

## FATHER / SON

---

by  
Gonzalo Rodríguez Risco

## CHARACTERS

Gonzalo, *thirty five*.

## SETTING

A stage in a theater. Any place.

## NOTES ON THE TEXT

*A beat* is like a breath. Almost imperceptible.  
*A pause* is slightly longer. Things are happening.  
*A silence* is much longer. It can be felt.

## NOTES ON THE PERFORMANCE

This play was written so as to be performed by the author, in English, and with a distinct Spanish accent. The accent is not the performance, nor is it a burden or a challenge. It just is.

*The stage is bare, except for a tall stool upstage center.*

*The stage and audience spaces are both dimly lit, so that it seems that there are no boundaries between them. As the play progresses, the stage will be lit and the audience darkened gradually.*

*Gonzalo greets the audience as they arrive. He seems self-confident, almost too eager to be there. Once the audience has settled, he sits on the stool and addresses them.*

### GONZALO

It's a Louis XIV style armchair. Wood painted white, green velvet on the seat and arms. No rough corners or crevices anywhere, round contours, carved ornamentations of flowers and grapes all over the wood. I don't remember it being white. Someone, my aunt I suppose, must have had it painted a few years ago. The soft velvet has a few little holes in it. Moths.

*Beat*

This chair was my grandmother's. She used until she died, a few weeks before her 99th birthday... We usually live very long lives in my family, so I was actually rooting for 100... Nice round number... Anyway, the chair, I assume that she just inherited it from some other ancient relative (maybe her father, very possibly her grandfather). It has probably survived many generations of my family... It's also one of the most comfortable chairs I've ever sat in: the soft velvet, the strong wood, the large separation between the arms which makes the heaviest among us (also a very common trait) both able to fit in the chair and not fear it will break and fall into pieces. I've seen it happen with less sturdy chairs. It's very embarrassing... It hasn't happened to me. Not yet.

*Beat.*

Why am I talking about a chair?

*Beat.*

It's a trick, really. A way to describe something emotionally charged by accurately describing something that isn't. Preferably an inanimate object or animal... I do it all the time, as a playwright. It's supposed to be both poetic and evocative, but somehow detached... And it works. Sometimes.

*Beat.*

It also helps to keep feelings at bay. Like a self-defense mechanism... It let's you deal with the truth by attaching it to simple wordplay. Imagery.

*Beat.*

Not that I need to keep my emotions at bay... The story I have to tell, it's-- I don't *need* protection. Not anymore.

*Beat.*

Ah... Forget the chair... I'm sorry... Let's just...

*Sighs.*

My father started dying two days before Christmas. And it finally happened eight days before my birthday, on January. It took him almost a month-- Not him. Death. It took *death* almost a month... That was little over a year ago...

*Beat.*

Things didn't start then... It was actually ten years before, when he had his first stroke and suddenly became my son. There's really no other way to explain it... Anyone who's spent time with a stroke victim will understand. He became my son... Like a child... Trust me, that's not something you want when you're in your mid twenties, and haven't quite figured out what the hell to do with your own life. "Reversed parenthood" is definitely not on the list. But it happened.

*Beat.*

I was angry about that, for a while. It wasn't fair. Then I just got used to it. Like chronic pain. That's something else my brothers and I inherited from dad: Kidney Stones.

*Beat.*

The last year... He had truly improved since the first stroke: He could walk, hold entire conversations, read simple books, even offer advice, very good advice, sometimes... Of course, there were things that I couldn't share with him... My life... Stuff... Even before the stroke. We weren't really close. We hardly ever spoke.

*Beat.*

I think that he was disappointed in me... Before the stroke... Sometimes he gave this look, as if saying: What the hell are you doing in theater? We're all engineers, businessmen. We make real things happen... After the first stroke, he never missed any of my plays...

And he smiled when I mentioned that I was applying to Yale. But he was already lost by then. And by the time I was admitted, he was gone.

*Beat. Finds the thread.*

Anyway, he was doing better... Almost living a normal life... Until he burned himself while taking a shower. He suddenly couldn't figure out how to turn off the hot water tap. He didn't move away. He just screamed for help while his skin turned red and started peeling off, blistering... He spent a month in the hospital. So I spent a month in the hospital... We had to hire a full-time nurse, and he was never on his own again.

*Beat.*

He was quickly losing all his faculties, things like getting up by himself, walking, using the bathroom, understanding a book, a quick conversation, and sometimes recognizing his own room when he woke up... They all became such difficult tasks, things that required special concentration, focus-- The first diaper I ever changed was my dad's--

*Beat. He didn't mean to say that.*

I loved him. I never stopped... I didn't mind.

*Pause.*

My inner writer suggests that I get back to the chair... Switch the focus to keep things more interesting. To let the story breathe... But I won't. Not for now...

*Beat.*

So two days before Christmas: The nurse called me at home and told me that my dad was paralyzed. She was crying. I simply went into what I like to call "automatic emergency response": Called an ambulance, drove to his place, informed my sister and brothers. Went to the Hospital. Emergency Room. ICU. Forms. Insurance. Paperwork. Signatures... And then, the waiting room.

*Beat.*

If you did this for over ten years it would mean nothing.

*Beat.*

He was unresponsive. Like sleeping with wide open eyes. He never responded to anything else again. Not really. Christmas went by, and New Year's. Then something changed.

The doctor informed us that his red blood levels had started to decrease very rapidly, and that he may suddenly go into cardiac arrest... The strange thing was that this had nothing to do with the stroke, it was just... Chance?

*Beat.*

I was relieved. This is true. He was going to die sooner thanks to-- Yes. *Thanks* to unexpected leukemia. There was nothing we could do about it. We had no choice--

*Beat.*

I'm sorry. Sorry-- That was a bad example, we *did* have a choice: The doctor said that if we gave him blood he would be able to live longer. We didn't give him blood. I'm glad that we made that-- Not glad. I'm not glad.

*Beat.*

Is this cold? Am I the worst son in the world?

*Beat.*

Yes. I'm glad for that choice. It's true.

*Beat.*

I'm not here to explain myself, or to question my choices... There was nothing I could have done differently... I don't think--

*Pause. Breathes. Takes control.*

The last month. The last few days. The hospital. It's like a blur.

*Beat.*

Small white surgery gloves have been filled with water. They are five-fingered water balloons. About twenty of them. I push his body to one side and hold him there, while the nurse takes out the warm balloons and places new ones, cold ones. His body is warm, almost feverish. The sheets cling to him and leave red marks on the back. The smell is more difficult to describe. Cologne. Sweet vinegar. Baby powder... Old mixing with new. The breath is different. Dead. As if he were rotting from the inside. The skin seems so fragile. Old skin. Almost peeling away from the body. Like liquid wrinkles.

*Beat.*

This person I'm moving around like a piece of furniture, this alien, is my father. My dad.

*Beat.*

Sometimes, during that month, I lock myself in the bathroom and cry. I don't do this because I don't want people to see me, who cares if they see me cry? My father *is* dying. I just don't want *him* to see me. Which is plain stupid, because he doesn't respond to anything anymore... But still, I only give him smiles. I have perfected the fake smile.

*Beat. Smiles.*

I need to get back to the chair... I apologize... It's also tall... A tall chair... Which makes it a perfect choice for people that find it difficult to sit down or get up... That also explains its popularity among the *viejitos* -the old folks- in my family.

*Beat.*

My aunt showed up with the chair one day... Long before that final stroke... Grandma had passed away a few months before and my father was between hospital visits. He was very grateful. The simple act of standing and sitting was turning out to be a painful activity that a high chair would definitely make easier... Of course, he also had the nurse's help, and someone was usually there in the afternoons--

Sometimes I hated that man for putting me through this... For making me live in a constant state of emergency for *over ten years!* A phone couldn't ring in my house at night, because I just *knew* it meant ambulance, hospital, Emergency Room, ICU... I know it wasn't his fault, but it wasn't *mine* either! I was-- I needed to figure out so much in my own life... Who the fuck do you blame? I *needed* to blame someone--

*Beat.*

Shit. Sorry.

*Silence.*

The day that we decided that it was better for my father to die... I spent it in the hospital... I knew that my sister would visit in the afternoon, and my aunt and uncle... Maybe it was New Year's Eve, I really can't remember now...

"Is there no hope?" That's my aunt... She looks so sad... She never expected to lose a mother and a brother in the same year... I shake my head no. "Are you sure, Gonzalo?". She's interrupted by my uncle, who's a doctor: "Leukemia will end his life soon". And then it's my turn: "I don't want him to go through that... I don't want CPR and injections... It's not fair".

*Beat.*

Really: I just want him to die. It's been enough. For him. For all of us...

*Beat.*

Finally, my aunt agrees.

*Beat.*

And that's that. No machines. No emergency team in case of a cardiac arrest. That's it.

*Beat.*

We go into the room again and see him laying there, lost, somewhere... He seems so small. I've already cried in the morning, so now I just read the newspaper and do crossword puzzles.

*Pause.*

I haven't mentioned my mom. And I won't. She's not part of this story. She has her own. It wouldn't be fair.

*Beat.*

We were able to move my father back home after New Year's Eve. I was happy for that. One should die in his own room, surrounded by pictures, by family... And he did. About fifteen days later. I wasn't there, I'd gone out for coffee... I had been sitting in that room for more than ten days... Why couldn't he wait for me?

*Beat.*

How do you say this properly? He "passed away" on the 20th of January, 2006. That day is important to me, every 20th I celebrate one more month with my partner... My dad never knew... That 20th is our five years and nine months anniversary... Not a huge date, but a date... We don't celebrate. I close my father's eyes and tie his chin with a white cloth.

*Beat.*

It's also eight days before my 34th birthday. Another date to remember: One day before, on the 27th of January, 1992, my older brother had enough, and... For my family, death in January seems to be a pattern.

*Beat.*

I sit on the chair and caress the soft velvet after closing his eyes... In that chair I sign the form assuming full responsibility for telling the paramedics not to bring him back... You see, the heart doesn't really stop, it just slows down... For about ten minutes it's still possible to... Why do they give me that choice? You don't do that. Even if it's standard practice. You don't do that to someone...

*Beat.*

I tell them no. I sign a release. I cry.

*Beat.*

After the paramedics have left, before everyone else arrives... I kiss him on the forehead. Comb his eyebrows with my fingers... And then, for about an hour, I say goodbye.

*Beat.*

Everything else, the wake, the funeral, all this... It's for others. Not for me...

*Beat.*

That hour is for me.

*Lights slowly fade to black.*

**END OF PLAY**