

Dramatis Personae

(Fragment)

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We go from regular lights and music to sudden darkness and silence, as if an unexpected blackout happened.

A moment. Then:

SCENE 1

Writer's Think-Tank # 1.

Lights slowly up on Lucas's apartment. Hardly any furniture. Unlit candles set on various tables and chairs. A large dual pane window. Most of the panes are broken and shards of glass are scattered all over the floor.

Lucas and Ben are sweeping while Marla carefully picks up books by the corners, shakes them, blows powdered glass off them and sets them on a pile, away from the debris.

BEN

I had to use the restroom in a bookstore a few days ago. Lately, they're the only places in this city that let you shit for free... No "Customers only" sign... Of course, you *do* have to purchase any books you want to read while... Anyway, I just went in. No book. There was large graffiti on the wall, behind the toilet: Big black-marker words that proclaimed something like: "JESUS IS LORD, CHRIST IS KING, HE'S COMING BACK, ACCEPT JESUS CHRIST AS YOUR SAVIOR OR FACE DAMNATION". Another graffiti artist had crossed out the words "Jesus Christ" with a black pen, and replaced them with "Santa". And "Damnation" became "No presents". I thought that was funny... Accept Santa or face no presents. Reminded me of my mother.

Apparently, the Jesus guy came back later and wrote, with the same marker: "WHEN YOU MOCK THE LORD, YOU MOCK HUMMANITY", with two m's. And the other guy also returned and replaced "the Lord" with "Santa" and crossed out the extra "m". He also drew a crooked smiley face.

Now came a third person, red pen, who put little comments everywhere, all of them aimed at the Jesus-freak guy, things like "Your simple mind vomits scripture because you've been programmed not to think" or "How can you force me to accept a savior who threatens me with damnation?" Very tight handwriting, almost perfect, in a creepy obsessive-compulsive sort of way.

Marla nicks her finger with a small shard of glass. After carefully removing the splinter, she sucks the blood and keeps sorting the books.

Then there was a fourth guy, this is true, I swear, blue pen this time, and his only comment on this improvised theological bathroom discussion was to draw two small breasts with hard nipples and the word: "Boobies".

That guy I want to meet. Or create.

Smiles:

"Boobies".

He looks at Lucas and Marla.

That's it.

Marla sets a book aside.

Ben and Lucas are almost done sweeping. Marla gets a large dustpan and helps them.

MARLA

When a woman nicks her finger while chopping carrots for dinner, a sudden, unexpected thought hits her: She's trapped in a void, an endless, pointless marriage. At the same time, with the same clarity, she knows that her only way out is through an act of pure violence. So she approaches Anton, that's his name, and stabs him to death while he babbles endlessly. He doesn't suspect a thing because he never looks at her; it's like she's become an object in this house, a shadow... And that's how it starts.

BEN

You just bled on that book, are you gonna kill us?

MARLA

Depends on what you think of my story.

BEN

It's brilliant. A work of genius.

They're done cleaning. Lucas unrolls a large carpet over the floor as Ben and Marla bring in chairs and a coffee table, rearranging the living-room.

MARLA

I like how extreme it is... How this mindless violent act has become her only escape.

BEN

Why doesn't she just leave?

MARLA

I just said that, Ben. It's not an option. He has to die.
And now I have to figure out why.

That's it for me.

They look at Lucas.

He shakes his head.

BEN

Shocker.

MARLA

(To Ben:)

So you're gonna write about graffiti?

BEN

No. About the guy who drew it, the--

MARLA

"Boobies guy"?

BEN

That's a good name.

LUCAS

When I got home after the explosion and saw the remains of my window, I thought: What if I'd been standing there when it happened? I mean, it's all chance, right? Who lives and who dies. Who misses the flight that falls into the ocean. Who takes the wrong exit as the bridge collapses. We never get a choice, and when we do it's not an easy one... It's up to death, and she really doesn't care.

It's not a story. I'm just thinking out loud.

A beat, then:

BEN

Do you have any beer?

LUCAS

In the fridge... It might be warm, though... Lights just came back a few hours ago.

BEN

I'll risk it.

Ben exits.

MARLA

What do you think? Do I have a story?

LUCAS

You have a moment. Now write it, see what happens.

MARLA

And what about you? Still nothing?

LUCAS

That's what writer's block is.

BEN

(Off:)

Fucking blackouts! I *hate* warm beer.

MARLA

Why don't you work with that? Start a journal. Write about the bomb, the hostages--

LUCAS

I don't like journals. Feels too *Anne Frank*.

And shouldn't *you* write about the hostages?

MARLA

I should, yes. But I can't.

Would you be able to do it?

LUCAS

Probably not.

Ben enters.

BEN

I think your milk is now good cheese.

LUCAS

Damn. I just bought it.

MARLA

You get fresh milk?

LUCAS

The shopkeeper's a big fan. I'll get you some next time.

BEN

So, Marla, what happens after the wife murders the guy?

MARLA

I'm not sure... But I think it's nothing big... Maybe she cleans the knife and keeps making dinner.

BEN

It's a bold beginning. I like it.

MARLA

I'll write something for next time. We'll read it.

(Turns to Lucas:)

And you can give me some feedback.

Lucas is now staring intently out the window.

BEN

Lucas?

MARLA

Shouldn't you fix the window?

LUCAS

Not until it's over.

Marla approaches him.

MARLA

Thanks for letting us meet at your place... I know it's dangerous. But even if I can't write about my ex and this whole hostage thing, I still want to be around.

LUCAS

That makes sense.

Marla shrugs.

Lucas and Marla look out the window.

BEN

Well, my fellow... fellows. I have to get home before curfew, and write a spot for dog food or coffee, or some shit, so... When?

MARLA

What about this Friday?

BEN

Sunday's better for me.
I have too much work--

Sudden blackout.

Fuck! Again?

Without pause, Marla gets a small flashlight from her purse and points the way as Lucas and Ben light candles.

MARLA

Sunday works for me... Lucas?

LUCAS

Sure.

MARLA

And how about some homework? One page.

LUCAS

Homework?

MARLA

A challenge. It's not a writer's group if we don't write. So bring in anything you want, but it has to be at least one page long.

BEN

Can it be porn?

MARLA

Anything, Ben.

A gunshot.

Instinctively, Ben and Marla fall to the ground.

Lucas simply backs away from the window.

BEN

They're still shooting?

LUCAS

Just warning shots. In the lawn.

MARLA

Get away from the window.

LUCAS

You know, I like it...
One page.

Another gunshot.

SCENE 2

Lucas, solo.

LUCAS

(To us:)

Every time I get a new idea I walk to the "Used Books" store three blocks away from my apartment. It looks like a warehouse, stacks and stacks of books, magazines, CDs and even cassettes and vinyls... All displayed on tables with section signs: "Novels", "Non-Fiction", "Drama", "Travel", "Gardening", "Foreign Language" and "Miscellaneous", whatever that means.

Five years ago I wrote a book. A novel. "Fiction". It was the story of a young, confused man who barely survives a terrorist attack, only to get sick and die anyway. Not much of a plot. I had very low expectations for it... And of course it was a hit. The second and third editions had to be released within six months, it was translated into half a dozen languages and won a pile of awards. Almost overnight I went from "aspiring novelist" to "the fresh voice of a war torn, tortured generation". Their words, not mine.

Now there's a copy in the "Bargains" section of this bookstore, down in the basement. A bright orange sticker claims that almost two years of my life, of *his* life, are worth less than a candy bar. The orange sticker of shame. You can't even rip it off without damaging the cover. It's the worst review I ever got, but it's honest enough.

Every time I get a new idea for a book, I walk to this bookstore and check if my old idea is still rotting there.

I was down in the basement, leafing through my novel, wondering if I should sign the first page and transform it into a "collector's item" when I felt the explosion. It was all around me: Windows shattering, car alarms blaring, screams... Actual living people, *real* people, screaming in pain, as if the characters in the war that I had so "brilliantly depicted" in my novel had suddenly sprung to life... The Prime Minister's birthday party was interrupted by a car bomb which blew up part of the wall surrounding his mansion and shattered all the windows in my apartment, across the street... Hostages were taken, political demands are being negotiated... And I have the perfect view.

Pause. Shift.

Alright. Here comes the part I can't explain.

I had a brother. Marc. He died almost eight years ago, when he was nineteen. I saw him, sometimes, while I was writing my book... Not like a ghost or hallucination, but more like a song that you can't get out of your head... That keeps repeating itself over and over again, until it stops making sense and turns into white noise. A blur. My little brother... I figured that the best way to rid myself of this obsession was to write him into a character and then make him die. Again. Or twice... And it worked. He was gone.

Fiction. Best-seller. Then bargain.

He's been silent for a long time. But now that's changing.

Soon. Here. Dying to make the connection to the violence outside my window.

How many times will I have to kill him?

SCENE 8

Lucas and Marc. A dream.

MARC

Nothing's changed.

LUCAS

I know.

MARC

You're gonna do it again.

LUCAS

It's supposed to be this way.

MARC

No. You're *making* it this way.

Alright. I'm here. Just do it. Go on.

What will it be this time? An accident? Chance? Some rare disease?

I'm waiting--

LUCAS

It's not you, Marc--

MARC

Who else, then? Your other dead brother? Yourself?

LUCAS

I'm making you up... You know that, right?

MARC

No. I don't know that because I'm already dead.

You should've left me alone.

LUCAS

I can't. I couldn't--

MARC

Don't lie, Lucas. You like it. This endless wallowing. Self-pitying bullshit.

LUCAS

It's *your* fault, you forced me to--

MARC

No. You don't get to blame me.

I was sick! It was taking too long, and it hurt--!

LUCAS

I know. I made it stop.

MARC

But it keeps hurting-- Fuck you!

LUCAS

I *need* to write a page.

MARC

Oh boo hoo... I need to write a page... Someone put a sticker on my book.
I need some fucking rest.
Stop using me, Lucas.

LUCAS

I can't.

MARC

You know what? I wish I could haunt you--

LUCAS

You are.

MARC

No. I'm somewhere else. Heaven. Hell. Maybe I'm some sacred cow in India. I'm unaware. You're using me to haunt yourself. And that's so sad, big bro--

LUCAS

It's eight.

MARC

What?

LUCAS

Alarm.

An alarm sounds.

Lucas wakes up. Writes.

Marc reluctantly becomes the character.

It wasn't the glass, or the smoke, or the fire. It's really never the fall that's the problem, it's the landing. He'd always liked cartoons. The first time he watched an American cartoon he was almost twenty, already too old for them... But he'd grown up under a ten year military dictatorship which put a ban on everything American.

When he was nineteen, he could spend entire mornings watching the coyote follow the roadrunner at full speed through winding roads...

The bird was always almost within reach, if he could just stretch his arms a bit more... But then the roadrunner would turn around, stick its tongue out, go "Beep! Beep!" and hit turbo, disappearing at full speed and leaving a cloud of dust behind... The startled coyote would miss a turn and run off a high cliff, stop to breathe, look down and, only then realizing that he was actually floating midair, fall...

Marc makes the Coyote falling sound.

He thought that was hilarious. And he was hooked. Things don't exist until you realize they're there. The anvil isn't heavy until it's hanging over your head...

He heard the explosion. He saw the glass fly all around him. But it seemed unreal, like a cartoon... Almost funny... Then he saw one of his legs laying on its side, a few meters away, and the pool of blood slowly surrounding him. And he knew. Everything had changed. The unthinkable had happened. The bombs had reached the capital as the world missed a turn and ran over the cliff. Everything was floating.

MARC

I'm falling.

LUCAS

He thought. And died.

Marc dies. Again.

SCENE 12

Lucas and Marc.

LUCAS

A fat man dropped his donut. One of those glazed ones, with the shine. It took him almost five seconds to decide whether he should just leave it there and get a fresh one from the bag, or pick it up. In those five seconds he also wished he had a dog: those barking vacuum cleaners that make all the crumbs (and donuts) disappear, and even lick the floor clean afterwards. He had no dog, so... Ants? Would ants invade his apartment if he just left a donut laying around until the cleaning lady came the next day? And wasn't that a bit pathetic? It was, so he bent down on the fifth second, just before all the windows in his apartment exploded, sending large shards of glass flying everywhere, barely missing him.

He cut his tongue when he bit into the donut half an hour later. Glass sticks to glaze.

Pause.

Marc shakes his head.

It's funny.
I *never* write funny.

MARC

It's not honest.

LUCAS

Of course it's not honest, Marc. It's not about you.
And at least he doesn't die--

MARC

Why are you asking for my approval?

LUCAS

I need to write about something else... I can't keep bringing you back just to kill you again and again...

MARC

Can't argue with that.

LUCAS

So what? Do I retire? Go into seclusion? Become some sort of mystery so that I can sell the same book forever?

MARC

You're saying that if I hadn't died you wouldn't be a writer?

Beat.

LUCAS

I don't know.

MARC

You know. Don't bullshit yourself.

LUCAS

Yeah. I'd be a writer.
But I still need you.

MARC

Then I'll never go. You won't let me.
But you'll keep selling books.

Pause.

LUCAS

How come you always look the same?

MARC

The perks of death?

LUCAS

The first few months after you died, I could only remember you with the oxygen mask and the IV stuck in your arm. Pale and thin, like in the end.

MARC

The very end?

Beat.

LUCAS

No... But I'd rather see you this way.

MARC

You don't see me.

LUCAS

Are you alright?

MARC

I'm dust, Lucas.

Silence.

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