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The ruins of water and fire

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translated by
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(excerpt in English)

OTHELLO: She was false as water.

EMILIA: Thou art rash as fire.

—*Othello*

Characters:

Arley Carreño

Carmen Torres Himmel

ACT ONE

Two chairs and a table. In one of the chairs is CARMEN (35 years old), in the other is ARLEY (between 40 and 50 years old). ARLEY is tied by his feet to the chair. The chair is nailed to the floor. At the back of the stage, diagonal to the table, there is a window.

SCENE 1

ARLEY

Do you think I'm sick?

CARMEN

What do you mean by "sick?"

ARLEY

Well, sick, Ma'am. What else can being sick mean? I know a lot of sick people end up in prison, but I— I sure know some scumbags. And I know I'm not like them.

(ARLEY points at the window.)

Who else is there?

CARMEN

My research team.

ARLEY

See, one time in the jungle, we found out that a *canapiare* secretly took pictures of us and then posted them on the side of a house, supposedly for an art exhibit.

CARMEN

What's a *canapiare*?

ARLEY

A crazy person. That's how we call them back in the Plains. What did he get out of showing our faces to the whole world? What did he want?

(Pause.)

I don't like when people talk about me.

CARMEN

The whole country is talking about you. “El Enchivador” Carreño. A lot of people have heard about you.

ARLEY

What do they say about me?

CARMEN

What should they say about you?

(Silence.)

I think it’s essential that people are able to hear you out. You have been silenced by most media in the country. Other voices have overshadowed yours: those of victims, even those of guerrilla members.

ARLEY

What is your name again?

CARMEN

My name is

(CARMEN says her name and job title, unnecessarily loud.)

Carmen Torres Himmel, lead researcher at the “Recollection/Reconciliation” project: that is recollection, slash, reconciliation.

ARLEY

I want to come out of this with my good name intact. I have to work. I’m not rich.

(ARLEY gets comfortable in his chair.)

You’re going to help me with that.

CARMEN

If you help me.

(Pause.)

So, the idea is to meet every two weeks. This is not a trial. If, in any interview you feel uncomfortable or mistreated, you have the full right to stop it. Shall we begin?

(ARLEY nods.)

OK. First thing is to talk about how you became part of the war. What was the first thing you heard about it?

ARLEY

I don't know, when I was a little shit.

CARMEN

Why did you decide to take up arms?

ARLEY

There was not much else you could do back in town. You couldn't work the fields, because of guerrillas— And to come to the capital... well, no.

CARMEN

Were you forced?

ARLEY

No, no— It was because of my mom.

CARMEN

Is she still alive?

ARLEY

(Laughs. It's a fake laugh. He laughs because he thinks he should laugh, not because he feels like laughing.) No.

CARMEN

Why did you laugh?

ARLEY

As old as I am, would I have a mom still around?

CARMEN

My dad is older than you, and my grandmother is still alive.

ARLEY

No one out there in the country lives that long.

CARMEN

Did she ever see you... armed?

ARLEY

Of course. I left because of her. In order to take care of her too. *(Smiling.)* She loved me very much. When I was a kid, I saved her from a bad life. I'll tell you the story: because she was living in sin, well, she left our house's doors open, like a ranch, so at night any friendly neighbor could come in. She made some food and told stories— But we had a neighbor that was impossible. He came in all messed up, drunk with jaundiced eyes. He would close the doors right after coming in. He'd say: "This dump is mine." The guy was very noisy. And I saw my mom, useless, crying, and all that stupid crap— So one day I met some cops who taught me how to use a knife. They told me: "Don't go stabbing him." One day, I saw this neighbor sitting in my mom's bed and I slashed his neck.

After that, the cops told me to go with them. Like I'm telling you, that was the best option. When I said goodbye to my mom, she was sad. So I asked her what her deal was if I was going with some cops and she wouldn't have to deal with the neighbor anymore. She started crying. But she was grateful.

CARMEN

Do you really think she was grateful?

ARLEY

Yes.

CARMEN

Was that your first murder?

ARLEY

No, I had killed a mutt before.

CARMEN

Why?

ARLEY

My mom gave it to me and told me: "you have to take care of it. You can't let even one tick on it." So everyday I looked at it and checked that it didn't have any of those bugs. But it always did. Even though it was a mutt, I talked to it, I asked it not to roll around on the grass... That's where it got them! Everyday I'd pin it against the ground and pick off the ticks one by one— It made me very angry because I couldn't let the ticks get on it, but no matter how much I told it not to roll around on the grass, it didn't listen to me. I was a kid. And I was so annoyed, that an uncle saw me and told me what ticks do. Motherfucking ticks. Creeping goddamn bugs! So that's when I came up with an idea: if ticks wanted the mutt's blood, well if it had no blood, they wouldn't get on it. It was a dumb, childish idea, but— You know where mutts bleed more? Right here.

(ARLEY touches his crotch.)

I tried different spots, and that's where they bleed more.

CARMEN

You saw your dog die.

ARLEY

I was a kid, I didn't understand anything like that.

CARMEN

Do you understand now?

ARLEY

I tell you this crap, because you told me to...

CARMEN

OK, OK. I just want to know if you understand. A dog is a living being.

(CARMEN pauses. Thinks. Makes a note. Looks at her notes.)

Did your mom ever say something to you about going with those police officers?

ARLEY

Like I told you: she agreed. The communists had come to my town, and they had killed almost everyone in the security forces. We had to defend them.

CARMEN

Have you ever sat down to talk with a guerrilla member?

ARLEY

No. What for?

CARMEN

Despite the war, you, as an armed group, and your ideological enemies, the leftist guerrilla, had many points of convergence. Both your rhetoric denounced, sometimes, the same problems. For example, both criticized the country's centralism, one of the most common effects of decolonization.

(CARMEN pauses.)

Have you ever thought how the guerrilla's rhetoric reached you?

ARLEY

I swear those people never lectured me.

CARMEN

You recognize the effects of excessive centralism in the country, isn't that right? I mean, the absence of the State in the regions where you lived.

ARLEY

Well, see, I'll tell you the truth of things. Let's see if I can explain myself. Imagine the country is like a building, like this, very tall. Like what they call skyscrapers. There's some people that have always tried to figure out how to keep building. The building— do you follow me? They want everything to be OK, and so they're cleaning or fixing everything that breaks down, and so on. And they work on that for all their lives. Those people live in the building they have built. As they should. But there's some other people outside the building and they're jealous because they don't live there. So they try to figure out how to tear down the building. I worked to take care of the building. That was my struggle. Do you understand me?

CARMEN

No.

ARLEY

Imagine a ranch...

CARMEN

Did you live in the building?

ARLEY

Not at first, because I was poor. I'm talking about very tall buildings. We don't have any of those where I was born.

CARMEN

Low income people don't live in the building?

ARLEY

No.

CARMEN

Why?

ARLEY

Because... How do they say? Cut bait— Fish the bait. The boss used to say something like that. You know how it is: some people are born under a lucky star. But us, those who were born under a stormy cloud, well, no one helps us.

CARMEN

Then why did you defend it?

ARLEY

Because what you need to do to come live in the building is to work, not to destroy it so people end up around there homeless— everyone equal, without anything. That's a mediocre mentality, isn't it? That's the trap of communism: make people used to misery. I feel irony just thinking about it.

CARMEN

You mean it's a paradox.

ARLEY

Yes, I feel a terrible paradox.

CARMEN

No, no, that's not how you say that

(CARMEN pauses.)

Would you say you enter that armed group because of your socio-economical status?

ARLEY

Well, when I was called, I was poor.

CARMEN

OK. Do you realize you do know what's your narrative?

ARLEY

It's not a narrative, ma'am: it's a truth. I was called upon to save the country. Save it from that bunch of criminal terrorists.

(ARLEY pauses.)

Are you a communist?

CARMEN

No.

(ARLEY laughs.)

What are you laughing about?

ARLEY

Those communists are such creeps...

(ARLEY pauses.)

I'm sorry, I don't know what gets into me. Since I'm here I get riled up very easily. Here they really tame us. You know how long it's been since I've worked? But since they give us food here... There's the bed. If I get sick, they go and cure me. That's when you think and say: "I'm not a man anymore, I'm cattle." And your snout goes like...

(ARLEY grimaces)

...like a cow.

(ARLEY pauses.)

I sometimes close my eyes and I see that life, the whole world, is a cow.

(ARLEY pauses.)

That's scary, isn't it?