

ct

On insomnia and midnight

(A tale to frighten chambermaids)

de
Edgar Chías

traducción de
David Johnston

(fragmento en inglés)

« Je m'suis fait tout p'tit devant une poupée Qui ferm'les yeux quand on la couche.
Je m'suis fait tout p'tit devant une poupée Qui fait *maman* quand on la touche. »

Georges Brassens

Characters

HE

SHE

Notes

The action takes place in the bedroom of a large hotel in a provincial city.

The space is intimate and estranging. Estranging, because nobody who occupies it really belongs there; these are people in transit. Intimate, because we can only show our darkest depths, our weakness and our tenderness, the illuminations of our doubt and the capriciousness of our love, when we share that space with someone who is also alone.

HE is a man growing old, or at least he thinks he is. He feels ill. He probably is. But what he is suffering from is the decline of an intelligence that is implacable with all things, including with himself.

SHE is young, probably pretty, almost beautiful perhaps. She is not quick to understand. Indeed, she is ingenuous, even cruel: but vital.

The moment, like all moments, is a time out of time – although it is worth saying that there are gaps between the unfolding

of these moments, periods of time in which something has happened and all that is left for us are its residue or its effects.

Light and shadow are fundamental elements, as are silence and looks.

1

The only light comes through the door, which is lying ajar. SHE's standing with her back to him, holding a glass containing brandy. HE's sitting in the shadows, watching without being seen.

SHE

Nobody saw him. And nobody's seen him since.

HE

What do the papers say?

SHE

Not much. Nothing new. Just that she threw herself into the river. The girl, she threw herself in. That's what they say.

HE

Nothing else.

SHE

No.

HE

No photo of him?

SHE

No.

HE

All right. Shall we start?

Pause.

SHE

Can I turn on the light?

HE

What's the matter...? It's like you were frightened. Is that what it is? Are you?

SHE

I'm not frightened, no. It's...different.

HE

Different, how?

SHE

I don't know, because I don't know how to say it. Things feel...complicated. Maybe I shouldn't be here.

HE

But you are here.

SHE

Yes.

HE

Because you're young. Everything always feels complicated, but it passes. It'll pass.

SHE

The light. Do you mind? I'd like to be able to see. That's all. Just that I'd like to be able to. I think it would help.

HE

You said that yesterday too.

SHE

I'd like to have been able to see yesterday, and I'd like to be able to today.

HE

Would you rather go?

SHE

I didn't say that.

HE

Do you want to stay then?

SHE

I didn't say that either.

HE

You can turn round a bit.

Pause.

SHE

Like that?

HE

Yes. Come closer.

SHE
Here?

HE
Yes. Now take a deep breath. You're starting to make me feel nervous.

SHE
So can I turn on the light? It's just that the shadows...

HE
Close the door then.

SHE
There'd be even less light.

HE
There'd be less shadows too.

SHE
No. It's okay like this.

HE
Let's start. Tell me something.

SHE
It's getting late.

HE
But you're here now.

SHE moves towards the door.

Stay still. Just as you are. Now relax. Tell me.

SHE
I don't know what to tell you.

HE
Tell me the same thing...

HE is racked by a sudden cough.

SHE
Are you all right? Do you need anything?

HE
I don't need anything.

SHE

I could turn on the light...

HE

You've got lovely legs...strong...sturdy legs.

SHE

How do you know?

HE

Just tell me the same thing as yesterday. I don't need anything. I just want to listen.

SHE

All right. But don't look at me. Don't. Please.

HE

I'll try not to. But I can't promise.

Pause.

SHE

Reverend Mother didn't like me.

HE

Reverend Mother was an idiot. All mothers are. How could she not like you?

SHE

She didn't like me, that's all there was to it.

Pause.

HE

Go on.

SHE

That time, the time I was telling you about, it was eight o'clock. The moon was round and red, like a cheese.

HE

Red cheese?

SHE

Cheese made of blood. It was in the window. Watching... warm.

HE

Warm? What was? Reverend Mother, one of the sisters, you? You didn't tell me that.

SHE

The moon. The moon was warm... Anyway, it felt warm. Reverend Mother was watching us. I felt scared. I could hear footsteps in the corridor. There was a bell somewhere...like an animal crying. All the sisters, just sitting there in silence, lifting their spoons up and down. Staring into space, chewing. Eating their cold soup.

HE

Cold, like your feet are?

SHE

How do you know?

HE

Because they are. Go on.

Pause.

SHE

I was trying so hard. My cheeks were all puffed out. I hate cornflour. It was slimy.

HE

How was it slimy? Like what? Tell me. Slimy like what?

SHE

I don't know. Like a guava, like a newborn baby, like a wet rat.

HE

Wet, like you?

SHE

How do you...?

HE

Good. Very good. Go on.

Pause.

SHE

I was always telling them I didn't like soup, that it was disgusting, especially cornflour soup, because it reminded me of my mother.

HE

That's not uncommon. My mother wasn't so much disgusting as pitiful. Go on.

SHE

It was disgusting because it reminded me of the soup my mother used to make - cold watery soup. It was the soup that was disgusting. Not my mother. I feel pity for her sometimes, but not disgust. It's

different.

HE

What else?

SHE

Well, they took no notice. Every time I complained, they made me say the 'Our Father' over and over again. 'None of your whingeing,' that's what they used to say. They'd make me kneel down on thistles and recite 'Our Fathers'... over and over again. Under the altar. The huge big empty altar. With its candles...smelling of grease, of rancid fat.

The sisters stood over me. If I got the words wrong, I had to start all over again. It worked. I felt... punished. That time, that time in particular, they didn't care that the soup was making me feel sick. I asked if I could go to the toilet.

HE

You needed to defecate?

SHE

No. I just needed to go to the toilet. To get out of there... to let things settle. I must have insisted too much because Reverend Mother got cross and started shouting. She wouldn't let me go.

HE

What was she shouting?

SHE

I don't remember. Terrible things...they scared me. She tried to make me swallow. She took the spoon and filled it with soup. Up to my mouth and down to the bowl, again and again, into my mouth and back down to the bowl.

HE

How many times?

SHE

I didn't count. A lot. The sisters were staring. They weren't scared, but they were staring. My teeth hurt. I thought I was going to be sick. I could feel my eyes filling up. I wasn't crying. But the tears were streaming from my eyes. I could see the moon in the window, like a big stain in the middle of the window, filling up like I was filling up. It filled with water and I filled with soup. Me with soup and the moon with water.

Pause.

HE

What happened then?

SHE

I said something. No, I don't remember. No, I did say something. Reverend Mother got cross, then everything suddenly went dark and quiet... Then I remember her with her fists full of hair...my

hair. It'd come away in her hand when she'd banged my head onto the table. A big hard wooden table.

HE
Was she very angry?

SHE
She was dirty, but she was angry too. Mostly dirty. I couldn't help it.

HE
What? What could you not help?

SHE
It's embarrassing.

HE
Tell me.

SHE
It's embarrassing.

HE
Tell me.

Pause.

SHE
The sick.

HE
Who was sick?

SHE
She was.

HE
Why?

SHE
Because it was disgusting.

HE
What was?

SHE
My face.

HE
Your face? Why?

SHE
Because it was covered in sick.

HE
She splashed you with sick?

SHE
Yes, but not really. I started it. The soup stuck in my throat, and I threw it up all over her habit. She held back for as long as she could, she was very particular, and she didn't vomit very much. That's what they told me. She blessed herself before she did. It splashed all over me, over my face and hair. The sisters were giggling. The rest isn't funny. Not that that bit was, but the rest was even less funny.

HE
What is the rest?

SHE
She did what she'd threatened to do. Please let me turn on the light.

HE
No, it's getting late. It's cold. It'll be time to go to sleep soon. There's no need to turn anything on. So what happened in the end?

SHE
I had to wash down the floors in the middle of the night.
The bit before the end was what she threatened. She threatened that if I didn't swallow the soup, if I spat it out, like I did sometimes, she told me...she told me that... And that's what she did.

HE
Did what?

SHE
That.

HE
What 'that'?

SHE
That. She spooned it into me.

HE
And you let her?

Pause.

SHE
How could I stop her?

HE
You let her.

SHE
She said that what God has blessed may not be wantonly wasted. That it was for my own good. I had to learn. That's what it was about. Learning to please the Lord.

HE
Unbelievable.

SHE
She said you shouldn't take the Lord's name in vain. She said that was why she was carrying out her threat. If she hadn't have done that, she'd have had to do something far worse.

HE
She's right. God's a stunted little bully. He loves humiliating...punishing. That's why he makes so many demands.

SHE
Yes, and I was scared. God's fury. And the Reverend Mother's. Together. It was too much for me.

HE
As if that means anything! They're just empty words.

SHE
I was scared. I felt ashamed.

HE
That other thing – the something far worse...would you have told me?

SHE
I'm not sure. The bit about me having to swallow her sick was enough. Anyway I can't imagine what far worse thing she could have thought up.

HE
Tell me again.

SHE
What?

HE
One more time, please. Tell me again.

SHE

It's not a good idea. It's late. I can come tomorrow. I'll tell you again tomorrow.

HE

All right. Tomorrow. Pass me my drink... No, closer.

Closer.

SHE moves towards him and holds out his drink. HE coughs.

SHE

You shouldn't be drinking. You don't sound well. You'll make yourself worse.

HE

What could be worse? This nothing life...that's God's real fury.

SHE

You're scaring me.

HE

You've lovely legs, sturdy, strong legs. Smooth skin.

SHE

How would you know? Maybe.

HE

Maybe. Cover yourself. Make sure nobody sees you on the way out.

SHE

I will.

HE

Come back tomorrow and tell me if they've found him, what people are saying. I'd like to know.

Come back tomorrow. I need to know.

SHE

I do too. I'd like to.

HE

Come back tomorrow. Early. Tomorrow.

SHE

I'll be here.

2

SHE is standing beside the door, which is now closed, waiting, holding a tray. HE is sitting on the bed. HE becomes progressively agitated.

HE

At first it's like you were being rocked. A slow sleepy rocking feeling. Then nausea. Burning, like fingernails scraping down the inside of your throat. Your arm...

SHE

Can I do anything? Your arm, you said, señor?

HE

Sssh. My arm, always the same one.

SHE

The same arm?

HE

My left arm, like some ridiculous, useless, limp...rag. You can't move it. You can't breathe, then you start sweating, your head's spinning with fever, and everything, all the normal things, change...

SHE

Your drink, señor?

HE

You don't understand any of this. You're still young. Come over here. It's like...you were moving through thick air, or floating uselessly inside some dense liquid, like spit. And you feel like a fool, like one of those fish with great big staring eyes that never see enough to stop themselves from being caught. The minutes stretch out in front of you, not moving, and time drags on endlessly. Things, objects, have a sort of echo, they spill out over their own edges. Your eyes are closed and there's no darkness, your head feels hollow, like it's been scooped out, but it's not quiet inside. You look out from a place that's already deep inside your eyes. Sounds are muffled, they lose their clarity, they slow down. Everything that's happening, it's happening inside you, that's how it feels. You feel an inertia that permeates everything, that disorientates you. Then you get the feeling...

Pause.

You don't know what I'm talking about, do you? Do you want to know?

SHE

No. Go on.

HE

The feeling of things blurring, of terrible pressure. And then a surge of unstoppable anxiety. That's what I'm talking about. The walls close in around you, they threaten you, the light mists over. Everything becomes...like an enemy. Grotesque and deformed. And you're able to watch

– I mean you can actually watch – how one of your eyes, usually it's your left eye, or it's always your left eye, and the whole left side of your head, they swell up and separate and are about to explode. And before that happens, they burst inside your head, in the most horrible detail: you see your arteries swirling with blood clots that could block them at any moment...you can feel the flow getting weaker, the flow of your polluted blood...

SHE

Señor...

HE

Your pulse pounding in your forehead, your teeth clenched, the paralysing pain, again and again and again...and that terrible desire to bite, to bite and beat and to break whatever it is so that you can drag it down with you, so you don't have to go on your own. Life's final useless gesture, to destroy. To keep your terror at bay, to inhabit the silence, to sink your nails into that one last moment, not to allow the light and that last flickering voice of consciousness to fade, to die. That final terror of going on your own... Because you disappear and...then there's nothing.

Pause. The rain can be seen through the window.

Look. It's still falling. It won't stop. Did you notice?

SHE

Do you mind if I go now?

HE

Answer me. I asked you a question, I believe.

SHE

Sorry...what was it?

HE

Whether you noticed. It hasn't stopped. Like yesterday.

SHE

Yes. It doesn't seem to have. And it won't.

HE

It won't stop. What sense is there to it? Can you tell me?
Is there any?

SHE

Sorry?

HE

The rain, snow, the way trees slowly defy the law of gravity. Is there any purpose to it?

SHE

I suppose there must be.

HE

You suppose, eh. You suppose. What is it you suppose?

SHE

I don't know. There's some reason. Everything's here for a reason.

HE

What reason? Nothing changes anything. If we weren't here, things like that would just go on the same, regardless. They were here before us and there was no sense to them.

Whatever sense they have now, it was us that gave it to them. We invented it because we wanted to. And we invented time. How else would we measure our failure, our decay? A yardstick for our crumbling bodies. What else are we – bags filled with flesh and fluids, that's all. And the bags get old, they rot, and they burst.

SHE

I don't understand. I don't know.

HE

So you don't understand, and you don't know and you don't worry about eternity, and why things are here for no reason. The simple things.

SHE

Simple things?

HE

Like this endless rain. Do you think it cares whether you and I are cold or frightened or don't understand? And do you know the worst thing, it's that all our will- power is focussed on not wanting to lose it, on wishing our life would go on for ever, on wanting to explain the senselessness of it. Because we're ruled by desire, animals driven by desire.

Pause.

You can close the window now.

SHE

I should be going.

HE

You haven't done what I asked.

SHE gives him the drink and goes to close the window. HE follows her with his eyes,

caressing her with his gaze.

You're very young. Do you dye your hair?

SHE

What? No.

HE

So that's your real colour. Good. That would be senseless. Although if nothing has any sense, then why not? But that's your natural colour, you say. You can never account for beauty. If it's there at all, it's in spite of ourselves. There's no need to be embarrassed. What's your name?

SHE

Sorry, I'm not allowed...

HE

You're not allowed? To have a name? What stupid rule prevents you from having a name? Tell me your name.

SHE

Sorry.

HE

Then tell me this: do you still believe in God?

SHE

I can't...

HE

You can't believe?

SHE

I'm not...

HE

So what can you do? Just stand there fiddling with the hem of your skirt? You're nervous.

SHE

Your hands.

HE

What about them?

SHE

They're...very elegant.

HE
Thank you.

SHE
They're...

HE
What? What are they?

SHE
Nothing... I was just imagining... It's late.

HE
Have you been working here long?

SHE
No.

HE
Are you new?

SHE
No.

HE
Then?

SHE
I'm not allowed. To talk, I mean...

HE
Not allowed? Why not? What they pay you for making beds, is it enough to buy that too? Does their money buy every single hour of your day? Everything your hands do? Now that sounds tempting, sinful even. The silences you're so keen to keep? Everything you do with your mouth? Every word you speak, few and far between though your words are? All of that for a few notes and a handful of coins a week? That's what they bought from you when you started work here? And your name into the bargain? I could pay more.

SHE
Good night.

HE
No, don't go. Please. I didn't intend to cause any offence. Well, I don't think I did. I wasn't suggesting anything, and I wouldn't...unless you wanted me to. There's no need to be...worried. This would be beneficial to both of us. I would be free to ask you for whatever, and you would feel freed, released, from the oppressive conditions of your employment. So, a little space of freedoms...for us both. What do you think? We could share my drink.

SHE
It's not allowed. I have to go.

HE
You're shivering.

SHE
I'm cold.

HE
I think it's warm.

SHE
But I'm cold.

HE
I'd like us to talk.

SHE
Some other time. Good night.

HE
Good morning. It's past midnight.

SHE
Good morning, then.

HE
You're beautiful and warm...like fruit ripening.

SHE
I don't know what you're talking about.

HE
Stay a moment. Just one moment.

SHE
I have to go.

HE
Please. You can go in a minute. I just want to look at you.
Stay still.

Pause. HE circles her, close enough to catch her scent. HE looks at her from behind.

SHE
You're scaring me.

HE

Don't turn round. Wait, please. Please. There's no rush. I wouldn't do the slightest thing to make you...anxious. Take a look at me and you'll see for yourself. There's nothing to be scared of. I'm not asking you to have a drink to take advantage of you; I don't mind one way or another, but it'll stop you shivering. I don't want to be alone. All I'm asking you to do is listen. And talk.

SHE

Talk? I don't know how to talk.

HE

That's a lie. You may not like talking, but you can't not talk. You have to talk to say you don't know how to talk. And that makes you an object of...considerable fascination. Take care, because sooner or later it'll cause you problems. Or pleasure. Naïvety is perverse.

SHE

I'm not.

HE

Naïve or perverse?

SHE

Neither.

HE

Another lie.

SHE

I have to go.

HE

I suppose you do. I'm going to be here for some time. Are you in every day?

SHE

I live here.

HE

All the better. I'm enjoying this drink. Will you bring me another one tomorrow?

SHE

You can order it from whoever's on tomorrow.

HE

You're on now and I'm ordering one for tomorrow.

SHE

Somebody else might bring it up.

HE

I'll ask for you; we'll say you made a good impression, and I was generous. I gave you a good tip.

SHE

There's no need.

HE

Here. Take it.

SHE

If you like.

SHE goes to take it. HE catches her hand. SHE pulls it away immediately.

HE

Do *you* like? That's what makes sense, makes sense of things. Me telling you to do it, which I'm not by the way, that isn't enough. I don't need some sort of object in a skirt. I want you to want to bring me the drink, to like bringing me the drink. It's wanting that makes sense; desire gives pleasure, and only pleasure makes sense, no matter what it costs.

SHE

I can bring your drink.

HE

Do you want to?

SHE

I don't know.

HE

You can't not know. I want – I need – you to.

SHE

Ninet brought it up yesterday.

HE

Now I know her name. I'm not interested in her bringing it though. I'm interested in you doing it.

SHE

Me? Why me?

HE

Because you listen.

SHE

I don't know.

HE

You've said that.

SHE

That's because I don't know. I'll think about it.

HE

No need to knock. The door'll be open.