

The Sin Eater

by

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The Sin Eater

DESCRIPTION

Margaret Pasqualini, a professional photographer, is arrested at a photo lab for taking nude pictures of her son, pictures she said were part of an exhibit she was putting together as a final project for her class in advanced photographic techniques. Police had been notified by the lab owner about the pictures and were forced to arrest Pasqualini when she refused to accompany them to the station. Rather than agree to a plea bargain in her subsequent conviction for malicious destruction of property and disorderly conduct, she instead chooses to go to jail for 30 days. There she meets Vera Cortez, serving 25 years for being an accomplice in the murder of her own child.

Cortez, as she prefers to be called, is from East Harlem, but she originally grew up in Puerto Rico, from a family which provided her a good education and a comfortable home. At 17 or 18 she became involved in the independence movement, specifically in working for the release of Los Quince (fifteen Puerto Rican men and women in American jails, accused of being members of either FALN or Los Macheteros). She narrowly escaped the FBI crackdown that resulted in the arrest of scores of Puerto Ricans, and her family shipped her off to live with relatives in New York City.

There, she struck out on her own. Unfortunately, life did not treat her well: she had two children with two different men and eventually ended up in an abusive relationship (with whom she has a third child). This man killed her daughter by beating her to death; Cortez is arrested and convicted as an accomplice to the murder and agrees to serve 25 years in prison.

Their month-long relationship opens up the possibility for a real and vital connection between people who, though from completely different classes and experiences, can find common ground. Truces also raises questions about the thin line between art and exploitation.

CHARACTERS

- Margaret Pasqualini, photographer, mid-30s
- Vera Cortez, prisoner, 31 years of age, from East Harlem; originally from Puerto Rico
- Prison Guard, female, mid-30s.

TIME

- Present

SETTING

Women's prison (based on MCI -Framingham MA)

SET

- Two beds, a footlocker at the foot of each.
- A table and two chairs

- A deck of cards on the table
- CORTEZ's bookshelf, overflowing with books
- On the back wall CORTEZ has two posters which indicate Puerto Rican/Latino pride
- A small Puerto Rican flag
- A diploma hanging on the wall -- associates degree in communications
- On stage right is MARGARET's area; stage left, CORTEZ's area.

MISCELLANEOUS

Suggestions are made throughout the script for sound, lighting, and music, but the director and lighting and sound designer are free to make whatever changes necessary to produce the show as long as the choices are in the spirit of those suggested in the script.

NOTE: At various points in the script the GUARD enters to check what is going on. The director is free to have the GUARD check in at other times as if he or she feels it's appropriate.

The Sin Eater

SOUND: Selection from opening of Lou Reed's "Busload of Faith" from New York.

LIGHTS: Up.

Bare stage. MARGARET PASQUALINI, VERA CORTEZ, and GUARD enter carrying various props. The three set up the "cell" for the play. They snap their fingers.

LIGHTS: Down.

* * * * *

SOUND: Music morphs into the background sounds of a prison.

CORTEZ is asleep.

GUARD stands with MARGARET PASQUALINI. PASQUALINI wears a light jacket and holds a paper bag.

GUARD speaks into her shoulder mike.

GUARD
5 - 1 - 7 - 6 - open.

SOUND: A metal door slides open.

GUARD guides MARGARET into the cell.

CORTEZ jerks awake.

Tamara? CORTEZ

It's not -- GUARD

Tamara? CORTEZ

It's not Tamara. GUARD

Tamara -- CORTEZ

It's not Tamara -- GUARD

What -- CORTEZ

GUARD
It's the dream. Again.

CORTEZ
Who is [she] --

GUARD
Need aspirin?

CORTEZ
Take care of it myself -- who --

GUARD
Always tough coming out of the dream.

CORTEZ
You done?

GUARD
I'm done.

CORTEZ
So her?

GUARD
I told you --

CORTEZ
That's right -- the new beef.

GUARD
Don't be nasty.

CORTEZ
The virgin territory.

GUARD
Better but not by much.

GUARD puts her hand on the small of MARGARET's back, moves her forward.

GUARD
Clock is now ticking officially.

GUARD steps outside the cell.

GUARD
5 - 1 - 7 - 6 - closed.

SOUND: Door sliding closed.

GUARD leaves.

CORTEZ

Bienvenidos.

No response from MARGARET.

CORTEZ

That footlocker is yours.

MARGARET opens the footlocker, puts her bag and jacket in, closes it.

CORTEZ

That bed is yours. So sit down. Sit down -- I am not known to bite.

MARGARET sits.

CORTEZ

Standard operating procedure, so that things start right right off. I am tired, and I am going to get some sleep, so I do not want to be disturbed. You are only here for a month -- I live here, Boricua prisoner of war -- you are just a radar blip, so --

MARGARET

Thought you wanted to sleep.

CORTEZ

¿Cómo?

MARGARET

You said you were tired --

CORTEZ gives MARGARET a straight look that MARGARET holds.

MARGARET

You said you want to sleep, so you should take your sleep.

CORTEZ

The rules of the house are what I say they are.

MARGARET

Goes without saying.

CORTEZ

I will say it anyways.

MARGARET

I'm just a blip of beef.

CORTEZ

Now I will sleep.

But before CORTEZ can lay down, MARGARET stretches out and faces the wall.

CORTEZ

No one has slept away their whole thirty days.

MARGARET

Wanna bet?

CORTEZ

What are you willing to bet?

PASQUALINI ignores her.

LIGHTS: Fade to black

SOUND: Background sounds continue as transition

* * * * *

Scene 1

LIGHTS: Up to "night light" -- dim, indirect.

CORTEZ sleeps.

MARGARET rolls out of bed. She creeps over to look at CORTEZ's face, studies it until CORTEZ stirs in her sleep. MARGARET leans back, then leans back in to study the face. She frames it in a "shutter" made by placing index finger against index finger and thumb against thumb, making a square. She "snaps" a photo by closing and opening the "shutter."

CORTEZ stirs again, and MARGARET sits back on her bed.

CORTEZ jerks out of her sleep.

CORTEZ

Goddamn it! Goddamn it!

CORTEZ moves around the cell, waving away the demons.

CORTEZ

Leave me alone -- just leave me alone -- Tamara -
- Tamara --

CORTEZ stands there, staring into the dark, then becomes aware that MARGARET is watching. They lock eyes.

They remain this way as a bell or alarm goes off.

SOUND: A wake-up call, prison sounds.

LIGHTS: Up to full.

* * * * *

Scene 2: The First Degree

GUARD walks by to check on them, then exits.

SOUND: Background noises gone by "Goes out after a month."

CORTEZ
Some advice?

MARGARET
If it's free.

CORTEZ
Eat something.

MARGARET
If there was something to eat.

CORTEZ
You have to eat.

MARGARET
Can't eat.

CORTEZ
Fake it, then, rent check, or you are not going to make it.

MARGARET gives her a blank look.

CORTEZ
"Rent check." Goes out after a month.

This brings a small smile to MARGARET, which CORTEZ notes.

CORTEZ
Ah --

MARGARET
What now?

CORTEZ
Now nothing. The jefes have a lockdown on for contraband. Standard operating procedure.

CORTEZ takes out a thick book to read.

MARGARET
Not used to sitting so still --

CORTEZ
No hurry to be in a hurry around here.

MARGARET
What are you reading?
MARGARET's leg bounces.

CORTEZ
Chill.

MARGARET
Sorry.
MARGARET taps her fingers on the table.

CORTEZ
I said --
MARGARET gets up and paces.

CORTEZ
No parades.
MARGARET sits and fidgets.

CORTEZ
You do have the scorpions --

MARGARET
Just --

CORTEZ
Just what?

MARGARET
Just -- thinking.

CORTEZ
Just control it.

MARGARET
Can't just turn it off --

CORTEZ
Just have to. Gets very close in here.
MARGARET's leg jumps up and down.

MARGARET
I'm trying!

CORTEZ
Not hard enough.

MARGARET
So -- what? You seem to give a lot of advice.

CORTEZ
Those scorpions make you deaf to advice --

MARGARET
Yeah?

CORTEZ
Because they force you to face that you are a
loser --

MARGARET
Is that what yours do to you at night? "Tamara,
Tamara" -- shit! sorry, I'm sorry --

CORTEZ puts down her book and moves toward MARGARET.

CORTEZ
You need some self-discipline.

CORTEZ sits in the other chair across from MARGARET. After a pause,
CORTEZ simply places her hand on MARGARET's jumping leg. MARGARET's
leg goes still.

CORTEZ
I told you you could do it. Now offload what you
are thinking.

MARGARET
Wouldn't even call it thinking, all right -- all
jumbled --

CORTEZ
Like smoke up in your head --

MARGARET's leg shakes. CORTEZ calms it.

CORTEZ
Smoke, jumbled --

MARGARET
My son -- it's my son I'm thinking about --

CORTEZ
His name?

MARGARET
Alex.

CORTEZ
Age?

MARGARET
Four.

Married? CORTEZ

Alex? MARGARET

You, tonta. CORTEZ

I am. MARGARET

Have a name? CORTEZ

Matthew. MARGARET

He treats you well? CORTEZ
Your husband, not Alex.

Yes. MARGARET

Cheat on you? CORTEZ

Not that I know about -- MARGARET

Yell at you? CORTEZ

No. MARGARET

Hit you? CORTEZ

Never. MARGARET

Provide for you? CORTEZ

We've got -- we run -- a small construction company together. MARGARET

Equal down the middle? CORTEZ

MARGARET

I go out on the jobs -- he makes sure the money makes it into the bank account.

CORTEZ

A "woman in the building trades."

MARGARET

Apprenticed my way through the shit of men to become that.

CORTEZ

Makes you proud.

MARGARET

I've earned all my certificates, all my chops, and though the word is "foreman," I get to be the boss -- and that is sweet.

CORTEZ

A little revenge.

MARGARET

For having "Property of the Cunt" sprayed across my locker? Yeah, that's true -- who wouldn't -- for all the -- but seems stupid now --

CORTEZ

Who can tell, forewoman? So, nice son. Husband who treats you human. Entrepreneur. A life composed.

MARGARET

Not that it's all --

CORTEZ

It is never all that, is it? -- but it does not sound bad.

MARGARET

No, it's not bad at all.

CORTEZ

So what would make you go away from what is not bad at all and stick yourself here with me?

MARGARET doesn't answer.

CORTEZ

Notice your leg?

MARGARET notices how still it is.

MARGARET

Huh.

CORTEZ

And without my hand.

MARGARET

Huh.

CORTEZ

Not about me wanting to know. It is about you wanting to tell. Unless I read you wrong.

MARGARET

My leg.

CORTEZ

Yes -- the world is full of signs.

MARGARET

Huh. It's just -- all so stupid --

CORTEZ

"Stupid" is not eating for two days.

MARGARET

"Stupid" is trying to sleep through it all -- you were right [about] --

CORTEZ

I learned that on my apprenticeship. Look, just start.

MARGARET takes a deep relaxing breath.

MARGARET

What would make me go away. Okay -- I got bounced here because of disorderly conduct. Plus malicious destruction of property.

CORTEZ

Bring it to the details.

MARGARET

I damaged a photo lab. I fought a police officer -- two -- this forewoman resisted arrest --

CORTEZ

This lab -- did it take more than an hour to print your pictures?

MARGARET

No, they printed the pictures --

CORTEZ

Then they did a bad job.

MARGARET

No, no, it wasn't [anything like] -- they wouldn't give me back what was mine when I asked for it. And they had called in the police to make sure --

MARGARET falls silent. MARGARET's leg jumps. CORTEZ points at it. MARGARET controls it.

CORTEZ

So what was in the pictures that needed a police escort?

MARGARET

Nothing.

CORTEZ

Will not wash. Of whom?

MARGARET

Of Alex -- my son, Alex.

CORTEZ gets up. She lets the silence hang.

MARGARET

I didn't do anything wrong.

CORTEZ

You wrestled with police officers. You "damaged" property --

MARGARET

I didn't do anything wrong.

CORTEZ

So what do you think you did?

MARGARET

It's what they did.

CORTEZ

You are the one in here.

MARGARET

They were just pictures of Alex.

CORTEZ

Not "just pictures," obviously --

MARGARET

For a photography class, a project for my class -
- but people saw -- things -- that weren't there.

CORTEZ

You gave them some reason.

MARGARET

No reason! I knew what I knew, solid --

CORTEZ

So, the mama lion defending her cub --

MARGARET

Against all their filth --

CORTEZ

They offer you a deal?

MARGARET

I had a deal -- I could've taken a deal.

CORTEZ

But you did not--

MARGARET

Eighteen months probation, 50 hours of community
service, \$300 in restitution, and a written
apology.

CORTEZ lets the deal, and MARGARET's refusal, hang in the air.

CORTEZ

All you had to do was fake the sorry --

MARGARET

I couldn't.

CORTEZ

-- and you would be at home right now --

Silence.

CORTEZ

Those pictures, amiga? What is up with the
pictures?

Silence.

CORTEZ

Maybe here is where you should be, a mother who
abandons her child --

MARGARET

I didn't abandon anybody -- I protected --

CORTEZ

You chose principle -- how is it protecting anyone to choose principle with your whole family hungering for you to stay?

MARGARET

It's Alex. My principle is Alex. I bet even you can understand that.

CORTEZ

Can he?

MARGARET

He'll understand. Someday.

CORTEZ

How is that going to work?

MARGARET

Because I'll tell him, that's how. When he grows up.

CORTEZ

I am sure the anticipation keeps the smile on his four-year old face right now. This is all about you, yes?

MARGARET

About me for him -- so he'll know --

CORTEZ

Know what?

MARGARET

That nothing ever happened.

CORTEZ

Except that his mother disappeared on him for a month.

MARGARET

He'll find out that was a small price --

CORTEZ

Such faith.

MARGARET

I'm tired.

CORTEZ

Selfishness will do that to you and your "kind."

CORTEZ sits at the table, picks up the deck of cards, lays out a game of solitaire.

CORTEZ

I read about you, you know. When they told me you were coming. The prison librarian gave me articles.

MARGARET

My tax dollars at work --

CORTEZ

Don't look so shocked --

MARGARET

More like disgusted --

CORTEZ

Your choice.

MARGARET

You know, so why are you jerking [me around] --

CORTEZ

Because newspaper articles never give me the information I want.

MARGARET

The dirt --

CORTEZ

"Dirt" is not what I want --

MARGARET

Then what?

CORTEZ

We will get to that later.

MARGARET

I want to get to it now.

CORTEZ

For now, you get this about this: lines, Margarita Pasqualini. On a tiny island like ours, lines mean everything. Keeping them clear, making them straight --

MARGARET

And what info can I get for some lines that'll keep you off my back?

CORTEZ

I can give you my name.

MARGARET
That's it?

CORTEZ
I know you have not read about me.

MARGARET
That's it?

CORTEZ
That is it.

MARGARET
So read me your name.

CORTEZ
Cortez. I have a first name -- Vera -- but do not use it. I go by Cortez. You I am calling Pasqualini.

MARGARET
No.

CORTEZ
Pascua, the feast -- Pasqualini, the little feast --

MARGARET
No.

CORTEZ
So read it to me.

MARGARET
I go by Margaret. Not Pasqualini, not a little feast. Definitely not Margarita.

CORTEZ
Say that again.

MARGARET
Which part?

CORTEZ
"I go by -- "

MARGARET
I go by Margaret? I go by Margaret.

CORTEZ
Now we have some lines.

MARGARET
On our little island.

CORTEZ
For the turn of a moon.

MARGARET
You like this all the time?

CORTEZ
No -- sometimes I talk a lot.

MARGARET
Even in your sleep.

CORTEZ
That shows some spirit -- I can respect that.

MARGARET
Means you shut up now?

CORTEZ doesn't answer, continues to play the game. MARGARET goes to the table.

MARGARET
You missed the seven.

Instead of moving the seven, CORTEZ gathers the cards together, shuffles, and sets up a new game.

CORTEZ
My mantra: In for a dime, in for the dollar.

MARGARET
I didn't do anything wrong.

CORTEZ
I think you still come up ninety cents short.

CORTEZ continues to play. MARGARET musses up the cards, then goes to her bed and lies down. CORTEZ rearranges the cards, sets up a new game, continues to play.

LIGHTS: Down.

SOUND: Transition music.

* * * * *

Scene 3: The Second Degree

LIGHTS: Up.

MARGARET is sitting at the table drawing in a sketch pad with pencils. CORTEZ plays solitaire.

CORTEZ

You ate today.

MARGARET

You mean I got it down.

CORTEZ

Only took you a week.

MARGARET

Incarceration as my diet plan. When do we do something other than sit around?

CORTEZ

Soon, from what I hear -- they finally found who and what they wanted to find. And I can go back to my class.

MARGARET

A class?

CORTEZ

Not important. What is it like, being famous?

MARGARET

Is that what you call it?

CORTEZ

You were. Maybe you still are.

MARGARET

Wouldn't call what crapped on us as "famous."

CORTEZ

You had your picture in the papers --

MARGARET

Cat in a tree can get that --

CORTEZ

News at six, again at eleven --

MARGARET

Same with the cat --

CORTEZ

Reporters mucking in your garbage --

MARGARET

My bones and egg shells --

CORTEZ

You have another definition?

MARGARET thinks.

MARGARET
It felt like being raped.

CORTEZ
Ever been raped?

MARGARET
No.

CORTEZ
Then it did not feel like that. Try again.

MARGARET
You read it all -- you tell me.

CORTEZ
As I told you, the public record never gives the right details.

MARGARET does not respond.

CORTEZ
You do have the right to remain silent.

MARGARET
No, it's just -- nature specials, on the public television station --

CORTEZ
With the lions --

MARGARET
With the lions eating the antelope that isn't even dead yet. "Picked up for child porn." The perp walk. The radio talk shows where I'm pegged as the demon mother.

CORTEZ
Daughter of Satan.

MARGARET
The bitch of Beelzebub. Everyone ripping out a hunk and carting it off.

CORTEZ
The papers did draw you as a real bitch --

MARGARET
Anything can and will be used against you --

CORTEZ

The way you refused the cops, the way you decided to come here. They get that right?

MARGARET

What does all your detail-reading tell you?

CORTEZ

Not seen it in you yet --

MARGARET

Maybe because I'm malnourished -- underjuiced -- a quiet volcano --

CORTEZ

No, not that --

MARGARET

Then what?

CORTEZ

I think probably closer to the lion than the antelope.

MARGARET

You think I'm ready to kill something?

CORTEZ

Well?

MARGARET doesn't answer. CORTEZ indicates the set-up of her solitaire game.

CORTEZ

Am I missing anything?

MARGARET reviews the cards.

MARGARET

The six.

CORTEZ

Right. I miss so much sometimes.

MARGARET

Yeah, sure.

CORTEZ

Would you like to make a living out of taking your pictures?

MARGARET

I'd like to do that. Look, I am not ready to kill somebody --

CORTEZ
Not a cheap dream to pursue --

MARGARET
I am not --

CORTEZ
I heard you -- consider yourself heard -- the
undernourished volcano --

A moment.

MARGARET
Red queen to black king.

CORTEZ
Ah --

MARGARET
No, not cheap -- the photography. Matthew made
sure I had the money to pay.

CORTEZ
You were taking a class --

MARGARET
Called "The Human Form."

CORTEZ
I have one of those.

MARGARET
The class --

CORTEZ
You can laugh at my joke!

MARGARET
That was a joke?

CORTEZ
The words, not my human form.

MARGARET
I thought it was a proposition.

CORTEZ
You?

MARGARET
I'm not worthy?

CORTEZ
No taste for leather belts with tools in them.

MARGARET

There're worse things to have around your waist.

CORTEZ

The ball peen hammer is all yours.

MARGARET

The pleasures of the wrench --

CORTEZ

All yours. The class.

MARGARET

The class. The class. Thought it was the best thing that ever happened to me. We got this assignment: photograph an emotional state of being using a person.

CORTEZ

The teacher said "using."

MARGARET

Using a person, yeah -- see, I didn't start off as a photographer.

CORTEZ

Woman in the building trades.

MARGARET

Always just doing the useful stuff -- that's how the pictures even got started, of Matthew's and my work, so we'd have, you know, a record, a portfolio. Then one day --

MARGARET gets up and moves.

MARGARET

I gotta move around.

CORTEZ

The lion --

MARGARET

So, yeah, one day -- must've been the sunlight laying across an old hammer and screwdriver against each other on a bench: they struck me --- you know, solid. So, snap, snap -- really, just useless pictures.

CORTEZ

That gave you pleasure.

MARGARET

That something so regular could look so, well, unregular at the same time -- that idea seemed to like me, so I liked it back. I liked that I could take away what I saw. "Taking" a picture -- a very pushy idea --

CORTEZ

And Margaret does like to push things.

MARGARET

Another joke.

CORTEZ

Uh-huh.

MARGARET

And then, in the darkroom -- Cortez, when you see the negatives on that first roll of film you develop yourself, and then the first print appears in the developer, something you took -- whew! I was hooked. Closest thing to joy I'd felt since -- since --

CORTEZ

Since whatever.

MARGARET

Since whatever! No comparing it. All by itself. I started taking pictures of people on the site -- and I saw a -- something in them that they never saw they had. But I knew. My eye knew. The light knew. Me and the light -- we partnered.

CORTEZ

First real laugh that has come out of you.

MARGARET

I had my first show in a diner! Yeah. And when they saw themselves up there, and then saw other people seeing them and liking what they saw -- even buying the pictures -- that changed something in them -- especially the women. All my mates had got noticed.

CORTEZ

The regular becoming unregular.

MARGARET

It's always been best when I just -- I don't know -- when all of me is just like a lens, letting the light through. Just like that first time, with the tools. No thoughts, just eye.

MARGARET just shrugs, goes silent.

CORTEZ

You still need to finish this dollar --

MARGARET

All right. Slowly -- real slow, but steady -- seeing things this way sucks you in -- sucked me in. I got -- greedy. I got ambitious. Studio equipment, more classes --

CORTEZ

The Human Form.

MARGARET

It drained -- it was so expensive --

CORTEZ

Matthew was okay with that?

MARGARET

I can't say that he was --

CORTEZ

And then the big bad scary pictures.

MARGARET

The pictures nobody knows.

CORTEZ

Using a person -- taking a person --

MARGARET

I looked at Alex and thought, Innocence.

CORTEZ

And you wanted to take --

MARGARET

I wanted to capture --

CORTEZ

Whatever word you want --

MARGARET

Capture -- what it felt like when I gave him a bath and smelled his skin, read his books to him, when he says "I love you."

MARGARET makes the ASL signs for "I love you." CORTEZ signs "Thank you."

CORTEZ

The little mute boy.

MARGARET

That in the papers?

CORTEZ

Margaret -- everything except your tit size.

MARGARET

Glad they left me one thing.

CORTEZ

Only because they had no use for it.

MARGARET

This wasn't in the papers -- the "state of being" with Alex -- Alex, Alex in italics.

CORTEZ

Being with his innocence.

MARGARET

So I talked it over with Alex --

CORTEZ

You "talked it over" with a four-year-old --

MARGARET

I asked him if he'd like to get his picture taken, which he loves anyway. And I had this idea -- this flash --

CORTEZ

The spark of genius: without his clothes on --

MARGARET

There wasn't a thing in those pictures I took of Alex that some -- master hadn't stuck up on a wall in some museum -- in one picture I even have wings on him, like a cherub -- the wings I got from a set-up by this guy Caravaggio, of a naked Cupid -- a master -- so why would anyone think --

CORTEZ

You say you saw Innocence --

MARGARET

That's what I saw --

CORTEZ

But this ambition of yours is like a lion --

MARGARET

He wasn't naked in all the pictures!

CORTEZ

You should not have "done" Alex that way at all.

MARGARET

I didn't "do" Alex --

CORTEZ

A four-year old naked kid up on the wall does not happen by accident. He was put there by his mother for all the world to gawk at. That is "doing" Alex. They gave you the trouble you were asking for.

MARGARET

He liked it --

CORTEZ

You knew this?

MARGARET

Yes.

CORTEZ

How?

MARGARET

I'd taken pictures of him before, naked --

CORTEZ

In the bathtub --

MARGARET

In his bed -- he got a kick out of it --

CORTEZ

What kind of mother would do that? You have gone silent.

MARGARET

I'm -- not -- sure --

CORTEZ

In here, anything is possible.

MARGARET

Forget it -- we're done.

CORTEZ puts her cards down.

CORTEZ

Are you that kind of mother? You are a figure of importance and I want to know how a figure of importance thinks. What really happened? Answer me. What happened that day?

MARGARET
Nothing "happened."

CORTEZ
You got Alex thinking this was going to be fun --
yes? Come on, answer me.

MARGARET
We set up the pic[ture] --

CORTEZ
We?

MARGARET
Matthew and I.

CORTEZ
Bathtub?

MARGARET
In my studio.

CORTEZ
Your studio. Your place.

MARGARET
I took my son -- into the studio --

CORTEZ
Your studio --

MARGARET
Alex and I had a great --

CORTEZ
Into your studio, this kid who cannot talk --

MARGARET
This is --

CORTEZ
Wait, the two people he loves the most -- and
take his clothes off --

MARGARET
This is foul --

CORTEZ
-- doing this is fine -- he is my child -- spread
him out for all these stranger's eyes --

CORTEZ pretends she's doing the photo shoot with ALEX, mock-taking pictures, interspersed with the "ka-chick" of a photo being taken.

CORTEZ

Another point of view, yes? "Lindo, smile for me," "Look adorable, honey pie" --

MARGARET

You are twisting [it] --

CORTEZ

The POV of Alex as a little island. "Oh, my sweet cheeks." Invade the island with love. "My little angel" --

MARGARET

You shit!

CORTEZ

Do this. Raise that. Extract the riches. Lift. Spread. Take it all away.

MARGARET tries to knock the "camera" from CORTEZ's hands.

CORTEZ

What sort of mother did the photo lab see?

MARGARET knocks the "camera" out of CORTEZ's hands.

MARGARET

Keep your filth away from him!

MARGARET bellies right up to CORTEZ during the next lines. CORTEZ is passive, letting MARGARET do this.

MARGARET

How could you know, how could you kn[ow] --

CORTEZ

Would you kill me?

MARGARET

-- how could you know anything --

CORTEZ

Would you kill me --

MARGARET

-- about what Alex and I had that day --

CORTEZ

Kill me --

MARGARET

How could you? If you were a mother, you'd know --

CORTEZ
Would you kill me right now --

MARGARET
-- bottom feeder --

CORTEZ
-- right now if you could?

MARGARET
You're just like them, just like them all --

CORTEZ
Would you kill me to protect Alex?

MARGARET
I did not let them take away anything anything
and not you not you either not any of you --

The GUARD comes around, and they part quickly. The GUARD lingers for a moment, then leaves.

CORTEZ
You would do it.

MARGARET
What?

CORTEZ
Kill me -- kill me, kill me right now, if you
could.

MARGARET
Kill you?

CORTEZ
To protect Alex.

MARGARET
Kill you?

CORTEZ
You're on fire.

MARGARET
You -- stay -- aw[ay] --

CORTEZ
You'd do it, wouldn't you?

MARGARET
Back off --

CORTEZ

The power you have --

MARGARET

Just back off.

CORTEZ

Something so loved it drags the beast into the
light --

CORTEZ makes a "shutter" with the thumbs and index fingers of each
hand -- a square -- and puts it up against her own right eye.

CORTEZ

If you do not make really, really clear lines --

CORTEZ squeezes the fingers shut, then open, as if they were a
shutter.

CORTEZ

-- you end up hurting the people you are supposed
to protect -- all of us islands, Margaret, all of
us need lines -- you have that power --

MARGARET

Always -- always -- lines with Alex --

CORTEZ

Al[ways] --

MARGARET

Always. Clear. Clean. Lines.

CORTEZ picks up the cards and goes back to playing.

CORTEZ

Well, he got lucky then. Because he was being
chased by someone with artistic ambition -- the
center of the universe. Lines do not matter much
to people like that -- just translating your
testimony. He got a lucky cut of the cards.

MARGARET

Cut of the cards --

MARGARET makes the "shutter" with her own fingers and looks at CORTEZ.

MARGARET

Look at me.

CORTEZ continues to play cards.

MARGARET

Look at me.

CORTEZ looks up. MARGARET snaps the "shutter."

CORTEZ

You see --

MARGARET

I just took a "mate" I know nothing about.

MARGARET makes believe she's taking a print out of a tray and holding it up, letting it dry.

MARGARET

Is this you?

CORTEZ leans in.

CORTEZ

Lighting is dim.

MARGARET looks at the "print."

MARGARET

I'll tell you what I see.

MARGARET mimes hanging the "print" up to dry and stands in front of it.

CORTEZ

Careful, shape-thief -- don't steal my [soul] --

MARGARET

I see -- an island -- a face floating like an island --

CORTEZ

Isla is not hard -- laced in my delicious accent. Anything else?

MARGARET

Words. "Shape-thief," "turn of the moon" -- poet, maybe. Poetry to me, at least.

CORTEZ

Still looks dim.

MARGARET

So -- want to do a little touch-up for me?

CORTEZ looks at MARGARET as if deciding something, then gathers the cards together and neatens the pile.

CORTEZ

I can tell you something.

CORTEZ takes the hanging "print" and rips it up. To MARGARET's surprise, CORTEZ begins to dance, the song in her head.

CORTEZ

I was hot! Hot! Imagine the light of 19 years old -- the age of majority -- this beautiful face in a very dangerous time. "Viva Puerto Rico libre!" That is how it was, in my beautiful 19th year. "Viva Puerto Rico libre!" Filled with revolutionary ambition! "It is time to wake up, Borinqueños! Remember El Grito de Lares! Pedro Albizu Campos, and our mother, Lolita Lebrón! Free Los Quince. Unchain yourself from the clown called Uncle Sam! Wake up, boricuas, commit the sin of memory!" But then my family, for my own good, they said --

CORTEZ shifts.

CORTEZ

I don't care, Mamá -- let the fucking F.B.I. take me, I am not going to go live in New York with --

CORTEZ stops dancing, claps her hands together as if she had been slapped. Starts dancing again.

CORTEZ

Yes, Papá, I am sorry, I should not have spoken -
- No, Papa, I can't tell you who I know! I
won't --

Again stops dancing, again a slap. Dancing again.

CORTEZ

(sarcastically)

But Pablo, dearest brother, I know about your investments -- in the companies that butcher -- enough: I don't want to waste --

Stop, slap.

CORTEZ

"You do not know what my own good is." But -- la guagua aérea --

CORTEZ makes an airplane motion and sound.

CORTEZ

-- and I am deposited in San Manhattan Juan, ahora Nuyorican, Ame-Rícan. On the island of the enemy in the dead country. Mi familia perdida. And I turn into the lost soul they thought I was

already. Estoy aún en el paisaje lejos de mi
visión.¹

CORTEZ catches her breath.

CORTEZ
(more quietly)

Me busco.

MARGARET
Looking for what?

CORTEZ
Estoy aún en el paisaje lejos de mi visión.

MARGARET
What vision?

CORTEZ does not answer.

MARGARET
What vision are you looking for?

CORTEZ
And that is how I came to live in the dead
country.

MARGARET
What's the vision?

CORTEZ
Since then, so much blood has just -- evaporated.

MARGARET
What do you mean? I don't understand.

CORTEZ
You would not. Could not. Enough.

They look at each other. CORTEZ gathers the cards. GUARD enters.

GUARD
Everything all right?

MARGARET
Right as rain.

GUARD
Whatever that means.

MARGARET
I never understood it either.

1 Julia de Burgos, Songs of Simple Truth, "#2: Intimate," (pp. 6-7)

GUARD
Cortez?

CORTEZ
We were talking about nature specials on public television.

GUARD
Uh-huh.

CORTEZ
We have a very high intellectual level in here.

GUARD
Uh-huh.

GUARD leaves. CORTEZ gathers up the cards, starts building a house of cards.

LIGHTS: Go to black.

SOUND: A suite of Puerto Rican music.

* * * * *

Scene 4: The Third Degree

LIGHTS: Up full.

SOUND: Music out.

MARGARET on her bed reading. The GUARD enters with CORTEZ, who is carrying a math text book.

GUARD speaks into her shoulder mike.

GUARD
5 - 1 - 7 - 6 - open.

SOUND: A metal door slides open.

GUARD guides CORTEZ into the cell.

GUARD
(to CORTEZ)
Watch yourself.

CORTEZ makes a dismissive gesture.

GUARD
I mean it.

GUARD speaks into her shoulder mike.

GUARD
5 - 1 - 7 - 6 - closed.

SOUND: Door sliding closed.

GUARD half-leaves. CORTEZ hesitates, then slams the math book down. CORTEZ and GUARD lock eyes, then GUARD leaves.

MARGARET reads the spine of the book.

MARGARET
Ah, algebra.

CORTEZ
Math -- sucks.

MARGARET
Some women find math hard, Cortez --

CORTEZ
The numbers just jump around --

MARGARET
I know I did, on the job --

CORTEZ
Like a -- goddamn knife stuck in my eye --

MARGARET
If you finish this -- then your B.A., right?

MARGARET signs the letters "B" and "A."

CORTEZ
Bullshit. Artist.

MARGARET
Bachelor of Arts. Vera Cortez, B.A. More than I've done.

CORTEZ
Not now. I cannot. Not now.

MARGARET
All right.

CORTEZ flips through the book, exasperated. MARGARET continues to read, half an eye on CORTEZ. Finally, CORTEZ slams the book shut.

CORTEZ
I cannot get it to stick!

MARGARET
Let it rest --

CORTEZ

You do not underst[and] -- I have got to make it stick.

MARGARET

It'll stick, it'll stay -- if you relax, it'll come --

CORTEZ begins to pace.

CORTEZ

You --

MARGARET

What?

CORTEZ

Forget it.

MARGARET

You're pacing. Chill.

CORTEZ

Are you any good at it?

MARGARET

(bad DeNiro)

You talkin' to me?

CORTEZ

What?

MARGARET

Are you talkin' to me? Sorry.

CORTEZ

What the fuck was that --

MARGARET

Sorry. Joke, small -- very small --

CORTEZ

Well?

MARGARET

I used to hack my way through math.

CORTEZ

Yes?

MARGARET

Yeah.

CORTEZ

Well?

MARGARET
(mild irony)

Well, I don't know, Vera -- you keep me pretty busy here.

(holds up her book)

Have to finish the poems of Julia de Burgos which you gave me to read --

CORTEZ
(sotto voce)

Fuck you --

MARGARET
You know, me busco and all that -- and then --

CORTEZ
Fuck you.

CORTEZ grabs the book and slams it on the table.

MARGARET
Wait --

CORTEZ
Fuck everyone like you.

MARGARET
-- I was just kidding --

CORTEZ
Fuck you all.

MARGARET
Just kidding! Bad timing! Course I'll give you a hand. Let me get the book.

MARGARET gets the book. CORTEZ grabs her by the throat and backs her across the cell. MARGARET drops the book, grabs her wrist.

CORTEZ
I do not need irony --

MARGARET
You're hurting me --

CORTEZ
-- from an Anglo kid-fucker bitch --

MARGARET
You're hurting --

CORTEZ

Get away from me! You're useless!

CORTEZ lets her go.

MARGARET

But in not very many days I get to leave.

CORTEZ goes for her throat again. MARGARET knocks away the hand and pushes CORTEZ, hard. It catches CORTEZ unaware.

MARGARET

Enough!

CORTEZ

You are a fucking pervert.

MARGARET

And you're an idiot.

The GUARD walks in and surveys the scene.

GUARD

What's the state of the state here?

CORTEZ

Could not be better.

GUARD

And nothing but the truth?

CORTEZ

So help me.

MARGARET

Yes.

GUARD leaves.

CORTEZ

You do not know, so back off.

MARGARET pushes CORTEZ, not hard, just enough to make CORTEZ stumble.

MARGARET

I'm in for a dollar.

CORTEZ

In for a doll[ar] --

(laughs)

Ditz rolls the dice --

MARGARET

You in?

MARGARET stands there defiant. CORTEZ looks around to see if the GUARD will come back, then retreats with a dismissive gesture.

CORTEZ

You are not worth it.

MARGARET picks up the book.

MARGARET

So -- why?

CORTEZ

Go read.

MARGARET

I asked you why!

CORTEZ

Your neck?

MARGARET

So why?

CORTEZ

Your neck?

MARGARET

Fine. So why?

CORTEZ

The numbers, I told you -- they jump --

MARGARET

You crack my throat because --

CORTEZ

I cannot nail them down.

MARGARET

So nail me instead?

CORTEZ

You do not know --

MARGARET

How do you know what I know?

CORTEZ

It makes me crazy.

MARGARET

It makes you mean.

CORTEZ

It makes me forget.

MARGARET

It makes you a human being.

CORTEZ

I do not need -- not this time of year -- I do not need -- not from you, not from anyone -- I do not need people -- anything -- telling me "no" --

MARGARET

What does spring have to do about it --

CORTEZ

Look, I am sor[ry] --

MARGARET

Why this time --

CORTEZ

I am s[orry] --

MARGARET

Why --

CORTEZ

That -- all that -- from way back --

MARGARET

Back --

CORTEZ

From the dead country.

MARGARET

I want to help you --

CORTEZ

Put the book down.

MARGARET

No -- I'll hold it.

CORTEZ

Stop wanting to help. Give me the book -- what are you doing?

MARGARET

Nothing.

CORTEZ

What?

Way back. MARGARET

Give me the book. CORTEZ

Dead country. MARGARET

Not where I want to go. CORTEZ

You really want to show some sorry? MARGARET

I never said the word -- CORTEZ

Tell me -- MARGARET

I never say the word -- CORTEZ

Tell me what keeps you waking me up at night.
You owe me that. MARGARET

CORTEZ circles around her. MARGARET does not move.

Owe you? Owe you? CORTEZ

CORTEZ sits on MARGARET's bed.

This is mine. This is mine. CORTEZ

MARGARET goes to sit on CORTEZ's bed. CORTEZ pushes MARGARET away.

No. Mine, too. My space. All mine, all the
time. You get none. CORTEZ

Don't get stupid -- MARGARET

Do not feel privileged. CORTEZ

Privi[leged] -- MARGARET

CORTEZ goes to MARGARET's footlocker and starts piling things on the bed.

MARGARET

Hey --

CORTEZ

Eminent domain.

As much as she wants to, MARGARET does not touch CORTEZ. She puts the book on the table.

MARGARET

Hey --

CORTEZ

Subtraction. Division. You own nothing that ain't mine -- call me Puerto Rico. Oooh, a picture of Alex --

MARGARET

Put that --

CORTEZ

Nope.

CORTEZ puts the picture in her pocket.

CORTEZ

Mine. All mine. Now what are you going to do, little island?

MARGARET

This is not about --

CORTEZ

Tú no sabes what this is about.

MARGARET

Give it back --

CORTEZ

Fuck you, "Property of the Cunt" -- owe you? You are the dead country I do not want to go back to.

MARGARET

This dead country is not me, it's you -- give me back --

MARGARET lunges to get her picture back, but CORTEZ easily choke-holds her.

MARGARET

Let me go! You fucking witch!

MARGARET tries to wrestle free, and as she does so she swings her elbows around, one of which catches CORTEZ hard in the temple/cheek/bridge of the nose. CORTEZ falls to her knees.

In half a heartbeat MARGARET grabs the book and looms over her. She raises the book to hit CORTEZ deliberately, really means to do it -- then doesn't.

MARGARET
Cortez? Cortez? Cortez?

CORTEZ
You taking roll call?

MARGARET
Cortez -- never done that to anyone.

CORTEZ
Two cops, right?

MARGARET
Well, them -- yeah.

CORTEZ
Should have --

MARGARET
Sorry.

CORTEZ
-- remembered that.

MARGARET
Here --

CORTEZ
Hands to yourself. Man, that hurts!

CORTEZ gestures MARGARET to back off.

CORTEZ
I will survive.

They are at a loss for the moment.

CORTEZ
Irony.

MARGARET
Irony?

CORTEZ
That irony act of yours -- "oh, I'm so busy" --

MARGARET
Meant it to be, you know, friendly.

CORTEZ
You were feeding on Vera Cortez looking weak --

MARGARET
Oh, suck my --

CORTEZ
You took respect from me --

MARGARET
I tried to make you laugh -- remember how to
laugh, independentista? Ha ha ha ha ha? Can't
someone just want to make you laugh, dickhead?

CORTEZ, looking at MARGARET as she overemphasizes the syllables of the word, suddenly lets out a genuine laugh -- and the tension breaks.

MARGARET goes to put her stuff back in the footlocker.

CORTEZ
Why didn't you? You know -- the -- book -- up --

MARGARET
Maybe because you're not a cop. Or a lab tech.
I don't think I smack things down that I respect.

CORTEZ watches MARGARET put her things away.

MARGARET
I'm not going to push -- spring, why you come
back from one math class and you're okay, and
then this one and you're not -- me busco -- "I
seek myself" -- Julia [pronounced like "Julia
Roberts"] --

CORTEZ
(correcting her)
Julia.

MARGARET
(pronouncing it correctly)
Julia de Burgos -- see, I read everything you
give me --

CORTEZ
The word is bruja.

MARGARET
What?

CORTEZ
Witch. You said "witch."

MARGARET
I guess I don't smackdown witches, either.

MARGARET motions to CORTEZ. CORTEZ hands the picture of Alex back to MARGARET.

CORTEZ
Bruja is also a plant in Puerto Rico. Each leaf has its own seeds, so you can take a cutting and plant it anywhere and it will grow. It is a tough plant.

CORTEZ comes over to help MARGARET put away the rest of her things.

MARGARET
Yeah, well, you have obviously never carried pipe with fat-assed thugs who gut-hate you just because you lack a prick and who would just as soon chuck you off the scaffolding as drink their coffee. You never had a chance.

CORTEZ
Never thought getting algebra-tutored would be so hard on the body.

CORTEZ lays down on her bed.

MARGARET
So do this, then, bruja: $x^2 + 5x + 6$. Factor it.

CORTEZ figures it in her head, raises her arms and, using sign language, says "x plus 2 times x plus 3."

MARGARET
Bueno, bruja. There is hope for you yet.

LIGHTS: To black.

MARGARET exits.

* * * * *

Scene 5

LIGHTS: A lighted area center stage.

CORTEZ gets up and gets a Walkman from her footlocker. She pops in a tape, clips the Walkman to her waistband and, moving into the lighted area, begins to dance to the salsa, for fifteen seconds or so. The music CORTEZ hears is what the audience hears.

SOUND: Good salsa music.

The GUARD escorts MARGARET back. GUARD speaks into her microphone.

GUARD

5 - 1 - 7 - 6 - open.

SOUND: A metal door slides open.

MARGARET steps into the cell.

GUARD

5 - 1 - 7 - 6 - closed.

SOUND: A metal door slides closed.

The sound of GUARD speaking into her microphone, the door opening and closing, can't be heard by CORTEZ, who is dancing intently. There is a small exchange between MARGARET and the GUARD, then the GUARD leaves.

CORTEZ notices MARGARET but doesn't stop dancing. Instead, she moves to MARGARET and begins showing her the steps; MARGARET does her best to follow, eventually sort of getting it. MARGARET then indicates for CORTEZ to wait a second, and MARGARET goes to her footlocker. She takes out a double headset. She exchanges CORTEZ's headset for hers; now they can both hear the music. MARGARET listens for a moment and, following CORTEZ's steps again, begins to move to the beat. For a few moments they dance salsa together, awkwardly but with determination and amusement.

Then MARGARET stops the tape, takes off her headset, hands it to CORTEZ, goes to her footlocker, and gets a tape. She pops out CORTEZ's tape and puts in hers: 1930s/1940s swing music.

SOUND: 1930s/1940s swing music

She puts on the headset and then starts dancing a few steps of the Lindy. CORTEZ looks at her, puzzled. MARGARET encourages CORTEZ to do the steps. CORTEZ does, and then MARGARET partners her as well until they do the Lindy together. The music should be Glenn Miller-ish. MARGARET, on a whim, spins CORTEZ out and back.

Then CORTEZ stops the tape, takes off the Walkman and puts it in her footlocker, and without any apparatus between them, CORTEZ begins to dance a combination of salsa and Lindy, combining rhythms. MARGARET picks up on it, and for a moment they dance a hybrid dance, in silence until lights fade to black. Then transition music/sound to cover scene change. CORTEZ and MARGARET get into their beds.

* * * * *

Scene 6: The Final Border Crossing

LIGHTS: Night in the cell.

MARGARET sits on the edge of her bed. CORTEZ murmurs in her sleep.

CORTEZ

Tamara -- Tamara -- Tamara -- Tamara --

CORTEZ jerks awake.

MARGARET

Beat you.

CORTEZ pulls herself upright.

MARGARET

Hey --

CORTEZ

Fine --

MARGARET

Need aspirin?

CORTEZ

I am fine, I said --

MARGARET

Who's Tamara?

CORTEZ

What do you care?

MARGARET

You were saying it just now. Over and over like you've done every night ever since I got here --

CORTEZ

As I said --

MARGARET

On fire, in your sleep -- the name, over and over again -- Tamara --

CORTEZ

And I ask you again: What do you care?

MARGARET

Because it's Cortez who's saying it.

CORTEZ

You are freed tomorrow -- you do not have to, nothing making you, so go back to sleep.

MARGARET
House rules have changed.

CORTEZ
Because Cortez said it?

MARGARET
Because Cortez has been saying it.

CORTEZ
And you think your thirty days has made you ready?

MARGARET
I am ready.

CORTEZ
Yes?

MARGARET
Yeah. Yes.

CORTEZ
You are sure?

MARGARET
I am ready.

CORTEZ
Then go ahead. Ask.

MARGARET
Vera Cortez, why are you here?

CORTEZ
I am here, Margaret Pasqualini -- you find me here -- because I helped kill my daughter. I helped kill my daughter. You, my Americanita, have been dancing with a murderer.

MARGARET's body has just taken a blow.

CORTEZ
You called for it -- time for the border-crossing. Spring is the cruelest time for me because Tamara -- my Tamara, my lost daughter -- would be fourteen this month.

The following must be delivered with little sentimentality and to MARGARET. It should not be staged in a separate light or as if time were suspended or using any other kind of monologue trick.

CORTEZ

I had a family. In the dead country. I had three children -- now there are only two. I cannot say "I have" any more.

He beat them. My daughter and son -- Tamara and Michael -- Tamara three and Michael just a year old. They were not his. I had had them with two other men -- my rebellion in exile on the island of strangers. Of course, my family rejected them completely -- not their blood -- so I went with him because he said he would take me in. My savior -- but really my colonizer.

To show you how the fear had turned my mind to ice -- I even had a child with this man -- Jawanza -- calculating changes, hoping for softness, figuring he would not beat one of his own. But I had just given him fresh meat.

He had this "thing" about Tamara -- it seemed to inspire him for pain. One night, drugged, he started belting her. "Thirty nine lashes" he kept yelling. Locked in the bedroom with Jawanza and Michael, both of them trying to crawl inside my ribs, I -- could not -- move.

Then it stopped. He dragged a chair. Tamara screamed -- screamed once, just once -- then quiet. Waited. Waited. Then opened the door -- and I wanted to tear my eyes out. He had tied Tamara to his chin-up bar -- her arms slung over it so she hung from her armpits -- just like a little Christ rag-doll. I remember my eyes -- straight to her right hand -- I watched a drop of blood bead up and then fall. Then another. Then one more. By the fourth one I had cut her down. El Señor Muerte had passed out on the table, hissing like a dragon.

And what did I do? I took her into the bathroom and washed her off and put her to bed -- such a good mama! The dragon hissed. I waited.

The next day, I went to wake them for day care -- I had a job. No breath. I held this hand just over her mouth, as I did sometimes at night, to feel their breaths. Nothing. I screamed, just once, like Tamara. The dragon came.

"You're gonna help me," it said -- and I obeyed. And here is what we did. We dropped Jawanza and Michael off at day care, like the good parents we were, then we dumped her body in the rough grass

by the side of the highway. I watched everything from the side view mirror, numb as stone. Then we found a police officer and told her that Tamara had disappeared -- maybe even kidnapped! Two days later, they found her, and he started playing the kidnap for all his worthless self was worth. But I knew they would find the truth. And even if they did not, how could my heart hold any peace? I had held my dead daughter in my arms, helped trash her body. Peace? What island could offer me that asylum?

So while the dragon steamed in his sleep, I called the detective who had given me her card, from the corner phone, one dime to my name. Dialed and hung up, dialed and hung up, and when I finally did connect, I was ready to cut it off in half a breath. She knew, she knew, because at one point, my mouth so thick with shame I could not speak, she said to me, "In for a dime, in for a dollar." I told her everything. I paid. She was kind.

And when the police came, and the social workers took Michael and Jawanza for foster care, and they cauterized the dragon, and I could feel the cuffs embrace my wrists -- it was the first time in a long, long time I felt safe. I was finally back on an island: lines were drawn; the monster drowned; and I could begin my shame.

I took twenty-five on a plea bargain. He got sixty. Tamara would be fourteen this month.

CORTEZ lifts up her pillow and takes out a piece of colorful cloth.

CORTEZ

This is from her funeral dress.

She hands it to MARGARET.

CORTEZ

That's my dollar. So. Nothing to say? You always have something to say.

MARGARET

Um -- I can't -- I think we -- should -- go back to sleep --

CORTEZ

You said you were ready. You said you were ready.

MARGARET
(in a hiss)
You helped kill your child!

CORTEZ
Yes.

MARGARET
Not just "helped" -- you killed your own child.

CORTEZ
It comes to that.

MARGARET
All that -- swill about protecting Alex -- that
spew about oppression, about "lines" and "keeping
people safe" -- she was never safe with you --

CORTEZ
She's gone, which makes her the only safe one
around here.

MARGARET
No.

CORTEZ
Did not think it was going to end this way, did
you?

MARGARET
No no no no --

CORTEZ
You thought, whatever I had done, we would be in
solidarity, de mujer a mujer, con un corazón
grande y calido. But now you have something much
more complicated than that, much more -- rich --
than that.

MARGARET
I am not under[standing] --

CORTEZ
That cloth -- keep it close, it soothes you.
Listen.

MARGARET
I don't understand.

CORTEZ
Here is what comes before her name escapes from
me each night. Just when I may have slipped over
the border into peace, or at least emptiness, I
am called -- sounds like lost voices draw me to

this bright light -- which I know is Tamara but with no body, just this knife-white light. I reach, but it slides -- here, then there -- but it never disappears. And then, always, there is a moment -- when it allows me to arrive.

A bright light bathes MARGARET.

CORTEZ

I shape my hand --

CORTEZ puts her hand up to MARGARET's face but does not touch it.

CORTEZ

-- I circle it, un abrazo de mi niña perdida --

CORTEZ circles her arms around MARGARET but does not touch her.

CORTEZ

-- and for one breath -- one breath -- I feel pardoned. She tells me I can now get rid of hope and shame: I do not need hope and shame. She offers me a truce. Una tregua.

The bright light goes out.

CORTEZ

And just when I think, finally!, at last!, she leaves -- and the truce -- dissolves. I wake up on the rough edge of the road -- here -- still breathing, still caring, still shamed. And then the first bell rings. And then the day breaks open.

MARGARET

And you expect me --

CORTEZ

Do not get ahead of yourself --

MARGARET

I am not going to be --

CORTEZ

How do you know what you are going to be or not going to be?

MARGARET

I know I won't --

CORTEZ

You are in a strange country now, Margaret -- house rules have changed again -- who knows?

MARGARET
(holding up cloth)
You killed your daughter --

CORTEZ
We need to move on.

MARGARET
It's like you don't have any --

CORTEZ
What I do have, Margaret, is a vision of life --
all my political about the borders and lines and
power -- that has been my life. But it is not
just Puerto Rico, "libre, libre," Lebrón, Lebrón,
Lebrón -- that is just one step, just one step
toward reaching the border that heals us.

MARGARET
But you killed your daughter.

CORTEZ
All I need -- to cross that last border -- into
the peace the truce can bring -- is Tamara. But
she will not guide me, be my coyote. And why?

MARGARET
Because you killed her!

CORTEZ
Every night she tells me why she will not guide
me.

MARGARET
She denies you peace -- good for her --

CORTEZ
You are doing such good work, Margaret --

MARGARET
What are you talking [about] --

CORTEZ
That cloth under my ear, the one you grip so
hard, so righteously, whispers, "Mami, how you
can come in to this new day, this new way, if you
cannot trust some one person enough to tell them
the whole story?"

MARGARET
Come on.

CORTEZ
That is what it says.

MARGARET
You've never told? I don't --

CORTEZ
Never the truth whole.

MARGARET
I don't believe that.

CORTEZ
Bits, junk, lies -- never "and nothing but the"
because those I have shaken awake in that bed
would either try to one-up me in pain or shut me
out. And I have come too far over this ocean to
let anyone or anything deny me.

MARGARET
So why --

CORTEZ goes right up to MARGARET's face and peers into it.

CORTEZ
Do not bend -- stay with me. You have gone this
far. Keep looking. Tell me what I have seen in
you that lets me say all this. This is your
final test.

MARGARET
Final test?

CORTEZ
Tell me.

MARGARET
Test?

CORTEZ
Tell me.

MARGARET
You saw --

CORTEZ
Go on.

MARGARET
You saw I would take Tamara's side.

CORTEZ
Defend the oppressed.

MARGARET
I would give you no shadows for hiding.

CORTEZ
Like Tamara's light in my dreamwalk.

MARGARET
And you saw --

CORTEZ
Go on --

MARGARET
You saw I would not feel sorry for you.

CORTEZ
You would bring me an eye bitter and acid. To
see myself whole.

CORTEZ breaks off the eye contact.

CORTEZ
I knew I could count on you to be my coyote.

MARGARET
Forgive you --

CORTEZ
Forgiveness? It is not required. It is never
required of the sin-eater.

MARGARET
The sin-eater?

CORTEZ
You. That is you. What you've been tested for.

MARGARET
Sin. Eater.

CORTEZ
Yes.

MARGARET
Tested?

CORTEZ
Yes.

MARGARET
Tested? The humiliations --

CORTEZ
I had to see if you would do.

MARGARET
Fattened up.

CORTEZ

From the day I started reading about you, I wondered -- no common mother, you.

MARGARET

What do you feel right now?

CORTEZ

A soft peace.

MARGARET

I don't.

CORTEZ

You are not supposed to.

MARGARET

I get to carry these -- images -- this sin --

CORTEZ

You are doing what it is in your nature to do --

MARGARET

It's not enough.

CORTEZ

¿Cómo?

MARGARET

Not enough for you to tell just me. She's not some discard. She is your daughter.

CORTEZ

Was.

MARGARET

Is. Is! You think the slate's clean just because -- to a stranger? If you don't keep faith with your child every day --

CORTEZ

Chulita, this is all past judgment, past "paying my debt." I have paid. In full. It is on to the next now: life with Tamara after Tamara. Or, in another word -- oh, you are not going to like this! -- redemption.

MARGARET

Redemption.

CORTEZ

I have that -- ache.

MARGARET

You?

CORTEZ

Not the dead Tamara, the sin you squeeze so
preciously, that cloth you clutch. Keep the
cloth! Dance with the dead all you want! The
Tamara who redeems me will come when we all
change the lines that now turn us into our lowest
devils. Listen to me --

MARGARET

I can't --

CORTEZ

Listen to me -- women on every building site,
huh? you can understand that -- all colors, all
shapes! Can you understand that?

MARGARET

Yes!

CORTEZ

That is Tamara.

MARGARET

That's bullshit!

CORTEZ

It is the better world you want.

MARGARET

Not this way --

CORTEZ

Who says you get to pick the way? Children born
to parents who want them, with shelter, food,
dignity. That is Tamara.

MARGARET

It's just more bullshit!

CORTEZ

No more tribes about language or pigment or power
or violence. No more Puerto Rico -- blinded by
wanting a nation -- what is a nation except
another way to keep the outsiders outside? -- no
more of any of that, but citizen of a better
world! All that in the word "Tamara." I give
you the old so I can raise my new daughter.

MARGARET

You leave me with knives in my eyes, this picture
of you --

CORTEZ

It will take time --

MARGARET

They can hack out all my organs while I'm still
alive if I have to turn as cold and as acid as
you to be this new kind of human being --

CORTEZ

It will take time.

MARGARET

All this new world mouth music makes me sick to
my stomach. You make me sick to my stomach.

CORTEZ

Tamara --

MARGARET

Stop it --

CORTEZ

(ignoring MARGARET)

Link:

the transnation of the airplane, la guagua aérea,
carries me from the montañas of the jíbaro
to the capital of the empire, Nueva York, city of
Harlem bantustans,
Gringolandia perforated by sub-dermal pop-rockéro
frequencies,
where the world's oldest colony is a suburb of
Brooklyn,
and San Manhattan Juan is a jazz riff of
diaspora,
and our unwanted emperors hold their death grips.
Bam!

The plane touches down.

Bam!

We have jumped the pond.

Bam!

Immediate Nuyorican.

Bam!

Instant Ame-Rícan,

Bam!

The new mestizo of the hyphen-nation.

Bam!

Born in the desires that fall between acá and
allá.

In the plane we Puerto Ricans inhabit this
smeared-edged borderland,
a frontera between the emptinesses of
destination,
we are the postmodern, we are Tamara,
the "land of all of us," pan-everything,

the new non-nation, our bodies the location
of this postmodern archipelago, each of us
double-helix'd
by DNA of fax and phone and email and texting
and the universal declaration of the human right
to human rights
and that we will be divided and conquered, fucked
and fucked-over,
extracted, redacted, burned, twisted, packaged,
and forgotten
no more, no more, no more, nunca más.
We float confused, contradictory, ambiguous,
ambivalent,
torqued, tidal, multi-tongued, lunar-mad --
But we are also large, we include multitudes,
and Tamara is a new world between acá and allá --
feel it in your nostrils, look for it under your
feet,
hear the stars beat out ritmos de bomba y plena
in the very pulse of the universe,
all of us universal, all of us at home in the in-
between.
Tamara.

CORTEZ sits on her bed. MARGARET stares.

LIGHTS: To black.

SOUND: Music for transition.

* * * * *

Scene 7

LIGHTS: Full up.

GUARD enters carrying a photographer's portable frame for hanging a backdrop, which will be set up in front of the "cell." She sets it down, exits.

Several seconds later, GUARD returns carrying a chair, a canvas backdrop, and a cosmetic case. She puts them down, exits.

Several second later, GUARD returns, MARGARET following with a camera case, a tripod, and a briefcase.

GUARD

Most sane people stay left when they leave this place.

MARGARET

That's why sane people never get anything done.

GUARD
(pointing to briefcase)
Let me see it again.

MARGARET hands it over; GUARD checks it, hands it back.

GUARD
Your husband and kid must really love you.

MARGARET
It's very Christian to be kind to crazy people.

GUARD turns to exit.

MARGARET
Hey! Your daughters?

GUARD
As of today, still mine.

MARGARET
Good.

GUARD
Glad you remembered to ask.

MARGARET
I guess I'll take it from here.

GUARD exits. MARGARET brings over two chairs and starts to hang the backdrop; as she does, CORTEZ enters with the GUARD. The GUARD leaves. As MARGARET speaks, she prepares for the shoot: puts lens on camera, sets up tripod, etc.

CORTEZ
Well.

MARGARET
Hello.

CORTEZ
Hola.

MARGARET
You got my letter.

CORTEZ
Obviously.

MARGARET
So what do you think?

CORTEZ
A photography project.

MARGARET

Yes.

CORTEZ

Isn't that what nailed you the last time?

MARGARET

And look what that got me. As I said in the letter -- I received --

CORTEZ

For photographing women in prison.

MARGARET

Yes. Abused women -- women who have killed their children --

CORTEZ

Why?

MARGARET

I say a lot of things when people ask me that. And I really do believe what I say. About making my photography useful, after trying to make Alex into something he wasn't. You pointed that out to me, thank you very much. But that's all second. You know why I'm here.

CORTEZ

I do not have to do this.

MARGARET

Didn't see you being dragged in here. Leave. But you'll leave knowing why.

CORTEZ

I will hang -- for the moment -- it gets me out.

MARGARET

I didn't put this into the letter because it was too late -- I've already arranged to have a gallery show the pictures. Part of a benefit for battered women. Auctioned off to raise money.

CORTEZ

Really.

MARGARET

Book and website to follow.

CORTEZ

Your cut?

MARGARET
Everything out of pocket. And the grant.

CORTEZ
And the goodness of your heart.

MARGARET
Actually, Señora Cortez, dead wrong about that.

CORTEZ
Oh?

MARGARET
I'm doing all this out of the coldness of your heart.

CORTEZ
You should be careful with your words.

MARGARET
As careful with you as you were with me.

CORTEZ
Revenge?

MARGARET
Don't flatter yourself.

CORTEZ
You are not making any money at it.

MARGARET
So it isn't greed. Or ambition. Or lust, sloth,
gluttony, envy --
(points at CORTEZ)
-- what's to envy?

CORTEZ
I guess I will say "ouch."

MARGARET
C'mon, Vera -- you know: only one sin left.

CORTEZ does not respond.

MARGARET
All right, then, Vera -- straight and simple
anger. At you. For being a coward.

By this time MARGARET has finished her set-up. She has set two chairs
in front of the backdrop.

MARGARET
I was not going to let you get away with it.

MARGARET hands CORTEZ the piece of cloth from Tamara's dress.

CORTEZ

I think I will leave.

MARGARET

Sit. Please. Por favor.

CORTEZ

We are finished.

MARGARET

I called you a coward. I named you. Where's your dollar now?

CORTEZ

I am fresh out.

MARGARET

(taps her breastbone.)

Right here -- it sticks. I can't get it past. This whole little star called Tamara hangs right here and explodes, every day. I try to catch the pieces and smash them back together and I can't do it! I am filled with sadness and [defeat] --

CORTEZ

The condition of the sin eater, the human condition.

MARGARET

So. I'm not going to do this "it" alone. You are going to help me.

CORTEZ

No, I am not. I am done. Use somebody else.

CORTEZ moves to get the GUARD.

MARGARET

"Poema al hijo que no llega."²

CORTEZ

What?

MARGARET

"Poema al hijo que no llega."

CORTEZ

Speaking Spanish now? Not well, I have to say.

2 Julia de Burgos, Songs of Simple Truth, pages 490-491.

MARGARET

I learned something. For you.

CORTEZ

Because?

MARGARET

Ammunition.

CORTEZ

So you have come as the warrior.

MARGARET

"Poem to the Child Who Doesn't Arrive." She came to me in a dream and fed it to me.

CORTEZ

In a dream.

MARGARET

Why not? Things came to you in dreams all the time. "No sé cuándo ni dónde / pero sé que vendrás." Come on!

CORTEZ

"I don't know where or when -- "

MARGARET

" -- but I know you will arrive."

They peer at each other.

MARGARET

"Child of mine, bathed by sublime tenderness / I have dreamt you a thousand times, / but where can you be? / Why don't you rebel and burst into the world...?" Listen to me! "You will arrive at my arms on a solemn day / when everything at my side will dress in light. / There will be light in the shadows..." That's why I'm back here: it's up to me to bring the light to the shadows so that she is not abandoned. And not alone. You are going to help me finish eating this sin.

CORTEZ

And how did your grant proposal --

MARGARET

By having you be the first voice out of the shadows. By being Tamara's voice.

CORTEZ

You are giving communion now.

MARGARET

Very simple equation, Vera: you killed your daughter with silence. Like I said, a coward. And a fool, too, expecting some droopy-assed middle-aged white chick sin-eater to shift the universe for you. Sloppy, sloppy, sloppy.

(goes to the camera)

This is what I bring -- this "eye" -- but the shadows need your voice from underneath -- you don't do this, you kill off Tamara, old and new, for good. But if you speak out -- do now what you should have done then -- then maybe no more Tamaras get fed to the dragons. That's my new world. That's my half-assed attempt at redemption -- I remembered your word.

CORTEZ

You want a truce.

MARGARET

I want coöperation.

CORTEZ

You want more than that.

MARGARET

I would love to make you pay -- but I did learn something from you, after all, about keeping our eyes bigger, our hearts large -- that's what brought me back, to you.

CORTEZ

To me.

MARGARET

So we could work together.

CORTEZ

So, a truce, then --

MARGARET

A truce is for combat.

CORTEZ

You brought the ammunition.

MARGARET

True, but --

CORTEZ

If I agree, I come opposing everything you think and feel is right. So it will be a truce.

MARGARET

Are we that divided?

CORTEZ

Your -- sentimentality, your kind of
righteousness -- so sweet, so weak --

MARGARET

If it doesn't come from the heart --

CORTEZ

Tamara's death punctures my heart every day.

MARGARET

I sometimes think your heart's a stone --

CORTEZ

My heart is atoned -- you don't understand that.

MARGARET

No, I don't.

CORTEZ

I did not give you Tamara -- she will never leave
me. You never had her. What is in this --

(showing the cloth)

-- is that endless loop of breast-beating you
seem to find so inspiring. I am done with the
smell of burned skin. Time for me to prepare for
my release.

MARGARET

So you're not big enough to face --

CORTEZ

Stop it! Stop it. I wish you could see your
face right now -- not the good, strong, open,
scared-into-life face that was here a year ago,
that was my coyote, that helped me cross the
border. No, now it is a judge's face. Here is
another Julia for you: "But I was made of
nows..." "Nows!" Hear that, Margaret --
dragging no more corpses around! "But I was made
of nows / and my feet level...would not accept
walking backwards..." Hear that -- not
backwards! "...and I went forward, forward, /
mocking the ashes to reach the kiss / of the new
paths."³

CORTEZ, standing near MARGARET, kisses her.

3 Julia de Burgos, Song Of The Simple Truth, "I Was My Own Route," #20 (pp. 56-57)

CORTEZ

New paths, querida -- that is where Tamara and I are going. Do you want to come?

MARGARET, to her surprise, seems pacified by the kiss.

MARGARET

I don't want Tamara repeated -- new paths, too. And I'm going to tell the story.

CORTEZ

You go, girl! I am just not convinced the liberal guilt thing is the way to do it. All of us here own our own shame -- fully vested. No one here needs to be wept over. But if you are set on that, then you need some balance, some frame for your picture -- a bite of the pepper with the sugar.

MARGARET

What?

CORTEZ

The gallery, the benefit -- too clean. Arrange to put these pictures in the dead country, too -- here at the prison, in a church, a bodega, a school, Christ, even just hang them on a fence -- anywhere but just a gallery. And you have to get the do-gooders to go there.

MARGARET

I'm listening.

CORTEZ

You need a context. You need charts of ownership and income and health and education. If you want no more Tamaras in the morgue, they need to know how much of the dead country they own -- they have to own up. They need to cross the borders, not just feel oh so lagrimoso and sensitized. Those are my terms. And if you do not accept them, I will make sure no one sits for you. That is my ammunition.

MARGARET

Deal.

CORTEZ

Bueno.

MARGARET

So do we have our truce?

CORTEZ

That is up to your anger.

MARGARET

My anger -- to one side. Partnership, then, for the moment.

CORTEZ

Peace along the fronteras.

MARGARET

We'll call the truce Alex and Tamara.

CORTEZ

Tamara and Alex.

MARGARET

Tamara and Alex, then. The name of the truce. Anything else?

CORTEZ

Ask me formally if I want to do this. You have asked everyone else -- now ask me.

MARGARET

Vera Cortez, would you like to participate in this project -- in the name of Tamara?

CORTEZ

In the name of Tamara, yes.

Things get quiet.

MARGARET

Now what?

MARGARET

Sit down.

CORTEZ

You are going to take the pictures now?

MARGARET

Nothing formal. I'll come back out later for the set-up shots. Now it's just to get people used to the camera.

CORTEZ

I do not even know what I look like. According to you, I have devil's horns.

MARGARET

The only horns you have is because you haven't seen a man in a long time.

CORTEZ
For a white piece, you do have a mouth.

MARGARET
Here's a mirror.

CORTEZ
A mirror.

CORTEZ looks at herself tentatively.

CORTEZ
A brush?

MARGARET hands CORTEZ a brush. MARGARET brings over a small box with some simple cosmetic items in it.

CORTEZ
It has been so long. No brush, no make-up. Just my game face. What now?

MARGARET
Get comfortable. Just look at the camera and pretend there's no one behind it.

CORTEZ
That is easy to do.

MARGARET
For a brown piece, you do have a mouth. We have lots of time. Now, try a smile out on me.

CORTEZ is a bit uneasy, not sure whether to smile fully or not. MARGARET goes to the camera, takes pictures.

MARGARET
And talk to me.

CORTEZ
About?

MARGARET
Tell me about Tamara.

CORTEZ
Tamara.

MARGARET
What was she like? Go ahead -- it's all right.

CORTEZ
Tamara liked to sing. She had a bird voice, breathy, almost like a whisper.

(takes a pose)
Did that work?

MARGARET
Whatever feels natural.

CORTEZ
"Natural" is easier said than done.

MARGARET
You're doing fine. Tell me more.

CORTEZ
She liked to sing to herself.
(takes a pose)
I would stand outside her room and listen.
(takes a pose)
She made up words -- she could rhyme well -- and
tunes. Barely a whisper sometimes.

As MARGARET prepares to take the next picture, CORTEZ stands up and moves toward her.

MARGARET
What are you [doing] --

CORTEZ
How do you work this thing?

MARGARET
What?

CORTEZ
Show me.

MARGARET
Press this down halfway -- that's the autofocus.
Then just pop it.

CORTEZ
Sit down. Sit down.

MARGARET sits down. CORTEZ pops a picture by accident.

CORTEZ
Sorry, sorry. Okay, get yourself settled -- is
that the right thing to say? I want you to talk
to me.

MARGARET
You bruja!

CORTEZ
Talk to me about Alex.

CORTEZ starts taking pictures and takes pictures throughout MARGARET's lines.

MARGARET
This is so strange. I've never sat here.

CORTEZ
Talk.

MARGARET pauses in her speech to take poses. CORTEZ takes pictures at those points.

MARGARET
Alex. He's mute, so he can't sing, like Tamara.
(takes a pose)
But he draws a lot. And he loves to swim.
(takes a pose)
He's a lot like us -- he likes to build things.
(takes a pose)
How I'm doing?

CORTEZ
You will learn. This have a timer on it?

MARGARET
You can even set the number of pictures you want.

CORTEZ
Three. Focus?

MARGARET
Press here to set it. When you're ready, press this button. Five seconds to get there, three seconds between pictures. And it beeps to warn you.

CORTEZ
All right. Sit down.

MARGARET sits down.

CORTEZ
They take pictures, yes?, after a truce gets signed, to burn it into memory? Here is our official record.

MARGARET
Heart and history.

CORTEZ
Tamara and Alex.

CORTEZ focuses the camera on MARGARET, then presses the button. CORTEZ sits beside MARGARET. They can fill the intervening seconds

with whatever feels appropriate. But the camera beeps, and they face it in their first pose.

As the lights fade to complete black, there will be three successive pictures, and the lights should burst and then fade slowly, three to four seconds. The fade-out on the last picture should go five to six seconds to blackout.

* * * * *

Scene 8

Almost immediately, before applause can begin, the lights bump up to houselights, showing the actors in their last pose. After several seconds, selections from Lou Reed's New York play as GUARD joins them, and the three of them clear the stage. When done, they come forward to take their bows.

After their last bow, they turn and exit.