

The Woodpecker's Tongue

by

Gustavo Ott, 2019

A 10 min play

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Characters:

VILMA

JORGE

Setting:

Facing the counter in a store. To the right, a window -or blinds- that lets in sunlight creating small symmetrical shadows on the floor. The spectators are customers.

LIGHTING effect*:

During the play, I use the LIGHTING stage direction repeatedly to suggest the movement of the shadows cast by the sun from right to left. This is a noticeable but delicate shift in the frame. This effect, repeated throughout the play, can be different each time, alternating not only the shape of the light but the cones of shadow. The idea is to give the impression of time passing. The effect is quick, avoiding blackouts, and shouldn't work as a transition. I think here the actors transform themselves -with wardrobe or an object- before the audience and that the play should be represented as though it were a single scene.

Theme music:

A piece that inspires nobility.

(Vilma, at the counter, waiting to be helped. Enter Jorge, looking at other customers)

JORGE: Who was here first?

VILMA: *(To the others)* Don't worry, this will be quick. *(TO JORGE)* I'm looking for a fishing rod.

JORGE: Do you fish with friends or on your own?

VILMA: Why?

JORGE: We have special rods for fishing on your own or with other people. There's even one for duet fishing.

VILMA: Now that's something I never heard of before.

JORGE: It sounds a bit silly, I know. Are you into fishing? *(A BIT SEDUCTIVELY)* By yourself or with company?

VILMA: Lately, by myself. *(LAUGHS)* When I was little, I used to go fishing with my dad.

JORGE: I do it by myself more often than with other people too.

VILMA: Don't your friends have time?

JORGE: They're all busy. Making plans with them is harder than solving a Rubik's cube. If one can, the other one can't; if the morning's no good, noon's worse, and the afternoon forget it. Did you use to do it near here?

VILMA: Fish? No, we'd go over to the pier.

JORGE: Back then there were tons of fish, right?

VILMA: And animals. Sometimes you ended up being the catch.

JORGE: *(LAUGHS)* What do you mean?

VILMA: One time we came across a crocodile. And when we ran, the monster came after us.

JORGE: And what happened?

VILMA: We made it inside the car, but the creature sat there right next to it waiting for us with his enormous jaws wide open. And all I could do was imagine what it would be like inside the jaws of crocodiles.

JORGE: How terrifying! When was that?

VILMA: I must've been eight.

JORGE: So yesterday then.

VILMA: Thanks, but I'm twenty-one now.

JORGE: And I'm twenty-four. (HOLDS OUT HIS HAND) I'm Jorge.

VILMA: Vilma.

JORGE: I've got crocodile repellent too, if you're interested. (THEY LAUGH. HE PULLS OUT A FISHING ROD) We have this model fishing rod. It's cheap and it doesn't break easily. It comes with a reel to let the line out and reel it back in. It recognizes when a fish hits the line and isn't fooled by rocks or plants.

VILMA: Does it clean and gut the fish and fry it too?

JORGE: (SEDUCTIVELY) If that's what you want.

(LIGHTING* VILMA LAUGHS. SHE LOOKS TO BOTH SIDES. GIVES A RAP ON THE COUNTER)

VILMA: And which of those guns would you recommend for me, Jorge?

JORGE: For hunting or...?

VILMA: For personal protection.

JORGE: Seriously? Personal protection?

VILMA: One that's reliable. That won't jam.

JORGE: Vilma? That's your name, right? (SHE NODS) Are you asking because you had one before?

VILMA: Yes, an automatic. And it jammed.

JORGE: While you were trying to shoot?

VILMA: Of course.

JORGE: But good god... Who?!

VILMA: I live alone, with my mom. One night we heard noises in the house. (JORGE IS FRIGHTENED) We got up, Mom got the gun and when we realized there was a man coming through the window, she tried to shoot to scare him, but the gun jammed.

JORGE: Sweet mother of Jesus!

VILMA: Of the immaculate conception. And us without a gun to fire.

JORGE: (SHOWS HER A 38 PISTOL) This one's a big seller. And it doesn't jam, it protects you.

VILMA: Do you guarantee it?

JORGE: Of course. That's why it's so big. That way if it doesn't fire, you can crack the intruder's skull in a single blow.

(THEY LAUGH. LIGHTING.* JORGE TAKES OFF HIS JACKET)

VILMA: So, which one do you recommend today, Jorge?

JORGE: (WITH A MAGNUM 17) This one's really popular with women, because of its weight. And it's very reliable. Smaller than the other one you bought a while...

VILMA: Right, I know. It's the fourth gun we're buying!

JORGE: Don't say it like that. That customer's going to think you're arming a battalion. And I'm your accomplice.

VILMA: You are my accomplice, Jorge!

JORGE: Why? Why are we going out? (TO THE CUTOMER) We've only gone out seven times and we've slept together nine.

VILMA: (ASHAMED) Shut up! Don't say that!

JORGE: (TO THE CUSTOMER) She's taking advantage of me and my innocence. I told her no, but she kept at it and at it and there I was, terrified, staring down the barrel of a gun she lost later, what could I do? I gave in to her dishonorable intentions.

VILMA: (TO THE CUSTOMER) He's an idiot, don't listen to him.

JORGE: (TO THE CUSTOMER) That's why she likes me. (ANSWERING THE CUSTOMER) What happened to the other ones? My other girlfriends? The guns! (TO VILMA) Go on, tell him, silly.

VILMA: The silly guns disappear on me. I don't know why. The first one jammed and I sold it. The second one I hid and now I can't find it. The other one got stolen.

JORGE: Keep it up, losing lethal weapons. (TO THE CUSTOMER) I honestly don't know why she wants it. When she has me now.

VILMA: (TO THE CUSTOMER) It's just we're expecting our first child.

JORGE: I think it's because of the crocodile. A crocodile with enormous jaws chasing after her since she was a little girl!

VILMA: Don't be silly. It's because you have to live on the defensive, love. That's something you have to be a woman to understand. (VILMA HANDS BACK THE GUN) I'll take it.

JORGE: For your defense wouldn't you prefer a newer model?

VILMA: They're all the same to me. Bullet, trigger, blow, lost, and that's all.

(LIGHTING*. JORGE CHECKS HIS PHONE. DURING THE DIALOGUE THEY SWITCH PLACES. NOW SHE'S THE ONE SELLING AND HE IS AT THE COUNTER)

JORGE: (LOOKING TO THE OTHER SIDE) Did you see where Jorgito went? Your son is a disaster, Vilma.

VILMA: My son? He's just like you!

JORGE: But the savage in the family is you.

VILMA: Don't say that in front of the lady, she'll think it's true.

JORGE: (TO THE CUSTOMER) She's wrestled snakes. She's yanked the teeth out of a crocodile. She has the aim of an Olympic sharpshooter. And she collects skulls. Who do you think the savage is in this marriage?

VILMA: (TO THE CUSTOMER) Jorgito is three years old, he can't sit still, and he likes to hide. And his father, who doesn't pay attention to anything, lives in between: half the day lost and the other half hiding.

JORGE: But with the energy of an out-of-control teenager. (HE SEES SOMETHING, IS ALARMED) Wait, I just saw him. I better go get him.

VILMA: If you saw him let him play.

JORGE: It's just he's in the lamp section!

VILMA: Run!

(LIGHTING*. VILMA TAKES HER PHONE. TALKS TO A CUSTOMER)

VILMA: I'm sorry I'm paying so much attention to my phone. Don't think I'm not helping you, ma'am. My work comes first. But the thing is I'm in the middle of a legal mess. No, it's not serious. It's just a divorce. We were married for nine years. (SHOWING HER A LOCK) You like this one? Do you want a lock with two keys or one? Because you can't let them paralyze you.

The lock? The divorce?

That's it: we can't let it paralyze us.

No, it's not the divorce, it's the battle.

Hard? It's life or death. More death than anything else, really. Money. Custody. Everything all together. I made up so much stuff and he's faked so much too that now we don't know what's true and what's not. In front of the judge we've said all kinds of things to each other. And forget run-of-the-mill insults: criminals is the nicest thing we've called each other. That's right. Criminals. And here ever since I got married, I quit buying guns to defend myself, well now I think I need a big one, a very big one!

(LISTENS) Your divorce was awkward but easy? Well, maybe you didn't love him that much. How'd you do it? That. Not love him that much. I've never been able to. (PAUSE) It's just I fall in love to the death. I've always thought it's out of curiosity. Like what's it like to love like that, like when suddenly you're curious about things you don't have or that have nothing to do with you. Like... Ah... How big is the sun? Or how did they make ice when there were no refrigerators? (BEAT) Love is a thief. Maybe it's better to avoid it. (THE CUSTOMER POINTS TO SOMETHING) What do you want? The lock... The combination lock? The shotgun! Wow! (SHE GETS IT) No, ma'am, this shotgun isn't for sale.

(LIGHTING*. VILMA TAKES DOWN THE SHOTGUN. SHE PUTS HER PURSE ON THE COUNTER AND PULLS OUT A PAPER. SHE TALKS TO ANOTHER CUSTOMER)

VILMA: Lately I've been having hot flashes. I don't know where my head is. I've had a horrific week. It's these medicines, they have a side effect I hate: they affect my memory and I forget everything. (LISTENS TO A CUSTOMER) At my age? Thanks, but I'm forty-eight already, honey.

(LIGHTING*. VILMA PUTS A HANDKERCHIEF OVER HER HEAD. WE HEAR A CHILD PASSING BY. ENTER JORGE)

JORGE: What can we do with him! Jorgito's been that way ever since he was a kid, Vilma. Curious. Rebellious. Smart-mouthed.

VILMA: They all say he's taller than most people and that's why he's so violent.

JORGE: He got my grandfather's height, that's for sure.

VILMA: But his temper he got from your dad. So, nothing from me. If I hadn't given birth to him, I'd say his mother was someone else.

JORGE: Maturity bites.

VILMA: Like a crocodile. The thing is before our divorce he wasn't like that. But when we split that's when the behavior problems started. The psychologist said that they're stages: at first kids turn into the jealous husband, then the protective friend, and then later on the one who leaves you again.

JORGE: Time will help.

VILMA: The jealousy, the protectiveness or the getting left?

JORGE: All three. Girlfriends change everything.

(LIGHTING*. VILMA TAKES OFF THE HANDKERCHIEF AND EATS COOKIES)

VILMA: These cookies are delicious. They taste like pastry cream; like vanilla milkshakes; like old music.

(LIGHTING*. VILMA PICKS UP A MOUSETRAP)

VILMA: I found this.

(JORGE TAKES IT, LIKE AN EXPERT)

JORGE: How come you have mice in the house, Vilma?

VILMA: One. A rat.

JORGE: Wait, how do you know that?

VILMA: Because I saw it, of course.

JORGE: What's it cost?

VILMA: Between twelve and fifteen.

JORGE: You're buying it, Vilma.

VILMA: I mean, because of what you owe me.

JORGE: Is it somehow my fault you have a rat in your house?

VILMA: (TAKES OUT HER WALLET) Never mind, Jorge. I'll pay for it.

JORGE: This is the worst time for me, Vilma. I owe everybody.

VILMA: But what you owe me isn't a debt, Jorge, it's a responsibility.

JORGE: And I've always come through for you.

VILMA: Not always, because you aren't coming through now. So not always. Even though I had to ask a judge to scold you!

JORGE: I barely have enough to pay the rent this month.

VILMA: Doesn't your girlfriend help?

JORGE: We're not together anymore.

VILMA: She left you.

JORGE: How do you know? How do you know she's the one who left me, and it wasn't me that kicked her out?

VILMA: Intuition.

JORGE: Your curiosity is making your head spin. I bet you asked!

VILMA: I like to start my day off well-informed.

JORGE: It's not good to be so curious. It's uncomfortable for other people. Sometimes it's rude. Disrespectful.

(VILMA PUTS THE MOUSETRAP IN A BAG)

VILMA: Shall we pay?

(JORGE AND VILMA LOOK AT EACH OTHER. JORGE MAKES NO MOVE TO PAY. VILMA THEN TAKES OUT HER CREDIT CARD. LIGHTING*.)

JORGE: Jorgito? Really?

VILMA: I checked all his hiding places. Nothing. Not even his friends have heard from him. He's gone, Jorge!

JORGE: But he's barely nineteen!

VILMA: Almost twenty. And he took my shotgun.

JORGE: God help him, Vilma. Or luck.

VILMA: "Luck is the residue of design."

JORGE: What's that?

VILMA: Me, being curious.

JORGE: So now what will you do, miss curious?

VILMA: With what?

JORGE: With the fact you'll be alone, right?

VILMA: Alone with myself, sure.

JORGE: You're beautiful.

VILMA: But skittish.

JORGE: Why?

VILMA: I live in fear of a monster that lives under my bed.

JORGE: Another crocodile?

VILMA: There's always one lying in wait for you there.

(LIGHTING*. JORGE BRUSHES HIS HAIR. SMELLS SOMETHING. MUSIC)

JORGE: You're wearing perfume? Is it new?

VILMA: It's the same as always.

JORGE: You smell good, delicious.

VILMA: Like what?

JORGE: Like a vanilla flower. Like music.

VILMA: But, Jorge, it's the same perfume I've always worn.

(THEY BOTH LAUGH. SHE GOES TO HIM. VILMA LOOKS AT HIM AND KISSES HIM, VERY PASSIONATELY. LIGHTING*. MUSIC PLAYS)

VILMA: You know that gun I'd put away and could never find finally showed up? At least we know where it is now.

JORGE: The Magnum? That's what I'm talking about, Vilma. I want to help you. You're not that young anymore.

VILMA: I raised my son, he got lost, he came back. And if one day he gives me a grandchild, I'll take him too. I can raise them all, Jorge. You too, if I have to.

JORGE: Don't worry. You won't have to. I'm on my own.

VILMA: Did you get a job yet?

(LIGHTING*. JORGE PUTS ON A CAP)

JORGE: No, not yet. This city and its suburbs have gotten difficult for me. I don't know how to measure them. Everything's so blah and yet, so special. What about you?

VILMA: My job? One more year here and I'll get my pension.

JORGE: I don't know how you've done it, Vilma. I left his counter five thousand years ago. You took over and you've been working here a lifetime. How do you do it?

VILMA: What?

JORGE: One single job your whole life.

VILMA: You do what we do. Now what?

JORGE: Now nothing, Vilma. It turns out apparently I'm old. Suddenly, I'm old. It's barely been 15 minutes of life and it turns out I'm old.

(LIGHTING*. VILMA PICKS UP A BIRD FEEDER)

VILMA: I like this one for our bedroom window. The sparrows are supposed to like it. And blackbirds and starlings. Can you imagine waking up in the morning to the sound of birds singing? I've even seen woodpeckers go to it!

JORGE: Don't they make a lot of noise?

VILMA: Noisy as hell. But they're pretty.

JORGE: I don't think I've ever seen one. Maybe on TV. Woody Woodpecker?

VILMA: They're rare. They have a very long tongue. To store it, their tongue goes all the way around their brain and goes through all the holes: mouth, nose, ears.

JORGE: A tongue that goes through all the senses.

VILMA: Sexy, huh? But they peck up to 12 thousand times a day and with all those blows to the head it's their tongue that protects their brain.

JORGE: What if it decides to make its racket at 6 in the morning and that crazy bird drills into our dreams?

VILMA: Well, we'll just snuggle together.

JORGE: So how is it you know so much about birds now?

VILMA: Curiosity. I look up everything on the internet. I'm always informed. (VILMA PULLS OUT HER PHONE) Let's check it. *The woodpecker's tongue*. Let's see. (MUSIC) Leonardo da Vince?

JORGE: The Mona Lisa one? What's the artist got to do with the woodpecker's tongue?

VILMA: (READING) It's his diary. It's Leonardo da Vinci's to-do list for the day. It says: (READING. THEME MUSIC) "Ten things to do today, February 3, 1490: Measure the city and its suburbs. Find the squaring of the circle. Study proportions. Understand how ice is made. Learn to repair a canal. Measure the sun. Find a skull. Measure a cadaver in finger lengths. Describe the jaws of the crocodile. And measure the length of the woodpecker's tongue."

JORGE: All that in a day!

VILMA: And without internet!

JORGE: I can't even eat lunch in one day!

VILMA: I guess a day is really long if you measure it in thoughts.

JORGE: That bit about squaring the circle? What's that?

(VILMA EXTENDS JORGE'S ARMS AND LEGS, LIKE *ECCE HOMO*, AND TRACES A CIRCLE IN THE AIR. AND OVER THE CIRCLE, A SQUARE)

JORGE: Beautiful. And simple. Does it say how long the woodpecker's tongue is?

VILMA: Yes.

JORGE: How long?

(SHE KISSES HIM PLAYFULLY. IMAGE OF *ECCE HOMO* BY DA VINCE. THE MUSIC CONTINUES. VILMA ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE COUNTER, AS A CUSTOMER. THERE IS AN EMPLOYEE WE DON'T SEE. IT CAN BE A SPECTATOR. VILMA SHOWS HIM A SMALL POSTER)

VILMA: Are you the new employee? Wow, that was fast. I mean two weeks ago there was a girl here. Do you think I can hang one of these signs here? It says: "Jorge Arenas lives in this neighborhood." It has his picture. (READS) "69 years old. Last seen near the hospital wearing jeans and a white shirt. Needs medication urgently." He has moments when he forgets everything and wanders around not knowing even his own name. Then he gets better, but I'm scared something could happen to him. The thing is, a long, long time ago, he used to work here and maybe someone will recognize him. I used to work here too and... (STARTLED) No? I can't? It's a small poster...

(LIGHTING*. VILMA USES A CANE. SHE TALKS TO ANOTHER EMPLOYEE)

VILMA: Are you new? They really go through employees here! In two years, I must have seen a dozen. But you have a pretty face. (SHE SHOWS HER THE CANE). I'll take this one. And the duet fishing rod. Can you ship it to my house?

(VILMA PAYS. SHE TURNS AROUND)

VILMA: Love. Jorge. Jorge. (JORGE APPEARS BESIDE HER. HE DOESN'T HEAR HER. TO THE EMPLOYEE) The thing is he's a bit deaf now. Because of his illness. (LOUDER, TO JORGE) Jorge!

JORGE: Who's Jorge?

VILMA: You're Jorge.

JORGE: I'm not Jorge.

VILMA: Who are you then?

JORGE: I'm the woodpecker.

VILMA: Ok, stick out your tongue.

(JORGE DOES. SHE IS GOING TO TOUCH IT BUT ASKS HIM TO STICK IT OUT FARTHER. HE DOES. SHE LAUGHS. SWEET, VILMA GIVES HIM A KISS THAT IS PASSIONATE, ADOLESCENT, AWKWARD, LIKE IT WAS THE VERY FIRST TIME.)

VILMA: Fine, woodpecker. Let's go home, my love!

(Jorge walks to her with difficulty. Vilma gives him the cane and takes his arm. She takes her card and says goodbye. Near blackout. Only the shadows cast by the sunshine remain on the floor and the music and the sound of the woodpecker pecking.)

The end