes, it all happens here, in the very heart of our capital, amidst these courtyards and fountains, that aviary of rare tropical birds. Not to mention the largest freshwater swimming pool in all of Central America. Over there--see?

(Points)

Every single person in this garden restaurant knows who I am. Fears me. Envis me. Wants to be me. Take note of the discreet yet supplicating glances in my direction. Why? Because without me, none of them could survive a day in this town. Take the Colonel, for example. Quite notorious in our long civil war. Let's just say he and I have a little history ... And I know all his relevant business.

Gertrudis takes a seat at "her" table.

AURA

Buenos días, Doctora Stüber. What can I get for you?

Aura hands Gertrudis the morning paper.

GERTRUDIS

I'll have my usual, Aura. But make sure the coffee is extra hot, not like yesterday. And extra pineapple with my fruit salad.

AURA

Enseguida, Doctora.

PARROT'S VOICE

Aaaawk! "There's no such thing as a small country!"

Aura approaches the Colonel, who's fuming over parrot.

AURA

Good day, sir.

COLONEL

Did you teach him that crap?

AURA

I beg your pardon?

COLONEL

The fucking parrot.

AURA

It picks up snatches of conversation from our guests.

COLONEL

Trained by Communists, no doubt!

AURA

No harm meant, Colonel, I assure you.

COLONEL

I see you know your military rankings.

AURA

But you're quite famous, no?

COLONEL

(Succumbs to vanity)

Well, Señorita, I've done my part for our patria pequeña. I'll have a double Dewars straight up and your pork chops special.

AURA

A sus órdenes, Colonel.

COLONEL

(Lowers sunglasses)

And make sure they're extra juicy for me, eh?

Aura nods stiffly and circles over to Bartender Miguel.

AURA

Pendejo creep.

MIGUEL

Just spit on his pork chops.

GERTRUDIS

(Shouts to Aura)

Where's my coffee?

AURA

Right away, Doctora!

Ricardo Morán ENTERS, all smiles. Gertrudis Stüber waves him over. They shake hands and sit together.

RICARDO

Finally, we meet!

GERTRUDIS

Where's your wife, Señor Morán?

RICARDO

Eh, she's been delayed.

GERTRUDIS

We'll see her shortly, I hope?

RICARDO

She's still in New York. Swamped with work.

PARROT'S VOICE

"There is no pain as great as being alive!" Aaaawk!

Ricardo is amused. Aura goes to their table, serves Gertrudis, offers Ricardo a menu. Gertrudis calmly eats.

AURA

What can I start you with, Señor?

RICARDO

How about some more poetry from that parrot? Ha! And quoting Rubén Darío, too!

AURA

He's a favorite with our guests.

RICARDO

(Flirtatious)

I'm a poet myself.

AURA

Bueno, I'm sure the parrot wouldn't mind if you joined in.

RICARDO

Touché, Señorita. I'll have ...

(Consults menu)

your crab enchiladas.

AURA

Very well.

Aura leaves them.

GERTRUDIS

When exactly can we expect your wife?

RICARDO

Not for awhile.

GERTRUDIS

Is something wrong?

RICARDO

Oh, no no no. Just a minor delay.

GERTRUDIS

I'm afraid I cannot surrender Baby Isabel to your care without your wife present.

RICARDO

Surely, I can pick her up by myself?

GERTRUDIS

Your contract clearly states that Baby Isabel must go to both you and your wife.

RICARDO

But I'm the father!

GERTRUDIS

Not yet, you aren't.

Aura joins Miguel at the bar.

PARROT'S VOICE

Che wants a beer! Aaaawk!

AURA

Your bird's going to get us in trouble, Miguel.

BARTENDER

Poor Che here is what passes for the resistance nowadays.

GERTRUDIS

(To Ricardo)

Please check back with my assistant Elva Flores when your plans are firmed up. A good day to you, Señor Morán.

Gertrudis dabs at her mouth with a napkin.

RICARDO

But--

Gertrudis stands, EXITS. An overwrought Ricardo remains. Aura comes over with his meal.

RICARDO

I'm afraid I've lost my appetite.

AURA

I'm sorry to hear that, sir. May I wrap the enchiladas and have them delivered to your room? You might get hungry later.

RICARDO

That's very kind of you.

They hold their gaze a moment. Ricardo EXITS. Aura circles back to the bar.

MIGUEL

I see our big-shot lawyer is selling off more made-to-order babies today.

AURA

Quiet. Someone might hear you.

MIGUEL

First they steal our land. Then they steal our children.

AURA

Por favor, Miguel. No politics today.

MIGUEL

Come to dinner with me.

AURA

You never give up, eh?

MIGUEL

Not when it comes to you.

(Holds up an orchid)

This came for you this morning.

Aura is surprised and pleased.

MIGUEL

From your secret lover?

AURA

Cállate ya.

MIGUEL

I just want to know--

AURA

Make me a double Dewars straight up. Pronto. And please, can you cover for me after lunch? I need to go up to the roof to ... get the laundry.

MIGUEL

(Testily)

A sus órdenes, Señorita.

Aura rolls her eyes. The Lady Matador ENTERS and strides over to the bar. Action stops. All eyes on her.

SUKI

(To Miguel)

Do you have absinthe?

SCENE 3.

SHIFT TO Hotel Miraflor's rooftop, afternoon. SOUNDS of city. Aura ENTERS with the orchid.

AURA

The capital looks so different from up here. As if the buildings and the ceiba [pronounced SAY-BAH] trees and even the cathedral itself were suspended by an invisible grid of wires. How the streets stretch crookedly in all directions! And the colorful little flags of the market tents flap-flap in the wind. The smoke is rising from the dump, burning who knows what? I wonder if everything were upside down--

(Looks upside down)

Would people on the bottom end up on top? Or would the rich still find a way to reign?

(Searches the skies)

Hermano? Hermano, dónde estás? Can't you drop down from a cloud, or something?

SOUND of wind. Aura keeps searching.

AURA

Ay, Julio. Have I lost you forever?

Julio appears barefoot, dressed in white, aglow, otherworldly.

AURA

There you are!

(Holds up the orchid)

Did you send this?

JULIO

Yes, I did.

AURA

Like the ones Mami grew. How I've missed you!

JULIO

Perdóname. I've been busy.

AURA

(Playful)

So even the dead are busy these days? I've brought you caramelos--your favorite.

Aura reaches into her apron pocket and offers him some.

JULIO

Gracias.

AURA

Have you stayed the same age Julio? Or have you gotten old like me? Tell me. Are angels ageless?

Aura unwraps a caramel, pops it into her mouth.

JULIO

Shhhhh, hermana. I haven't come for games.

AURA

What is it then?

JULIO

He's among us.

AURA

Who?

JULIO

El asesino.

AURA

The captain?

JULIO

Yes, except he's a colonel now. You served him pork chops at breakfast.

The horror dawns on Aura.

JULIO

Do you remember him now?

LIGHTS DIM. CUE MUSIC: indigenous Guatemalan flute. Julio and Aura recount their memories in a trance-like monotone. They stand side-by-side.

JULIO

The day the soldiers came, it hadn't rained in a month.

AURA

Our cornfield was modest, barely enough to feed our family.

JULIO

The captain indicated with a jut of his chin that his soldiers burn down our field.

AURA

The corn took to the fire eagerly, crackling and popping, offering itself to heaven.

JULIO

I watched it burn until I couldn't stand it anymore.

AURA

(Turns to Julio)

Before I could stop you, you rushed into the field and tried to put out the flames with a blanket.

JULIO

The soldiers pointed at me and laughed.

AURA

Only the captain wasn't amused.

Aura and Julio hold hands.

JULIO

He ordered his men to surround the plot.

AURA

How you danced, trying to outrun the fire.

JULIO

But the soldiers refused to let me escape.

AURA

(With growing emotion)

You leaped into the air like you were taking wing. Your ribs etched in flames. Your arms straining heavenward. Your neck extended like a hissing goose. I prayed that you'd fly, join the black-throated jay in the ceiba tree. Instead you fell to the ground. Your skin charred and smoking. Dying miserably in what was left of our corn.

Music FADES. LIGHTS gradually brighten. Transition back to the present, to the rooftop. SOUNDS of capital.

JULIO

There's a place in the universe where memories are preserved, where nothing is forgotten. You must send him to me, hermana.

AURA

Me? How?

JULIO

Tú sabes como.

AURA

I don't do that anymore.

JULIO

Isn't that why you joined the guerrillas in the first place? To hunt that bastard down?

AURA

I can't let rage overtake me again, Julio. I need to forget.

JULIO

It's impossible to forget.

AURA

The past is the past.

JULIO

It lives inside us still. Every minute of it.

AURA

I've saved almost a thousand dollars--U.S. By this time next year, I'll have enough to go to El Norte, to start over. Away from this--forgive me--this land of ghosts.

JULIO

And forget me? Forget all we've suffered?

AURA

No, never.

JULIO

Mamá grew orchids in the little patch of sand behind our house. Kept us alive selling her orchids at the market even when the drought killed our corn. Do we betray her sacrifice? Her hopes?

AURA

You don't understand.

JULIO

I'm dead. I understand too well.

AURA

Violence may feel like moving forward. But with every step it consumes you.

JULIO

Doing nothing consumes you worse. You can't let that monster get away!

AURA

Killing one man or fifty won't bring you back, or Mamá--or any of our dead. What will it change?

JULIO

Maybe nothing. But you do it because it's right. No matter how hopeless ... You can't escape your destiny.

AURA

My destiny is elsewhere.

JULIO

(Fading)

Don't betray me, hermana ... And hey, next time bring me an orange soda, okay?

SCENE 4.

SHIFT TO hotel ballroom, afternoon. SOUND of vigorous applause. Colonel Martín Abel is at a podium, mid-speech, waiting for applause to subside.

COLONEL

We are twenty-two nations strong at this hemispheric military conference--our common history forged from passion, glory, and a commitment to order. Here at the Hotel Miraflores, in our fine colonial capital, the fate of the Americas is decided. Together with the support of the United States, we're responsible for stopping the spread of Communism in Latin America. For containing the epidemic of liberalism contaminating our societies.

(Pauses for more applause)

A nation without a strong military is a nation plagued by chaos and lawlessness. In times like these, we must work together. Reaffirm our mission. And above all, we must remember that we're NOT battling mothers, sisters, or sons but enemies, guerrillas, comunistas.

More prolonged applause.

COLONEL

(Getting worked up)

It's kill or be killed with those bastards. Don't you think they dream of murdering us every single day? We must remain vigilant. Maintain the clarity of crosshairs between our eyes. That's what distinguishes us from ordinary men. Fellow officers, I ask you: What is our fundamental task? To suck out the doubting spaces in the brain! Yes, to accomplish what we know is right! No matter the cost!

Applause morphs into SOUND of clanking barbells.

SCENE 5.

SHIFT TO hotel gym, late afternoon. Suki ENTERS wearing a leopard print unitard; looks around, annoyed.

SUKI

Look at this gym. It's pathetic. No Stair Master. No rowing machine?

Suki sets up a couple of weights then slips on her headphones. CUE MUSIC: Suki flips through I-pod songs before settling on a lively Latin pop tune circa 2003. She warms up with biceps curls. The Colonel ENTERS in swim trunks, sunglasses, towel. He can't be heard over the loud music.

COLONEL

(Mouthing words)

Do you know the way to the pool?

Suki ignores him.

COLONEL

EXCUSE ME, BUT--

Suki puts down barbells and slips off her headphones. Music STOPS.

COLONEL

--I'M LOOKING FOR THE POOL!

Suki stares at him and points.

COLONEL

(At his most charming)

Ah, the infamous Suki Palacios! In all her splendor. So you've come to exhibit yourself here as well?

The Colonel bows. Suki pulls a cigar from her unitard and lights it. He whiffs the air.

COLONEL

Do I detect the scent of a Cohiba?

Suki blows smoke with a sultry tilt of her head.

COLONEL

It's the one thing those damn Cubans are still good at.

SUKI

Whatever.

COLONEL

Que será será, eh? I'm intrigued by your--

SUKI

I'm busy.

COLONEL

Rumor has it that you're a fine tango dancer. I hope you'll squeeze me onto your dance card while you're in town?

A hint of a smile from Suki.

SUKI

You're well-informed.

COLONEL

My specialty, corazón, is timing. You seem to know a lot about that yourself.

SUKI

Timing is everything in my line of work.

COLONEL

Already we have much in common.

CUE MUSIC: A scorching tango.

COLONEL

May I ?

The Colonel offers his hand. Together they do a brief, stunning tango that ends with a dramatic dip.

COLONEL

Perhaps you mistake me for one of your bulls?

Suki disentangles herself.

SUKI

What makes you think you can compete with my bulls?

COLONEL

Everyone knows you're a slayer of men as well as bulls.

(Shields heart in mock fear)

And here I am, unprotected.

Suki faces him, bullfighting ready.

COLONEL

(Breathing hard)

We kill what we can't resist, eh?

SUKI

I can see you're bristling for death.

COLONEL

Sí, amor. I'm always bristling for death.

Suki holds up an imaginary cape, unsmiling. Hypnotized, the Colonel paws the ground, poised to charge. Surging SOUNDS of bullring.

SCENE 6.

CUE MUSIC: Mystical theme song to Pajarita's TV show with "live," enthusiastic audience.

TV ANNOUNCER VOICE

And now, who you've all been waiting for ... the one, the only, the extravagantly mystical ... PAJARITA!!!

LIGHTS UP on cross-dressing Pajarita in outlandish costume and turban. She circles in place, arms outstretched.

PAJARITA

Ay, ay, ay, ay! Bienvenidos a todos! It's time for another peek at my crystal ball. Are you ready?!

SOUND of audience cheers. Pajarita sits before her crystal ball, examining it intently.

PAJARITA

My crystal ball is hazy today but I see clouds brewing on the horizon. Is it a hurricane, or the tempest of dirty politics? Whoever wears a hint of lavender mañana will be protected from the wickedness that looms over our country like a rain cloud ... And don't forget: Thursday is the most auspicious day of the year for eating ...

(Dramatically holds up an acorn squash)  
CALABAZAS! So devour them morning, noon, and night--y buen provecho!

(Peers closer into crystal ball, gasps)  
Ah, but what's this? Queridos, por favor, do not--I repeat, do NOT--wait another day to unburden your feelings to a secret love. The clocks may be chiming off-schedule but be sure YOU know the time ... That's all for now, my lovelies!

SOUND of ticking clock continues into next scene.

SCENE 7.

SHIFT TO garden restaurant, closing time. Aura wipes down a table then removes and folds her apron. Miguel straightens up behind the bar.

AURA  
These double shifts are killing me.

MIGUEL  
Waiting hand and foot on those damn goons.

AURA  
Shhh. These walls have ears.

MIGUEL  
I'm sick of watching my every word, my every move.

AURA  
Don't be foolish, Miguel.

MIGUEL  
What are your plans tonight?

AURA  
You mean besides sleeping? Alone?

MIGUEL  
Affirmative.

AURA  
Nothing whatsoever.

MIGUEL

I suspect you have more going on in your life than you let on. Who sent you that orchid?

AURA

None of your business.

MIGUEL

(Faux melodramatic)

My love for you festers like an incurable illness!

AURA

Oh, please.

MIGUEL

Seriously, Aura. Is it heartbreak? Are you heartbroken?

AURA

Who in this country isn't heartbroken?

MIGUEL

You're starting to sound like my parrot.

AURA

(Laughs)

He's quite the troubadour. When I was a girl, I had a crush on the real Che.

MIGUEL

That's tough competition.

A beat.

AURA

The truth is ... everyone I love gets killed.

MIGUEL

Who?

AURA

My brother, for one.

MIGUEL

The bastards!

Aura gets teary-eyed. Miguel takes her hand.

MIGUEL

I'm so sorry, Aura.

(Quietly sympathetic)

Our enemies have tried to destroy us. Destroy our possibilities for a normal life. But we can't forget that our world is older and stronger than theirs.

AURA

Older maybe but not stronger.

MIGUEL

You're still here. And I see you, Aura. Te veo. From the moment you first walked into the hotel restaurant, I saw you--and was bewitched.

AURA

Ay, such a Romeo--

MIGUEL

I swear it. I thought: this tiny, fierce, BEAUTIFUL woman has secrets. All I want is to be worthy of her trust--and her love.

AURA

But you know nothing about me.

MIGUEL

I know that some wounds never heal.

Miguel and Aura hold their gaze for a moment.

PARROT'S VOICE

"There are points of silence circling the heart." Aaaawk!

They laugh.

AURA

That doesn't sound like Darío.

MIGUEL

It's Juarróz. We're expanding our repertoire.

AURA

About time.

MIGUEL

Dinner then?

AURA

I'll think about it. Buenas noches, Miguel.

Aura EXITS.

THURSDAY

SCENE 8.

SHIFT TO garden restaurant, morning. The place is empty. Gertrudis ENTERS and looks around. A lavender handkerchief peeps from her suit pocket.

GERTRUDIS

Is anybody here yet? Oh, for Christ's sake.

Gertrudis checks her watch and sits at "her" table. Aura ENTERS hurriedly, tying on a lavender apron. She hands Gertrudis the morning paper.

AURA

Disculpe, Doctora. We're a bit delayed in the kitchen. Your usual?

GERTRUDIS

Yes--and I'm in a hurry.

AURA

Of course, Doctora. Can we tempt you with some fresh tamales de calabazas?

GERTRUDIS

Gracias, Aura, but no.

Gertrudis opens the newspaper and reads with growing fury. She thwacks it down, picks up her cellphone, dials.

GERTRUDIS

Elva, have you seen the front page of La Prensa Libre?! ... Call Senator Jimenez and tell him I'll be at his office in exactly thirty minutes ... Stop nattering on. Now get going!

Gertrudis hangs up. Aura returns with coffee and fruit.

AURA

Here you go, Doctora. My apologies for the delay.

As Aura EXITS, Ricardo ENTERS, beelines to Gertrudis's table and sits down, uninvited. She proceeds with her breakfast.

RICARDO

I need to talk to you.

GERTRUDIS

I'm very busy.

RICARDO

Just three minutes of your time.

Gertrudis checks her watch then looks at him with impatience.

RICARDO

I want to tell you more about myself, about why I need to have Baby Isabel.

GERTRUDIS

I read your application in full, Señor Morán.

RICARDO

Twenty-three years ago I fled Cuba and left my newborn daughter behind. I haven't seen her since.

GERTRUDIS

That was your choice.

RICARDO

No, it wasn't. I was in prison--a political prisoner--and Castro's henchmen put me on a boat during the Mariel exodus. It was either go, or rot away in that cell for the rest of my life. So, in fact, I had no choice!

Aura ENTERS and hands Ricardo a menu.

AURA

We have a tamales de calabazas special today--

GERTRUDIS

I'm not interested in the vicissitudes of your political life, Señor Morán.

RICARDO

But I'm the one who wants the baby! My wife couldn't care less about having a child!

GERTRUDIS

That's none of my concern.

RICARDO

You don't understand--

GERTRUDIS

What you need to understand, Señor Morán, is that I will not release the child to you without the express approval of your wife. Your soon-to-be EX-wife.

Ricardo is caught off-guard.

RICARDO

But we're working things out.

GERTRUDIS

Let me be frank with you. Divorce makes it impossible for me to finalize your adoption. International adoptions have become rather ... politically delicate, of late.

RICARDO

I swear to you, it's just a rough patch. All married couples--

GERTRUDIS

I spoke to your wife an hour ago. Your divorce will be final in twenty-three days.

RICARDO

Not if I can help it!

GERTRUDIS

And then there's the issue of the unpaid balance. Now seeing as your wife is--WAS--the primary breadwinner, I don't see how we can move forward. I can't very well hand over Baby Isabel to a penniless pauper.

RICARDO

I am a poet, Madam.

GERTRUDIS

Poetry doesn't pay the bills, Señor Morán. Do you have any idea how expensive it is for me to prepare a baby for the international adoption market?

RICARDO

I don't want//to know.

GERTRUDIS

Medical expenses. The rising fees of my finicky caretakers. Baby formula, clothes, disposable diapers--nobody wants to wash cloth ones anymore. Why, it's endless!

RICARDO

I promise I'll--

GERTRUDIS

You have forfeited your right to this child, Señor Morán.

RICARDO

But that's not fair!

GERTRUDIS

What does fairness have to do with it?

RICARDO

Surely you can make an exception? I've flown all the way here to pick up my daughter. Doesn't that show good faith?

GERTRUDIS

Good faith doesn't entitle you to this child, Señor Morán ... But another \$10,000 might.

RICARDO

Por favor. She looks just like my own Barbarita in the photos. If only I could see Isabelita, hold her for a few moments. You'll see what a good father I'll be!

GERTRUDIS

You know very well that's against the rules.

RICARDO

What rules?

GERTRUDIS

Clause 19, paragraph 4.

Aura returns.

RICARDO

But--

GERTRUDIS

The deal is off. Do be in touch again should your circumstances change. If you'll excuse me, I'm very busy.

Gertrudis EXITS. A devastated Ricardo remains behind.

SCENE 9.

SHIFT TO Room 719, midday. Suki wears a long silk robe. She tests the hilt of her sword and practices a few of her signature bullfighting moves.

SUKI

Before the final thrust of the sword come preludes of ritual and fear. The whip of my red muleta. The stink of the bristling bull as it passes. My pivoting hips as I wind the beast around me, like an extravagant sash. The reverse slide across the dusty ring, fluttering my cape like butterfly wings. All the while I keep a watchful eye on my bull. On the thick hump of its beckoning muscle which, if pierced properly, will lead me straight to its heart. As I await the last charge, in the suerte de recibir--

(Lifts sword high to strike)

I approach the crucial moment of our battle, the moment that separates life from death, oblivion from immortality. In this precise moment, my mouth floods with a mineral saltiness, as if some essential earthly cycle is fulfilled--

SOUND of knocking. A handsome bellhop ENTERS with a calabaza and a lavender envelope on a silver tray. Suki puts down her sword, tears open the envelope, glances at the card, tosses it aside.

SUKI

Men are so unimaginative.

BELLHOP

Did you know that calabazas bring good luck today? I could have the kitchen prepare some for you. A soup perhaps?

Suki shakes her head then slowly looks the Bellhop up and down.

SUKI

I like simple men, grateful and discreet.

BELLHOP

Understood, Señorita. Will there be anything else?

SUKI

Take off your shoes.

BELLHOP

I beg your pardon?

SUKI

Your socks, too. Do it now.

The Bellhop is embarrassed but complies. His socks are a pale lavender.

BELLHOP

My name's Manolo--

SUKI

I don't need to know your name.

Suki loosens her silk robe, gives the Bellhop a glimpse of her breasts. He looks stricken.

BELLHOP

(Quavering)

M-m-may I lay my head there?

SUKI

Do you really need to ask?

The Bellhop removes a tiny gold cross from around his neck, kisses it, slips it into his back pocket. Very carefully, he rests his head against Suki's chest.

SUKI

(Indicates sword)

Swords like mine have shaped the world.

BELLHOP

Y-y-yes, of course.

SUKI

If you breathe a word of this to anyone, I'll skewer you.

The Bellhop looks Suki in the eye then without warning, he licks her throat.

BLACKOUT.

SCENE 10.

SHIFT TO city street. SOUNDS of vendors, honking cars, chattering birds. A miserable Ricardo is taking a walk, a little lost and talking to himself.

RICARDO

(Adapts opening of famous Darío poem)

“The swan composed of snow floats in shadow, amber beak translucent in the last light ... And then on ripples of the clear blue lake, when the crimson dawn is over and done, the swan spreads her wings and lets her neck make an arch, silver and burnished by the sun.”

(Sighs)

Ay, all the years I’ve dreamt of holding my own baby in my arms. My own little swan. Isabel, Isabelita, I haven’t given up on you yet!

A nervous Young Thug brushes by Ricardo then pushes him up against a wall, a knife to his ribs.

YOUNG THUG

Your wallet, cerote.

RICARDO

Qué carajo?

Young Thug’s hand shakes badly.

RICARDO

Is this your first time? Because I’ve been mugged in New York and I can tell that//you--

YOUNG THUG

Tu pisto. Or it’ll be your LAST--

RICARDO

Give me a minute. I’m trying to adopt a baby girl and frankly, I don’t have a lot of money. My ex-wife has a lot of money but I don’t. I’m from Cuba and was forced to leave on the Mariel boat lift. Have you heard of it? A harrowing journey, believe me. Some psycho tried to push me overboard in the middle of a storm. So all I want now is to pick up little Isabel and take her home ... Do you know that what you’re doing is seriously bad karma?

YOUNG THUG

Are you fucking kidding me?!

The thug pushes the tip of his knife into Ricardo's ribs.

RICARDO

(Gasps)

It's not so easy to kill a man. It took two men and an ax to murder my father.

YOUNG THUG

(Impressed)

Really? No jodas.

RICARDO

Are you Catholic?

YOUNG THUG

My brother's a priest.

RICARDO

I don't believe you.

YOUNG THUG

It's true. He says the eight o'clock mass at St. Sebastian's.

RICARDO

Wouldn't he disapprove of what you're doing?

YOUNG THUG

Fuck you.

Young Thug pushes the knife in another half-inch.

RICARDO

(Hurting)

Okay, okay.

YOUNG THUG

One more word, pendejo//and I'll--

RICARDO

Go!

Ricardo give him the wallet and Young Thug runs off.  
SOUNDS of city streets, a siren in the distance. Ricardo  
examines his ribs under his jacket.

RICARDO

(Growing weak, dizzy)  
Oh my God ... I'm dying!

Ricardo EXITS, staggering.

SCENE 11.

SHIFT TO modest rental room in capital, evening.  
SOUND of Bruce Lee rerun on TV. Aura is alone in  
shorts and T-shirt, practicing kung fu.

AURA

I love Bruce Lee and all his movies, especially "Fist of Fury" and "Enter the Dragon."  
The forces of evil didn't stand a chance against him.

(Warms up with a few kung fu moves)  
Fighting, Lee said once, isn't something you seek but something that seeks you. Often  
when I'm confused, I ask myself: What would Bruce Lee do?

(Performs more complex sequence)  
During the civil war, I joined the guerrillas. Lived in the jungle for months. In those days,  
I carried a hunter's knife and a Russian pistol. Laid booby traps against scum like the  
Colonel. Fired machine guns. Threw grenades at passing army trucks. Learned to see in  
the dark as well as any jaguar.

(Her routine builds in intensity)  
The first time I killed a man, it was easier than I thought. His blood didn't seem real to  
me, nor did the look of disbelief on his face. Only his lips, ill-defined as ground meat,  
reminded me of what he'd done. Raped eleven girls in as many days. No, that soldier  
wasn't difficult to kill. But it got harder.

(Stops, short-winded)  
Ten years have passed since the end of the war. And what am I reduced to now? Rubbing  
spit on the Colonel's pork chops? Useless. Bruce Lee wouldn't be so ambivalent. He'd  
turn my serving tray into a deadly discus and dispatch his enemies on the spot.

(Acts out fantasy with sound effects)

But what good would it do? One butcher dead for countless poor souls. And my future? What would be left of it then? Nada.

SOUND of Bruce Lee's voice from TV.

BRUCE LEE'S VOICE

"This time you're eating paper. The next time it's gonna be glass."

SCENE 12.

SHIFT TO hotel lounge, night. CUE MUSIC: disco. The Colonel and Ricardo sit together getting drunk.

RICARDO

And so this kid, jittery as hell, sticks his rusty knife into my ribs and runs off with my wallet. I got eight stitches at the hospital. At least I still have my passport and a credit card. I always put things in different pockets, for safety.

(Gingerly displays his ribs)

Ño, I'll probably die of tetanus!

COLONEL

You gotta be careful, amigo. There's a war going on.

RICARDO

I thought the civil war was over.

COLONEL

It's never over. The enemy is everywhere. Like cockroaches. Like rats. Even right here in this hotel. It's my mission to root them out.

RICARDO

How can you tell who's who?

COLONEL

I've got my ways. But in war, amigo--and this is war, believe me--the sides are always sharply defined.

A beat.

RICARDO

My father was a policeman before the Revolution. He was hacked to death when Castro came to power.

COLONEL

Fucking Communists. They murdered my father, too.

Ricardo regards him with interest.

COLONEL

He was the mayor of Barillas, a town north of here. Two guerrillas shot him as he was leaving his office for lunch. It was a Friday and Mamá had cooked his favorite dish: turkey stew. The bastards who killed him sped away on a goddam moped.

RICARDO

Did you ever catch them?

COLONEL

Not them. But vermin like them. I've dedicated my life to hunting them down.

(Loosens his collar)

See this birthmark? It's identical to the one my father had. Revenge, hombre, is my sharpest weapon.

RICARDO

But words live longer than violence.

COLONEL

Bullshit. DEATH always has the last word.

The two drink in silence. Suki ENTERS in a shimmering jumpsuit, orders an absinthe, sways to the beat.

COLONEL

Por tu madre. A woman like that is a Cleopatra, a queen. I imagine she'd be a tiger in bed.

RICARDO

She'd sooner kill you than fuck you.

COLONEL

I welcome a challenge.

RICARDO

Does she even like men?

COLONEL

What she likes is playing hard to get. Watch this.

The Colonel walks over to Suki and invites her to dance. She declines but whispers something in his ear that makes him laugh. She EXITS. The Colonel returns to Ricardo.

RICARDO

What did she say?

COLONEL

(Proud)

She got my calabaza.

RICARDO

Qué? Is that a local courtship ritual?

COLONEL

Don't you watch Pajarita?

RICARDO

Everyone is fixated by her.

COLONEL

With good reason. That fortune teller's crystal ball never lies.

The Colonel pushes up his sleeve, shows Ricardo the discreet lavender ribbon on his wrist.

COLONEL

Superstitions, hombre. Better than instincts.

The two resume drinking.

RICARDO

I'm supposed to be adopting a child here. But my wife abandoned me.

COLONEL

My wife took our boys to Miami--and never came back.

RICARDO

At least you have kids.

COLONEL

They're forgetting me already.

RICARDO

I have a grown daughter in Cuba. Her name's Barbarita. She doesn't even know me.

COLONEL

Fuck 'em all.

They continue drinking.

RICARDO

My lawyer Gertrudis Stüber says--

COLONEL

Stüber? Piece of work, that one.

RICARDO

You know her?

COLONEL

Everyone knows her. Makes a fortune selling babies to Yankee religious fanatics. You a Christian?

RICARDO

Agnostic.

COLONEL

(Lowers voice)

Last spring some crazy-ass clients of hers killed a baby girl right here in the hotel.

RICARDO

Que carajo?

COLONEL

It was covered up. Stüber's a one-woman electrical plant. Connected everywhere.

RICARDO

What happened?

COLONEL

The way everything happens around here. One phone call leads to another phone call that puts a stop to the investigation. The order came down from the very top of the food chain.

RICARDO

El presidente?

The Colonel shrugs.

RICARDO

Who knows about this?

COLONEL

Well, it got as far as me.

(Suddenly suspicious)

Why are you asking, anyway?

RICARDO

Stüber's been very ... inflexible with my situation.

COLONEL

She screws everyone over. Looks down on anyone who isn't white.

RICARDO

Mierda.

COLONEL

She litigated my divorce--for my ex-wife. Cleaned me out. Créame, Stüber has more enemies than a mound of termites ... You wanna know more? Get ahold of Elva Flores. Her personal assistant. Elva knows every inch of that bitch's business.

RICARDO

I know her. She helped with our adoption.

COLONEL

Elva owes me a favor. I'll give her a call tonight. You follow-up with her in the morning.

RICARDO

Mil gracias. De veras.

A plan is dawning on Ricardo. The Colonel holds up his glass in a toast.

COLONEL

From one anti-Communist to another!

COLONEL/RICARDO

Salud!

They belt back their drinks.

COLONEL  
What do you do, anyway?

RICARDO  
I'm a poet.

COLONEL  
Fuck. Never trust a poet.

RICARDO  
That's unfair.

The Colonel waves away the remark. He drinks some more, looks over to where Suki departed.

COLONEL

(Muses)  
If only the Lady Matador had stayed ...

RICARDO

(Distracted)  
She's all danger, that one.

COLONEL  
Danger? Gives me a hard on every time.

RICARDO  
I'm turning in, Jefe. Thanks for the drinks.

Ricardo EXITS. The Colonel holds up his glass for a refill.

COLONEL  
Nothing but lightweights around here.

He picks up his phone, starts punching numbers.

COLONEL  
Oye, Elva?

BLACKOUT.

FRIDAY

SCENE 13.

CUE MUSIC: Theme song to Pajarita's TV show.

TV ANNOUNCER VOICE

And now, who you've all been waiting for ... the one, the only, the extravagantly mystical ... PAJARITA!!!

LIGHTS UP as Pajarita ENTERS to lively applause.

PAJARITA

Ay, ay, ay, ay! Bienvenidos a todos! I have a VERY exciting guest for you this morning. Sí, the most daring, bravest, sexiest lady matador in the Americas ... SUKI PALACIOS! And guess what, my lovelies?! She's agreed to have me tell her fortune--LIVE--in front of you, our studio audience, and our viewers everywhere! Are you ready?!

CUE MUSIC: vibrant flamenco. Suki ENTERS and sits next to Pajarita. More applause.

PAJARITA

We're so pleased to have you with us today, Suki. And how brave of you to let me read your fortune like this! Aren't you afraid of what the future may have in store?

SUKI

Gracias, Pajarita. I'm a big fan of your show. And I say: Bring it on.

PAJARITA

First, let's review a few of the most delicious rumors about you, hmmm?

Suki nods, bemused.

PAJARITA

SO ... Is it true that you drink egg yolks and beef's blood shakes for breakfast? That you sniff whale pheromones to dominate the bulls? That your father was a tango dancer who taught you everything you know?

SUKI

(Laughing)

Yes, it's all true. Every word. Especially about the whale pheromones.

PAJARITA

Then you dare to do what the rest of us only dream about?

SUKI

I didn't know you harbored ambitions of entering the ring yourself?

PAJARITA

Ay no, querida! Facing an angry mass of muscle intent on my destruction is not my idea of fun!

SUKI

Well, what else is there to do around here on a Sunday afternoon?

Audience laughter.

PAJARITA

I understand your mother was once a student at your father's tango studio in Los Angeles?

SUKI

Yes, she traveled all the way from Yokohama to study with him.

PAJARITA

And that she didn't survive childbirth? That you're her only child?

SUKI

That's not up for discussion.

PAJARITA

Claro, querida. I understand perfectly. Just one more question before we turn to my crystal ball.

(Dramatic pause)

What does it take to break all the rules, like you do?

SUKI

The promise of death.

PAJARITA

Qué cosa?

SUKI

Each time I step into the ring, the bull promises me death. In this way, we make each other whole.

PAJARITA

That's soooo philosophical!

Audience ooohs and aaahs.

PAJARITA

Then nothing I foretell will frighten you?

SUKI

Only if you predict I'll live forever.

PAJARITA

(To Audience)

Don't you just love her audacity?

Audience applauds.

PAJARITA

Now it's time to look into my crystal ball and see what awaits you, querida Suki!

(Gazes into crystal ball)

Ooooh, what do we have here? Hmm. It's a bit hazy. But ... WAIT. What's this? I see a baby in your arms!

SUKI

A baby?! No way.

PAJARITA

Ah, yes! It's very clear to me now. You're holding your baby girl ... and ... and ... she's wearing a little pink matador's outfit! Que adorable es!!

Audience is loving this.

SUKI

That can't be true!

Suki peers into the crystal ball then looks up, aghast.

SCENE 14.

SHIFT TO garden restaurant, afternoon. The Colonel watches as Aura serves him lunch and a pot of coffee.

AURA

There you go, sir. A delicious caldo de res.

COLONEL

I didn't order this.

AURA

(Checks her notepad)

I have you down for a beef stew?

COLONEL

I said I didn't order this.

AURA

My apologies, sir.

COLONEL

Take it away.

AURA

Certainly. May I pour your coffee?

COLONEL

Do I look like an invalid?

The Colonel flexes his pectorals.

COLONEL

What's your name?

Aura points to her name tag.

COLONEL

I want to hear you say it.

AURA

Say what, sir?

COLONEL

This isn't a game where I ask you a question and you answer me with a question. Tell me your goddam name.

AURA

Aura Estrada, sir.

COLONEL

Where are you from, Aura Estrada? You look like a country girl.

AURA

San Marcos province.

COLONEL

Where exactly?

AURA

A village you've never heard of.

COLONEL

Try me.

AURA

San Vicente de la Luz. Can I get you something else? We have a nice grilled tilapia with a side of calabazas purée.

COLONEL

What's the rush, preciosa? Now, how often do your customers ask you that?

AURA

Never, sir. If you'll excuse me--

COLONEL

(Fixates on her)

What did you do during the war, Aura?

AURA

I don't know what you mean, sir.

COLONEL

Where did your sympathies lie?

AURA

I was just working, sir. Same as everyone.

(Meets his gaze)

Farming, factory work, whatever I could find. I was lucky to get this job.

COLONEL

Tell me, Aura. Is there a patron saint of waitresses?

AURA

Not that I know of, sir.

The Colonel stares at her, memorizing her face.

COLONEL

We should get to know each other better ... compañera. Buenas tardes.

The Colonel stands and EXITS. Aura freezes to the spot. Gertrudis ENTERS, cellphone to her ear. She sits at “her” table and motions for Aura to bring her coffee.

GERTRUDIS

Call the President’s secretary immediately. I want to see him this afternoon ... What the hell’s the matter with you, anyway?! Just do as your told. Hang on a minute.

Aura serves her coffee

GERTRUDIS

(Switches lines)

Gertrudis Stüber & Associates ... I’ll give you a statement ... Listen up: This anti-humanitarian bill will cause immeasurable damage to the many poor children whose lives depend on international adoptions. Such adoptions as I’ve facilitated guarantee real futures for the most vulnerable of our society: opportunities for education, optimal health, financial security, and, ultimately, productive lives ... Good. You recorded that? ... What do you mean ‘inventory?’ Babies are not inventory! ... No, I have nothing further to say.

(Returns to earlier call. )

Elva, are you still there? ... What did the President’s office say? ... Damn it, what are you waiting for?!

Ricardo ENTERS and walks toward her.

GERTRUDIS

I expect to hear good news from you within the hour.

Gertrudis hangs up. Ricardo sits across from her.

GERTRUDIS

You again.

Aura ENTERS with a menu for Ricardo.

RICARDO

(To Aura with a wink)

I'll have a double espresso.

GERTRUDIS

Nothing for him, Aura. Thank you.

An awkward moment. Aura EXITS.

GERTRUDIS

I believe I've made it clear, Señor Morán, that I'm not interested in the lamentable details of your life.

(Opens newspaper and reads)

I'm very busy today.

RICARDO

Certainly. What with you being newly crowned the Black Market Baby Queen. The Number One exporter of your country's most vulnerable children. Felicidades.

GERTRUDIS

(Icily)

I have no time--

RICARDO

Then let me get to the point of what isn't mentioned yet: You've been selling babies to religious zealots in the U.S. for six and a-half years. Contracting indigenous women to breed babies for them. Using their wombs as factories for your profit. In other words, baby trafficking.

GERTRUDIS

Utter nonsense.

RICARDO

I know all about that Pentecostal couple who drowned a baby girl right here at the Hotel Miraflor. Room 602, to be specific, on May 7th of this year. Dan and Marjorie Wood claimed they were "baptizing" little Rachel. You vouched for them, arranged their safe passage out of the country. No charges were pressed.

GERTRUDIS

Nothing but vicious rumors.

RICARDO

An innocent baby. Killed.

GERTRUDIS

Who fed you these lies?

RICARDO

I'm not at liberty to say.

GERTRUDIS

I'm saving my country's poor, unwanted children from destitution. Giving them a chance for a more promising future.

RICARDO

Your President fully supports the new law terminating international adoptions. A law that was passed to stop unscrupulous lawyers like you. Effective immediately, federal judges are under injunctions to halt all adoption proceedings ... It's a done deal.

GERTRUDIS

Nothing is ever a done deal here

RICARDO

Imagine for a moment the public reaction when it comes to light that you covered up the death of that child to protect your business interests. The fact that you're harboring yet another "black market" infant--my child, it so happens--is in direct defiance of the new law.

Gertrudis's face tightens.

GERTRUDIS

You know nothing about how this country works, Señor Morán.

RICARDO

I know your country has produced more than its share of poets.

GERTRUDIS

Then you must also know that every last one of them came to an unfortunate end.

RICARDO

Touché, Madam. But you still need to get rid of Baby Isabel. No one will risk adopting her now. Not even from your fundamentalist pipeline. I'll take her off your hands. Give her a good home. Voilà. Problem gone. Otherwise? I'll go public with the information about that baby's death and subsequent cover-up ...

Did you know, Madam Stüber, that many of your country's newspapermen are also poets? Poetry does have its advantages. In the real world. The eyes of the world are watching ...

A long beat.

GERTRUDIS

Meet me in the cathedral tonight at ten o'clock sharp. Behind the confessional.

Gertrudis EXITS. A triumphant Ricardo breaks out with a mini mambo and EXITS. Aura ENTERS, wipes off their table. Then Miguel ENTERS in a fresh shirt and apron.

MIGUEL

You're a vision of loveliness this afternoon!

AURA

Shhhh.

MIGUEL

Qué pasó?

AURA

The Colonel was asking me a lot of questions at lunch.

MIGUEL

Shit. What did he want?

AURA

To know what I was doing during the war. Por Dios, I can't wait to leave this place.

MIGUEL

Qué? You're quitting?!

AURA

This country is what I'm quitting.

MIGUEL

You can't leave!

AURA

Can you cover for me again?

MIGUEL

More laundry? Why don't you just tell me what's going on?

A beat.

AURA

I'm tired of losing, Miguel. The criminals win no matter what.

MIGUEL

It's the fighting that matters.

AURA

You sound like my brother.

The Colonel comes into view, sidles up to the bar.

COLONEL

Not interrupting anything, am I?

AURA

I was just leaving.

Aura EXITS with a quick glance at Miguel.

PARROT'S VOICE

"The treacheries of ambition never cease!" Aaaawk!

MIGUEL

I swear that parrot's reading poetry behind my back. Your usual, Colonel?

The Colonel fixes on Che as Miguel prepares his drink.

COLONEL

I used to go bird hunting with my father when I was a boy.

Che clucks nervously.

MIGUEL

(Setting down drink)

Here you go. Double Dewars straight up.

COLONEL

You the one who named this bird Che?

MIGUEL

Nah, I won him at poker. It's the only name he answers to.

COLONEL

Who'd you win him from?

MIGUEL

I can't recall.

COLONEL

I see. Do you read poetry?

MIGUEL

Poetry?

COLONEL

You heard me.

MIGUEL

Only as a schoolboy.

A beat.

COLONEL

Who taught this comemierda bird to speak?

Squawk of indignation from Che.

MIGUEL

I wouldn't know, sir.

COLONEL

You're not a fan of Darío then?

PARROT'S VOICE

(Proudly)

"If one's country is small, it grows bigger in dreams."

The Colonel stares at Miguel then belts back his drink.

COLONEL

I'm watching you, hueco. I've got eyes everywhere in this fucking hotel.

He slams down his glass then EXITS.

SCENE 15.

SHIFT TO hotel rooftop, verging on dusk. SOUNDS of city. Aura searches the skies for a sign of her brother.

AURA

Come, hermano! I need to talk to you!

(Holds up soda can)

Look! I brought you an orange soda, like you asked.

SOUND of wind. Aura keeps looking around. Distant cathedral bells ring. She gets lost in her memories.

AURA

There was a baby girl the soldiers kicked around like a soccer ball that day, her christening gown billowing in the wind. Others killed by the captain's soldiers. The mechanic's head bashed in with the butt of a rifle. The Gutiérrez brothers shot at point-blank range. Even the mayor's horse was slaughtered and left to rot in the sun. How many pine wood coffins we built and stacked up to the skies ...

Miguel ENTERS, startling her.

AURA

You scared the hell out of me!

MIGUEL

Enjoying the view?

AURA

What did the Colonel want?

MIGUEL

To talk about poetry.

AURA

Qué?

MIGUEL

What are you doing up here, anyway?

(Looks around)

No orchids? Or laundry?

AURA

How is this your business?

MIGUEL

Because I ... care about you. At least have dinner with me. Because I can't bear the thought that you might leave and I'll never//see you again.

AURA

Okay.

MIGUEL

I swear to God I'm going to convince you to stay right here//with me!

AURA

I said okay, Miguel.

MIGUEL

Really?! Wow. Aura, if only I could--

Miguel approaches her hopefully. She turns away.

AURA

Mañana pues.

MIGUEL

Sí, mañana.

Aura EXITS. Miguel is left dreaming as dusk takes hold.

SCENE 16.

SHIFT TO cathedral interior, night. SOUND of hymn in Latin. Gertrudis ENTERS carrying Baby Isabel and a leather portfolio. She looks around, checks her watch. Ricardo ENTERS, rushes over to Gertrudis and the baby.

RICARDO

Ay, look at her! Almost identical to Barbarita at that age!

Ricardo tries to take Baby Isabel but Gertrudis pulls her away.

GERTRUDIS

Keep your voice down. She's finally asleep.

Gertrudis hands Ricardo a sheaf of papers.

GERTRUDIS

(Low, urgent)

Sign here first.

RICARDO

What for?

GERTRUDIS

Insurance. Things can change very fast around here. Now shut up and listen. No refunds are to be issued on any portion of your ex-wife's payment. My firm assumes no liability in case of accident, death, or illness once the child is in your custody. You agree to forfeit your right to seek legal redress of any kind in connection with this adoption. Is that all clear?

RICARDO

Perfectly clear.

Ricardo signs without examining the contract.

GERTRUDIS

And I'll be unreachable for the foreseeable future.

RICARDO

Okay, okay. Let me hold her!

Gertrudis hangs on to baby.

GERTRUDIS

One more thing, Señor Morán.

RICARDO

Por Dios! What else?!

GERTRUDIS

(Looks behind her)

You haven't seen me. This meeting never happened.

Ricardo nods. Gertrudis awkwardly surrenders Baby Isabel; wipes hands on a handkerchief. Ricardo embraces the baby, winces at the weight of her against his ribs.

RICARDO

(Overcome with emotion)

Cómo es posible? Ay, Isabelita, mi cielito lindo! Que hermosura! Mi niña preciosa.

Gertrudis slips on a pair of sunglasses.

GERTRUDIS

Excuse me but I have other business to attend to. I wish you ... Oh, never mind.

RICARDO

You're mine now. All mine.

Gertrudis EXITS. Ricardo tickles Baby Isabel as they EXIT. Offstage SOUND of crying baby. SPOTLIGHT on Aura as she ENTERS, lights a votive candle, kneels on a pew. She crosses herself, pulls out a rosary.

AURA

(Hands clasped)

Dios te salve, María, llena eres de gracia, el Señor es contigo. Bendita tú eres entre todas las mujeres, y bendito es el fruto de tu vientre, Jesús. Santa María, Madre de Dios, ruega por nosotros, pecadores, ahora y en la hora de nuestra muerte. Amén.

(Pauses, looks up)

Life is stronger than death, Virgencita--and yet it's death I'm facing again. I come from the land that gave birth to the corn that enabled my family to live. But nobody's left. Julio's gone. Mami, too. And so many others. I belong nowhere. Ayúdame, Virgencita. Help me find the strength to do what's right ...

SOUND of cathedral bells begin tolling, grow louder.

AURA

Por favor, Virgencita. Ease my gnawing misery. I don't want to kill anymore. Send me an omen that will point the way.

(Looks heavenward)

Why do you ignore my pleas, Virgencita? Do you even see me?!

LIGHTS BRIGHTEN as cathedral bells toll deafeningly then fade. Aura recites the coda of a Darío poem.

AURA

“A bat goes by. So does a fly. Then a hornet. A bee at dusk. Then nothing. Death has come.”

SOUND of huge explosion nearby.

BLACKOUT.

ACT 2

SATURDAY

SCENE 17.

MUSIC CUE. Theme Song to Pajarita's TV show, early morning.

TV ANNOUNCER VOICE

And now, who you've all been waiting for ... the one, the only, the extravagantly mystical ... PAJARITA!!!

LIGHTS UP on a sleepy Pajarita and her rituals. SOUND of audience applause.

PAJARITA

Ay, ay, ay, ay! What a turbulent night! I didn't get a wink of sleep, did you? Who heard that bomb go off? Gracias a Dios, nobody was killed. But it did shatter two of our cathedral's most beautiful stained glass windows!

(Big yawn)

Now queridos, let's leave violence aside and concentrate on what's important: LOOOOVE! ... Lipstick on the collar? Don't let a smudge of red ruin your day. If you suspect your lover of philandering, rouge your nipples and look the other way. Rest assured, your straying sweetheart will return by the full moon. YOU must be the cat dangling the mouse in its jaw ... And remember this: peacocks wheel their tails in the HEAT. So cultivate a tolerance for high temperatures and fan open those pretty feathers ... Today's lucky color is PINK. Pink, pink, pink! ... That's all for now, my lovelies! More prognostications soon. Prognostications. Don't you just love that word?!

Pajarita blows the audience a kiss.

SCENE 18.

SHIFT TO Room 1017, early morning. Light pours in through window. The Colonel is slumped in a chair, asleep and snoring, an empty bottle of Dewars at his side. Suki appears in the Colonel's dream as his pin-up fantasy in a short, red silk robe, stiletto heels, up-do. Scene is highly stylized.

COLONEL  
Is it you, mi amor?

SUKI  
Suki smiles.

COLONEL  
How I worship you.

SUKI  
You know I can't promise you more than--

COLONEL  
One night.

SUKI  
One night then.

COLONEL  
One unforgettable night. Have you come to slay me then?

SUKI  
Is that what you want, mi rey?

A beat.

COLONEL  
What I want, corazón, is to break you. To leave you with something to remember me by.

Suki moves closer.

COLONEL  
A hunter must be patient.

SUKI  
Very patient.

COLONEL  
To give pain. To give pleasure.

SUKI  
Sí, mi bruto.

COLONEL  
I've been waiting for you.

SUKI

I hope it's been worth the wait.

Suki slips off her robe, reveals sexy lingerie.

COLONEL

I want to love you. Kiss you until you bleed ...

Suki shakes out her red robe like a bullfighting cape.

COLONEL

Sing for me.

SUKI

I don't sing.

COLONEL

Do as I say, cabróna.

SUKI

Tweet ... tweet, tweet ...

COLONEL

Now dance for me. Like it's your very last dance.

CUE MUSIC: vibrant flamenco music.

SUKI

Our time has come.

COLONEL

I say when it's time.

Suki turns in place, slowly at first then faster and faster, until she's a whirling blur of red. The Colonel is entranced. Suki stops, stares at him. Two long beats.

SUKI

Now close your eyes, guapo. Don't open them until I say so.

The Colonel closes his eyes, anticipating her next move. Suki EXITS. The Colonel waits a bit longer. Then he sputters awake with a terrible hangover. He looks around the room. The light hurts his eyes.

COLONEL

Carajo.

SCENE 19.

SHIFT TO: outdoor rally for the Battle of the Lady Matadors. CUE MUSIC: upbeat Latin pop. SPOTLIGHT on Journalist Victoria Bell in a bright pink suit and holding a microphone.

JOURNALIST VICTORIA BELL

Good afternoon. This is Victoria Bell from Radio Bemba, live at the Lady Matadors' pre-battle rally at the Plaza Central. Tomorrow the hemisphere's fiercest women will compete for the title of Best Matadora in the Americas. Leading the line-up is the remarkable Mexican-Japanese bullfighter from Los Angeles, Suki Palacios!

SOUNDS of cheering crowd. No sign of Suki.

JOURNALIST VICTORIA BELL

What? Isn't she here yet? Has anyone seen the Lady Matador?

CROWD

SU-KI! SU-KI! SU-KI!

JOURNALIST VICTORIA BELL

Do not--I repeat do NOT--miss the Battle of the Lady Matadors tomorrow at the municipal bullring! Please stay tuned, dear listeners. In just a moment, I'll be interviewing the other female bullfighters and, hopefully, the elusive Suki. But first, a word from our sponsor ...

SHIFT to Room 719 at the Hotel Miraflor. SPOTLIGHT on a distressed, disheveled Suki wearing sweatpants and an old T-shirt. SOUND of increasingly loud ticking.

SUKI

There's a second heartbeat deep inside me, ticking like the timer on a bomb. A miniature version of me, head-to-toe in a pink traje de luces. I keep seeing her face--my face!--with her tiny montera and a wisp of silk at her throat. This kid's already haunting me. How am I supposed to fight a bull with her inside me? Fuck. This was the last thing I expected to happen. The last thing I expected to feel ...

Suki holds her mother's omamori, presses it to her belly.

SUKI

(Voice breaking)

I'm scared, Mom. More scared than I've ever been facing even the biggest, most ferocious bulls. But I also feel ... weirdly protective. Like I can't let anything hurt this little ... uh, this little me. But tomorrow ... oh, Christ ... Tomorrow is the culmination of everything I've worked for ... I need more time to think this through ... Tell me: how the hell can I be a mother if I never had a mother myself?!

Suki imagines "hearing" the interrogating VOICE of Victoria Bell along with intensifying SOUNDS of jeering crowd. Suki grows increasingly anxious.

VOICE OF VICTORIA BELL

Suki, I must ask you what the whole country is dying to know: Are you pregnant?

SUKI

Still uncertain. However, I'd like to say--

VOICE OF VICTORIA BELL

Because your baby appeared in Pajarita's crystal ball.

SUKI

Not exactly scientific proof.

VOICE OF VICTORIA BELL

Rumors are flying that you might forfeit the fight.

SUKI

(Resurgence of old self)

Fighting is what I live for.

VOICE OF VICTORIA BELL

So what you want is a glorious death?

SUKI

(Losing confidence again)

That's what everyone wants ... Isn't it?

VOICE OF VICTORIA BELL

A lot of people would settle for dying in their sleep.

Crowd gets louder.

VOICE OF VICTORIA BELL

Won't you endanger your unborn child if you fight? What if you were wounded in the ring? And the baby matadora dies ...

(Distorted echoing)

dies ... dies .... dies ... dies ...

Suki is stricken.

VOICE OF VICTORIA BELL

Wouldn't that be the reverse of what happened with you and your mother?

(Pressing hard)

Isn't it true that your own mother died giving birth to you,?

Suki is in a roar of pain and loss. She collapses to the floor, curls up in a ball.

CROWD VOICES

(Overlapping)

INTERLOPER! COWARD! DARING TO PLAY THE MAN! IMPOSTER! YOU DON'T BELONG IN THE RING!

Crowd voices fade into next scene.

SCENE 20.

SHIFT TO city bus stop, afternoon. SOUNDS of traffic, honking horns. Bus Passenger waits in a straw hat and carrying a shopping bag. A disheveled Ricardo ENTERS with Baby Isabel, his guayabera stained with blood.

RICARDO

Excuse me, do you know the best place in town to buy baby supplies?

BUS PASSENGER

Sí. Bebé Juguetón has the best selection--and prices. This bus will take you there.

RICARDO

(Nuzzles Baby Isabel)

Ooof. We're so tired. Aren't we Isabelita?

BUS PASSENGER

She's a cutie. Muy adorable.

RICARDO

Gracias, Señora.

BUS PASSENGER

She must look like her mother.

(Notices blood stain)

What happened to you?

Ricardo looks down at his stained shirt.

RICARDO

Ay, my wound is leaking again.

Bus Passenger looks at him with suspicion.

BUS PASSENGER

Qué pasó?

RICARDO

I was stabbed in an alley. I barely escaped with my life.

BUS PASSENGER

What were you doing that somebody stabbed you?

RICARDO

(Indignant)

Are you suggesting I provoked my own stabbing?

Bus Passenger stares at him.

RICARDO

I was minding my own business, if you must know.

(Softly recites Darío poetry to Baby Isabel)

“When the crimson dawn is over and done, the swan spreads her wings ...”

BUS PASSENGER

Is she yours?

RICARDO

Of course she's mine.

BUS PASSENGER

You're not from around here, are you?

RICARDO

From Cuba originally--but I'm against the Revolution one hundred percent!

BUS PASSENGER

Are you going to raise her yourself or sell her to a hospital?

RICARDO

I have no idea what you're talking about.

BUS PASSENGER

My sister says Canadian tourists bought her neighbor's boy then had his body carved up for his kidneys and heart.

RICARDO

That's unspeakable.

BUS PASSENGER

Que dices?

RICARDO

People like that deserve the same fate!

BUS PASSENGER

I read in the paper that international adoptions are illegal now.

Ricardo rushes off.

BUS PASSENGER

Damn foreigners.

SCENE 21.

SHIFT TO garden restaurant, lunch. CUE MUSIC: a lively marimba.

SPOTLIGHT on Aura racing around in her waitress uniform. A tour de force stream of consciousness with perfunctory waitress-speak.

AURA

Every year, I doubt that spring will come and then it comes--as if no horror, no history can touch the blooming jacarandas, the optimism of the sparrows. It's hideous and beautiful all at once. A forgetting and a renewal ... Yes, of course. Pinto beans on the side. Tostones, extra crisp ... I live my life between these extremes, forgetting and renewal. Not living my life really, but surviving it. Like the explosion near the cathedral last night. I'm not alone, though I often feel desperately alone ... A skirt steak with onions. Got it ... A collective amnesia has seized my country, a denial of what was and continues to be. On the worst days, a red rage flares inside me and I want to scream--

(Breaks into furious kung fu sequence)

DIE, SONS OF BITCHES! DIE!

(Resumes waitress self)

A Coca-Cola, no ice. Three chicken tamales. A sus órdenes ... Then I hear the jays chattering in the flamboyán trees and for a moment, or even an hour, my tenderness returns. Until I remember that the children aren't safe. That criminals are still free to attack us. That the best of us, the kindest, the most innocent and hard-working die first ... Sí, we have a cactus salad special today, very delicious. Extra dressing? Certainly ... Sometimes I imagine my body floating in the air like a leaf, free to fly or land, free from thought, from decision. Then I catch a glimpse of my shadow. How I drag it around like stone, like marble, a mausoleum of a shadow ... For dessert? Tres leches, a coconut flan, and guayaba cheesecake ... What keeps propelling me forward?

Aura STOPS. She stares straight ahead, breathing hard. Miguel ENTERS in a good mood. Aura removes her apron, prepares to go.

MIGUEL

We still on for dinner tonight?

AURA

I'm not sure.

MIGUEL

Please don't change your mind.

AURA

I had a close call at the cathedral last night.

MIGUEL

Oh my God. Are you okay?

AURA

I've seen worse. The blast blew out a couple of windows. Stained glass rained down everywhere.

MIGUEL

(Anxious)

Those damn Fascists! What were you doing there?

AURA

Praying.

MIGUEL

Praying?

AURA

To the Virgin Mary. I wonder if that was her answer.

MIGUEL

To what question?

Aura crosses her arms.

MIGUEL

You know the church is always in lockstep with the right. Right?

The Colonel secretly ENTERS and overhears the rest of their conversation from a hidden place.

MIGUEL

(Lowers voice)

Thousands are still fighting, Aura. Fighting for all of us, including you.

AURA

Nobody's fighting for me. And you know what, Miguel? When the leftists go far enough in one direction, they become Fascists--and vice versa. You're more alike than different.

MIGUEL

How can you say that?! We have nothing in common!

AURA

You share the same stubbornness that makes it impossible to compromise.

MIGUEL

You can't negotiate with those bastards!

AURA

This is what I'm talking about.

MIGUEL

I happen to know that the military set off that bomb! To create instability. Blame the left, as usual. Prevent real elections.

AURA

I'm sick and tired of all the violence.

MIGUEL

But they killed your brother!

A beat.

AURA

(Furious)

I didn't tell you that so you could throw it back in my face!

Aura storms off. Miguel chases after her.

MIGUEL

Aura! Aura, please stop. I didn't mean--

LIGHTS UP on the Colonel, smiling slowly. Suki ENTERS, stealing his attention. She's still quite shaky.

SUKI

Where is everyone? I could use an absinthe.

COLONEL

A pleasure to see you again, my dear Lady Matador. May I interest you in a Cohiba in the meanwhile?

The Colonel slips two cigars from his pocket, offers one to a grateful Suki.

SUKI

Even better.

The Colonel lights Suki's cigar. Her hands are trembling.

SUKI

You've come prepared, Colonel.

COLONEL

I'm always prepared, corazón. Especially for you.

The Colonel lights his own cigar.

COLONEL

I heard you on Pajarita's show.

SUKI

(Nervous again)

All nonsense.

Suki turns to go.

COLONEL

Tranquila. At least let's enjoy our cigars ... You know, I'm a big fan of one of your heroes.

SUKI

(Distracted)

Oh?

COLONEL

The great Joselito. It's a crime he died so young.

This is Suki's favorite subject.

SUKI

Only true aficionados know how dangerously he worked.

COLONEL

Not to mention the other matadors of the Spanish Golden Age.

SUKI

They revolutionized bullfighting for generations! But Joselito was the best. My grandfather saw him gored by his last bull in Toledo.

COLONEL

Your abuelo was El Azteca, no?

SUKI

Again, you're very well-informed.

COLONEL

(Smiles)

Oh, you have no idea.

The two continue smoking.

SUKI

"Tell me how you die and I'll tell you how you've lived ..."

COLONEL

Octavio Paz.

SUKI

You're full of surprises, Colonel.

COLONEL

I'm just getting started ... You have such exquisite wrists, amor. Essential to what captivates us in the ring, eh?

SUKI

Male matadors often neglect their wrists, you know.

COLONEL

Y eso?

SUKI

They already walk a fine line strutting around in their pink stockings.

The Colonel laughs. The heat is on.

SUKI

But you like to play the bull, no?

COLONEL

Trust me. I can play much more than the bull.

SUKI

What I love to do is to turn a bull so short it falls to its knees.

COLONEL

I like the sound of that.

SUKI

Without the bull the matador is nothing. There's no drama, no poetry, no--

COLONEL

Immortality?

They hold their gaze.

COLONEL

I understand that you, too, were gored once.

SUKI

Twice. Both times, a few drops of courage seeped out.

COLONEL

But you still have many gallons to spare, hmm?

They laugh. Suki's enjoying this. Another beat. The Colonel slowly kisses her hand.

COLONEL

Let me confess: I dream of you, mi matadora. Every night. Ay, if you only knew what I dared dream ... You know, corazón, I could take care of you. Protect you. You wouldn't have to worry about a thing.

SUKI

What makes you think I need protecting?

COLONEL

I'm a man. I have eyes. It takes a strong man to protect a woman like you ... You need me more than you know.

(Offers Suki his room key)

Why not slay another bull? ... Before the one tomorrow, that is ...

(Seductive whisper)

Room 1017.

Eyes glued, Suki accepts the key. She EXITS. The Colonel stares into her absence, continues smoking.

PARROT'S VOICE

"The dead are growing more restless each day." Aaaawk!

The Colonel glares at the parrot then he, too, EXITS.

SCENE 22.

SHIFT TO airport. A desperate Gertrudis--in dark sunglasses and pink-tinged wig--paces anxiously, cellphone in one hand, a roller suitcase in the other.

GERTRUDIS

Listen to me, Elva: My flight was cancelled! And every other flight is oversold. I don't know what the hell's going on. Charter a private jet for me. Immediately ... To Miami, New York, fucking Düsseldorf. I don't care ... I want out ... Hello? HELLO?

SOUNDS of police sirens grow increasingly loud.

GERTRUDIS

Elva?! For Christ's sake, ELVAAAAA!!!!

SOUND of megaphoned police voice. SEARCHLIGHTS on Gertrudis.

POLICE VOICE (OFFSTAGE)

GERTRUDIS STÜBER, YOU'RE UNDER ARREST. PUT YOUR HANDS ON YOUR HEAD.

Gertrudis tries to escape by striding quickly in one direction.

POLICE VOICE (OFFSTAGE)

MOVE AWAY FROM THE ROLLER BAG.

The way is blocked. She tries another direction.

POLICE VOICE

I SAID: MOVE AWAY FROM THE ROLLER BAG.

Gertrudis is surrounded on all sides. Finally, reluctantly, she raises her hands.

BLACKOUT.

SCENE 23.

MUSIC CUE. Theme Song to Pajarita's TV show.

TV ANNOUNCER VOICE

And now, who you've all been waiting for ... the one, the only, the extravagantly mystical ... PAJARITA!!!

LIGHTS UP on Pajarita and her rituals. SOUND of cheering audience.

PAJARITA

Ay, ay, ay, ay! Bienvenidos a todos! It's a time of searing turmoil but remember this, queridos: You must first be a caterpillar before you can soar like a butterfly!

(Dramatic pause)

Try for a moment to imagine yourselves in the last larval stage of the lowly caterpillar. Sí, when your wings are still invisible to the naked eye. Soon your little pre-wings will grow and grow until they RUPTURE the chrysalis. And what comes next? Ooooh, the DRAMA of inflating the wings with blood. Sí, con SANGRE! Then the brief, terrible vulnerability to predators. But if you're lucky enough to survive, my lovelies, you'll reach the pinnacle of existence. YOU. WILL. FLY!!

CUE MUSIC: Excerpt "Flight of the Bumble Bees."  
Pajarita swoops around. Boisterous audience applause.

PAJARITA

(Stops, breathless)

They don't call me Pajarita for nothing.

SCENE 24.

SHIFT TO interrogation room. The Colonel looms menacingly over a handcuffed Miguel, whose face is a bloody mess.

COLONEL

I have all the time in the world. But your hours are as numbered as your terrorist friends.

No response from Miguel.

COLONEL

You know, as a young recruit, I was given a puppy to care for. All of us were. We raised our chuchos, fed them, trained them, grew to love them. Then we were ordered to kill them with our bare hands. Cook them. Eat them.

MIGUEL

Heartwarming.

COLONEL

How easy it is to cut short a life. What once moved stops moving. It's that simple ... We know Aura Estrada is working with you. You're in love with her. We know that, too.

Miguel grows very still.

COLONEL

A juicy little number. I wouldn't mind getting a piece of her myself.

Miguel doesn't take the bait. The Colonel brings his face inches from Miguel's.

COLONEL

In fact, I think I'll have my men pick her up right now. Maybe you'd like to watch?

No reaction from Miguel.

COLONEL

You know, the bishop wasn't too happy about you blowing out his cathedral windows. What's next, hueco?

(Pauses)

Tell me, Miguel. Why do you do it? Why do you continue fighting on the wrong side of history? Without power, without glory, without honor--

MIGUEL

Honor?

COLONEL

Honor is achieved on the battlefield. Not in back alleys, scuttling around like the vermin you are. Names, cabrón. I want every last name ... Or would you prefer to go another round with me?

Miguel remains silent.

COLONEL

After the rest of you Communist rats are rounded up and exterminated--

(Consults watch)

which shouldn't take too long--nobody will be left to spread your vile propaganda. You. Will. Be. Forgotten.

Stare down.

SCENE 25.

SHIFT TO jail cell, evening. Gertrudis paces like a caged animal in her prison jumper. SOUND of dripping water.

GERTRUDIS

This can't be happening. To me, the finest legal mind in this goddam backwater. That backstabbing Elva is to blame. And the President. And his spineless lackey senators. Betrayed by them all ... Think, think. For Christ's sake, think.

(To Audience)

You're all against me, too, aren't you?! Thrilled to have me rotting away, far from the limelight. You sit there gloating, pretending like justice is being done. But there's no justice--not here, not anywhere. You know what put me in this cell? The fact that I'm a woman. A very rich woman--and smarter than every last one of you.

(Scratches herself)

You think my ambitions destroyed me? Wrong. But my ambitions will destroy you. That's right. Because my rage has no vanishing point. It will burn and burn until Elva Flores and every last one of you who conspired against me are either dead or mortally wounded. I'll fucking ruin you!

(Venomously low)

You act all high and mighty now. Aghast at the "Black Market Baby Queen." Extortion. Obstruction of justice. Manslaughter. Oh, please.

You think you'll have the last word on this? No, I'll have the last word. You expect me to wait quietly for a reversal of fortunes? Wait? Quietly? Ha! I never learned those womanly arts.

(Furiously scratches)

Damn fleas. And the roof's leaking. I'll catch a pneumonia. You're all enjoying yourselves immensely, aren't you? Yeah, I'm a regular entertainer!

Growing SOUND of dripping water.

GERTRUDIS

GODDAM IT!! GET ME OUT OF HERE!!

SCENE 26.

SHIFT TO SPLIT SCENE. CUE MUSIC: gypsy flamenco singer, with a raw, sorrowing voice. Most of the action takes place in silence as singer wails on.

1) Aura is in the hotel kitchen, cradling the orchid her brother gave her.

2) Miguel is kneeling in prison, hands tied. The Colonel strolls toward him, a pistol at his side.

3) Aura and Miguel see one another and hold their gaze across this magical, charged divide.

MUSIC STOPS.

MIGUEL

“And in my soul, another star like Venus burns ...” Remember us, mi amor.

4) We hear the cock of the Colonel's pistol, which he aims at Miguel, execution style.

BLACKOUT.

SOUND of gunshot.

SCENE 27.

SHIFT TO hotel garden, night. Suki wanders restlessly, holds tightly her mother's omamori. She lifts the amulet to her lips, kisses it gently. Aura ENTERS, spots Suki, secretly watches her from a corner of the garden.

SUKI

Tomorrow's your birthday, Mom. And mine. This omamori is all I have left of you ... The good luck charm that brought you no luck at all ... Christ, I never wanted to get this old. I did everything I could to prevent it. Yet here I am. The exact same age as you when you died. What can I offer you but my grief? And now this ... baby? What if I fight tomorrow ... and I'm gored? And we both die? Or worse still, the baby dies and I survive? ... People say I have an appetite for death but they're wrong. It's the exact opposite of that. Only by seducing death, defeating death, can I honor what you gave me at great sacrifice ... You get it, don't you? ... Don't you, Mom?

Suki spots Aura and is immediately on guard.

SUKI

What the hell are you doing?

AURA

Just passing through.

SUKI

How long have you been lurking there?

AURA

A few minutes. I didn't want to disturb you.

(Gently)

I couldn't help overhearing ...

Aura pulls a photo from her pocket, shows it to Suki.

AURA

This is my brother Julio. He died when he was fifteen. I still talk to him.

Suki glances at the photograph.

SUKI

What happened to him?

AURA

He was ... murdered. During the civil war.

SUKI

And you talk to him? For real?

AURA

Yes. I don't know how it works exactly. Julio is the only dead person I talk to. I mean, who talks back ... Not even the Virgin Mary talks back to me.

SUKI

I wish I could talk to my dead.

AURA

Sometimes they tell you things you don't want to hear.

SUKI

I ... wouldn't mind.

AURA

Remind you of things you don't want to remember.

Suki listens closely. LIGHTS DIM to an intimate blue.

AURA

I have a history of ... killing. During the war. Seven men and a woman. All criminals. I believed I was fighting for justice.

SUKI

Were you?

AURA

Where's the justice in such justice? It became impossible for me to rationalize. After a year, I stopped.

SUKI

But justice is real. Honor is real. It depends on your reasons.

(Pauses)

Does your brother want something?

AURA

He wants me to take justice into my own hands. Revenge him.

Against his killer?  
SUKI

Aura nods.

AURA

(Blurts out)

Damn it. I don't have the courage to do what I must! He's murdered hundreds. Maybe thousands ... You know him.

Who?  
SUKI

The Colonel.  
AURA

(Aghast)  
SUKI  
What the fuck?! ... Jesus, I was ... tempted by him.

No es posible.  
AURA

SUKI  
He promised to take care of me. And the baby.

Aura watches her carefully. A long, painful silence.

SUKI  
My mother bled to death giving birth to me. A brain hemorrhage that went unnoticed. I took my first breath with her last ... Now I'm wondering if maybe I should surrender all I've fought for. A complication has arisen, one that would make my life unrecognizable.

AURA  
It's not a secret. Do you know for sure?

SUKI  
I don't. And yet somehow I do. Is Pajarita ever wrong?

AURA  
Not that I know of.

SUKI

Damn psychics.

AURA

Will you fight tomorrow?

SUKI

I don't know. And it's the not knowing that's most dangerous.

AURA

Te entiendo.

SUKI

Without unwavering focus, I could get hurt. We could both ... get hurt.

A beat.

AURA

Every baby comes with a loaf of bread under its arm.

SUKI

I want to believe that.

AURA

Don't pray for an easy life. Pray for the strength to endure a difficult one.

SUKI

That sounds familiar.

AURA

Bruce Lee.

SUKI

Maybe the dead are speaking to me, after all.

Suki fishes for the Colonel's hotel room key, hands it to Aura.

SUKI

Room 1017. It's his. When the dead speak, amiga, you must listen.

Suki EXITS. Aura stares at the key, tucks it away. Then she, too, EXITS. SPOTLIGHT on Ricardo carrying Baby Isabel and a duffel bag across the garden.

RICARDO

(Quoting Darío again)

“Walk peacefully, o wayfarer! You’re still so far from that unknown country of which you dream.” Sleep, Baby Isabel, Isabelita de mis sueños, mi niña preciosa. Soon, very soon, miya, we’ll be on our way. Sí, we’ll find our way home.

Ricardo EXITS.

SUNDAY

SCENE 28.

SHIFT TO Room 1017, moonlit, past midnight. CUE MUSIC: a sexy tango. The Colonel readies himself for Suki. Shirtless and barefoot, he preens before a mirror, spritzes on cologne, slips on a guayabera. CUE MUSIC: indigenous flute supplants tango. Aura hides in the Colonel's room, Russian pistol ready.

COLONEL

(Seductive)

Is that you, amor?

The Colonel buttons his guayabera partway. Then he turns and faces Aura, her Russian pistol aimed at him.

COLONEL

Put a madre?!

AURA

For my brother. For Miguel. And for everyone else you killed.

Aura fires but the pistol jams. Tries again. Fails.

AURA

Fuck!

The Colonel laughs, slowly approaches her.

COLONEL

Piece-of-shit Communist pistol. What did you expect?

Aura attacks the Colonel with the gun but he disarms her, shoves her further into the room. Aura launches into a flashy Bruce Lee sequence but the Colonel is a formidable opponent. Finally, he gets her in a chokehold. Aura grabs his crotch. The Colonel groans, doubles over. Aura twists him under her.

COLONEL

Fucking bitch!

The Colonel knocks Aura to the ground, jams his bare foot on her throat.

COLONEL

You're mine, pendeja.

AURA

(Choking)

I'd rather die, hijo de puta.

COLONEL

Suit yourself.

The Colonel grinds down harder. A struggling Aura bites his foot then seizes his pant legs. He topples over. Aura is behind him in a flash, her hunter's knife to his throat.

AURA

(In a half-breath)

Now and at the hour of our death--

She slits the Colonel's carotid artery. Cascade of blood.

COLONEL

(Gasps, eyes wide)

Joder!

AURA

Amén.

BLACKOUT.

SOUND of cathedral bells tolling three times.

SCENE 29.

CUE MUSIC: salsa from the radio. SOUNDS of traffic and rickety, backfiring bus. SHIFT TO bus interior, morning. Julio and Aura sit together.

Aura wears a headscarf and the Colonel's sunglasses.  
Julio is in his angel white.

JULIO

It's time for me to go.

AURA

Wait. You're leaving?!

JULIO

My work here is done.

AURA

Your work?! I'm the one who did all the work!

JULIO

You avenged me, avenged all of us. It was heroic!

AURA

I'm supposed to feel better after murdering a man?

JULIO

Not just any man, hermana. The son of a bitch who killed me.

AURA

Goddam it, Julio.

JULIO

You needed to do this. As much for yourself as for me. For all of us.

A beat.

AURA

How am I supposed to live now?

JULIO

"Move on, like a god, without fearing the serpents."

AURA

At least stay with me until Mexico City.

JULIO

That's impossible.

AURA

What about ME?

JULIO

Don't be afraid. No one can harm you now.

AURA

I'm alone. And lost. And I can't go home.

JULIO

You can be lost two steps from home.

AURA

This is no time for riddles, Julio!

JULIO

I must go so you can live, hermana. I won't haunt you any longer.

A beat.

AURA

Just when I was getting used to it.

JULIO

(Fading)

Live with a full heart ...

AURA

Not yet. Por favor.

JULIO

Te quiero mucho ... Adios, Aurita ...

Julio EXITS in a blinding white light.

JULIO (OFFSTAGE)

“And Death glides away on white beautiful wings.”

SOUNDS of bus screeching to a stop, doors opening. Ricardo climbs aboard with a sleeping Baby Isabel and his duffel bag. He sits across from Aura, who's lost in thought. She sees the baby but doesn't quite register her.

RICARDO

Ah, lovely to see you again, Señorita!

Aura doesn't answer.

RICARDO

So you're going to Mexico City as well? I understand it's a wonderful place to get lost in. Infinite, in fact.

AURA

Cómo?

RICARDO

May I ask why you're going to Mexico?

Aura starts to focus on Ricardo.

AURA

It's hard to explain.

RICARDO

I don't believe I've formally introduced myself: Ricardo Morán, poet at large, Cuban exile, anti-Communist, and ex-political prisoner. Also, if I do say so myself, a fine mambo dancer ... and new dad.

Ricardo holds out his hand. Aura limply shakes it.

AURA

I'm Aura Estrada. And I'm ... uh, I do kung fu.

RICARDO

Where's home for you? Don't you live in the capital?

AURA

Actually, I'm kind of homeless right now.

Aura stares out the window again, distraught.

RICARDO

We're all homeless without love, Señorita.

(Pauses)

If truth be told, I've had my eye on you since that first day when you kindly wrapped up those crab enchiladas for me. Though I did suffer a bit of indigestion.

Baby Isabel gets a little cranky. This jolts Aura back to the present.

AURA

I see you finally got your baby, Señor Morán. You must be very pleased.

RICARDO

It wasn't easy, believe me. But Isabelita is all I've ever wanted. My own daughter.

Aura holds out her arms, softening.

AURA

May I?

RICARDO

Isabelita gets very cranky with people she doesn't know.

Ricardo gingerly hands over Baby Isabel. Aura softly sings the Guatemalan lullaby.

AURA

A LA RORRO, NIÑA, A LA RORRO RO  
DUÉRMETE, MI NIÑA, DUÉRMETE MI AMOR ...

RICARDO

A miracle worker, you are. A baby whisperer!

AURA

It's nothing. It's just that ... I had a younger brother once.

A beat.

RICARDO

Then Death glided away on white beautiful wings?

Aura stares at him, incredulous and grateful.

AURA

Yes, yes he did.

They smile at each other. SOUND of bus fading into the distance.

SCENE 30.

SHIFT TO municipal bullring, midday. SOUND of festive music. The crowd roars as Suki--drop dead gorgeous in her traje de luces--strides into the bullring's elliptical light. She circles the ring, acknowledges her fans. Then she squares her shoulders, whips open her cape, takes a fighting stance. Growing SOUND of bull.

SUKI

I am the Lady Matador. Now and forever.

SPOTLIGHT on Suki as she performs with stunning bravura: daring pivots, backward slides, fancy cape moves. SOUND of crowd cheering: Olé! Ándale! Brava!

SUKI

(To herself)

Arrogance. Honor. Death.

Suki turns to seduce the majestic, snorting bull.

SUKI

Come, my proud beast. My magnificent creature. You're mine. All mine. Come to me. Closer. Closer still. I'm here for you. My gorgeous brute. My beautiful macho. Only one of us will leave the ring alive. You know that. Because this is between you and me. You and me alone. Now it's time to meet your fate. Yes, I see you, mi amor. I adore you. And I promise you a spectacular death ... Tell me: Is there any greater glory?

Suddenly, all is starkly quiet except for the synchronous, amplified breathing of Suki and the bull. It's as if they've merged into one body, one growing heaving breath. Suki removes her montera, out of respect for the beast, tosses it aside. Then she bows slightly, her eyes still glued to the bull. Suki reaches for her sword, raises it high, tastes the mineral saltiness in her mouth.

SUKI

Come home, my heart. Come home to Mama.

Suki leans forward, aims the sword to kill. SOUND of charging bull.

BLACKOUT.

END OF PLAY