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The Smell of Money

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Translation by the author

Can money buy happiness? Out of self-respect, Michael, a broke painter, refuses the dirty money left to him by his father upon his disappearance in an airplane crash. But as Michael proudly rejects this inheritance from a father who abandoned him when he was five years old, his decision puts him at odds with his partner and his sister. The two women are less bothered about the origin of this unexpected fortune and both have very good reasons not to let it slip away. But who exactly is this man offering them ten million in exchange for a simple signature, and where does the money really come from? To each their own truth ...

Characters

Michael

Diana

Carlos

Vanessa

SCENE 1

In the loft he shares with his partner Diana, Michael has a modest painter's studio that doubles as a living room. Behind his easel, Michael is working on a canvas while listening to music. Diana enters from outside, wearing a coat and carrying a briefcase.

Diana – Hey!

Michael – You're already here?

Diana – What a welcome... If I'm bothering you, I can come back in an hour.

Michael – I'm sorry... I didn't realise how time flew by.

Michael stops the music but continues painting.

Diana – You're so lucky... For me, this day felt endless... *(She takes off her coat, sets down her briefcase, approaches him, and gives him a kiss on the lips.)* Sorry for interrupting your work... I hope that someday you can have your own studio.

Michael – This one suits me just fine.

Diana – I mean a studio of your own that doesn't double as a living room. So I don't disturb you when I come home from work.

Michael – You never disturb me, you know that.

She glances at the painting.

Diana – Is this a new canvas?

Michael – Yes...

Diana – Another face... Mysterious, indecipherable...

Michael – One can spend a lifetime trying to unravel the mystery of a face.

Diana – And still no model...

Michael – Do you want me to paint your portrait?

Diana – So you can uncover all my secrets, as you say? You would be disappointed. I have nothing to hide...

Michael – We all have something to hide. To me, you will always remain a very mysterious woman.

Diana – What surprises you so much about me?

Michael – That you chose to live with me, to start with.

Diana – That's called love, isn't it?

Michael – Then love is something very mysterious.

Diana – That's true... By the way, I wonder why you chose to live with me.

Michael – Oh, that's very simple.

Diana – I'm listening.

He puts down his brushes, approaches her, and embraces her.

Michael – But because you're a civil servant in the National Education system! For an artist, having a stable job is reassuring.

Diana (*amused*) – You bastard...

Michael – Without you... no bank would have granted us a thirty-year loan for the acquisition of this former garage that we now call a loft.

Diana – Well, I didn't choose you for your romanticism, that's for sure...

Michael – You're mistaken, I am a true romantic. Forced to hide my sensitive nature behind apparent cynicism.

He puts down his brushes and kisses her.

Diana – You're right, keep painting without a model. I wouldn't appreciate coming home and finding a naked girl lounging on my couch in a provocative pose...

Michael – Do you want to pose for me? Nude... in a provocative pose...

Diana – I wouldn't have the patience. And we'd have to turn up the heating...

Michael – I'm not sure if we can afford that... Well, I think I'll stop here.

Diana – I distracted you.

Michael – I love it when you distract me... How was your first day back at work?

Diana – Preparatory day... Today was just for the teachers. The big day is Monday. We release the wild beasts...

Michael – They've banned animals in circuses. They should also ban children in schools.

Diana – But then I'd be out of a job. We're already surviving on potatoes.

Michael – I love potatoes. Well, I love eating them with you, at least.

Diana – We'll make it through. They'll eventually realise you have talent.

Michael – I haven't sold a painting in weeks.

Diana – Your website brought in some visitors, though.

Michael – Yes. They come, they look, they chat... at any time. I offer them coffee, but they rarely pull out their chequebooks in the end.

Diana – Your last exhibition went well.

Michael – An exhibition in a restaurant... until I'm in a proper gallery. Preferably in London...

Diana – But you refuse to contact London galleries!

Michael – What's the point? No one knows me. And they're already so overwhelmed with requests...

Diana – And what about your mysterious Russian collector? The one who used to buy a painting from you every month, to be delivered to Paris...

Michael – I haven't heard from him anymore... He might be dead...

Diana – Come on... There will be others...

Michael – Of course... I took care of dinner.

Diana – Great! What are we having?

Michael – Potatoes.

Diana – Awesome... French fries? Mashed?

Michael – It's a new recipe. I think they call it... potatoes in a dressing gown.

Diana – I'll put on mine, and I'll be with you in a moment. For a romantic evening...

Michael – Do you mind if I stay like this? I don't look good in a dressing gown.

Diana – I'll take the opportunity to take a shower.

She exits. He looks at his painting with a dissatisfied expression. The doorbell rings. He goes to open it and returns with Carlos.

Michael – Please, come in... This is my studio...

Carlos – Thank you for receiving me on short notice.

Michael – I'm used to it... But it's better to call ahead. I might not have been here...

Carlos – I would have come back... *(He looks at the painting)* It's very... unsettling, this portrait. But it's magnificent. Is it a man's or a woman's face?

Michael – That... That's part of the mystery...

Carlos – The truth never reveals itself at first glance, in all its nakedness...

Michael – Otherwise, we might as well take a photograph.

Carlos – Mystery is what gives the Mona Lisa its charm, isn't it?

Michael – At least with the Mona Lisa, we know it's a woman... But you're right. I paint to access a certain form of truth. By representing reality differently than it appears at first sight. I was just talking about it with my wife...

Carlos – So, you're married...

Intrigued by the personal turn the conversation is taking, Michael simply smiles.

Michael – Did you discover my paintings on my website?

Carlos – No...

Michael – Are you a gallery owner? Collector? Or just an art enthusiast?

Carlos – I do love painting, it's true... but I'm none of those. To be honest... I didn't come to buy a painting.

Michael – Now that you're here, you can still take a look, it doesn't commit you to anything.

Carlos – What I have to tell you has nothing to do with painting, unfortunately...

Michael – I suspected as much... But go ahead, please.

Carlos – You might already be aware...

Michael – No, no... Let's just say... I'm not used to strangers ringing my doorbell out of the blue to bring me good news.

Carlos – Behind bad news, you know, there's often a positive aspect.

Michael – You're starting to worry me a little... You're not a Jehovah's Witness, are you?

Carlos – No, don't worry.

Michael – Then who are you? And what do you have to tell me so urgently?

Carlos – I am... Well, I was your father's lawyer.

Michael – My father?

Carlos – Charles. Charles Andreani. You are indeed his son?

Michael – Yes... So they say.

Carlos – Well... Your father has left us.

Michael – I'm sorry for your loss. But you know, my mother, my sister, and I, he left us many years ago as well.

Carlos – I meant to say that... Mr. Andreani has passed away.

Michael – I had got it.

Carlos – I know you haven't had any contact with your father for a long time, and I understand that this visit comes as a surprise. I could have sent you a letter, of course. But I wanted to inform you in person.

Michael – When my father left England, I was five years old. My mother passed away a few years ago. She hadn't heard from him in a long time. Obviously, he didn't come to her funeral either. You'll understand that the news of his passing doesn't really upset me.

Carlos – I understand.

Michael – According to what my mother told us, he went to the United States hoping to make a fortune there by opening a restaurant... That's all I know...

Carlos – He died in Mexico. That's where he had been living for years.

Michael – Are you Mexican?

Carlos – It's a bit more complicated than that.

Michael – I wouldn't have expected anything less. And what was he doing in Mexico?

Carlos – He owned... restaurants, actually. Well, more like bars...

Michael – Our mother told us that his business in the United States didn't go as well as he had hoped.

Carlos – That's why he went to Mexico.

Michael – And he chose a lawyer to inform me of his death? Is he trying to sue me?

Carlos – I understand your bitterness, believe me.

Michael – I doubt it.

Carlos – But beyond the emotional aspect, there are also legal and financial matters. That's where I come to the positive aspect...

Michael – Meaning?

Carlos – You were his son. You are the heir.

Michael – The heir?

Carlos – Along with your sister, of course.

Michael – Did you go see Vanessa?

Carlos – Yes.

Michael – But what did he leave exactly? Bars, right? I do like Corona, that's true, but I can't imagine myself as a bar owner in Mexico. And I'm not sure my wife would see herself working at the cash register either.

Carlos – Your father did own bars, that's true. But in the last years of his life, he had disengaged from that business and had invested a significant portion of his fortune in Europe.

Michael – Did you just say... his fortune?

Carlos – Yes... Well, he wasn't a billionaire either.

Michael – But we're talking about how much, exactly?

Carlos – I can't give you an exact figure today, but you will know soon. Initially, I wanted to inform you of your father's passing.

Michael – Are you really a lawyer?

Carlos – I was primarily his confidant... and his friend.

Michael – His friend?

Carlos – Let's just say that... I helped him out of some delicate situations more than once.

Michael – So you're a lawyer... when you say "delicate situations", does that include prison as well?

Carlos – You know, you don't make a fortune without taking some risks. Especially in Mexico. Which sometimes means taking a few liberties with the law...

Michael – I'm not sure I want to know more.

Carlos – Maybe it's better that way, indeed.

Michael – And I can still refuse the inheritance.

Carlos – I'll let you think about it, but that would be a shame.

Michael – I've thought it through. Money doesn't interest me. Especially not my father's money.

Carlos – Take the time to mourn. And talk to your wife. Women often give good advice. Especially when it comes to money...

Michael – I've been mourning for a long time already. And I suppose the funeral has already taken place?

Carlos – There was no funeral. His body was not found.

Michael – What do you mean, his body was not found? How did he die?

Carlos – He was in a plane. A small plane that crashed into the sea off the coast of Veracruz. Only the wreckage of the fuselage was found...

Michael – My father truly remained someone very... elusive until the end.

Diana returns, wearing a robe.

Diana – Sorry to receive you like this, I didn't know we had visitors...

Carlos – I apologise, dear Madam... In fact, I was just leaving...

Diana – I'm not the one chasing you away, I hope. You know, I can take off this robe. (*Carlos looks at her in surprise.*) Well, I mean... to put on something more decent instead.

Carlos – It's late. We will meet again soon to discuss all of this. With a clear head. Madam, my respects.

Michael – I don't even have your contact information...

Diana makes a motion to see him off.

Carlos – I will contact you. Don't worry, I know the way.

He leaves.

Diana – Who was that guy?

Michael – A friend of my father.

Diana – Your father? You told me you barely knew him. I thought he was dead...

Michael – Yes, me too...

Diana – And what did he want?

Michael – To inform me that my father had died.

Diana – I'm truly sorry.

Michael – Well, at least now it's official...

Diana – Are you okay?

Michael – The last time I saw him, I was still a kid.

Diana – But you remember him?

Michael – I'm not quite sure anymore what I remember... and what I've made up. It all gets a bit mixed up in my head...

Diana – So you're resentful towards him... Well... you used to be.

Michael – I resented him, of course. At first. Then I started blaming myself...

Diana – Why?

Michael – I wondered if it was because of me that he left.

Diana – That's silly... but I understand that. You should have asked your mother about it...

Michael – Yes... But those aren't the kind of subjects that are easy to bring up with your mother.

Diana – Obviously...

Michael – And then, after a while... I made peace with it. I had almost managed to forget about him. If I had crossed paths with him on the street, I probably wouldn't have recognised him.

Diana – And tonight, a stranger rings the doorbell to inform you of his disappearance...

Michael – It still feels strange to know that he's really dead.

Diana – I don't know what to say...

Michael – I didn't say it particularly saddened me. He abandoned all of us years ago, and we never heard from him again.

Diana – So why bother having someone notify you of his death?

Michael – It's apparently for settling the inheritance.

Diana – Ah yes, that's true... There's that too... And he entrusted a friend to handle his inheritance?

Michael – This guy was also his lawyer...

Diana – He doesn't really look like a lawyer.

Michael – Yes, that's what I thought when I saw him.

Diana – What's his name?

Michael – I didn't even think to ask him. I was so surprised. He's Mexican.

Diana – Mexican?

Michael – Yes, I know, he doesn't look Mexican either...

Diana – Well, we've never been there. I suppose not all Mexicans have a dark complexion, and they don't all walk around with a sombrero and a bandolier across their chest, Pancho Villa style...

Michael – Definitely not the lawyers, at least... According to him, my father ran shady bars in Mexico.

Diana – He told you that just like that? Shady bars?

Michael – That's what I understood. Anyway, I'm going to refuse the inheritance.

Diana – Well... Are you sure?

Michael – Sure about what?

Diana – That you want to refuse the inheritance.

Michael – I don't want complications. And most importantly, I don't want that money.

Diana – Is it a lot of money?

Michael – I don't know... He didn't tell me.

Diana – And you didn't ask him?

Michael – He had just informed me of my father's death...

Diana – I'm sorry, but since you told me that you didn't care much... It's foolish of me. The death of a father certainly doesn't leave anyone indifferent.

Michael – He didn't tell me the exact amount of the inheritance. But based on what I know about my father, there are probably more troubles to expect than money.

Diana – Still, think about it. Refusing your father's inheritance isn't just about money. There's a symbolic dimension to it as well...

Michael – Oh, really...? I would talk to my psychoanalyst about it, but I can't afford one.

Diana – Exactly... We don't have too much money.

Michael – We have enough to get by.

Diana – If you say so.

Michael – As long as we can afford to buy potatoes...

Diana – It's up to you... It's your father...

Michael – That's it... It's my father...

Diana – And your sister?

Michael – He went to see her too.

Diana – We'll be hearing from her soon, then.

Michael – Definitely not tonight. She must be quite upset about all this...

Diana – Don't you want to call her?

Michael – What would I say to her?

Diana – I don't know... Well... Let's sit down to eat.

The doorbell rings.

Michael – And here I was thinking of having a quiet evening...

Diana goes to open the door. She comes back with Vanessa, Michael's sister.

Vanessa – So, did you see him?

Diana – He just left. You could have bumped into him...

Vanessa (*very excited*) – That's a crazy story! I feel like I've seen Santa Claus, and I'm pinching myself to make sure I'm not dreaming.

Michael – Hi Vanessa. I suppose by Santa Claus, you're referring to that Mexican lawyer who just informed us of our father's death.

Vanessa – This isn't another one of your jokes, is it...

Michael – No, no, don't worry. It's not a joke. Dad is really dead...

Vanessa (*recovering a bit*) – It's true... He was our father, after all...

Diana – Do you want something to drink? Coffee?

Vanessa – Thanks, I'm already worked up enough...

Michael – How about some herbal tea?

Vanessa – Well, at the same time, everyone believed he was dead for a long time. So, it's just a confirmation.

Diana – OK... No herbal tea either...

Vanessa – I heard there wasn't even a funeral. It's unbelievable...

Michael – Why? Would you have gone?

Vanessa – Wouldn't you?

Michael – I don't know. Mexico is far away...

Vanessa – Well... He's dead, and that's it... But did he talk to you about the inheritance?

Michael – You know me... Money...

Vanessa – Yes, well... Even if we're not interested in money... We're talking about 10 million dollars, after all...

Diana – Sorry?

Vanessa – Isn't that what he told you?

Michael – He wasn't that specific. And I didn't ask for details...

Vanessa – It would be around 5 million each.

Michael – Don't get too carried away... I'm afraid it's not that simple...

Vanessa – Even if there are some formalities and we have to wait a bit to access the funds...

Michael – That's not what I was thinking about...

Vanessa – What else?

Michael – He mentioned some more or less legal affairs. In Mexico. And believe me, for an activity to be considered illegal in Mexico, we're definitely not talking about a simple tax fraud.

Vanessa – He assured me that all that money is perfectly clean. That he reinvested everything in real estate in Paris...

Michael – It's still dirty money. Doesn't that bother you?

Vanessa – Money is money. And money has no smell.

Michael – Ah, I see... If we start invoking popular wisdom, then...

Vanessa – Don't you agree, Diana?

Diana – It's your father... It's up to you to decide what you want to do with that money...

Vanessa – Money comes and goes. As long as now it's clean money...

Michael – It's called money laundering...

Vanessa – Money changes hands! What tells you that at some point, the cash you have in your pocket wasn't used to buy drugs?

Michael – You're right... The nature of money is to be dirty. I believe Freud even said it was shit. That's why I avoid having it in my pocket.

Vanessa – True, I forgot... Monsieur is an artist... Money... Monsieur is above all that...

Michael – Not everyone can make a living from real estate speculation like your dear husband...

Vanessa – Because art isn't a market, is it? Well, for artists who manage to sell their paintings, of course...

Diana – Maybe we should calm down a bit, okay?

Vanessa – Well, let me tell you, I wouldn't turn down five million. No matter where they come from... It's our father, after all. We can't say he took much care of us. We're entitled to a little compensation...

Michael – Our father? We know nothing about his life. Even less about his affairs. As for his so-called Mexican lawyer...

Vanessa – He's not coming to ask us for money, he's coming to give us money!

Michael – I remind you that when you accept an inheritance, you take on the assets and the liabilities. In his case, I'm not sure the assets outweigh the liabilities. In every sense of the term...

Diana – You could accept the inheritance with the benefit of inventory.

Vanessa – She's right... Nothing prevents us from seeking the advice of a notary.

Michael – Do you really think a small suburban notary will be able to tell us whether or not to accept the inheritance of a Mexican mafia member?

Diana – A mafia member... Don't you think you're exaggerating a bit...?

Michael – And what does your husband think about it?

Vanessa – Mark? I haven't talked to him about it yet... I wanted to be sure.

Michael – Sure about the amount of the inheritance?

Vanessa – Sure that I'm not dreaming!

Michael – Well, thank you for your visit, Vanessa. It's true that you don't honour us with your presence often...

Vanessa – I could return the compliment. How long has it been since you last saw your nephew and niece?

Diana (*to lighten the mood*) – Don't you want to stay for dinner with us?

Michael – We made potatoes... It'll be a change for you... You probably don't eat them frequently... You'll see, they're very good... when prepared properly.

Vanessa (*to Diana*) – That's kind of you, thank you, but I don't think I could eat anything. Besides, I have to go. Mark will wonder where I've been. And the kids too. Let's talk about all this tomorrow, okay?

Michael – Sure... Good night... And sweet dreams...

Vanessa leaves.

Diana (*sarcastic*) – You were right, she seems completely devastated by her father's death...

Michael – I don't understand... She doesn't even need the money... Her husband earns more in a month than the two of us in two years.

Diana – Her husband, yes...

Michael – She doesn't even need to work!

Diana – Exactly... Maybe she wants to have her own money. To be less dependent on her husband.

Michael – If I had five million, I wouldn't even know what to do with it.

Diana – Five million, me neither. But if I had five thousand dollars, I'm sure I would. And as for the rest, we would have time to think... I'm sure we'd come up with ideas...

Michael – Yeah. Like what?

Diana – I don't know... Pay off the mortgage on this apartment, for starters. To avoid half of my salary being confiscated every month by the bank... And to have something left to put butter on the potatoes...

Michael – Be careful, butter makes you gain weight.

Diana – I've lost three kilos in the past year, and you haven't even noticed. Take the time to think, Michael. Five million would change our lives.

Michael – For the better, are you sure? (*Ironically*) To quote the great proverbs, like my sister, I remind you that according to popular wisdom, "money doesn't buy happiness"...

Diana – What exactly bothers you about the idea of having a few million? If you're trying to sell your paintings, it's to have money.

Michael – Don't you start as well! Money that I would have earned on my own, yes. But I can't see myself living off the money of a man whom I've always despised. I have the right, don't I? And besides, we don't really need the money.

Diana – Speak for yourself...

Michael – Excuse me?

Diana – You don't need money, I'm the one paying the bills!

Michael – Alright... Here we are...

Diana – If you have a good reason to refuse this money, tell me, Michael. If it's something serious, I'll understand.

Michael – I'm not an abused child, if that's what you mean... My father abandoned us. I don't want anything that comes from him, that's all. Aren't we happy, the two of us?

Diana – Yes...

Michael – This money won't bring us anything good, believe me. Nothing that comes from my father can bring us anything good.

Diana – I understand that all of this isn't easy for you. But today, I'm asking you to think about me a little.

Michael – About you?

Diana – You've realised your dream, Michael. You're a painter.

Michael – Yes... Thanks to you, I know...

Diana – If I didn't have to work anymore...

Michael – I thought you loved your job as a teacher. That you felt useful...

Diana – I did love it... But I feel less and less useful. Teaching in the suburbs, you know, has become very difficult. I'm not saying I'm useless, but I wouldn't mind passing the torch to someone else. To finally do what I want to do. At least try...

Michael – Like what?

Diana – Do you think I'm incapable of having personal desires?

Michael – Not at all! I'm just asking what you would do if you didn't have to work anymore!

Diana – I don't know... Maybe I would start writing...

Michael – I didn't know you wanted to write... You've never mentioned it to me...

Diana – Because until now, you see, having two artists in our relationship was at least one too many...

Silence.

Michael – Alright, I promise I'll think about it...

Diana – Thank you...

Michael – But I can't promise I'll change my mind...

Fade to black.

SCENE 2

Michael is painting, but this time without music. The phone rings. He reluctantly picks it up.

Michael – Yes...? The Solidarity Credit Union? Oh, alright... Yes, yes, we do have an account with you... And a thirty-year loan, indeed... I don't understand... It must be a mistake... I know Solidarity Credit Union never makes mistakes... No, no, of course... Alright, I'll talk to my wife, she's the one who takes care of... And she'll call you back, right... Thank you... Merry Christmas to you as well...

He sighs, looking worried, and goes back to painting. The doorbell rings. He opens the door, visibly upset, and returns with Carlos, a briefcase in one hand and a paper bag in the other.

Michael – Seems like we can't get rid of each other...

Carlos – I got some fruit scones from the bakery downstairs. They looked so good. I couldn't resist. (*Extending the package to him*) Would you like some?

Michael – Do you really think you can buy me with scones?

Carlos – I'm not here to buy you, Michael. I'm offering you five million, and there are no strings attached.

Michael takes the paper bag and places it on the table next to a coffee maker.

Michael – I'm supposed to offer you coffee in return, I imagine.

Carlos – In exchange for five million? I knew London was an expensive city, but... that would be the most expensive coffee I've ever had.

Michael – So, do you want coffee, yes or no?

Carlos – Well, I wouldn't say no. It's so kindly offered...

Michael pours him a coffee. They sit down, each take a scone, and eat it.

Michael – Thanks for the scones...

Carlos – It's been years since I've had any...

Michael – Don't they make scones in Mexico?

Carlos eats a scone.

Carlos – It's my own Proustian madeleine... It brings back a lot of memories...

Michael – So you've lived in London... By the way, you speak English better than I do. What brought you to Mexico as well?

Carlos – I'll tell you about my life another time... For now, it's about your father.

Michael – I'm listening...

Carlos – I need to know your decision. Your sister, you're aware, has decided to accept the inheritance.

Michael – And what if I refuse?

Carlos – She'll get all of it.

Michael – And she doesn't care where the money comes from?

Carlos – I've provided her with all the necessary guarantees. And her notary as well. Everything is perfectly in order with the British tax authorities.

Michael – If you say so... But that's not the point of my question. It's one thing for this money to be legal today. But where does it come from? I need to know...

Carlos – Your sister doesn't have as many scruples as you do.

Michael – I'll take that as a compliment...

Carlos – And your brother-in-law either...

Michael – He's a property trader... And you know that a property trader isn't necessarily a model of morality. Where does this money come from?

Carlos – I told you, your father owned bars.

Michael – Don't make fun of me. You don't make ten million over twenty years by selling tequila to Mexicans.

Carlos – I'll be frank with you... The bars your father owned also employed... hostesses.

Michael – Hostesses? Well, well... So my father ran brothels, and I'm the son of a pimp.

Carlos – That's one point of view.

Michael – Isn't it yours?

Carlos – It's a bit like painting, you know. Things always seem very simple when you see them from a distance. When you get closer, you realise they're more complex.

Michael – Thanks for this little lesson in perspective... But you told me my father was in trouble with the law. I imagine that in Mexico, people don't worry about a simple pimping case. By any chance, did my father sell anything other than women and alcohol in his brothels?

Carlos – Indeed, he occasionally provided some clients with less legal substances...

Michael – So he was also a drug dealer.

Carlos – I would say more of a retailer. I've been honest with you. But it's better that you don't know more.

Michael – Ah, because there's something else?

Carlos – Your father wasn't the bastard you think he was.

Michael – You've just told me that he was a pimp and a drug trafficker. Just out of curiosity, may I know your definition of a bastard?

Carlos – Those brothels existed before Charles took control. Prostitution is the oldest profession in the world. And drug trade didn't wait for your father to thrive in Mexico either. He didn't invent anything, you know...

Michael – I'll repeat my question: is there anything else I should know?

Carlos – Your father had trouble with the law, that's true. He was in prison. And he was about to go back when he died in that plane crash.

Michael – For what reason?

Carlos – He was accused of murder. Given his background, he faced a life sentence...

Michael – A judicial error, I suppose.

Carlos – Your father didn't kill anyone in cold blood, I promise you.

Michael – That's reassuring, indeed. So he was a hot-blooded man?

Carlos – All you need to know is that Charles had disengaged from all his businesses in Mexico and reinvested his capital in luxury flats in Paris and London. All his businesses are now fully legal. I did what needed to be done for it.

Michael – But it's still dirty money.

Carlos – Clean and dirty, you know... You shouldn't judge people too quickly. Especially not your parents. You think you know them better than anyone else, but in the end (*He approaches the easel and points to the painting*) you only know the face they show you. The submerged part of their inner iceberg...

Michael – I know nothing about my father... I don't even remember what he looked like anymore...

Carlos – All the more reason not to condemn him based on appearances.

Michael – My only luxury is being able to look at myself in the mirror in the morning... I don't want to give that up for five million dollars.

Carlos – No one can force you to accept this inheritance. But I think it would be a mistake for you to refuse it. A mistake that you will no doubt regret one day...

Michael – Is that a threat?

Carlos – It's a piece of friendly advice. If you refuse your share, all of it will go to your sister. That's all.

Michael – And you've told her all this?

Carlos – She told me clearly that she didn't want to know.

Michael – I see...

Carlos gets up to leave.

Carlos – I'll let you think about it until tomorrow. Then I'll have to leave...

Michael – As you wish, but after what you've just told me, do you really think I'm going to change my mind?

Carlos admires the painting again.

Carlos – What you're painting is really beautiful...

Michael – Thank you...

Carlos – And that face vaguely reminds me of someone I used to know...

Michael – Oh yes...?

Carlos – You have a lot of talent. An artist like you should only care about his art. I think that's what your father would have wanted.

Michael – Did he tell you that?

Carlos – Thanks for the coffee.

Carlos leaves. Michael remains perplexed. Diana arrives.

Michael – So, how was your first day back?

Diana – The usual... Forty pupils per class... whose names I have to learn... and not all of them are easy to pronounce. A few new faces among the teachers... Freshly graduated young ones we have to be careful not to discourage, while we ourselves struggle to keep believing.

Michael – You don't have an easy job, I know... But if you don't even believe in it any more...

Diana – I believe in it, Michael... The day I really don't believe in it any more, I won't be able to continue.

Michael – I'm afraid that one day, you won't believe in me any more...

Diana – That will never happen, don't worry.

Michael – In the end, I'm just like all those kids with unpronounceable names. I also need someone to believe in me. Without you, I would have given up a long time ago...

They share a quick embrace.

Diana – How was your day?

Michael – Nothing special...

Diana – Well...

Michael – Oh wait... Solidarity Credit Union called.

Diana – I know... They called me on my mobile...

Michael – Is there a problem?

Diana – They haven't been able to deduct the monthly credit payment this month. We're overdrawn...

Michael – And it's only the 20th of the month...

Diana – Yes... December 20th... But since you stubbornly refuse to believe in Santa Claus...

Michael – If only I could sell one painting. Just one...

Diana – I'll take up some private tutoring.

Michael – I could give some too.

Diana – Painting lessons?

Michael – Well, yes, not math lessons...

Diana – And do you really think you'd find students?

Michael – I can put up ads at the bakery.

Diana – Yes... But you'll have less time to paint...

Michael – I'll manage.

A moment passes.

Diana – I ran into the lawyer on my way here.

Michael – Yes.

Diana – And...?

Michael – Nothing. He brought me some fruit scones. There are some left. You should taste them. They're really good...

Diana – Don't you think it could solve all our problems?

Michael – I had a discussion with him. He told me how my father made his fortune.

Diana – How?

Michael – His money comes from drugs and prostitution. My father was in prison, and if he hadn't died in that plane crash, he would have gotten a life sentence. For murder...

Diana – Okay...

Michael – I feel there is a "but"...

Diana – But after all, what's done is done. Imagine you won the lottery! If you had won the lottery, would you take the money?

Michael – Of course.

Diana – So what's the difference?

Michael – Lottery money doesn't come from drugs and prostitution.

Diana – For most unfortunate people in this country, the lottery is a drug. Lottery money comes from all the minimum-wage earners who leave part of their salary every month buying tickets, hoping to make a fortune. And they ruin themselves a little more every day, taking that money to gamble instead of filling the family fridge or paying for school lunches! Do you think that's better? It's this dirty money that a few lucky winners pocket every week. What kind of world are you living in, Michael?

Michael – You seem to know a lot about lottery. Yet you don't even play...

Diana – What do you know about it?

Michael – Do you play the lottery?

Diana – Sometimes.

Michael – You never told me.

Diana – Well, you see, in the end, I also have my share of mystery.

Michael – I'm sorry.

Diana – Sorry for what?

Michael – That my wife has resorted to playing the lottery in the hope of paying off the flat loan.

Diana – I've put my faith in you, Michael.

Michael – And you've lost.

Diana – No, I've won. I know you have talent.

Michael – The challenge is convincing others of that.

Diana – We'll get there. But for that to happen, you have to be able to keep painting. Not by wasting your time giving drawing lessons to teenagers or pensioners.

Michael – I can't do that.

Diana – What?

Michael – Take this money.

Diana – Where will that money go if you don't take it?

Michael – To my sister... But she won't take it.

Diana – You think so?

Michael – When she finds out where that money really comes from, she'll refuse the inheritance. Just like me.

Diana – You want to bet?

Michael – What can I give you if I lose this bet?

Diana – I don't know... Five million?

Fade out.

Scene 3

The same set. Michael is with Vanessa, more excited than ever.

Vanessa – That's a crazy story! Dad, a brothel owner in South America! It feels like we're in a movie...

Michael – Yes... A black and white movie...

Vanessa – That's a crazy story!

Michael – Watch out, Vanessa, you're saying that every other sentence.

Vanessa – What?

Michael (*imitating her*) – That's a crazy story!

Vanessa – Oh, you think so too. That's exactly what I said...

Michael – Yes...

Vanessa – You have to admit, what's happening to us is quite unusual.

Michael – It doesn't seem to affect you much, knowing that your father was a pimp and a drug trafficker.

Vanessa – Mum always made him out to be a loser. Well, at least he was successful.

Michael – Excuse me? Successful at what?

Vanessa – He made a fortune! I feel like I've won the lottery!

Michael – You are not going to talk about the lottery too.

Vanessa – It does seem similar, doesn't it? This money suddenly falling from the sky.

Michael – We're talking about our father's death, aren't we?

Vanessa – Yes, well, we hadn't seen him for years. And you hardly knew him. We're not going to cry over it, are we?

Michael – Don't tell me you're going to accept this inheritance?

Vanessa – Are you kidding? Why wouldn't I accept it?

Michael – It's drug money! Prostitution! Crime!

Vanessa – Carlos told us it was a mistake regarding the crime...

Michael – Nevertheless, it's dirty money!

Vanessa – Maybe it was. Now it's clean money. But do as you wish...

Michael – I don't understand. You don't need the money.

Vanessa – What do you know?

Michael – You live in a big bourgeois house, you have two cars, a ski apartment, a villa by the sea...

Vanessa – That's Mark's money.

Michael – You're married, aren't you?

Vanessa – You can never have too much money. Not everyone is cut out for bohemian life, like you. And what does Diana think about it?

Michael – Leave Diana out of this... And Marc, what does he say?

Vanessa – Money, you know... He doesn't care where it comes from. As long as everything is legal...

Michael – So you're going to accept this inheritance...

Vanessa – You bet I am! I'd rather have two than one...

Michael – If you do that, we will never see each other again.

Vanessa – We don't see each other much anymore... Do what you want...

Michael – Fine, then get out of here... And deal with your conscience...

Vanessa – If you weren't so blinded by your self-esteem, Michael, you would realise that there are people around you who are not doing well either.

Michael – Stop, you're going to make me cry. And don't tell me you're going to donate that money to charities...

Vanessa – I don't want to make money off you, Michael. So I swear that if your share of the inheritance finally comes to me, I will donate it to a charity.

Michael – Seriously? And which one, if I may ask?

Vanessa – An organisation against violence against women... Why not?

Vanessa leaves. Michael remains momentarily perplexed, not fully understanding. Diana arrives.

Michael – Were you there?

Vanessa – Yes, I live here. And I wasn't eavesdropping, if that's what you mean.

Michael – That's not what I said. So, you heard everything...

Vanessa – Yes... So after disowning your father, you're going to disown your sister too?

Michael – I didn't see her like that. And I'm disappointed...

Vanessa – Yes, indeed... I think you don't know your sister very well.

Michael – Oh, really?

Vanessa – You spend your time painting faces, trying to unravel their mysteries, as you say. But do you look at the faces of those around you?

Michael – I think so...

Vanessa – If you did, you would have noticed the marks on your sister's face...

Michael – What marks?

Vanessa – Forget it, just go...

Michael – I don't want to be like her, that's all. Is that how you see us?

Vanessa – How?

Michael – Can you picture us living a lavish lifestyle with money from a mafioso?

Diana – Whether you like it or not, that mafioso was your father.

Michael – That's something I can't change, indeed, but I don't have to accept his money.

Diana – It's not his money anymore, he's dead! It's just money. If you don't take it, your sister will take it all. And if she doesn't take it, it will go to someone else. And if no one wants it, it will go to the state. The Mexican state!

Michael – Maybe they need it more than us.

Diana – We've got bills to pay... I've got no choice... I'll ask my mother to lend me that money. And she's not a multimillionaire...

Michael – Can you imagine living in an apartment that was bought with money from prostitution? Come on... You're a teacher! I thought that meant you had to have a certain moral code...

Diana – Are you talking to me about morals? The few paintings you sell, you sell them to bourgeois people to decorate their living rooms! Not to mention your mysterious Russian collector... Do you know where his money comes from? Did you ask him for guarantees about the origin of his fortune? You should be wary of a Russian, you know. The mafia exists in Russia too, right?

Michael – Maybe, but that guy is not my father.

Diana – As far as I know, you don't donate your paintings to humanitarian organisations. You try to sell them in the art market... Is that what it means to be a socially engaged artist? Isn't it a form of prostitution as well?

Michael – So you're calling me a whore!

Diana – I work for you!

Michael – So you're calling me a pimp...

Diana – You're a hypocrite, Michael. But you're no better than the others. If you took that money, I wouldn't have to work anymore.

Michael – I thought you were doing your job for passion!

Diana – Let's just say I've fulfilled my passion, and I would move on to something else. And you, you wouldn't need to...

Michael – Paint?

Diana – Chase after clients!

Michael – Fine, you're right, I'll take the money. But it will be mine, I should point out. So if we change our way of life, you'll be living off of me. And we'll see who the real bitch is.

Diana – I won't burden you with that. You can afford all the whores you want. I'm leaving.

She exits.

Fade to black.

Scene 4

Michael is dozing off on the couch. The doorbell rings. He wakes up and goes to open the door, full of hope, but returns disappointed with Vanessa.

Vanessa – Sorry, am I disturbing you?

Michael – I'm a bit surprised, that's all. I thought I told you I never wanted to see you again...

Vanessa – That's precisely why I'm here, to ask for your forgiveness... Well, to attempt a reconciliation. Isn't Diana here?

Michael – She's gone...

Vanessa – Gone? You mean...

Michael – She left me.

Vanessa – I'm truly sorry... It's not because of... But no, obviously, you don't leave a man who's just inherited five million.

Michael – If you say so...

Vanessa – Unless, of course, that idiot refuses the inheritance.

Michael – Did you come back to call me an idiot? You must have missed something in the meaning of the word reconciliation...

Vanessa – Don't worry, she'll come back... If she was going to leave you, she would have done it a long time ago. Well, I mean...

Michael – Yes, what do you mean?

Vanessa – I mean that to have stayed with you up to that point, she really had to love you.

Michael – I'm not sure how I should take that either...

Vanessa – Michael, you haven't got a penny. And you're annoying.

Michael – Well, I think we've made up enough now. So if you don't have anything else to tell me...

Vanessa – I'm sorry. I'm... a bit confused.

Michael – What did you want, exactly?

Vanessa – To know if I could sleep here...

Michael – Sorry?

Vanessa – Just for tonight.

Michael – What's going on?

Vanessa – I had a fight with Mark too...

Michael – Really... You see... Money can't buy happiness...

Vanessa – So you're granting me asylum?

Michael – Okay... But only for tonight...

Vanessa – Thank you... (*For a moment, they seem embarrassed*) I'd like to drink something strong, wouldn't you?

Michael – You're right, let's drown our sorrows in alcohol.

Vanessa – Do you have any tequila?

Michael – You're going to laugh, but yes.

Vanessa – Let's finish the bottle.

Michael – We're not going to get drunk, there's only a little left. The bottle has been here for so long, I wonder if all the alcohol hasn't already evaporated.

Vanessa – What could possibly remain in a bottle of tequila when all the alcohol has evaporated?

Michael – I have no idea... Let's drink, we'll find out.

He empties the remaining contents of the bottle into two glasses.

Vanessa – Ah, married within the year, as the French say.

Michael – We're already married.

Vanessa – Divorced within the year, then...

Michael – Thanks, that really lifts my spirits.

They clink glasses.

Vanessa – Salud!

Michael – Salud...!

They down their drinks in one gulp.

Vanessa – Don't you have anything else?

Michael – Yes. Vodka. There's a little left in the bottle too.

He refills the glasses. They clink glasses again.

Vanessa – Do you know how to say "cheers" in Russian?

Michael – No, but I think after a few drinks, it will come back to me. (*He refills the glasses again.*) This one is empty too. I've got some whisky left, I think. Some raki. And an old cognac.

Vanessa – How long have these bottles been here?

Michael – They were already here when we bought the flat...

Vanessa – Come on, let's finish them all. Tequila, vodka, whisky, raki, cognac...

Michael – It will be the most international drinking binge in the history of soulography.

Vanessa – It will remind me of my youth. When I wanted to get drunk, I would sneak a bit from each bottle at home, so my mom wouldn't notice anything.

Michael – I never noticed anything either.

Vanessa – You, you never notice anything, that's what characterises you.

Michael – Really? So that's how you see me?

Vanessa – I'd rather not know how you see me...

Michael – Yes... Maybe you're right... A little bit of hypocrisy in social relationships can't hurt.

Vanessa – Especially in family relationships.

Michael – I'm not used to drinking like this.

Vanessa – But it feels good, doesn't it?

Michael – Yes...

Vanessa – So let's not think about the hangover we'll have tomorrow morning... It would spoil all the fun...

Michael – There are so many things we wouldn't do in life if we didn't think about the consequences.

Vanessa – Like having children, for example.

Michael – That's probably why I've never had any.

Vanessa – Yes... But you think too much. That's your problem.

Michael – And you don't think enough. It averages out.

Vanessa – How long has it been since we got drunk together?

Michael – We've never gotten drunk together.

Vanessa – That's a shame. It would probably have made our family relations much easier. It's very hard to be angry with someone who has seen you throw up in your lap.

Michael – Try to give me a little warning, though. Diana cares a lot about her carpet. It's an heirloom from her grandmother...

Vanessa – In the meantime, pour me another one, will you?

Michael – OK... What are we drinking?

Vanessa – We have a choice, don't we?

He seems hesitant in front of all those bottles.

Michael – I don't know...

Vanessa – What?

Michael – If we really have a choice.

Vanessa – It doesn't matter which bottle, as long as we throw up in the end.

Michael – No, I mean... choice. Destiny, you know?

Vanessa – Destiny?

Michael – Are we truly free in our choices, or is everything written in advance?

Vanessa – Well, are you going to pour me a drink, or not?

He refills the glasses while continuing his thoughts.

Michael – If you could relive your life, knowing what you know. Would you go through exactly the same thing again?

Vanessa – You mean, would I decide to go through it all again?

Michael – Imagine. You wake up one morning, and you're fifteen years old again. As if everything you experienced afterwards was just a dream. And you had to start over.

Vanessa – I'm already getting a headache.

Michael – Would you like to make different choices? Try a different path? Could we even do that? And above all, would this other life we chose be better or worse?

Vanessa – I don't know...

Michael – By trying to do the opposite of our mistakes, wouldn't that be another mistake?

Vanessa – Do I really have to answer that?

Michael – I would even say more, can we really do anything in life other than make mistakes?

Vanessa – I think I'm going to go throw up.

Michael – Was it the drop of raki that broke the camel's back? Or was it my philosophical considerations?

Vanessa – The mixture of both, I believe... I'm going to take a shower and go to bed.

Michael – Well... Good night then...

Vanessa leaves. Michael pours himself another drink. Diana arrives. He doesn't see her at first, so he is surprised when he notices her. Michael is quite drunk.

Michael – I didn't hear you come in.

Vanessa – I just came to grab a few things...

Michael – Okay...

Vanessa – Have you been drinking?

Michael – Yes...

Vanessa – You never drink.

Michael – There's a first time for everything, you see. I wanted to prove to you that you can always change. Especially for the worse...

Vanessa – I'm sorry it has come to this...

Michael – It's me... I'm sorry. I apologise

Vanessa – We're hurting each other. For no reason. When we have everything to be happy.

Michael – Except money, apparently. But I'll do whatever you want.

Vanessa – I love you. You're the one that I want. Not this cursed money...

They are about to kiss. Sound of vomiting. Diana sees the glasses.

Diana – You weren't alone?

Michael – Well, yes... No...

Sound of a toilet flushing. Then a shower.

Diana – Is there anyone in the bathroom? You replaced me so quickly!

Michael – No, come on, what are you thinking... And where would I have found someone to replace you so quickly... Unless I paid...

Diana – You're not getting away with a clever remark this time because tonight, I don't have much of a sense of humour.

Michael – She's my sister.

Diana – You're kidding me! Two hours ago, you two were enemies for life, and she is back at your place to take a shower? Is she having a water outage or something?

Another sound of vomiting.

Michael – Apparently, she mainly came to throw up... She had an argument with Mark...

Diana – Well, well... And she turns up at our house?

Michael – I like it when you're jealous... Even if it doesn't suit you very well... You have a slight sneer in the corner of your mouth. All that's missing is the drool. You look like you're about to kill someone.

Diana – I'm going to check the bathroom, and if it's not your sister, it might indeed end in a passionate drama.

Michael – We'll wrap the body in the shower curtain, and I'll help you make it disappear...

Vanessa arrives.

Vanessa – If it's me you're talking about, I'm not sure I'll accept your hospitality after all...

Diana – Good evening, Vanessa... No, no... Don't worry... We were talking about Michael's mistress.

Vanessa – I see...

Michael – Who doesn't exist, I assure you...

Diana – I mistook you for my replacement.

Vanessa – I'm sorry for barging in like this without warning. I'll leave you.

Diana – No, no, you can stay. You shouldn't go back there tonight...

Michael – And what if he shows up here? Drunk as I am, I might want to beat him up. And in my current state, I surely wouldn't have the upper hand...

Vanessa – He doesn't know I'm here, don't worry... Well, I'll go to bed... You two probably have a lot to talk about...

Diana – Good night, Vanessa... And be careful with the carpet in the bedroom...

Vanessa leaves.

Michael – That money has already nearly broken up two couples.

Diana – Well, for hers, I don't think it's that.

Michael – What is it, then?

Diana – I don't know...

Michael remains thoughtful for a moment.

Michael – When he died, he was wanted for murder...

Diana – I'm sorry. You're right. Refuse this inheritance. I'm staying with you. For who you are. For your integrity.

Michael – I don't know where I stand anymore... I know almost nothing about my father, apart from his criminal record... And now, he's left me enough money so that I won't have to work again until the end of my days...

Diana – Let's go to bed...

Michael – You are right. As Scarlett said in "Gone with the Wind": "After all, tomorrow is another day".

He stumbles, and she takes his arm.

Diana – Do you want me to carry you to bed?

Fade to black.

SCENE 5

Diana is having a cup of coffee. Vanessa enters in a bathrobe.

Vanessa – Good morning, Diana... And thank you again for your hospitality.

Diana – It's nothing. Did you sleep well...?

Vanessa – No... but it has nothing to do with the bedding.

Diana – Yes, I saw the dead bottles.

Vanessa – They're not the only corpses that haunted me last night...

Diana – Would you like a coffee?

Vanessa – Thank you, yes.

Diana pours her a cup of coffee.

Vanessa – I know you've never liked me.

Diana (*taken aback*) – But why are you saying that?

Vanessa – I didn't say you hate me... But you see me as a kept woman, don't you? A narrow-minded bourgeois lady.

Diana (*trying to joke*) – Don't forget... a bit conservative on the edges as well.

Vanessa – You were right... I didn't like myself either...

Diana – And now?

Vanessa – Now, I don't know where I stand anymore.

Diana – That's a start...

Vanessa – Please don't judge me, you know... I really need this money, even if it seems strange to you...

Diana – I'm listening... You can trust me...

Vanessa – I'm not getting along with Mark anymore. He has a mistress. And let me tell you, she definitely exists...

Diana – Do you know her?

Vanessa – She's his assistant at the estate agency. She's ten years younger than him. And more importantly, she's ten years younger than me.

Diana – Why don't you just leave him?

Vanessa – It's not that simple... He didn't want to divorce before, so he wouldn't have to give me half of our assets and pay me alimony. So now that I'm going to inherit...

Diana – Does he know about it?

Vanessa – He was there when Carlos came by last time.

Diana – But he can't refuse the divorce, can he?

Vanessa – I don't work. I'm completely dependent on him. And then there are the children... He's twisted, you know. If all this ends up in front of a judge, I don't know what he would be capable of, just for the pleasure of separating me from my children.

Diana – What do you mean?

Vanessa – He'll claim that I'm mentally fragile. That I've already attempted suicide...

Diana – Is that true?

Vanessa – It was an accident, I swear! I take sedatives, it's true. That day, I took two that I shouldn't have taken together. I passed out. The ambulance came... Mark will use that as an excuse to get custody of the children. I couldn't bear it... And believe me, I won't fail this time...

Diana – I understand... But you can't keep going like this...

Vanessa – This money would allow me to leave. Even if I have to give him a part of it, just to make him leave me in peace...

Diana – You can't give in to this blackmail. It's despicable...

Vanessa – I don't know anymore... He scares me... When Carlos came, he was very friendly with him, but when he left, he told me he wanted his share, or else...

Diana – Or else what? (*Vanessa clutches her robe tighter*) What are those bruises you're hiding under your robe...

Vanessa – It's nothing... I just fell...

Diana – Not to me, Vanessa...

Vanessa – I know, it's hard to believe... You wonder how I can accept this...

Diana – I'm asking you.

Vanessa – I've never been used to making decisions.

Diana – Do you want Michael to talk to him? He's your brother, after all...

Vanessa – Mark would take his revenge on me... Maybe even on the children... Please, don't tell Michael about it...

Diana – You can't accept this, Vanessa. You need to get help...

The doorbell rings. Diana leaves and come back with Carlos.

Carlos – Good morning, Vanessa... I didn't expect to find you here, but it's good that I see both of you, with your brother...

Diana – I'll leave you... I'll go and tell Michael. He's in the shower...

She exits.

Carlos – I regret your brother's choice. You should convince him to accept.

Vanessa – My brother is not someone easy to convince...

Carlos – Yes, I've noticed...

Vanessa – I understand him, but I don't have a choice.

Carlos – Why?

Vanessa – Let's just say... this money would allow me to regain my independence. If my husband agrees to let me go, of course.

Carlos – Doesn't your husband make you happy?

Vanessa – I've wanted to divorce for a long time... But... I'm afraid.

Carlos – Afraid? Afraid of what?

Vanessa – I'd rather not talk about it...

Carlos stands up and gently points to the bruise on Vanessa's cheek, hidden behind a strand of hair.

Carlos – Has your husband already laid a hand on you?

Vanessa's silence sounded like as a confession. More abruptly, Carlos opens Vanessa's robe to expose her shoulders, and he notices more marks.

Carlos (icy) – He's the one who did that to you...?

Vanessa adjusts her robe.

Vanessa – I want to divorce, but he won't let me.

Carlos – He won't...?

Vanessa – Now that he knows I'm going to receive a large inheritance, he wants his share.

Carlos – Didn't you have a prenuptial agreement?

Vanessa – No.

Carlos – Then he has no right to your inheritance.

Vanessa – I know... But... it's not that simple.

Carlos – Don't worry... I will explain it to him...

Vanessa – I don't think that will be enough, unfortunately.

Carlos – It will be enough, believe me. I may not look like it, but... I can be very persuasive.

Michael arrives and seems surprised by the closeness of Carlos and Vanessa. He also notices his sister's distress.

Carlos – Although as far as your brother is concerned, I haven't yet managed to convince him...

Vanessa – I'm going to finish getting dressed...

She leaves.

Carlos – Your sister is a very endearing person.

Michael – I'd rather use the word clingy, but... yes.

Carlos – She's also very fragile. Some people might abuse her...

Michael – What do you mean?

Carlos hesitates but changes the subject.

Carlos – You should accept my proposal.

Michael – "Your" proposal?

Carlos – Your father's proposal.

Michael – But he didn't intentionally decide to leave me that money, did he? I'm just the direct heir...

Carlos – He didn't have time to draft a will. But I know he would have wanted this inheritance to go to you.

Michael – What if, quite simply, I wasn't cut out to be rich?

Carlos – Nobody is cut out to be rich. That's the whole point of being rich...

Michael – All I need is a hundred thousand euros to sort out my cash flow problems.

Carlos – Sorry. It's not a bequest, it's an inheritance. It's all or nothing.

Michael – I don't know.

Carlos – I'll come back tomorrow with the power of attorney. You just have to sign. And I'll take care of the rest. In the meantime, I wanted to give you this...

He hands him a thick notebook.

Michael – What is this?

Carlos – His diary.

Michael – His diary?

Carlos – Or his logbook, if you prefer.

Michael – I didn't know Mafiosos kept diaries... It could be compromising, couldn't it?

Carlos – I found it among his papers. You can read it later. I hope it will help you understand some things...

Michael – Have you read it?

Carlos – I skimmed through it... I wanted to have a look at it before giving it to you.

Michael takes the diary.

Michael – Thank you. Would you like something to drink? I have some leftover bottles...

Carlos – Another time... I have an urgent matter to attend to... (*He glances at the ongoing painting one last time*) I really like your paintings... Your father had several of them at his place...

Michael – Sorry?

Carlos – He had them bought by a gallery owner in Paris. He had a very high opinion of you. Don't disappoint him...

He leaves, leaving Michael stunned. Diana returns.

Diana – Are you okay?

Michael – It was my father who had these paintings bought in Paris by my so-called Russian client.

Diana – Are you sure?

Michael – In fact, he's the one who has allowed me to scrape by all these years. Without him, I wouldn't have sold a single painting.

Diana – That's a crazy story! ... as your sister would say.

Michael – I didn't want this dirty money, but in reality, I was already living with it...

Diana – So what do we do?

Michael – A little more or a little less... My sister is right, money is always dirty.

Diana – So, are you accepting the inheritance after all?

Michael – We'll find a way of making a donation to a charity, as my sister used to say.... Just to ease our conscience at a low cost...

Fade out.

Scene 6

Michael is reading his father's diary. He seems moved. Diana enters.

Diana – Already up?

Michael closes the diary.

Michael – I didn't sleep a wink last night.

Diana pours herself a coffee.

Diana – I know... Me neither...

Michael – I absolutely had to read this.

Diana – Do you want to talk about it?

Michael – It's strange... I knew nothing about my biological father, and now that he's dead, I know more about him than any child will ever know about his father.

Diana – I hope it helps you reconcile with him a bit.

Michael – I would have preferred to do that while he was still alive, but well...

Diana – Will you tell me about it?

Michael – Of course... You can even read it. A bit later...

Diana – Okay.

Michael – Believe me, there's enough material to write a novel.

Diana – Will you write it?

Michael – It's too close to my heart, I couldn't do it. And besides, you're the writer, aren't you?

Diana – Yes... Well, I haven't written anything yet...

Michael – I don't believe you.

Diana – Okay, I have got a few notes in my drawers. And the start of a novel...

Michael – I can't wait to read it...

Diana – And what if you're disappointed?

Michael – Nothing that comes from you could ever disappoint me.

Diana – Now, I'm the one who will need you to believe in me.

Michael – Watch out... I said it wouldn't disappoint me, I didn't say I would necessarily find it good...

Diana – If it's that bad, you'll tell me, right?

Michael – What do you think?

Diana – I think you'll be able to make me understand.

Michael – One day, I'll show you my first painting.

Diana – Have you kept it?

Michael – I don't show it to anyone, of course. But when I really doubt myself, I take a look at it. I realise how far I've come, and it cheers me up.. At least for a while, because then I think about the journey that lies ahead.

Diana – I'm curious to see it...

Michael – You'll see. It will make you more forgiving with your first novel. Do you really think Leonardo da Vinci painted the Mona Lisa perfectly on the first try? Genius doesn't exist. Truth or perfection doesn't either. Genius is a total determination to persevere in error. Until you manage to make a mistake in a sublime way.

They are about to kiss, but the doorbell rings. Diana goes to open the door and returns with Vanessa, looking somewhat calmer and smiling, holding a paper bag.

Vanessa – Hi, Fred. Hello, Diana. I brought you some fruit scones.

Michael – What's the matter with everyone and fruit scones these days? Is there a promotion at the bakery around the corner?

Diana – Do you want a coffee?

Vanessa – Yes, please.

Michael – You seem to be doing better.

Vanessa – I'm getting a divorce.

Michael – In your case, I imagine that's good news.

Vanessa – It is.

Diana – Have you come to an arrangement with Marc? Out of court...

Michael – He didn't ask you to give him half of your inheritance, did he?

Vanessa – No. He didn't ask me for anything at all. I don't know why, but now he's being very nice to me.

Diana – And you didn't promise him anything in exchange for his consent to the divorce?

Vanessa – Nothing... Even regarding the children, he agrees to let me have sole custody.

Michael – That's what you wanted, right?

Vanessa – Of course. That's why I didn't want to divorce until I was sure I could keep them with me.

Michael – Do you think he would have been capable of hurting the children?

Vanessa – I don't know...

Diana – And... do you have any idea what could have made him change his attitude so suddenly?

Vanessa – No... (*Pauses*) The last time, he came home with marks of bruises on his face. I don't know if there's any connection...

Michael – Ah, yes... Maybe a little...

Vanessa – Do you have any idea who could have done that to him?

Michael – It wasn't me, I swear.

Vanessa looks uncomfortable.

Diana – I'm going to finish getting ready.

Diana exits.

Michael – Is there something else you wanted to tell me?

Vanessa – Yes...

Michael – I'm listening.

Vanessa – Mum used to talk to me a lot, you know... Especially towards the end of her life... She would confide in me sometimes...

Michael – More than she did to me, that's for sure... And...?

Vanessa – There's one thing she never told you... Well, I think so... Something I'd like you to know...

Michael – Okay...

Vanessa – Actually, if your father left...

Michael – "My" father? He's your father too, isn't he?

Vanessa – If Charles left... it's because she cheated on him.

Michael – Sorry?

Vanessa – In fact, I'm not his daughter. When Charles found out, he decided to go to America.

Michael – Did Mum tell you that?

Vanessa – Yes.

Michael – Okay... (*Pauses*) And what about me?

Vanessa – You?

Michael – Whose son am I?

Vanessa – You are indeed Charles's son, don't worry.

Michael – As the son of a pimp and a drug dealer, I'm not sure that reassures me, but alright... Fine...

Vanessa – Well, she didn't say anything about you, in any case.

Michael – Okay... And what about you, whose daughter are you?

Vanessa – The daughter of Charles's best friend, who was also his partner, I believe. A certain Karl who disappeared shortly after my birth.

Michael – Hopefully not under mysterious circumstances...

Vanessa – Mum never saw him again. And neither did I, of course...

Michael – And that would explain why Charles abandoned us all?

Vanessa – He felt betrayed. By his wife. By his friend. He couldn't bear it. That's why he left for America.

Michael – And you're telling me this now?

Vanessa – It was mainly my business.

Michael – Then why tell me today?

Vanessa – I'm going to accept this inheritance... You're considering refusing it... It would be absurd for all this money to come to me, instead of you, especially since I'm not even his daughter...

Michael – He acknowledged you, didn't he? You carry his name.

Vanessa – When he went to register me at the town hall, he still didn't know that I wasn't his daughter.

Michael – You're not responsible for all of this, Vanessa. You're like me, you have suffered. For me, you'll always be my sister... For better or worse...

Vanessa – So, will you be willing to share with me?

Michael – Of course... I wouldn't even know what to do with five million, so ten, you can be sure of that.

Vanessa – Thank you, Fred... You know, in reality, I never hated you... as much as I seemed to.

Michael – That's a confession that means a lot to me.

Vanessa – I think the truth is that I was just jealous of you.

Michael – Me? I'm a failed artist. I live off my wife. And according to her, I'm a know-it-all...

Vanessa – Yes, that... That's not entirely untrue either...

Michael – So, what exactly are you jealous of?

Vanessa – Your independence, I suppose. You've chosen your life. Against all odds. You tried to make your dream come true... You didn't succeed...

Michael – Thanks...

Vanessa – But at least you tried.

Michael – Yeah... What about you?

Vanessa – My problem was that I didn't have any dream at all... So I settled for getting married, to someone who would take good care of me. Well, that's what I thought...

Michael – So, you also believe that we don't have a choice...

Vanessa – Choice...? Life is like Scrabble. The rule is the same for everyone, and they make you believe that everyone has an equal chance of winning. But when you draw crappy letters at the beginning, and it keeps on coming...

They share a sibling embrace.

Michael – I'm truly sorry. It was right in front of me, and I didn't see it...

Vanessa – Yes... For a painter... it's ironic. Not seeing anything...

Michael – I blame myself... I was your big brother, it was my job to protect you.

Vanessa – My half-brother...

Michael prefers to return to joking.

Michael – You're right... The good news in all this is that... you're only my half-sister, after all.

Vanessa – And even with that, all your troubles are because of me, you see...

Michael – Strangely, I'm not surprised...

Vanessa – I also told you this so that you could be a bit more understanding towards your father.

Michael – Well... not all betrayed husbands go to America to open brothels...

Vanessa – No... It's destiny, as you say. I guess that was also written in advance...

Michael – Yeah...

Vanessa – And what about you?

Michael – What about me?

Vanessa – Since we're in the sharing mood... Is there something you know that I should know?

Michael – Not yet...

Vanessa – What do you mean, not yet?

Michael – Carlos gave me... Dad's diary. I haven't finished reading it yet.

Vanessa – I thought only slightly depressed young girls wrote a diary...

Michael – I guess that old pimp had his feminine side too.

Michael hands her the diary, and she flips through it. The doorbell rings. Diana arrives with Carlos.

Carlos – There, all the documents are here. **All you have to do is sign.**

Vanessa – Alright.

Carlos – But before that, I need to tell you something.

Michael – Again? You certainly know how to build up suspense.

Diana – Yes... You should write plays...

Michael – I'm listening... But I fear the worst...

Carlos – In Mexico, your father took a child under his protection. An orphan who is now five years old...

Michael – That's how old I was when he abandoned me...

Carlos – Your father didn't have time, before he died, to formally adopt this child...

Vanessa – And?

Carlos – Your father's plan was to bring her back to London, so she could get a good education and a better future. Of course, now...

Michael – I think I'm starting to understand...

Vanessa – And you're saying she's not his biological daughter.

Carlos – She's the child of a prostitute who worked in one of his establishments and died shortly after giving birth. Obviously, we don't know who the father is...

A moment of silence.

Vanessa – And our inheritance is on condition that we look after this child?

Carlos – It's not specified in a will, since Charles didn't make one. But that it's undoubtedly what your father would have wanted...

Vanessa – I don't know what to say... Fred, what do you think?

Michael – Do we really have a choice...?

Carlos – From a strict legal point of view, you can very well accept this inheritance and not worry about what happens to the child.

Diana – Legally, yes. But it would be monstrous...

Michael – Do you have a photo?

Carlos – Of course.

Vanessa – You realise, Michael, that if we look at this photo, even for a second, we won't be able to go back...

Michael – Give me that photo.

Carlos hands him the photo, and he looks at it for a long time before passing it to Vanessa.

Vanessa – No, sorry... I can't take it... Not right now...

Diana takes the photo and looks at it. She exchanges a meaningful glance with Michael.

Michael – Do you have any more news like this? Because if you do, you might as well tell us everything at once...

Carlos – I believe this time, you know everything.

Michael – I don't think so.

Carlos – Let's say... everything you need to know.

Silence.

Vanessa – I already have two children... And I don't have a husband anymore...

Michael – But you're a multimillionaire.

Carlos – It's a significant decision. If you wish, I can give you some time to think about it.

Michael – If we think about it, we'll say no. My sister is right, I think too much.

Carlos – So, is it a yes?

Michael – Diana?

Diana – We haven't had any children. I don't really know why.

Michael – My personal history didn't encourage me to start a family.

Diana – I didn't insist. I didn't want to lose you. This will be the child we didn't have together...

Michael – That will justify taking this money. For this child. To give her a happy life. At least a better life...

Vanessa – Yes, for her it will be reparation, and for you, it will be a kind... of punishment. (*The others look at her, surprised.*) I mean, for accepting dirty money...

Michael – I didn't want to take this money out of self-esteem. But in the end, self-esteem, dirty money... Love isn't always clean either...

Carlos – I also have the adoption papers for the child... If you agree, you just need to sign.

Diana – And where is this child?

Carlos – In an orphanage in Mexico.

A moment.

Michael – We accept this inheritance. And we're adopting this child...

Vanessa – Thank you... I'll help you, I promise.

Diana (*to Diana*) – I'm sure you'll make a wonderful aunt...

Carlos – Then, all you have to do is sign.

Michael – Fine.

Carlos – Don't you want to read first?

Michael – I don't really know why, but I trust you.

Michael and Vanessa sign the documents.

Carlos – With this power of attorney, I will handle all the necessary steps on your behalf. You will be notified of property transfers and transfers of funds.

Diana – And what about the child?

Carlos – With these papers, you can legally go and fetch her. In a few weeks...

Diana – We will go as soon as possible.

Carlos – Thank you.

Vanessa – You made the right choice, Michael.

Michael – I don't think I had a choice. But it was the right choice nonetheless.

Carlos – Well, then I will leave you. As a family.

Diana – Thank you...

Carlos is about to leave.

Vanessa – Will we see each other again?

Carlos – Only God knows... But I'll keep in touch with you from afar...

Diana and Vanessa move away for a moment. Michael speaks to Carlos in private.

Michael – And what about my sister? Did you manage to talk to her husband?

Carlos – We had a little conversation, indeed. I reminded him of some legal points regarding inheritance laws.

Michael – You're a really good teacher, because until now he wouldn't listen... My sister told me that his face was a bit swollen...I suppose when you mention legal points, it also includes some direct hits to underline the importance of your words?

Carlos – I gave him the choice between divorce and widowhood. I made it clear that I was talking about his wife's widowhood. He understood perfectly well.

Michael – Why are you doing all this for us?

Carlos – As I told you, your father was a friend. I'm used to handling his affairs...

Michael – And what was my father like? As a friend...

Carlos – Not very demonstrative. But he was someone you could rely on. He could have died for you...

Vanessa approaches.

Vanessa – I'll go too. The kids are waiting for me. We've temporarily settled in a hotel. *(To Carlos)* Can you give me a ride?

Carlos – Of course...

Carlos and Vanessa leave.

Diana – Do you think she's already found herself a new protector?

Michael – I thought you were going to say pimp... *(Incredulous)* No...? He could be her father.

Diana – At this point, nothing could surprise me anymore...

Michael – What do you mean?

Diana – Maybe he's the friend of your father... His partner who slept with his wife.

Michael – And who could be Vanessa's father?

Diana – What was the first name of that guy who also mysteriously disappeared?

Michael – Karl.

Diana – Karl, Carlos... It's unsettling, admit it.

Michael – I think we're starting to go off the deep end, aren't we?

Diana – Yes... And who knows, maybe your mother made all this up.

Michael – You think...?

Diana – I have to say that, by the end, she was seriously losing her mind, wasn't she?

Michael – And why would she have invented this... Karl? Why would she have claimed to have cheated on my father? It's not the kind of thing you brag about.

Diana – I don't know... Maybe to justify why your father abandoned you. To help you come to terms with it. It's hard to accept that a father would abandon you for no reason. At least here, he had a reason. She took the blame on herself, in a way...

Michael – Yeah...

Diana – Or maybe she was simply insane.

Michael – Well... I don't know if we can say that everything ends well.

Diana – We're still going to get five million...

Michael – I'll be able to continue painting.

Diana – And for me, it'll be my last back-to-school.

Michael – Next year, you will only have to worry about the literary season.

Diana – What about our first millionaire's trip to Mexico?

Michael – You mean our last couple's trip without children. Because after...

Diana – In the end, Carlos had a good heart.

Michael – Yes. One thing's for sure, he had a good right hook.

The phone rings.

Vanessa – Yes... Solidarity Credit Union...? Ah, yes...

Michael – Give them to me... (*He takes the receiver*) Yes... Listen, dear Sir, I'm really sorry, but we're going to have to change banks... Yes, that's right... We're going to change to a bank that's more in line with our assets... Goodbye to you.

Vanessa – Fatherhood suits you.

Michael – I was waiting for this to truly become a man...

He glances at his computer that just made a sound.

Michael – Oh, a new order... from my mystery client.

Diana – So it wouldn't be your father after all?

Michael – Then who?

Diana – That Mexican lawyer...? You told me he really appreciated your paintings...

Michael – Maybe...

Diana – Or maybe... your father isn't really dead.

Michael – Excuse me...?

Diana – Carlos said his body had never been found. For a guy wanted by the police, dying is a good solution.

Michael – Before being reborn under a false identity. But he would still be recognisable!

Diana – There's also plastic surgery.

Michael – And he would have abandoned his child?

Diana – It wouldn't be the first time he changes his life, leaving everything behind.

Michael – And he's not really abandoning his child since he managed to pass her on to us.

Diana – He can't take her on the run, that's all, and he wanted to secure her future. Just like ours...

Michael – You think so?

Diana – And what if it was him?

Michael – Him?

Diana – Carlos, your father!

Michael – But come on, I would have recognised him!

Diana – If he'd had his face done...

Michael – Still...

Diana – You barely knew him... And Charles... Carlos... Carlos is Charles in Spanish, isn't it?

Michael – So, according to you, Charles, Karl, and Carlos would be the same person...?

Diana – It's just a hypothesis. We'll probably never know...

Silence.

Michael – I don't know if we'll ever see him again...

Diana – It's unlikely. It's too dangerous for him...

Michael looks at the photo of the little Mexican girl.

Diana – Do you think it's true what he told us?

Michael – What?

Diana – That she's the daughter of a prostitute, born to an unknown father... Maybe she's his daughter... What did your father look like?

Michael – I don't remember very well.

Diana – Don't you have a photo?

Michael – I burned them all.

Diana – She looks a bit like you...

Michael – You think so?

Diana – You're the one who's right. Unraveling the mystery of a face is a lifelong endeavour

Michael – And even then, we're not even sure if we'll succeed.

Diana – Especially when people willingly change their faces...

Michael – I have the feeling that we're not done with this family saga... But can we still call it a family?

Diana – We're going to have one after all...

Michael – Yes... A child to whom we'll give all the care and love she needs for twenty years, and who will blame us for everything we haven't done for her. Holding us responsible for everything that goes wrong in her life...

Diana – I can't wait to start.

Michael – Me too...

Diana – I think I have an idea for my first book. It won't be a novel, but a play. I already have the title: The Smell of Money...

Michael – It is a great title, it makes you want to see the play.

She looks at the painting.

Diana – This face, it's your father's, isn't it?

Michael's mobile phone rings.

Michael – Yes? Yes, it's me... No, it's not me who... Okay... No, no, tomorrow at 3 p.m. is fine. Perfect... See you tomorrow... Thank you... (*He puts away his phone*)
She was the director of the most important art gallery in London. She wants to exhibit my paintings.

Diana – No way?

Michael – I assure you... I hope it's not a joke.

Diana – I don't think so.

Michael – What if it's Carlos?

Diana – Carlos?

Michael – Well... Charles... Or Karl... Maybe he went to see them... He offered them money... Or worse... He threatened them...

Diana – Your self-confidence never ceases to amaze me... So you think a gallery can only accept to showcase your paintings under threat?

Michael – Sorry... It's just lack of experience... But they said they were already familiar with my work... There must be someone who...

Diana – It's me.

Michael – You?

Diana – I went to see them with your catalog.

Michael – And they accepted me based on the catalog?

Diana – They were interested. They came here, and I showed them your paintings. On a day when you weren't here.

Michael – Why didn't you tell me anything?

Diana – I didn't want you to be disappointed. Just in case it didn't work out... And besides, you wouldn't have believed it anyway.

Michael – But you believed in it.

Diana – I've always believed in you.

Michael – In the end, I'm like God or Santa Claus... I need people to believe in me to continue to exist.

Diana – Everyone wants to believe in Santa Claus when he brings you five million dollars in his sack...

They embrace. She looks at the painting.

Diana – Have you finished your portrait?

Michael – I think so...

Diana – It's magnificent... It will be the centrepiece of your first exhibition in London.

Michael – Yes...

Diana – He looks a bit like God, doesn't it?

Michael – I don't know... What does God look like?

Diana – Like the image we have in our minds, I suppose.

Michael also gazes at the painting.

Michael – Or like Santa Claus... The one you never see but who brings you gifts...

Diana – We'll try to make something clean out of all this mess.

Michael – Hoping that we truly have a choice.

Diana – Let's hope... And if it turns out that we didn't have a choice after all... we will have always had hope.

Michael – Hope keeps us alive...

Diana – Promise me you won't start quoting proverbs left and right like your sister?

Michael – My half-sister... Well, I think so...

Fade out

End

About the author

Born in 1955 in Auvers-sur-Oise (France), Jean-Pierre Martinez was first a drummer for several rock bands before becoming a semiologist in advertising. He then began a career writing television scripts before turning to theatre and writing plays. He has written close to a hundred scripts for television and as many plays, some of which have already become classics (*Friday the 13th*, *Strip Poker*). He is one of the most produced contemporary playwrights in France and in other francophone countries. Several of his plays are also available in Spanish and English, and are regularly produced in the United States and Latin America.

Amateur and professional theatre groups looking for plays to perform can download Jean-Pierre Martinez's plays for free from his website La Comédiathèque (<https://comediatheque.net/>). However, public productions are subject to SACD filing.

For those who prefer reading or working from books, printed versions of his plays can be purchased from Amazon for a price similar to that of photocopying this document.

Other plays by the same author translated in English:

A Cuckoo's nest

A simple business dinner

An innocent little murder

Casket for two

Cheaters

Crisis and Punishment

Critical but stable

Four stars

Friday the 13th

Him and Her

Is there a pilot in the audience?

Just a moment before the end of the world

Lovestruck at Swindlemore Hall

New Year's Eve at the Morgue

One marriage out of two

Quarantine

Running on Empty

Strip Poker

The Ideal Son-in-Law

The Window across the courtyard

The Worst Village in England

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