

A Minor Character

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Translated from the Danish by Paul Russell Garrett

(The stage is dark. No movement, silence. From the darkness, a voice.)

Mother.

(Pause.)

Mother.

(Long pause. Then the rustling of a petticoat. Light footsteps crossing a floor. Silence. Dim lights reveal a woman's neck. The woman stands with her back to the audience, her head turns to where the voice came from. Frozen in movement.)

What does she want? What does she want from me?
There is nothing I can do as long as I'm imprisoned here.

(Pause. She turns.)

Rumours are circulating about her and the Prince at the royal court. The ladies-in-waiting were gossiping about it. They were seen together. Strolling in the garden, sitting in the gallery. Someone delivered his little love

notes to her chamber, someone saw her reading them.
Someone saw her blush.

It's pure lust, I said, keep away from him.

No, Mother, you mustn't use that word. He loves me.

Who can hear the voice of reason when their ears are
filled with honey? Not my daughter, apparently.

Read his letters, Mother, look, here is the latest.

Bad poetry, page after page of it. There is no end to what
men will offer us if we give in to their desires, eternal
love is the least of it.

Marriage, they say. Just offer up your alabaster body,
your rosy maidenhead, and then we'll lie there, and it is
painful, and it's brief and somebody will get something
out of it, but not us.

Afterwards we kiss the hand that pushes us away. We
cling to the back that denies us. We wet their feet with
our tears, we would dry them with our hair if they'd let
us.

In their hurry, they forget to inform you, marriage vows are only valid for as long as you remain chaste.

Nobody made you do anything, nobody took you by force. You spread your legs of your own free will, come, you said, like the worst kind of whore. Do you truly believe that a man marries someone like you?

Ophelia is not the first to delude herself, she will not be the last. When I was seventeen, I understood how things were and I kept myself intact. Ripe for the picking for a man with good prospects.

Polonius was the perfect match. So my father claimed, and so my mother agreed.

Polonius, my girl. He may be twenty years your senior but he is a stately man and he is close to the King. On top of that, he is always well dressed and who cares about a little potbelly?

My mother tried to sell me on Polonius. Mothers, they want us down in the mire with them. They don't want us to think we're something special.

As a married woman, you will gain status, my dear. You will rule the household, your children.

My mother, bloated and breathless, always with a comforting piece of marzipan tucked in her cheek. Double chin and rotten teeth. The smell of her breath should have stopped me, no happy woman smells like that.

You are a woman, my mother says. We women can't be bothered with all that other stuff, she says taking another piece of marzipan.

When all is said and done, there's some truth to that. Only men find power interesting. But power exacts its toll on those who possess it. It keeps them awake at night. Just imagine if someone were to seize it.

Power was the death of the old King. Now his murderer holds the power and so it continues.

Sudden illness, people said. The King went for a nap and never woke up.

Everyone knows it's a lie.

Everyone plays along.

(...)

A new day dawns. It is cool and clear. A fitting day to turn around and look back upon one's deeds.

Polonius and I sit by the fire. Ophelia and Laertes have retired. The time has come for a conversation.

You served the King, I say.

Polonius tenses in his chair.

The King treated you well, I say. From him came your power, your fortune, your honour. Now his murderer has usurped his throne while you stand idly by. Is that how it is meant to be?

A wife must be able to ask her husband that question. That's what I thought. A wife need not be a diplomat, she must be allowed to state the facts.

Perhaps. But I became wiser.

Are you out of your mind? he says, staring at me as if the devil himself were warming his feet at his hearth.

My question sounded like criticism. That was one step too far for him.

I wanted to hold him to some manner of decency. This was well over the line.

Out of your mind, he said.

The words were spoken. In the beginning was the word, so the Bible says. And God said, let there be light, and there was light. Let her be crazy, my husband said.

Let her be crazy. The word is spoken, the trap snapped shut.

I was no longer his wife. I was a madwoman. Four doctors confirmed it. God only knows how much he paid them.

I am not mad.

I shouted it out, I pounded my fists on the table, and the more I protested, the more proof they had.

You are out of your mind.

He stood behind me and hissed it in my ear.

You can't be seen in public any longer.

He spat with rage, there was spittle in my ear, my neck was wet with his spittle.

I want you out of my sight, out of the court, out of the children's lives, out, out, out.

There was emptiness around me, total emptiness. As if a tidal wave had washed everything away.

The only sound was the echo of my own voice.

Help me.

Help me!

(...)

She has been easy prey. She has slurped up his mindless
drivel like a cat lapping up cream.

Fancy that, Mother, a real prince declares his love to me,
and he is not like you say at all, Mother. He is so tender
and loving, his hands are as soft as the fur on my winter
cloak and he is as affectionate as my kitten.

Hamlet is a spineless coward and my daughter falls for
him. Falls for his promises, for his bad rhymes. Now
she is in the mire and no one helps her.

She came to my door.

Mother.

She whispered it. Once more, a little louder.

Mother.

I heard her feet crossing the floor, heard them
disappearing down the stairs. Did she run? Did she
walk? I don't want to think about it.

(Pause.)

Ophelia called out to me. I didn't answer.

(Lights down. Pause. Lights up.)

Prince Hamlet is mad, the servant girl says. He runs
about with his stockings around his knees, he is seen in
the gallery with dishevelled hair, mumbling to himself,
waving knives around.

People are frightened of him. Even his old drinking
buddies Rosencrantz and Guildenstern speak of him as
if he is a lunatic.

Prince Hamlet is strutting about like a madman. Perhaps
he is simply mad.

He still chases after Ophelia, the girl said. That was
news. But I suppose virginity isn't such a serious matter
for mad men.

Yesterday, they had been seen together. Ophelia wanted to return his love letters, which might indicate that she has come to her senses. But Hamlet would not accept them, he tore them to pieces and threw them in the air. Shouted that she was no better than a whore, or something along those lines, but at the same time, he held her to his chest.

Ophelia collapsed. The housekeeper put her to bed and gave her honey water but nothing could stop the tears. In the kitchen, they talked about her. In the kitchen, they felt bad for her, but for how long?

Ophelia. If you come to my door again, I will listen to you.

(...)

Something is brewing at the castle, some evil has been released, I can sense it. I read it in the servant girl's eyes. She is afraid, but she doesn't know why. Neither do I, but I am certain there is a reason for it.

A rotten land cannot survive, and Denmark is rotten. If Prince Hamlet is mad, he is not the only one.

Maybe that is my opportunity. All men become
acquiescent when the ground is shifting beneath their
feet.

My spouse is a diplomat. Provocations are lost on him, I
know that from experience. A petition, perhaps. A
petition might work.

Polonius, my dear lord, as husband and wife we must be
able to discuss certain matters pertaining to our family.
I therefore humbly ask for a brief moment of your
precious time.

Petitions are not my style, and Polonius is not stupid. He
would see right through that.

An offer to negotiate is better. Lay out the bait, arouse
his curiosity, what does she have up her sleeve, does
she know something I don't?

My lord, do me the honour of paying me a visit. I have
matters of the utmost importance to discuss with you
pertaining to our family.

That is better.

The servant girl brings me writing implements, she'll be my messenger. If Polonius flies into a rage, she runs a risk I cannot save her from.

Every hour, every day is precious, but if I am too insistent, it will have the opposite effect. Twenty years of marriage has taught me that.

Wait. Bide my time. Hope. What choice do I have?

(...)

I didn't even have time to open my mouth. Ophelia was the reason I was given my audience.

He enters, pulls out a chair, sits down heavily. Stares at me. On the whole, he seems the same as ever. But the expression on his face was new to me.

I have been married to the man for twenty years and I have never seen this look before.

Disconsolate is not the word for it, Polonius is never disconsolate. Annoyed. That is more like it. Caught off guard by something. Something inconceivable has befallen him. Something personal.

Ophelia, his daughter, is with child.

Her misfortune is not important. It is her father who has been subjected to an injustice.

(...)

Polonius. Don't leave.

He stops. Turns around.

Don't go in anger, Polonius. Surely we can discuss the matter, arrive at something. You're right, I wasn't listening, sit down. Explain to me once more what you would have me do, I promise to pay attention.

He sits down. He repeats his sermon, and I listen as any good wife would. I nod obediently, even repeating some of his empty phrases.

Poor Prince Hamlet, I babble. Virtuous Ophelia. Her father, my husband, was completely ignorant of the matter. Beside myself with shame, I withdrew for a while, now I only wish to do everything I can to make it right.

Only now am I beside myself with shame, as I promise to go along with this game. However, a marriage with a madman might be no worse than with a man who is

considered to be of sound mind. Polonius is one example, King Claudius another.

Apparently Polonius is satisfied. Now the time has come for the details.

(...)

Polonius's plan is clear. Tomorrow, Ophelia will be unleashed on Hamlet, with her father and the king listening in, that is how it will be revealed that unrequited love is the cause of the prince's madness. Myself, I will resume my role as Mrs Gertrude's favourite lady-in-waiting and tomorrow evening at the party, I will speak to her.

A lavish feast, my husband says, licking his lips.

Like all revelries at Claudius's court, it will be an enormous feast with music and divertissement, with Claudius and Gertrude drinking themselves silly under a flourish of trumpets while performers and actors ply their trade in the great hall.

That is where I shall also ply my trade. Whisper Polonius's words in Mrs Gertrude's ear, and if all goes according to his plans, we'll be making wedding arrangements for the couple before dawn.

Ophelia, forgive me. If all goes as I fear, you must know that I did it for your sake. It was the only choice I had.

But the final word has not been spoken. When I am free, I can make better plans for you and for myself, Ophelia.

Tomorrow then.

Tomorrow.

(...)

She opens her eyes and finally, she sees me.

Mother, she says. It is not a plea. It is a question.

Mother, she says, and now it is an answer.

She settles into the bed, like children do after a bad dream has faded.

Ophelia. I take her hands in mine, her two icy hands.

We only have a moment, pay attention to what I tell you.

Now.

A month passes quickly, Ophelia. A month went by and your monthly visitor didn't arrive as it should. We bleed together, you and I, as women living under the same roof often do. No blood arrived this month, and when the blood doesn't come, the nights become dark waters you can drown in. Swimming until your strength deserts you and finally, you sink. Like a stone, Ophelia, I know how it is, but there is a solution, as long as you act quickly.

Time is shrinking. Like your bodice, becoming smaller and tighter for every passing day, soon it will be too late, soon you will no longer be able to lace it tight enough.

Do as I say and everything will be fine.

Now pay attention, Ophelia. Repeat after me.

Remember these plants, I say, naming them one by one.

Tansy. Parsley. Pennyroyal. Juniper berry. Wormwood. Common rue, also called herb-of-grace. Herb-of-grace, yes, the bleeding-heart tree.

I too had to do this once, I say. Her fingers squeeze mine
and her lips form the words, she repeats them after me.
Tansy. Juniper berry. Wormwood.

One yellow, the other grey, serrated leaves, thorns to
prick your fingers on, but pick them all the same,
Ophelia, rue and parsley, pennyroyal. Their names
dance in the air like an incantation, a plea to higher
powers.

Down here, the ground smells of earth and herbs, and we
should keep to the ground, you and I, the heavens are of
no use to us. A basket over your arm, long gloves, as
though you are out picking roses, slip in through the
rose garden, roses will conceal the smell of herbs.

Boil them all in water from the well, the smell will be
sharp and bitter and make you nauseous, more than you
already are, but do it, Ophelia, promise me. Or have
someone do it for you, someone you trust, then drink
the concoction. Take a good drink and continue
drinking. Continue until the blood arrives.

(...)

May I lie on your lap, M'Lady?

Hamlet laughs and all the men laugh along: coarse,
crude, lewd laughter.

I know of nothing better than lying between the thighs of
a maiden.

Ophelia's eyes are pleading. She looks to Hamlet, to her
father. Her father nods.

Polonius nods. Polonius sanctions what happens, he
approves of his daughter being humiliated. He observes
without protest as Hamlet throws her down onto a
bolster, and even when he falls to his knees and buries
his head in her groin, Polonius doesn't raise a single
protest.

With my head between the thighs of a maiden, that is.

Everyone is laughing, men and women alike. Gertrude
throws her head back and cackles like an old whore.
Claudius, the King of Denmark, roars with laughter.

Claudius. Under his reign, Denmark no longer resembles
a kingdom. Denmark is a brothel where Hamlet can
treat my daughter like a simple whore, without a single
person raising a whimper of protest.

Not even I dare do it.

I should have shouted it out. I should have roared like an animal, I should have thrown myself on Hamlet, I should have torn him off her, dragged him onto the floor, bloodied his nose. I should have pounded his head against the hard stones and cracked open his skull.

Do it, said a voice inside my head, and that voice was my own. Do it now. Exact revenge upon the man who destroyed your daughter and mocks her for it.

Nothing happens. My earlier resolve has vanished, my strength has left me. My mind is a misty landscape where no thoughts cross.

In the heat of the great hall, I am freezing, I am shivering with cold, with impotence.

Hamlet has settled in, his head resting on Ophelia's lap. A servant hands him a glass of wine.

He raises the glass to Ophelia's mouth. She turns away but that doesn't stop Hamlet. He presses the glass

against her clenched lips so that the wine splashes over her white dress in a bloody stream.

Prince Hamlet is not mad, I am certain of it. Prince Hamlet hates women. He hates his mother and he takes this hate out on all women. He hates all women, the innocent and the sullied, it is all the same to him. And the one he dragged into the mire himself, he hates her most of all.

(...)

The key grates in the lock. Once. Twice. Footsteps crossing the floor. Down the stairs, then they are gone.

I lie in the darkness, listening. To the clocktower as it strikes midnight. To the guard's boots on the planks.

The clocktower sounds. Once. Twice.

Maybe I am asleep. Maybe I am dreaming.

In the dream, I wake up. Awake, I get up. There is a chair by the window, waiting for me. Something outside wants to be seen by me, but outside, the night is so murky, I can hardly make out the contours of the bridge.

Mist rises from the moat, diluting the darkness. Outside,
the darkness is grey.

A bier emerges from the greyness, borne on the shoulders
of six soldiers.

No priest. No incense burners. No standards, no coat of
arms. No mourners trailing the bier. The church bells do
not sound.

Perhaps I am seeing my own bier. Perhaps this is how it
will end.

Perhaps I am dreaming. But in the dream, I am awake. In
the dream I am refused sleep, in the dream I will never
sleep again, in the dream I will lie awake for all
eternity, waiting.

Outside, the day dawns and I greet it. Awake.

The light rises from the water like a powerful wave, it's
morning.

(...)

The night comes crawling forward. Once again, the night comes crawling. The wind has abated with a sigh, the day pulls a blanket over its head.

In the twilight, a bird. A mourning dove. Its song is a psalm sung by a grave.

If you have made up your mind that I shall die, Polonius. If you have made that decision, I beg you. Do it quickly. Send the executioner here with his sword, have him chop off my head while the bird is still singing or have him hang me from the rafters, but make it fast.

(...)

Does she founder? Does she allow herself to fall? I don't know. I only know that she flaps like a bird. That her clothes fill with air, the current takes hold and she floats away.

The current carries her off and no one can prevent it. No one can help her. Not I, not anyone.

Like a swan, Ophelia floats away in her white dress,
shining against the dark waters, like a swan. Shining
until she shines no more.

Until the water closes around her.

Cold. Dark.

Ophelia is gone. Time comes to a stop.

Is it sorrow I feel? I don't know. Shame, yes.

Desperation. But sorrow? People grieve for themselves.
They grieve over losing someone, they grieve over the
empty void, but I do not do that. If anything, I grieve
over waste.

I grieve over the life she never had. I grieve over a life
used by others for their own purposes, only to be cast
away.

Did she founder? Did she allow herself to fall? It is too
late to ponder that, it is too late to undo what was done.

Ophelia was used up, but not of her own accord.

Perhaps she allowed herself to fall. In spite. The only choice that remained. The only choice that was her own.

(Lights down. Lights up. Blinding sun. A summer's day.)

Laertes has returned home, summoned by rumours, driven by resentment. Now he wants to avenge her and his father. To what end?

My son will exact his revenge. My son will kill, my son will murder. I tell him no. I say, don't do it. Revenge is never clean, it is a double-edged sword, it is as likely to turn on you as it is your victim.

Hamlet must die, my son says. Why? I ask. Hamlet's death will change nothing. One death for another, where does that lead? To more death. His death will haunt you for the rest of your life, as if a part of you had died with him.

I had those very thoughts, Laertes. If I pierce Prince Hamlet's heart, I will be free. That was what I thought. I know now that I was wrong.

Ophelia lies in her grave. Nothing can change that.

They laid her in a grave. I was not there.

A sinner forfeits her right to the rites, and suicide is a mortal sin, so said the priest. I protested, but priests don't listen to someone like me. Priests do not speak of mercy, they try to put the fear of God in people.

For those who break the laws of the church, there is no mercy.

Who then deserves mercy? I asked. I received no answer.

Ophelia's frail body was placed in the grave. I was already on a horse by then, Claudius had kept his word.

Now I am here. In safety.

The court is far away. It is but a shadow, remnants of a dream. Ophelia is a memory of something that never came to be.

Laertes I have taken my leave of, once and for all.

At this very moment, Prince Hamlet and my son and are
duelling.

Whoever wins the battle, loses it.