

The Nun Drops Her Veil

by

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FADE IN:

EXT. PLAZA DE MAYO, BUENOS AIRES

A military parade. ARMED GUARDS and PLAINCLOTHESMEN scan the crowd. Placards about patriotism and honor, the CROWD polite but not enthusiastic. Brief focus on an OLDER WOMAN wearing a white kerchief, crying, holding a laminated photograph of a young man.

Suddenly, a wedge of SOLDIERS burst through the crowd as POLICE drag several YOUNG MEN away. One YOUNG MAN, bloodied face, clutching pamphlets, runs toward a church for safety.

INT. CHURCH

The young man bursts in, falls, blood streaming, and wraps his arms around the legs of a PRIEST. The young man also sees the cassock of another MAN and the black lace shoes and white knee socks of a SCHOOLGIRL.

Police explode in -- the young man sees their polished boots walk slowly toward him. He slips off his watch and holds it up -- a hand takes it.

YOUNG MAN  
(voice strained)  
My father's -- they'll steal it.

POLICE OFFICER  
We're sorry, but --

A gun muzzle points at the young man.

YOUNG MAN  
(whispering fiercely)  
Don't let them, don't let them --

POLICE OFFICER  
Father, we don't want to have to --

A moment, then the priest's hands reach down and unclasp the young man's hands.

PRIEST (O.S.)  
It will be all right.

YOUNG MAN

Don't let them, don't let them --

But once the young man's hands are freed, the police drag him out, leaving a trail of blood and pamphlets. The hand of the schoolgirl picks up a pamphlet.

PRIEST (O.S.)

There are laws -- he'll be fine.

The pamphlet falls from the schoolgirl's hand into the blood.

EXT. RIO NEGRO - DAWN TWO YEARS LATER

Establishing shot: houses, plaza, fields, mountains, church, school, sky full of color, people about their business.

EXT. CONVENT

Simple building, crucifix over the doorway, a battered Renault 4 parked outside.

INT. MARIA'S BEDROOM - EARLY MORNING

Black lace shoes under a desk tap lightly. They belong to MARIA, who sits at the desk writing in her journal. Around her: a bed, chest of drawers with family picture. On the wall: picture of Mother Teresa with a child, crucifix. In the corner: a statue of the Virgin Mary covered in a rough wool peasant poncho. Maria, wearing a modern jumper and white shirt, finishes writing, her journal nudging a small pot holding a single brilliant yellow flower. She stores the journal behind the statue under the poncho.

After putting on a short grey veil, Maria picks up three colored balls, labeled "Father," "Son," and "Holy Spirit," then juggles them as she murmurs her morning prayers, continuing down the hallway to...

DINING ROOM OF CONVENT HOUSE

FOUR NUNS sit in the simple room while ROSARIO, 50s, the nuns' housekeeper and all-round custodian, serves them simple food. They all watch Maria enter. SISTER JOSEFINA, the MOTHER SUPERIOR, thin-lipped, disapproving. SISTER TERESA, young, hiding a smile. SISTER CRISTINA, 30s, calm. SISTER CARMEN, 40s, shaking her head. Rosario with a big gap-toothed smile. Maria makes her way to her seat, sits, puts the balls on the table, and flashes everyone a smile.

MARIA

Good morning.

Sister Josefina goes to speak, but Maria grabs the hands of Sister Josefina and Sister Teresa and bows her head.

MARIA

Let us give thanks, shall we?

Outmaneuvered, Sister Josefina and the other nuns join hands. Rosario bows her head. Maria looks up, sees them all praying, and gives a quick wink to Rosario, who catches it and smiles.

EXT. CONVENT HOUSE

Maria carries the yellow flower in the small pot. She stops to draw a picture of a bird in the dust on the Renault's windshield, then strides toward the school.

EXT. SCHOOL

Maria watches army helicopters overhead, their propellers THUDDING.

INT. HELICOPTER

SOLDIERS look down on the town, search the mountains.

EXT. MOUNTAINS

Small group of ARMED REBELS, MONTENEROS, hiding, watch the helicopter cross the sky. They wear distinctive bandanas around their necks. They melt away.

INT. SCHOOL - HALLWAY

Rosario, imperious with her broom in hand, suddenly softens as Maria brings her the yellow flower.

MARIA

It called out to me that it wanted to  
belong to you. "Bring me to Rosario."

Rosario grabs Maria in a big two-armed hug and a kiss on each cheek.

EXT. SCHOOL

A gaggle of CHILDREN pile into the school, LAUGHING.

INT. SCHOOL - HALLWAY

MARIA

(to Rosario)

Have to go.

Maria stands outside her classroom juggling, greeting her adolescent STUDENTS. Sister Teresa, Sister Cristina, Sister Carmen also greet students. Rosario shooshes them along with her broom.

MARIA'S CLASSROOM

CHATTER, CHATTER, CHATTER until Maria enters juggling, then quiet. They know the routine. Maria juggles two balls and holds the third one out, and they repeat the word.

CLASS

Father!

Another ball.

CLASS

Son!

Another ball.

CLASS

Holy Spirit!

MARIA

Noooowwww --

CLASS

Aaaaayyyyy-men!

MARIA

Deep breath! Hold it --

In the silence, helicopters again fly over. Maria lets out her breath with a RAZZ. So does everyone else.

MARIA

Now we are ready! Into your groups --  
notebooks out so we can work on our  
essays.

Small chaos as the students scramble into place.

MARIA

Like Noah's ark. Clomp, clomp, clomp.  
Pablo, over here --

PABLO

But, Peti, I don't like --

MARIA

You'll learn. Life is all about  
learning to like. Hernán, Raul, Teresa  
-- begin with your groups.

EXT. ROAD INTO TOWN - SAME TIME

Three armed SOLDIERS in a jeep, with a priest, ERNESTO, 25.

INT. CLASSROOM

Maria sees the jeep pull up to the church. With a shock, she recognizes Ernesto.

MARIA

Teresa. Teresa. Watch the class for  
me. Class, class -- I want you to  
follow Teresa.

Everyone looks a bit stunned as Maria leaves. Very unusual. They crowd to the window. LUZ, 13, runs out to follow.

TERESA

Luz Elena!

EXT. CHURCH

Luz catches up and slides her arm through Maria's.  
Helicopters THUD by again.

MARIA

You have to go back.

But Luz refuses.

MARIA

Too much like me. Come on, then.

Arm in arm, they walk right up to Ernesto.

ERNESTO

A very nice picture, Maria Beatriz.

MARIA

Sister Maria.

ERNESTO

Sister Maria.

MARIA

What are you doing here?

ERNESTO

You're surprised.

MARIA

You're observant.

Maria glances at the soldiers warily.

MARIA

(indicating Luz)  
Please introduce yourself.

ERNESTO

My name is Father Ernesto. And yours,  
linda?

LUZ  
Is he your friend?

MARIA  
He might say that.

LUZ  
(to Ernesto)  
Luz Elena, Father.

The soldiers watch. The school windows are crammed with curious faces.

MARIA  
What are you doing here with --

ERNESTO  
Let's walk a little. How are things going with the school?

MARIA  
What are you --

ERNESTO  
(sotto voce)  
Just answer.

MARIA  
The school is doing fine --

Ernesto sees that they are far enough from the soldiers.

ERNESTO  
The letter from Gustavo.

MARIA  
Letter?

ERNESTO  
You didn't get it.

MARIA  
What letter?

ERNESTO  
I'm here to oversee the parish.

MARIA

Why?

ERNESTO

I have a letter from the bishop --

MARIA

Why?

ERNESTO

Because your name -- is being --

Ernesto indicates Luz.

ERNESTO

We'll talk later.

MARIA

Say what you have to say.

ERNESTO

Sister Maria --

MARIA

Say it.

ERNESTO

Because your name is being discussed.

Maria gives him a hard look.

MARIA

At the back of the church, Father  
Ernesto -- the door to your room.

ERNESTO

We'll talk --

MARIA

Luz Elena, we have to go.

SOLDIER

Father, are we finished with the  
festivities?

Ernesto walks back to the soldiers, takes his duffel bag.

SOLDIER

Don't forget your meeting with Colonel  
Martín.

ERNESTO

I look forward to meeting him.

SOLDIER

That's your own business. Let's go.

As the soldiers leave, Ernesto turns just in time to see  
Luz and Maria walk back into the school.

INT. SCHOOL - MARIA'S CLASSROOM

Students scramble to their seats and pretend to work.

HALLWAY

Sister Josefina waits, thin-lipped. Maria nods to her but  
says nothing, enters the classroom.

MARIA'S CLASSROOM

MARIA

Continue working.

Three balls in her hands and she juggles, says nothing to  
anyone, pacing, thinking.

INT. DINING ROOM - EVENING

Five nuns at dinner, silent, but aching to know the story.

KITCHEN

Rosario peeks through a small slit of open door into the  
dining room.

DINING ROOM

The CLINK of flatware on plates. Finally...

SISTER JOSEFINA

Maria.

All clattering goes silent except for Maria, who continues to eat. Five pairs of eyes are fixed.

SISTER JOSEFINA

I believe you have something to tell us. About our visitor. Do you know him? Stop eating. Do you know him?

MARIA

I know him -- the way a person might know about a breed of dog.

SISTER CARMEN

Since when do you say anything nasty about anyone?

SISTER CRISTINA

Not like you, Peti.

SISTER JOSEFINA

You will show some respect.

MARIA

Of course.

SISTER JOSEFINA

Well?

MARIA

Father Ernesto. Ernesto Saavedra. His family and my family are old friends. My uncle, Father Gustavo, helped Ernesto prepare for the priesthood.

SISTER JOSEFINA

Is there anything -- well, anything between --

MARIA

(laughing)

Sister Josefina!

SISTER JOSEFINA

Well, why else would you leave your classroom?

MARIA

I am as pure as the snow!

SISTER JOSEFINA

It doesn't snow here.

MARIA

But even if the snow doesn't fall here,  
it's still pure everywhere else.

SISTER JOSEFINA

Then why --

SISTER CARMEN

(looking at watch)

Sister Josefina -- the evening service?  
It's getting close.

Sister Josefina resents the interruption of her inquest,  
but no argument with Sister Carmen. Maria smiles at Sister  
Carmen for the reprieve, with a smile returned.

KITCHEN

Rosario at the sink as the nuns bring their dishes to her.

SISTER CARMEN

Was there -- anything -- you know?

MARIA

It was worse than that.

Sister Josefina enters. Everyone straightens up.

SISTER JOSEFINA

Sister Carmen, you were worried about  
the service.

SISTER CARMEN

And I still am, Sister Josefina.

SISTER JOSEFINA

Then all of you -- go. I'll clean.

The four nuns leave.

SISTER JOSEFINA

(to Rosario)

I'll do them. I have washed a dish or  
two in my life.

Rosario goes to put the food away and watches critically as Sister Josefina rolls up her sleeves and starts to wash the dishes with so much vigor that they fear for their lives.

INT. CHURCH - EVENING

Candlelight. People in prayer, led by Sister Carmen and Sister Cristina. Maria, at the rear, listening deeply when Ernesto enters. In the congregation kneels PEDRO, a rat-faced little man, who though looking like someone praying, keeps darting his glance as if he were looking for food.

ERNESTO

Quite beautiful, Sister Maria.

MARIA

We find that praying for peace is an  
excellent way to practice being humble.

ERNESTO

We could all use more of that.

Sister Josefina enters behind them.

ERNESTO

Please excuse me, Sister Josefina, for  
not paying my respects earlier.

SISTER JOSEFINA

You had a long trip.

The door behind them swings open sharply. EDUARDO, a young man in tattered clothes, goes directly to Maria. Pedro watches the scene carefully.

EDUARDO

Sister Peti, Sister Peti -- you have to  
come -- Belén --

MARIA

Still?

EDUARDO

Worse. (nods) Father. Sister.

ERNESTO

What is it?

MARIA

My godchild is sick. Do you want to come?

ERNESTO

I have to meet Colonel Martín.

MARIA

First things first. I have keys, Sister.

SISTER JOSEFINA

Take the car.

MARIA

It'll be faster to walk.

SISTER JOSEFINA

The usual light will be on. Peti, be careful.

Maria and Eduardo leave.

ERNESTO

Peti?

SISTER JOSEFINA

You want to know another one of her nicknames? Terremoto.

ERNESTO

I have no doubt Sister Maria can shake the earth.

SISTER JOSEFINA

Do you know that for a fact, Father?

ERNESTO

That I do.

INT. EDUARDO'S HOUSE - EVENING

Rude cabin, crowded with poverty. Frightened, Luz Elena stands next to her mother, CATALINA. BELÉN, 5, in a disheveled bed, clearly sick, is cared for by Maria.

MARIA

It's very high.

CATALINA

We've got no more medicine!

MARIA

I thought you had bought --

CATALINA

He hasn't worked.

MARIA

Why not?

CATALINA

Tell her! I'll tell her then. Because he's got a big mouth!

MARIA

Eduardito, we talked about this --

CATALINA

No one will take him on.

MARIA

You can't --

EDUARDO

They're bleeding us dry, Peti, they cheat --

MARIA

But you can't go around --

EDUARDO

I'm not the only one talking!

CATALINA

"Justice" and "fairness" while his daughter dies --

MARIA

Catalina --

EDUARDO

But you told me --

MARIA

And I believe all of it in my bones --  
you know that -- but your family -- you  
do justice by them first. Keep her  
cool -- bathe her -- I'll get the  
doctor.

CATALINA

Go with her.

At the door.

MARIA

Catalina, if he squawks again, turn him  
into a toad.

CATALINA

Then we'd have some food.

EXT. ROAD - EVENING

Bright moonlight, Maria and Eduardo walking, when all of a  
sudden headlights stab the darkness. Eduardo melts into  
the darkness just as a jeep with soldiers stops.

SOLDIER

Sister, it's late.

SIDE OF THE ROAD

Eduardo stares at the soldier, breathes shallowly,  
wondering if they can smell the fear in his sweat.

ROAD

MARIA

It's a short walk.

SOLDIER

The wolves are in the hills, sister.  
Get in -- we'll take you home.

MARIA

Thank you, no.

SOLDIER

No trouble at all.

MARIA

I'm going to the doctor's.

SOLDIER

Then you'll be there even faster.

Maria reluctantly gets in the jeep, this very small woman surrounded by large armed men.

SIDE OF THE ROAD

Eduardo watches a snake slither away in the silver moonlight.

INT. JEEP

As they pull away, the radio CRACKLES. Soldier answers loudly, over the RUSH of the wind.

SOLDIER

But we have a nun with us. Taking her home. Your name?

MARIA

(shouting)

Sister Maria Beatriz Alvarez.

SOLDIER

Sister -- You got that. Bring her in? You sure? All right.

MARIA

I have to get to the doctor's.

SOLDIER

Sorry, Sister, a small detour first.

MARIA

I have to get to --

But her voice is drowned out by the wind.

EXT. MILITARY GARRISON

The jeep pulls up to one of the buildings. One of the soldiers escorts Maria inside.

INT. COLONEL MARTÍN'S OFFICE

A spare office, maps, etc. COLONEL MARTÍN, the garrison commander, trim, uniformed, 40s, sits with Ernesto as Maria enters. Martín rises to greet Maria.

MARTÍN

Sister Maria Beatriz Alvarez.

MARIA

I was on my way to get the doctor.

MARTÍN

Good evening.

MARIA

I have to get the doctor.

ERNESTO

This is Colonel Martín.

A pause as Maria sees the warning in Ernesto's face.

MARIA

Good evening. Colonel.

MARTÍN

You were on your way to get the doctor.

MARIA

For my godchild. And I would like to continue --

MARTÍN

Eduardo Velez's daughter.

MARIA

(suddenly suspicious)

Yes.

MARTÍN

Father, have you have met Sister Maria Beatriz Alvarez?

ERNESTO

Yes, I have.

MARTÍN

But I mean, have you really met our singular Sister Peti?

Martín flips open a folder.

MARTÍN

We were just taking a look at you. Sister Peti. Sister Terremoto. Good family -- all pharmacists. Scientists, which makes them dependable. Became a nun for --

Flips a few more pages, pauses.

MARTÍN

Well, for reasons that are her own.

MARIA

I really have to get to the doctor's.

Holds up a photo: Eduardo in a group of OTHER MEN from the town. Martín points to Eduardo.

MARTÍN

Of course you know him. Do you know these others?

But Martín doesn't wait for an answer. He puts the photo away, flips through more papers.

MARTÍN

Reports, Sister -- and your name comes up -- talking to the sheep herders, the brick makers. A very active name.

ERNESTO

Colonel Martín? May I have the  
bishop's letter back?

Martín closes the file and hands the letter to Ernesto.

MARTÍN

Church and country -- an honor to  
defend them. To defend you both.

ERNESTO

Of course. And I appreciate any more  
information you can give me about my  
parish.

MARTÍN

We'll talk again.

ERNESTO

And now I believe Sister Maria really  
should get to the doctor's.

Martín pushes a button on his intercom. A soldier appears.

MARTÍN

Wherever they wish to go.

EXT. CHURCH

The jeep pulls away, leaving Maria and Ernesto standing.  
Tense silence between them. From the shadows, Eduardo  
speaks. They both jump, spooked.

EDUARDO

I got the doctor.

MARIA

Then go home where you belong.

EDUARDO

I'm sorry.

MARIA

Before Catalina turns you into a toad.

EDUARDO

Father.

Eduardo melts into the darkness. Silence stretches. Maria marches toward the convent house.

ERNESTO

Maria.

No response.

ERNESTO

Maria.

She skids to a stop and pivots fiercely.

MARIA

At first, Father Ernesto --

ERNESTO

Ernesto, Maria.

MARIA

At first, Father Ernesto, I couldn't tell the difference between you two.

ERNESTO

Let me explain.

MARIA

The priest and the lord of the castle. Did you have him call me in?

ERNESTO

Of course not.

MARIA

Then why was I there?

ERNESTO

Your file was already open when I got there. Why would you think that I --

MARIA

Because it wouldn't have been your first betrayal.

The word hangs heavy between them.

ERNESTO

It's part of my duty to talk to Martín.

MARIA

I know all about your sense of duty.

ERNESTO

We have to talk about --

But Maria already heads for the light over the front door.

ERNESTO

Maria!

MARIA

Sister Maria Beatriz Alvarez.

Maria stops, then turns back.

MARIA

Here, tomorrow, after morning prayers.  
You want information about your parish?

EXT. MOUNTAIN PATH - NEXT DAY

Maria confidently hikes up a dusty path trailed by a panting and sweating Ernesto carrying a heavy backpack.

ERNESTO

Can we take a --

But his words trail off as Maria strides on, and he pushes himself to keep up with her.

EXT. CABIN

A run-down yard. Maria KNOCKS on the warped doorframe, and PENELOPE, a small brown nut of a woman, appears, her face open in a toothless smile. They embrace.

PENELOPE

Peti, Peti, my Peti -- oh, oh, oh!

Penelope WHISPERING, pointing at Ernesto.

PENELOPE

The crickets told me all about the mule.

MARIA

I call him Father Ernesto. This is Penelope.

Penelope barely nods to Ernesto -- clearly no use for him.

PENELOPE

Did you bring, did you bring --

MARIA

All of it.

Another broad toothless smile and a HANDCLAP. Penelope and Maria disappear into the house, Ernesto trailing.

INT. CABIN

In the middle of the broken everything hangs an enormous unfinished embroidery on medieval themes -- phoenix, unicorn, apocalypse, fronted by a rough scaffolding. Maria pulls the backpack off Ernesto, almost tumbling him over, and takes out a package full of bundled colored thread.

PENELOPE

Yes, yes!

Penelope begins adding the bundles by color to thread already laid out.

MARIA

My mother sends them to me for her.

PENELOPE

We are getting closer, we are getting closer!

Finished, Penelope suddenly plants herself in front of Ernesto and bows her head.

MARIA

She wants you to give her last rites.

ERNESTO

But she's not dying.

Penelope remains planted, head bowed. Her VOICE, suddenly strong and clear, startles Ernesto.

PENELOPE

It never hurts to be ready.

ERNESTO

But I don't have --

MARIA

It's all right.

Ernesto quickly improvises the ritual, with a sign of the cross on her forehead. Penelope CLAPS her hands.

PENELOPE

Now I am ready.

Penelope climbs the scaffolding and begins her meticulous sewing, ignoring them. Ernesto, transfixed by the scene, traces the various figures with his hand. His amazed look at Maria is met by a silent nod and a reluctant smile.

EXT. CABIN

MARIA

Her son is a "disappeared." One of the first from around here. At night she wanders -- out there -- looking for him.

ERNESTO

The tapestry?

MARIA

A record. Of his soul's journey. A madness. A comfort.

Maria chucks the backpack at him.

MARIA

The crickets talk about the mule.

EXT. MOUNTAIN PATH

Ernesto clammers behind Maria, Penelope's cabin behind them.

ERNESTO

Where are we going now?

MARIA

Thirteen more stops. Just like the stations of the cross.

Maria strides over the crest of the hill, Ernesto trailing.

EXT. CREST OF HILL - LATE AFTERNOON

Maria and Ernesto rest, having made their last visit. They drink water and eat bread, the small town spread below them. Silence at first, then...

MARIA

Welcome to your parish.

ERNESTO

I will soon have enormous calves if my feet don't fall off first.

MARIA

That's entirely your own business. I was just giving you a tour.

ERNESTO

Thank you -- for the tour.

Ernesto wants to reach out to touch her, just as a kind of thanks, but he doesn't.

MARIA

I don't want to trade memories with you. Now would be the time to say what you want to say to me, Father Ernesto, or don't bother.

Ernesto hesitates, then digs into a pocket, pulls out the watch of the young man. Pain and disgust on Maria's face.

ERNESTO

I want to say I'm sorry.

Maria, furious beyond limits, stands, indicates for him to give her the watch.

ERNESTO

I learned what happened to him.

MARIA

Who cares what you did? What you did to him made you one of them.

Still furious, she points to the ground.

MARIA

Prostrate yourself.

ERNESTO

What?

MARIA

Right here! Do it!

Slowly Ernesto lays belly down in the dirt, his arms to the side. Maria puts her feet just a foot from his head.

EXT. ANOTHER CREST

Three Monteneros, with rifles, distinctive bandanas around their necks, crouch with binoculars and watch a priest prostrate himself in the dirt.

EXT. CREST OF HILL

MARIA

Grab my ankles! Listen. "My father's -- they'll steal it." Do you remember? "Don't let them, don't let them -- " Do. You. Remember?

ERNESTO

(into the dust)

Yes.

Maria crouches down and unclasps his hands, throws his arms to the side.

MARIA

He begged you. And all you could say?  
"There are laws -- he'll be fine."

ERNESTO

I was afraid.

MARIA

I would not have done what you did.  
Don't!

ERNESTO

I was afraid.

MARIA

And it made you weak. You were tested,  
and you failed! Failed!

A pause, a shiver of disgust.

MARIA

The bright young star of the seminary -  
- what good came out of that? I  
admired you. You taught me so much,  
you freed my mind.

Ernesto picks himself up, dust on his face.

MARIA

Clean yourself off.

ERNESTO

And now your name is making the rounds.  
Even as far away as the bishop.

EXT - ANOTHER CREST

The three armed young men see the priest get up.

YOUNG MAN 1

Strangest sex I've ever seen, even for  
a priest.

YOUNG MAN 2

Let's go.

YOUNG MAN 1

Let's stay.

YOUNG MAN 2

Put your tongue back and let's go!

The three slide down the hill and out of sight.

EXT. CREST OF HILL

Indicates for Maria to return the watch. Which she does.

ERNESTO

One on my conscience is enough. I  
won't have two.

MARIA

No one is asking you --

ERNESTO

The bishop has heard. Martín has a  
bead on you. I know the Monteneros are  
around -- a conversation or two with  
them, probably?

MARIA

Lots of people pass through town.

ERNESTO

And if I was afraid then, I'm even more  
afraid now. You've never been afraid?  
You've never failed?

ERNESTO

I want to do good work here. I want to  
do what's right.

Maria takes up the backpack and slings it at Ernesto.

MARIA

The corner of the church -- the  
southwest corner -- it should be  
repaired.

ERNESTO

All right.

MARIA

Eduardo could use the work.

ERNESTO

I have some funds --

MARIA

Then do it. (pause) Sister Josefina  
will be worried about me.

Maria starts down the path, then turns. Helicopter passes.

MARIA

Don't use me. Don't use any of us.

Pivots and continues on. Ernesto pauses, then follows.

INT. HELICOPTER

Soldiers see a priest and nun trek down the path. To the other side they catch a glimpse of three men sliding through the trees. The PILOT banks the helicopter and the GUNNER rips off several hundred rounds, shattering the branches.

EXT. HILLSIDE

Maria and Ernesto drop to the ground, watching the helicopter slip away over the forest. Eerie SILENCE falls, full of WIND and the RASP of blown sand. Slowly they stand.

ERNESTO

(spitting)

I have eaten quite enough dirt today.

They start back down, and then MARIA turns to face ERNESTO. She wipes some dirt from his cheek.

MARIA

You're not alone in feeling afraid.

She pivots and walks on. He follows.

INT. MARIA'S CLASSROOM -- THREE DAYS LATER

The children file out noisily while Maria, standing by the window, watches Ernesto and Eduardo repair the wall. This is clearly not work Ernesto has ever done, and Maria, watching his clumsiness, cannot keep herself from smiling.

EXT. CHURCH WALL

Maria watches a begrimed Ernesto slopping the cement.

EDUARDO

(gesturing)

Father, a little more --

ERNESTO

Right, right.

Maria, winking at Eduardo, picks up three half bricks and juggles, then tosses them to Eduardo, who neatly fits them into an unfinished course. Hitching up her skirt into her belt, she takes the trowel from Ernesto and smoothly mixes the cement. Eduardo indicates for Ernesto to bring him some bricks, a job he is clearly better suited for.

INT. MARIA'S CLASSROOM

Sisters Josefina, Teresa, Cristina, and Carmen all watch the three of them repair the wall. Rosario hovers over their shoulders.

ROSARIO

She knows how to juggle, eh?

Sister Josefina shoots her a withering look, met with a big gap-toothed smile from Rosario.

EXT. CHURCH WALL

Maria and Ernesto watch Eduardo scratch his name into the drying stucco, punctuated with his handprint. They all smile at each other.

INT. SISTER JOSEFINA'S OFFICE - LATER

A smudged Maria faces a frowning Sister Josefina. Sister Josefina indicates the skirt, which Maria lets fall, then picks off a spot of dried cement from Maria's cheek and taps her cheek lightly. A small smile escapes.

SISTER JOSEFINA

Go.

Maria leaves. SOUND of a helicopter.

INT. DINING ROOM - LATER

Ernesto and the five nuns sit at the dining table, polite and strained. Sister Teresa tries to hide a smile, Sister Cristina tears at a crust of bread, Sister Carmen gives Sister Teresa a hard look.

SISTER JOSEFINA

Father Ernesto?

ERNESTO

Yes.

SISTER JOSEFINA

We have a problem we'd like your advice on.

ERNESTO

I'll offer what I can.

SISTER JOSEFINA

We have many young women in the town under our care. What do you think is the best way to promote chastity among them?

Ernesto blushes, and it is only by the grace of God that the other nuns do not burst out laughing -- then they lose that grace altogether.

KITCHEN

Rosario is doubled over, hand over mouth, trying to keep her laughter as muffled as possible.

EXT. CREST OF HILL - NIGHT

Eduardo and several others, including IGNACIO, PABLO, ROBERTO, and Pedro, huddle around a fire, talk and pass around mate, the firelight playing across their faces. Out of the darkness loom ARMED MEN, masked. Everyone escapes, but it is clear they have come for Eduardo, his face jammed into the dust, a gun pressed against his nape. And then the gun FIRED, shattering the air.

INT. MARIA'S ROOM - LATE AT NIGHT

A loud RAPPING on the window tumbles Maria out of sleep. Luz Elena, her face terrified, hands Maria a Polaroid showing the dead Eduardo.

EXT. ERNESTO'S DOOR

Maria, heavy flashlight in her hand, pounds and pounds.

MARIA

Now. Now!

INT. EDUARDO'S HOUSE

Catalina holding Belén, Luz Elena cowering, Maria with flashlight, Ernesto clutching Polaroid.

CATALINA

(indicating picture)

They nailed that -- to the door --

MARIA

We'll find him.

CATALINA

Find him.

MARIA

Just stay here.

EXT. DITCH BY ROAD

A flashlight picks out a body, face down, hands tied. Ernesto rolls him over, but only by his clothing can they identify Eduardo because his face has been skinned to the bone.

Headlights, the GROWL of a jeep, spume of dust when it stops, Maria and Ernesto stark in the glare. Silence, then the CRUNCH of boot on dirt, a soldier kneeling by the ditch.

SOLDIER

Not much left for last rites, eh?

Ernesto kneels in the blaze of light, takes out his stole, kisses it, wears it.

ERNESTO

Go to Catalina. This is one thing I know how to do. Go!

Ernesto proceeds to give the sacrament as Maria follows the flashlight's beam to Eduardo's house.

EXT. EDUARDO'S HOUSE

The small house dwarfed by the darkness and the strangled WAIL of grief from Catalina that SHATTERS the night.

INT. MARTÍN'S OFFICE - NEXT MORNING

The haggard DOCTOR puts a folder on Martín's desk. Martín looks equally haggard. JOSE LUIS, Martín's AIDE, stands to the side.

DOCTOR

I haven't done an autopsy since medical school. I'm a pediatrician, Colonel --

MARTÍN

I'm sure you did the best you could.

DOCTOR

Yes, the best I could, but it isn't anything I want to do again.

MARTÍN

You knew him?

DOCTOR

Eduardo Velez? I just treated his daughter a few days ago for a fever.

MARTÍN

And she's better?

DOCTOR

Yes. Good of you to ask, I guess.

MARTÍN

Go on.

DOCTOR

(touching back of neck)

He died from a common disease these days -- one bullet --

MARTÍN

And the business of the face?

DOCTOR

Probably a gelding knife. Thin, sharp.

MARTÍN

Did Eduardo Velez deserve this? Doctor? It's all right, you can talk to me.

DOCTOR

His -- flaw, Colonel? He didn't like being cheated. But he wasn't a Communist, if that's what you're asking.

MARTÍN

The hands and feet?

DOCTOR

When they pierced them -- alive or dead -- who knows?

MARTÍN

Why make him look crucified?

DOCTOR

A body's sickness I can handle, but  
that one you'll have to answer on your  
own. Is there anything else?

MARTÍN

No. Thank you again. I assure you --

DOCTOR

Just assure me that I won't have to do  
this again.

Soldier escorts the doctor out. From behind Martín, a  
KNOCK.

MARTÍN

Yes.

JOSE LUIS answers, and a soldier shoves Pedro toward the  
chair. Pedro quivers as he goes to sit.

MARTÍN

Don't sit!

Martín hovers over him, whispers in his ear.

MARTÍN

Who did this?

Pedro shrugs. Martín taps Pedro on his nape.

MARTÍN

A common disease today. Find out.

Pedro's eyes twitch. A bead of sweat falls off his nose.

INT. EDUARDO'S HOUSE - TWO DAYS LATER

Rough coffin on two trestles, six MEN waiting. Catalina  
with Belén, Luz Elena by Catalina. ALTAR BOY, with censer,  
incense rising. A gesture from Maria, and the men shoulder  
the coffin as the altar boy leads.

INT. CHURCH - SAME TIME

Ernesto directs the nuns to arrange the flowers, light the candles, set the trestles.

DOORWAY

He and Josefina watch the road.

EXT. ROAD

The coffin gathers mourners as it travels. Catalina with Belén, Luz Elena, and Maria lead.

INT. CHURCH

The men set down the coffin. As the people sit, they SOUND like falling leaves. Josefina stands at the back.

EXT. ROAD

Martín and his driver pull into the town square.

INT. CHURCH

Ernesto SINGS the requiem, the people's VOICES in answer. Ernesto sees the driver step into the church and whisper to Josefina. Josefina leaves. Maria does not see this.

INT. JOSEFINA'S OFFICE

MARTÍN

I want to offer my condolences.

JOSEFINA

I have not lost anything.

MARTÍN

To the Velez family.

JOSEFINA

I'll make sure they know. Is there anything else?

MARTÍN

We need to have a talk about Sister Maria.

JOSEFINA

One of my best -- I am always proud to talk about her work.

MARTÍN

I want you to know that what happened to Eduardo Velez --

JOSEFINA

Any civilized person would condemn it.

MARTÍN

And I do.

JOSEFINA

That's good.

Josefina waits.

MARTÍN

Eduardo Velez's death is a dishonor -- to me, to my command --

JOSEFINA

Then the Army officially condemns it?

MARTÍN

My men had nothing to do with it.

JOSEFINA

That's good.

MARTÍN

And we will find out who did.

JOSEFINA

And does that bring us back to Sister Maria?

MARTÍN

Defending ideals shouldn't be a dirty business.

JOSEFINA

In an ideal world, we wouldn't need ideals. And Sister Maria?

MARTÍN

Speak to her. Keep her focused on her duties. She is still a child. No matter what she thinks of herself, she is still a child.

A moment as their eyes lock.

JOSEFINA

Thank you for your condolences.

INT. CHURCH

Maria behind the coffin, facing the congregation, half a broken brick in each hand. Martín and Josefina enter.

MARIA

(holding up brick)

This. This. A broken life. Eduardo Velez's life, somebody you all knew. A simple man. He just wanted to raise his family in dignity, and he was murdered and tortured because he wanted a day's pay for his day's work.

One half, the second half, on top of the coffin. The hard THUD of brick against wood echoes and dies.

MARIA

But he isn't the first, is he?

Question hangs in the air.

MARIA

Is he?

An uneasy stirring.

MARIA

Is he?

Air tense, eyes downcast.

MARIA

"I will keep my mouth with a bridle,  
while the wicked is before me." We  
know -- and we don't speak out. We  
know -- and we put the bridle in our  
mouths. Aren't you angry? Aren't you  
ashamed at what happened to Eduardo  
Velez?

Ernesto edges closer, stands at her elbow. Maria senses  
the warning in his closeness.

ERNESTO

(whispering)

Be careful.

MARIA

"I hold my peace, even from the good;  
and my sorrow is stirred." What good  
is peace like that? What truth does  
that kind of sorrow bring?

Maria chooses to ignore the growing discomfort in the  
congregation -- or just does not see it.

MARIA

Eduardo was the father of my godchild.  
My Belén. My family. Family. As we  
all are -- or should be. Unless we cry  
out in Christ's voice against those  
don't hear Christ's voice, like his  
murderers, Eduardo Velez will not be  
the last. There will never even be a  
last because we will be too busy  
keeping our mouths shut to fight back.

ERNESTO

(harsh whisper)

That is enough.

MARIA

(ignoring him)

Some of you know who did this -- I know  
you know -- and yet you sit there --

ERNESTO

Finish.

Startled by his voice, as if coming out of a trance.

MARIA

In Christ our Lord, amen.

A response from the people as Ernesto moves forward to finish the ceremony. Martín leaves.

EXT. CEMETERY

A mound of fresh dirt, flowers scattered across it, the low MOAN of wind.

INT. EDUARDO'S HOUSE

After the funeral: food and mate make the rounds. Maria holds Belén, trying to make her laugh. The air fills with LOW CHAT and GOSSIP.

Suddenly, Ignacio's VOICE rises, and Rosario's VOICE answers him. Maria moves closer.

ROSARIO

Go on, tell her.

IGNACIO

No.

MARIA

Tell me what, Ignacio?

IGNACIO

Nothing.

ROSARIO

My cousin is telling a lie.

IGNACIO

Shut your mouth!

MARIA

Ignacio?

ROSARIO

My cousin doesn't talk so big now!

IGNACIO

All right!

But Ignacio does not speak. Maria looks at the others. Ernesto drifts near. Pedro hovers.

MARIA

Did I miss it?

ROSARIO

My cousin said --

IGNACIO

I can talk for myself!

ROSARIO

So talk!

IGNACIO

You saw Colonel Martín there today --  
and yet you said what you said.

MARIA

I only said what we all know.

IGNACIO

Do you want more of us to end up like  
Eduardo?

MARIA

Of course not!

IGNACIO

Because you don't really know what  
you're talking about.

Ignacio looks around at the group, all of them attentive yet hanging back.

IGNACIO

You think you know us, but you really  
don't. Justice, the voice of Christ --  
all so pretty.

ROSARIO

That's enough.

IGNACIO

You come from the city and think you know all about how poor people live! Well, you don't!

ROSARIO

That's enough out of you!

IGNACIO

You could get us killed.

ERNESTO

Ignacio.

Suspended moment as everyone in the group realizes that everyone else in the small house hangs on their words. Pedro glances from face to face, nervous, attentive.

ERNESTO

Remember where you are.

MARIA

That's not true, Ignacio.

IGNACIO

More talk like what you did and --

ERNESTO

Remember why we are here. Sister Maria, Catalina could use a hand.

The group cannot meet her eyes.

ERNESTO

Let me take her.

Ernesto takes Belén from Maria.

ERNESTO

Catalina needs your help.

Belén struggles out of Ernesto's arms and runs after Maria. The group hang their heads.

ERNESTO

Ignacio, if you have anything to say,  
say it to me.

IGNACIO

I don't have anything to say, father.

ERNESTO

You were Eduardo's friend.

IGNACIO

I have nothing to say.

ERNESTO

Then I suggest a change in topics.

IGNACIO

You should talk with her, father.

ERNESTO

It's hard to talk to an earthquake, eh?

Small laughter at the shared joke.

ERNESTO

Give Catalina the respect she deserves  
and talk about the weather, eh?

EXT. ROAD

Ernesto struggles to keep up with Maria, who rockets along  
fueled by anger and dismay.

ERNESTO

You can't blame them -- Maria --  
Maria --

Maria stops so short that Ernesto runs into her.

MARIA

I am going to find out who killed  
Eduardo -- what is so hard to  
understand about that?

ERNESTO

Sister Terremoto, listen to yourself.

MARIA

Are you going to help me? Or are you going to get in my way?

ERNESTO

I came here to help you.

MARIA

You came to protect me because my name is being "discussed." I don't care about that.

ERNESTO

But if you care about them --

MARIA

Of course I care about them!

ERNESTO

Then you won't do this. If you push this, you know exactly what can happen. Ignacio is right -- it's the poor who get it in the neck. And do you think your veil gives you a pass? Did you forget what the army did to the Pallatine priests? The two seminarians? Have you? I saw the bodies. What was left of them.

This shuts her up.

ERNESTO

And what did they say or do that was so terrible? "Speak in the voice of Christ." Sound familiar? That was all they said, but that's all it took. I watched Martín today. He's a patient man, but he's not your friend or our friend. He will do what he has to do.

Ernesto pulls out the watch.

ERNESTO

His name, too, was Eduardo. And Ignacio is right -- no one is safe. Between the rebels up there, Martín's gang over there, and whoever killed your godchild's father, none of us is safe.

Then puts the watch away.

ERNESTO

And what if, while you're busy "finding out," Eduardo's killers decide they need to finish the job? What if they take Belén? The disappeared aren't always adults.

Maria, head bowed, does not see Ernesto reach out to touch her, then take his hand away before he does. Maria now walks much more slowly, Ernesto following.

ERNESTO

I will do my best to help you find out -- but we have to be careful.

EXT. OFF ROAD -- SAME TIME

A FEMALE MONTENERO, hidden, tracks Maria and Ernesto. Suddenly, the CRUNCH of a boot. Pedro skulks by, pauses, spies on Maria and Ernesto, then continues, the three now closely watched by the Montenero.

INT. JOSEFINA'S OFFICE - EVENING

Josefina looks at the tired Maria with concern.

JOSEFINA

Obedience has always been your hardest vow.

MARIA

I know.

JOSEFINA

I know you know because I've had to keep reminding you about it.

MARIA

I'm sorry, Sister.

JOSEFINA

Do I also have to remind you to continue your duties? Do I need to repeat them?

MARIA

No.

JOSEFINA

Good. Because Father Ernesto has told me everything. He was right to tell me, so don't look hurt. And I told him that I would make sure that you were completely sure about your real work.

Josefina waits.

MARIA

Yes, Sister.

JOSEFINA

I know you loved Eduardo. We all did. He was a good man. (pause) If you come across information while you're doing your real work -- if -- make sure it comes to my ears. Is that clear?

A moment as they link, an understanding between them.

JOSEFINA

Go join the others for evening prayers. And be careful.

INT. CHURCH

The church emptying out as Maria arrives. Warm greetings, embraces, as usual, but her mind is somewhere else, and she seeks a quiet place to pray. Ernesto sees her, and as he walks past, he speaks.

ERNESTO

You have all the help I can give you.

Ernesto passes on, closing windows, locking doors, snuffing candles, then leaves. Maria, alone, and the grief building up all day but kept inside finally breaks. Tears slip down her face like rain on a window.

INT. MARTÍN'S OFFICE

Martín signing, with Jose Luis taking the papers he signs.

MARTÍN

Done! That cabinet?

JOSE LUIS

Yes sir.

MARTÍN

The scotch -- and two glasses. I wish I had as many men here as I have pieces of paper on this desk.

Jose Luis pours scotch into one glass and hands it to Martín.

MARTÍN

The second glass is for you.

JOSE LUIS

No, thank you, sir.

MARTÍN

You don't drink?

Martín hands his glass, unsipped, to Jose Luis.

MARTÍN

Not alone, then. Let's walk instead.

EXT. GARRISON - NIGHT

They walk through pools of light and dark cast by the floodlights.

MARTÍN

Tell me why you don't drink.

JOSE LUIS

The body is a temple, sir.

MARTÍN

You really believe that?

JOSE LUIS

It's what I was taught by people who love me.

MARTÍN

It's that simple for you?

JOSE LUIS

Isn't it for you, sir?

They walk close to the gate of the garrison. The soldiers on duty snap to attention, then relax as Martín passes.

MARTÍN

I try to make it as simple as possible.

JOSE LUIS

Simple doesn't mean easy, sir.

MARTÍN

So smart so young -- and without scotch.

Standing between two pools of light, they hear MOVEMENTS outside the fence. Instantly pistols in hand.

They wait, light breathing -- and then the SOUNDS of jabalés, wild boars. Martín relaxes, and they laugh.

Then suddenly, a gunshot CRACKS. Martín and Jose Luis hit the dirt. A hail of shots, and instantly searchlights comb the grounds, picking out Monteneros.

Martín is up, running, shouting commands, Jose Luis right beside him. The air FRAGS with gunshots, ROARS with the GROWL of jeeps, SIZZLES with radio voices.

EXT. OUTSIDE GARRISON'S FENCE

Beams of light rip into the darkness as a full firefight blazes. Squad leaders fan out their soldiers, who move in disciplined groups.

Martín, in his element, shows himself every inch the officer. He orders, he decides, he commands.

MARTÍN  
(to Jose Luis)  
Stay here! Stay here!

Then off Martín goes.

The SHOOTING trails away, and then an eerie calm. The remaining soldiers patrol, secure the perimeter.

EXT. COUNTRYSIDE

Harsh glare from one of the floodlights on the back of the jeep. Three Montenero bodies, pulped by bullets.

SQUAD LEADER  
Like they usually do -- hit, disappear.  
They're gone.

MARTÍN  
Except for these. Our losses?

SQUAD LEADER  
Three.

MARTÍN  
(whispering)  
Tooth for tooth.

SQUAD LEADER  
I can set up patrols --

MARTÍN  
I want everyone back. We're blind out here. You know what to do with them.

Bodies laid in the back of the jeep, then a full retreat to the garrison.

INT. CHURCH

Maria praying, when suddenly, muffled but sharp, GUNFIRE.

EXT. PLAZA

Ernesto, Maria, townspeople -- straining to hear where the SHOOTING moves, tense, shallow-breathed. As the sound fades, people relax and move back to their homes. Maria and Ernesto glance at each other, then Maria goes back to the convent.

INT. MARTÍN'S OFFICE - SEVERAL HOURS LATER

Martín sees the untouched scotch, pours it back, caps it, puts it away. At first the cabinet door doesn't latch and swings open. Martín slams it shut -- it still doesn't latch properly. With more force than expected, Martín slams it again, hard. It catches -- but also cracks the panel in a jagged and precise line.

EXT. RIO NÉGRO - DAWN

Landscape filled with golden light. Helicopters fly by in silhouette.

EXT. MOUNTAINS

Face of a Montenero, bandana around his neck.

INT. MARTÍN'S OFFICE

Martín at his desk, awake and staring.

EXT. COUNTRYSIDE

Penelope wanders, looking for her son.

INT. HOUSE

Ernesto sitting at the bedside of a dying old woman,  
holding her hand.

INT. KITCHEN - CONVENT

Rosario preparing breakfast.

INT. MARIA'S BEDROOM

Maria in her room, juggling -- she drops a ball.

INT. MARIA'S CLASSROOM - LATER

Maria is seated at her desk staring off into the distance  
while the class works on an assignment. RAÚL raises his  
hand, but Maria does not see him.

RAÚL  
Sister Peti? Sister Peti?

When Maria doesn't answer, the other students look at one  
another, wondering, apprehensive.

RAÚL  
Sister Peti?

Maria finally hears Raúl and turns to him.

MARIA  
The answer to number six, Raúl --

RAÚL  
How did you know?

MARIA  
Because I know you. It's in what we  
talked about yesterday.

Maria spies Luz Elena staring at the paper in front of her,  
and intense sadness sweeps across Maria's face.

MARIA  
Put your pencils down. Bring your  
chairs.

Maria motions for them to gather around her in a circle.

MARIA

Hold hands. A story. Do any of you know about a man named Job?

RAÚL

Does he live in the mountains?

EXT. IGNACIO'S HOUSE

MARIA (V.O.)

He lived long ago -- Bible times. God treated him very badly -- gave him pimples, headaches -- everything you can imagine -- Job got it.

Two ARMED MEN, not Monteneros, drag the dead body of Ignacio behind them, followed by three other ARMED MEN. IGNACIO'S WIFE screams in horror as they throw his body at her feet.

RAÚL (V.O.)

Why?

MARIA (V.O.)

Because God wanted to test his faith.

RAÚL (V.O.)

Did Job do anything bad?

MARIA (V.O.)

Nothing but get up the morning and live his life, like all of us.

Ignacio's wife drops to her knees, frantic hands trying to pump life back into the corpse.

RAÚL (V.O.)

Then that's not right!

MARIA (V.O.)

That's what Job thought. He shouted at God -- yes. "Why, God, why me?"

One armed man grabs Ignacio's wife by the hair. A boot jammed between her shoulders, and he pulls back, hard.

MARIA (V.O.)

He wanted an answer from God. "Why do we suffer? Tell me, right now! Right now!" Job was confused. He felt betrayed -- you all know what that word means? He wanted justice.

INT. IGNACIO'S HOUSE

A roughened pair of hands grabs a baby from its bed.

EXT. IGNACIO'S HOUSE

Armed man holds the baby overhead, then slams it down in front of the Ignacio's wife. The man pulling her hair lets go, his boot in her back jamming her face into the dust.

RAÚL (V.O.)

Did he get an answer?

MARIA (V.O.)

He got the answer everybody gets.

RAÚL (V.O.)

Not fair that God did all that to him.

Ignacio's wife can only see boots in the dust, in the water overflowing from the pump. She can only see her crying child in the dirt. She can only see the gun pressed against the back of her child's head. She can only feel the gun pressed against the nape of her own neck. Then she sees and feels nothing as the air EXPLODES with gunshots.

MARIA (V.O.)

Raúl, our only hope for justice is in Christ. Christ died for us.

Two men prop the three bodies against the wall of the house.

MARIA (V.O.)

He rose to show us the way, and then he keeps coming back to save us -- he never really leaves.

The bodies arranged as if for a ghoulish family photograph.

MARIA (V.O.)

There is justice, Raúl, if we keep our  
faith in Christ.

SNAP of a Polaroid camera, the WHIRR of the spit-out film as a man takes a close-up picture of each corpse. A truck pulls up. Men throw the bodies into the truck bed while one man nails the Polaroids to the front door. A veil of dust, and the truck disappears.

INT. MARIA'S CLASSROOM

MARIA

That's the only way. It's hard -- but  
it's on the only way. Let's pray.  
"Our father" --

Hands held, heads bowed, WHISPERS of prayer -- moment of peace.

EXT. ERNESTO'S DOOR - LATER EVENING

The small nut of Penelope's hand knocks crisply on Ernesto's door. When Ernesto opens it, she holds up the Polaroids, then bows her head. When Ernesto recognizes what they are, he takes his right thumb and makes the sign of the cross on Penelope's forehead.

INT. CONVENT - DINING ROOM

All the nuns. Ernesto. Penelope composed. Rosario, sobbing. The Polaroids in the middle of the table. Cups of tea on the table, untouched.

ROSARIO

I was supposed to see them tomorrow.

JOSEFINA

Take your tea.

ROSARIO

(pointing at picture)

That is not my cousin! He's still  
alive, I know it!

JOSEFINA

Rosario -- stop. Maria.

MARIA

Penelope, were you looking for your son  
again?

Two raps on the table from Penelope's hard knuckles.

MARIA

Did you see this happen?

One rap, hard.

MARIA

No one?

One hard rap again.

MARIA

All right. I'll take you home.

One hard rap again. Penelope stands.

PENELOPE

My son's waiting to take me home. And  
then I have to work in the threads for  
the moon.

MARIA

Thank you.

Penelope simply turns and leaves.

ERNESTO

Be careful.

But Penelope has disappeared. The tea remains untouched.  
The pictures SCREAM silently.

ROSARIO

The bodies were not there.

The knife of silence in everyone's heart. Ernesto looks at Maria, then nods "yes." Maria nods "yes" back. They are agreed.

EXT. IGNACIO'S HOUSE - NEXT MORNING

The Renault skids to a stop in a plume of dust.

INT. RENAULT

Before the car finishes rocking, Maria is ready to launch herself. Ernesto grabs her arm.

ERNESTO

Stop! Stop!

MARIA

Let go of me.

ERNESTO

You don't know what you're doing.

MARIA

Let go --

ERNESTO

You want evidence, yes? Yes?

MARIA

Yes!

ERNESTO

Then you have to listen to me. I can't believe I'm doing this again.

MARIA

What?

ERNESTO

Here, take these.

Ernesto hands Maria a pad of paper and a pencil, and a plastic bag.

EXT. RENAULT

Maria and Ernesto close the car's doors.

ERNESTO

When I joined the bishop's office --  
thanks to your uncle --

MARIA

What is it?

ERNESTO

His Eminence -- you're not to tell  
anyone this! He started his own --  
investigations.

MARIA

Of the disappeared?

ERNESTO

Of everything.

Ernesto starts moving cautiously toward the house, his eyes  
scouring the ground. Maria moves slowly behind him.

ERNESTO

I got myself attached to the --  
project. I learned -- techniques.

Suddenly, Ernesto kneels. He digs a fingertip into a rusty  
brown patch. Just below the dry surface blood stains his  
fingertips. He smells it, then offers it to Maria, who  
smells its unmistakable metallic tang.

ERNESTO

(pointing)

See -- over there -- and there. This  
where they must have -- Give me the  
pencil.

Digging slowly through the stain, Ernesto unearths a shell  
casing out of the dust, holds it on the end of pencil as if  
it were a pearl.

ERNESTO

The bag.

The evidence captured. At the other patches, Ernesto digs up two more casings.

ERNESTO

(sotto voce)

One shot, each.

He drops the casings in the bag. They move to the door, see the stains in the wood where the bodies had slumped.

ERNESTO

See that?

INT. IGNACIO'S HOUSE

Everything thrown around, the baby's bed overturned. A life destroyed.

EXT. IGNACIO'S HOUSE

ERNESTO

Look here.

In the damp clay at the foot of the pump is a footprint, not filled with water, not erased by the dry wind.

MARIA

Stay here.

INT. IGNACIO'S SHED

Maria roots around a tangle of tools and other junk until she finds what he wants: a bag of plaster.

EXT. IGNACIO'S HOUSE

A thick white soup of plaster fills the footprint. They both squat, watching, waiting.

ERNESTO

(indicating plaster)

That was a smart move.

MARIA

What next?

ERNESTO

If all such simple questions had simple answers. I don't know.

MARIA

I do.

ERNESTO

All right.

MARIA

Martín. We can't go to the police here -- they're already bought and sold. Like the mayor.

ERNESTO

You hate Martín.

MARIA

I only hate what he represents. But if we're going to walk this road, Ernesto -- who else?

Ernesto rises, paces.

ERNESTO

How do we know it wasn't his people?

MARIA

We don't -- but that should stop us from asking?

Ernesto paces more, agitated.

MARIA

No one should ever die like this.

ERNESTO

The bishop has never released what he's found.

MARIA

So why did he bother finding it?

ERNESTO

He has good reasons.

MARIA

So because he's afraid to talk, we  
should keep quiet, too?

Maria stands by the cast of the footprint.

ERNESTO

You're going to break that, aren't you?

MARIA

Give me a reason not to.

They face each other, not hostile, not friendly.

ERNESTO

Don't break it.

MARIA

Why?

ERNESTO

Because we have to bring it to Martín.

MARIA

Along with everything else?

ERNESTO

We'll need more evidence.

MARIA

We'll get more evidence.

Ernesto reaches toward Maria's face, and she pulls back.

ERNESTO

Plaster. Right here. That's all.

Maria reaches up to her cheek, feels, picks it off.

MARIA

(hesitating)

Thank you. Look at me.

Maria, up on her toes, picks plaster off Ernesto's face.

MARIA

Now we're even.

EXT. CONVENT

Maria, standing at the Renault, watches Ernesto walk away.

INT. CONVENT - MARIA'S ROOM

Maria is putting the plaster cast and shell casings in a drawer when Josefina enters.

JOSEFINA

Did you find what you needed?

Maria holds up what she has.

JOSEFINA

Let me see.

Josefina, with great pain in her face, examines the artifacts, then hands them back.

JOSEFINA

Put them away. Keep them safe.

Which Maria does. Josefina wets her thumb, rubs it against Maria's cheek.

JOSEFINA

You have plaster on your face.

MARIA

I'll clean up.

JOSEFINA

Then join me for prayers.

Josefina half-leaves, then steps back, goes to say something, then leaves again. Maria sees the three balls on her dresser, touches them with great sadness on her face.

INT. EDUARDO'S HOUSE - NEXT EVENING

Maria and Ernesto sit at Catalina's kitchen table, a huge flashlight on the floor beside them. Luz Elena and Belén in the corner, eyes wide, cautious. Catalina, at the stove, betrays her anger as she bangs around the pots and pans.

CATALINA

Luz, take your sister into the bedroom.  
Now!

Luz Elena leads an abashed Belén to the bedroom.

MARIA

Catalina, I thought you wanted us to find out.

CATALINA

I've changed my mind.

MARIA

Why?

CATALINA

I just have! Go.

MARIA

This isn't like you.

Catalina leans against the counter to collect herself.

CATALINA

Not like me.

Catalina throws onto the table a gelding knife, the blade crusted in blood, the THUNK of metal against wood echoing.

CATALINA

On the step the other day. I can read the weather as sharp as anyone.

They stare as if the knife could suddenly come alive.  
Ernesto takes out a handkerchief.

ERNESTO

May I?

Picked up, wrapped in the handkerchief, it disappears into  
Ernesto's bag.

ERNESTO

Did the children see it?

CATALINA

They could see it in my face, but they  
didn't see the knife.

MARIA

Catalina, we need to know -- what was  
Eduardo doing?

Another long pause, then Catalina puts a wooden cigar box  
on the table, sits heavily.

CATALINA

Eduardo -- my little half-wit! -- he  
was going to organize the brick makers  
into a union. He had even gone to the  
city to talk to union officials there  
about how to do it.

Catalina pries the box open, takes out a Montenero bandana,  
a picture of the dead Che Guevara looking like Christ.

CATALINA

And this.

A sheaf of odd-sized papers scrawled with names and dates.

CATALINA

His own list of the disappeared.

MARIA

Who knew?

CATALINA

Who didn't?

MARIA

I didn't.

CATALINA

You might have been the only one, then.  
Eduardo -- not known for keeping his  
mouth shut. The night they murdered  
him --

EXT. CREST OF HILL - NIGHT

Eduardo and several others, including Ignacio and Pedro,  
huddle around a fire.

INT. EDUARDO'S HOUSE

CATALINA

He was meeting with some others --

EXT. CREST OF HILL - NIGHT

Fear in their faces as the armed men loom out of the dark.

INT. EDUARDO'S HOUSE

CATALINA

-- to talk about what they could do to  
organize --

EXT. CREST OF HILL - NIGHT

Eduardo's face jammed into the dust, a gun pressed against  
his nape.

INT. EDUARDO'S HOUSE

CATALINA

Someone must have known -- those  
animals knew right where he was!

EXT. CREST OF HILL- NIGHT

The gun FIRED, shattering the air.

INT. EDUARDO'S HOUSE

MARIA

Someone must have known?

CATALINA

How else?

ERNESTO

We need their names.

CATALINA

Well, Ignacio, for all the good it will do you.

ERNESTO

I know this is hard.

CATALINA

Pedro was there -- Eduardo went to get him. Probably Roberto, Pablo -- try them. You should go -- I have to feed my family.

Maria picks up the sheaf of papers.

MARIA

May I?

CATALINA

I'll just use 'em to start the fire.  
Go.

Ernesto and Maria leave. Catalina puts away Eduardo's mementos in the wooden box, restraining herself from throwing everything against the wall. Luz Elena and Belén creep out of the bedroom and huddle against Catalina, who weeps as she clutches her children to her.

INT. KITCHEN - ROBERTO AND PABLO'S HOUSE - NEXT EVENING

PABLO

Eduardo was a fool.

ROBERTO

He was a fool's fool, yes.

MARIA

Catalina said he wanted to organize a union.

PABLO

That's why I said he's a fool.

ERNESTO

You didn't agree?

ROBERTO

We liked Eduardo, crazy as he was. But organize? About as possible as pissing on the sun to put it out. Sorry.

PABLO

(pointing outward)

He was even in touch with them.

MARIA

The Monteneros?

Pablo and Roberto nod yes.

PABLO

And that's all I want to say to you.

ROBERTO

Me, too.

PABLO

We respect you --

ROBERTO

But we want to keep the skin on our faces attached to our faces.

PABLO

So please leave.

ROBERTO

Now.

EXT. HOUSE OF PABLO AND ROBERTO

MARIA

I feel so stupid for not knowing.

ERNESTO

Do you want to go back?

MARIA

No, I want to talk to Pedro. But I should have known!

ERNESTO

I think he was trying to protect you.

MARIA

So many men trying to protect me doesn't protect me. Don't protect me, all right? Just --

ERNESTO

Just what?

MARIA

Just be honest with me.

ERNESTO

How about, I have no idea where this is going and I'm more scared than I ever was when I did all this for the bishop. Will that do?

MARIA

Are you going to stop?

ERNESTO

No. All the way through.

MARIA

Then me, too. Scared as I am.

ERNESTO

To Pedro's?

MARIA

To Pedro's.

They start off down the path to the road, but Maria puts a hand on Ernesto to stop him.

MARIA

Thank you.

A moment when their eyes lock.

MARIA

I know I can be --

ERNESTO

Never met someone with so many nicknames!

MARIA

But -- I am glad you're here.

ERNESTO

You're welcome.

They continue on the path.

EXT. PEDRO'S HOUSE

Ramshackle cabin, leaky hand-pump, wandering chickens, an outhouse, and so on. The house of a poor and unkempt man.

MARIA

Pedro!

EXT. OUTHOUSE

The door cracked open, Pedro's face pressed to the crack.

INT. PEDRO'S HOUSE

Ernesto and Maria silhouetted in the doorway.

MARIA

Pedro?

The flashlight hits the glass chimney of a lantern. Ernesto lights the lantern, and the room fills with dancing shadows.

MARIA

Look at that.

In one corner is a brand-new boombox, with tapes stacked beside it, and a box full of unused batteries.

ERNESTO

Now, where would our poor little peasant get the money to buy this?

MARIA

And this.

Maria shows Ernesto a brand-new pair of workboots, steel-toed, unscuffed, highly polished.

ERNESTO

He hasn't worn them.

MARIA

At least for work.

ERNESTO

Like a precious sculpture.

They see more and more trinkets items that show Pedro has an income source other than his job at the brick-factory.

EXT. OUTHOUSE

Pedro, agitated, watches the shadows of Ernesto and Maria slide around his house.

EXT. PEDRO'S HOUSE - WINDOW

Like a periscope, Pedro pokes his head over the windowsill. His trademark drop of sweat hangs at the end of his nose.

INT. PEDRO'S HOUSE

ERNESTO

What would a runt like Pedro have to sell that would get him all this?

MARIA

You can't guess?

ERNESTO

I don't want to guess. But I can  
guess.

Maria grabs the flashlight and beelines out the door.  
Ernesto blows out the lantern and follows.

EXT. PEDRO'S HOUSE

Maria darts the flashlight's beam around like a sword.

INT. OUTHOUSE

Pedro ducks back into the corner.

EXT. PEDRO'S HOUSE

MARIA

If you can hear me, Pedro -- we will be  
back!

Maria's VOICE sinks into the darkness around her.

MARIA

You should be ashamed!

INT. OUTHOUSE

Pedro, cowering, cries as silently as he can, his face  
smeared, his mouth quivering.

EXT. PEDRO'S HOUSE

The flashlight moves like an accusing finger, Maria  
breathing heavily in her rage.

MARIA

Pedro! Pedro! You are going to lose  
your soul!

Ernesto puts a hand on Maria's shoulder, which makes her  
jump and point the flashlight directly into Ernesto's face.  
He gently lowers it.

ERNESTO

He's not here. Or if he is, we won't find him. Until he wants to be found. We'll come back.

Maria's breathing flattens, lessens. Suddenly, they are aware of how heavy the quiet feels.

INT. OUTHOUSE

Pedro, breathing shallowly, his face drained. But he makes no move to come out.

EXT. PEDRO'S HOUSE

MARIA

What do we do next?

ERNESTO

Let's not talk here.

The flashlight picks out the path. With the barest of hesitations, Ernesto puts his hand on Maria's back and guides her. For a moment she allows it, then shrugs it off.

MARIA

I'm fine. We talk as we walk. Wait -- look.

The beam flashes off the pool of water at the base of the leaking handpump, and embedded in the clay, neither too muddy-wet or dusty-dry, is a footprint. Maria squats to look more closely, Ernesto right beside her.

MARIA

Same boot.

ERNESTO

Same boot pattern.

MARIA

But it's the same, isn't it?

ERNESTO

Yes.

The water reflects their faces in skewed angles, the boot pattern stares back at them.

MARIA

This makes me sick.

Abruptly, off she goes, Ernesto, as usual, caught following in her wake.

EXT. OUTHOUSE

Pedro emerges in time to see the flashlight beam disappear down the path. Overhead, stars glint like crushed foil. In the distance, a helicopter's THUD-THUD battles with the SCRITCHING of the crickets in the brush. Pedro drops to his knees, the fear in him as sour as his sweat.

INT. MARTÍN'S OFFICE - TWO DAYS LATER

The evidence, laid out on a side table: the plaster cast of the bootprint, the shell casings, the Polaroids, the sheaf of papers littered with names and dates. Martín at his desk, Jose Luis standing at attention.

MARTÍN

I have no authority.

MARIA

We've been to the mayor and police -- you can imagine their enthusiasm.

MARTÍN

Didn't want to jeopardize their payoffs?

ERNESTO

Like it or not, Colonel, you are the law and order around here.

MARTÍN

I don't like it. That's your evidence.

ERNESTO

What we could salvage. And the bootprint at Pedro's.

MARIA

Along with what we found in his house.

JOSE LUIS

Perhaps Pedro did it.

MARTÍN

Even I don't believe that.

Martín walks to the table, peers at the evidence, traces with his finger a few names on the papers.

MARTÍN

I can tell you one thing -- it's not anybody here. None of my men would do this, or I would know about it.

JOSE LUIS

Yes, sir.

MARTÍN

I'm not the police. If your locals are on the take, it's not my fault.

MARIA

But --

MARTÍN

I can't help you.

MARIA

Won't help us.

ERNESTO

Maria.

MARIA

Is this because my name "comes up" too often?

Martín sits at his desk.

MARTÍN

Do you see that file cabinet there?  
The top drawer?

JOSE LUIS

Colonel.

MARTÍN

(stopping him)

It's full of reports -- evidence --  
shell casings -- Polaroids -- knives.

JOSE LUIS

Colonel, perhaps you shouldn't --

MARTÍN

I've been here longer than you have --  
the line in that drawer is longer than  
what's on that table. You're going to  
have to get in line.

MARIA

Why haven't you done something?

Martín pauses, his face pained, struggling not to show it.

MARTÍN

You and I are not far apart. We care  
about justice, we treasure freedom, we  
hate stupidity. But not everyone.

MARIA

But you do.

MARTÍN

I hate the disorder -- it offends me.  
In such a beautiful country -- it  
sickens me.

ERNESTO

The soul of a poet, Colonel?

MARTÍN

You'd be wrong. I'm sorry I won't be  
able to help you, but I wish you luck.  
Good day.

INT. MARTÍN'S OFFICE

Martín looks through the window at the retreating figures of Maria and Ernesto.

INT. JOSE LUIS' OFFICE

Jose Luis writes his report, the "To" line listing the name "General Salvador Rios," the last sentence being: "Colonel Martín continues to show an interest in local affairs that seems to interfere with his proper command of the garrison." The signature: Lieutenant Jose Luis Garcia. Then he folds the report, seals it.

JOSE LUIS  
(through intercom)  
Send in the courier.

Soldier enters, courier bag over his shoulder. Jose Luis hands him the envelope.

JOSE LUIS  
The usual delivery.

Jose Luis then digs into a pocket in his tunic, pulls out a clip of bills, hands them to the soldier.

JOSE LUIS  
For any tolls you might run into.

Soldier leaves. Jose Luis checks his watch, straightens his tunic, punches the intercom.

JOSE LUIS  
Have a driver meet me in ten minutes.

EXT. PEDRO'S HOUSE

Ernesto and Maria crouch behind the outhouse. Along the path comes Pedro, home from work. As soon as he enters his house, Ernesto and Maria bolt to the door.

INT. PEDRO'S HOUSE

MUSIC plays as Ernesto and Maria appear in the doorway. Pedro looks for a way out but knows there isn't one.

MARIA

You know, don't you? About Eduardo.  
Ignacio.

PEDRO

I don't know anything!

MARIA

What's going on, Pedro?

A moment where Pedro is completely paralyzed. Then he  
falls at Ernesto's feet, grabs his ankles.

PEDRO

Help me, father. I didn't mean --

Ernesto reaches down, unclasps his hands.

ERNESTO

Stand up, Pedro.

PEDRO

I want to confess.

MARIA

Good.

PEDRO

No, to him. "Bless me, Father -- "

MARIA

No!

PEDRO

Bless me, father!

MARIA

(to Ernesto) Don't answer him. You  
will tell us what you know now! No  
more hiding. You want to confess  
later, fine! But no more hiding!

PEDRO

Father --

ERNESTO

I agree.

PEDRO

You won't give me confession?

MARIA

Who killed Eduardo? Who killed Ignacio?

PEDRO

(crying)

I want to confess --

MARIA

How many others have you killed besides Eduardo and Ignacio?

PEDRO

I want to confess --

MARIA

How much money have they paid you? Who owns your soul?

PEDRO

I want to confess --

MARIA

Who owns your soul now, Pedro?

By now Pedro is crying hard, body wracked with sobs. Ernesto more or less picks him up and sits him down.

PEDRO

"Bless me, father -- "

ERNESTO

No, Pedro -- I won't bury it in a confession. Out loud, to both of us.

MARIA

Wait.

Maria gets the boombox, grabs a tape, sets it to record. Maria and Ernesto wait, their bodies showing clearly that they will wait for as long as it takes for Pedro to talk.

PEDRO

I work for Martín. I do the same work  
for Don Morales.

ERNESTO

Don Guillermo Morales?

PEDRO

I don't just make bricks for him.

MARIA

Did Don Morales kill Eduardo?

PEDRO

I set him up. To kill the communists,  
you see.

MARIA

Communists?

PEDRO

Got me those boots.

EXT. HOUSE OF DON MORALES

The jeep pulls up the sweeping driveway and rocks to a  
halt. Jose Luis steps out and greets the two ARMED MEN  
standing at the entrance, then enters the house.

INT. HOUSE OF DON MORALES - PATIO

DON MORALES sits in a large leather winged chair, not  
unlike a throne, his face unseen, only his VOICE heard.  
Around him stand several more armed men.

JOSE LUIS

Don Morales.

DON MORALES

My little mole comes up for air.

JOSE LUIS

Have you heard the one about the nun  
and the priest?

DON MORALES

A new joke?

JOSE LUIS

Sister Maria Beatriz --

DON MORALES

I've heard that one -- you're not my  
only songbird.

JOSE LUIS

What do you want to do? We can assume  
Pedro will crack up pretty soon.

DON MORALES

What does it matter what they do? I'm  
more worried about your boss.

JOSE LUIS

There are plans for him.

DON MORALES

Such as?

JOSE LUIS

I don't know. He's got a lot of  
connections with big families, so they  
can't just bounce him around. But  
something.

DON MORALES

Soon, I hope. Do you admire him?

JOSE LUIS

I do -- excellent soldier. But he's  
infected. With a sense of justice.

DON MORALES

And you're not.

JOSE LUIS

I'm like you, Don Morales -- I prefer  
order over justice.

DON MORALES

I prefer profit over everything. This Sister Maria -- Sister Peti -- make sure she understands her place.

JOSE LUIS

And Pedro?

A pause, a gesture from Don Morales that could be interpreted in any number of ways. Jose Luis nods in agreement.

INT. MARTÍN'S OFFICE - EVENING

Maria, Ernesto, Pedro with downcast eyes, Martín, all silent. Boombox. Martín stares at the tape sitting in the exact center of his desk. The door opens, and Jose Luis enters, takes in the scene immediately.

MARTÍN

What should I do with you, Pedro? I was stupid enough to think that you were supposed to report to me, the commander.

Martín gets up, paces, traces his finger along the crack in the panel of the cabinet door.

MARTÍN

But off you go Don Morales, and Don Morales -- arranges things. Eduardo Velez. Ignacio -- I don't even know his last name. And I am out of the loop. Not good. Well.

Martín presses his intercom button. A soldier enters.

MARTÍN

Arrest him.

ERNESTO

Colonel, Pedro --

MARTÍN

You wanted my help before, but now you don't? (to soldier) I said arrest him.

The soldier escorts Pedro out of the office.

MARTÍN  
(to Jose Luis)  
Make sure it's done right.

JOSE LUIS  
Yes, sir.

EXT. MARTÍN'S OFFICE

JOSE LUIS  
(to soldier)  
Go -- I'll be right there.

PEDRO  
Lieutenant --

JOSE LUIS  
Shut up!

The soldier leads off the frightened Pedro. Jose Luis remains, listening at the office door that he left purposefully ajar.

INT. MARTÍN'S OFFICE

Martín walks to the file cabinet.

MARTÍN  
Sister -- now what?

MARIA  
Can you arrest Don Morales?

MARTÍN  
On his word? It would be easier to  
arrest the wind.

MARIA  
Eduardo had started a list, with  
stories.

MARTÍN  
So that's what you want?

MARIA

Yes. I can do that.

MARTÍN

And then?

MARIA

I want everyone to know them. I want to take them to the bishop.

MARTÍN

(to Ernesto)

You worked for the bishop. I know the bishop -- my family -- everybody knows everybody.

Martín slaps the top file drawer.

MARTÍN

Starting tomorrow -- use what you can.

MARIA

Thank you, Colonel.

MARTÍN

Don't get me wrong, Sister. I'm nothing but what I am. I know very little about the "people." The "people" I know are Don Morales.

EXT. MARTÍN'S OFFICE

Jose Luis listens intently.

INT. MARTÍN'S OFFICE

MARTÍN

But I don't value order over what is wrong -- and your Eduardo, and this Ignacio -- if it won't work for them, then what's the good of fighting for it?

INT. JOSE LUIS' OFFICE

Jose Luis uses a small flashlight to illuminate the telephone as he dials.

JOSE LUIS

General Rios, please. Tell him the  
wolf has a message.

A pause, Jose Luis TAPPING his fingers nervously.

JOSE LUIS

General? I need to add something else  
to my report.

EXT. CONVENT - EVENING

Ernesto and Maria stand beside the Renault. Maria boldly  
holds out her hand to Ernesto.

MARIA

Thank you.

Ernesto, with mock seriousness, shakes her hand.

ERNESTO

You're most welcome.

Ernesto holds onto Maria's hand a bit longer than courtesy  
requires. Maria slides her hand out of his. A moment both  
awkward and affectionate.

ERNESTO

I haven't asked you.

MARIA

What?

ERNESTO

How am I doing?

MARIA

I can't answer that, Ernesto.  
(touching her heart) That's in here.

ERNESTO

But a hint.

Maria sits on the hood of the Renault.

MARIA

I feel a thousand miles away from all that.

Ernesto joins her.

ERNESTO

That day you made me eat dirt.

MARIA

You wanted to eat dirt. You came to me to eat dirt.

ERNESTO

But we've come somewhere else, haven't we?

Maria gives him her hand. He takes it, holds it for the moment she allows him, than lets it go as she slides off the hood of the car.

MARIA

My rounds tomorrow.

ERNESTO

My homily to prepare.

MARIA

And then Martín's in the evening.

ERNESTO

Pen and paper in hand.

MARIA

Good night.

Ernesto watches Maria walk into the convent.

ERNESTO

Good night, Sister Peti.

INT. CONVENT HALLWAY

Rosario , in the hallway outside Josefina's office, listening to the voices.

INT. JOSEFINA'S OFFICE

Maria paces agitatedly.

JOSEFINA

It's for your own good.

MARIA

Tonight I learned who killed Eduardo.  
And Ignacio.

JOSEFINA

And I have to think about the welfare  
of the community. You can't keep going  
on like this.

MARIA

So you're going to transfer me?

JOSEFINA

I am thinking about transferring you.

MARIA

Why not just have me killed?

JOSEFINA

Maria!

MARIA

Because that's the only way I'll shut  
up.

JOSEFINA

I don't want you to shut up -- I want  
you to stay alive.

MARIA

Did someone talk to you about me?

The slightest hesitation on Josefina's part gives her away.

MARIA

Who was it?

JOSEFINA

No one.

MARIA

Who was it?

JOSEFINA

No one!

Which is clearly not true.

MARIA

When?

JOSEFINA

Pray on this with me, Maria.

MARIA

When am I going to be banished?

JOSEFINA

Pray with me.

INT. CONVENT HALLWAY

Rosario, her mouth set in a grim line, listens to the MURMURED PRAYERS.

EXT. CHURCH - NEXT DAY

People coming to the church for Sunday mass.

INT. CHURCH

Ernesto getting ready to begin his homily, but before he speaks, Rosario stands and strides to the front.

ERNESTO

Rosario?

ROSARIO

Excuse me, Father, but I have something I have to say.

Ernesto perplexed but gracious, gestures to begin. Rosario faces the congregation, and her VOICE fills the air.

ROSARIO

You don't have to know who said this,  
but unless we say something, we are  
going to lose Sister Peti.

Rosario gives Josefina a sharp straight look in the eye.

ROSARIO

Somebody wants to send her away -- and  
you all know why. Because she's got a  
nose, and she follows it. Because  
she's got a heart, and she listens to  
it.

A fierce look at everyone, nailing them to their seats.

ROSARIO

She has asked you again and again for  
your stories, and you sit there like  
stones. You all already know my story  
-- my cousin Ignacio --

A CATCH in her voice, deep pain in her face.

ROSARIO

You all have them -- give them to her!  
Sheep or an eagle, hey? Which one for  
you? That's all I have to say.

A moment of awkwardness, Rosario's face flushed by her own  
boldness.

FRONT PEW

Josefina's face tight, her lips pursed. Maria's face  
troubled and tired.

ALTAR

Ernesto stands next to Rosario.

ERNESTO

If your soul moves you to speak, then  
you must speak. If Jesus showed us  
anything, he showed us that.

(to Rosario)

Go, sit.

Ernesto goes to pick up the mass where he left off when someone stands.

ERNESTO

Yes?

VOICE

If what she said, then it's wrong.

Another person stands, then another, and still another, each voicing the same point.

FRONT PEW

Josefina sitting ramrod straight, eyes ahead, Maria beside her, head bowed.

INT. MARIA'S BEDROOM - SUNDAY NIGHT

Maria is reading when a sharp RAP on the window startles her. She opens it.

VOICE

I have something to tell you.

MARIA

Wait.

Maria gets her journal from behind the statue of Mary, grabs a pen, opens it. A hand comes through the open window holding a photograph. Maria takes it.

MARIA

Tell me.

INT. CHURCH - THREE DAYS LATER

Ernesto moves around the church, followed by Maria.

MARIA

I have pages and pages, Ernesto. And with what we've seen at Martín's -- and Eduardo's list -- I think I have enough. The bishop needs to see.

ERNESTO

Let me tell you about the bishop.

MARIA

I don't want to hear about the bishop.  
I don't want a big dose of your  
"realistic."

ERNESTO

You don't even have an appointment.

MARIA

I'm used to camping out.

ERNESTO

You don't know what it's like.

MARIA

He's a good man. He will help. Just  
give me the letter of introduction you  
said you would write.

Ernesto hands her an envelope.

ERNESTO

What about Josefina?

MARIA

I lied -- I said my father is sick.  
I'll go to confession.

ERNESTO

Your bus?

MARIA

In an hour.

ERNESTO

Maria --

Ernesto takes her hand -- this time Maria does not pull it  
away.

ERNESTO

Just -- be careful.

Two breaths more and Ernesto lets her go.

INT. BISHOP'S OFFICES - BUENOS AIRES

Maria seems dwarfed by the refined interior, perched as she is on a large cushioned chair. Beside the chair sits an embroidered cloth bag full of papers. The SECRETARY behind the broad desk gives Maria a look, then another look, annoyed by this little woman.

SECRETARY

There's no telling when he'll be in.

MARIA

Then it could be at any minute. I'll wait.

SECRETARY

We close soon.

MARIA

I'll wait.

INT. BISHOP'S WAITING ROOM - NIGHT

Maria, still on her chair, sitting in the shadows cast by a few wall lights left on. She is eating an apple, the SOUND echoing in the empty room, when she hears the CLATTER of a janitor's cart. One wheel squeals. And then she sees the JANITOR at the same time he sees her.

JANITOR

Who are you?

MARIA

A pebble on a beach.

The janitor pushes his cart closer. Maria holds out the apple core.

MARIA

May I?

He nods. She throws it in his trash can.

JANITOR

You waiting for him? How many years  
you got?

MARIA

I'm in no hurry.

JANITOR

I pick up the bones each day of the  
people who'll say they wait.

MARIA

But I've got no bone to pick with you.

JANITOR

Good luck.

MARIA

Could you do me a favor? Where's the  
bathroom?

JANITOR

You may wait, but there are body parts  
that won't. It's over there.

MARIA

Thank you.

Maria picks up her bag and goes. The janitor remains,  
listening to her FOOTSTEPS, the THUNK of the closing door,  
the FLUSHED WATER, the returning FOOTSTEPS.

MARIA

You're still here.

JANITOR

I was saving your seat for you.

When she's re-seated, the janitor trundles off with his  
cart.

MARIA

Thank you again.

JANITOR

(over his shoulder)

Easier to get through the eye of a  
needle than into his office.

INT. BISHOP'S WAITING ROOM - NEXT DAY

The waiting room is busy with visitors going in and out of the bishop's office. The secretary glares at Maria, who simply smiles back serenely.

INT. BISHOP'S WAITING ROOM - NIGHT

Maria alone again, curled up in the chair asleep. The janitor comes by, the one wheel on his car squealing softly. Maria does not wake up. He stops, looks, shakes his head, moves on.

INT. BISHOP'S WAITING ROOM - EARLY NEXT MORNING

Maria wakes up to see a large, well-fed man looking at her, wearing the scarlet skull cap of the bishop. Sunlight slants in through the half-shuttered windows. Just behind him stands the secretary, disapproval pasted on her face.

MARIA

Monsignor Moreno.

Maria realizes how disheveled she must look, tries to straighten her clothes, rub her face into some semblance of alertness.

MONSIGNOR MORENO

You won't go away, will you?

MARIA

The third day, right? Good things come  
in days of three, right? I'm ready.

MONSIGNOR MORENO

Come in.

The scowl of the secretary follows Maria as she disappears into the bishop's office.

INT. CHURCH - RIO NEGRO - TWO DAYS LATER

A dusty, weary Maria framed in the doorway by the late afternoon light. The church is empty and no one is there to greet her.

INT. JOSEFINA'S OFFICE - LATER

Maria, now showered, but clearly bone-tired, the cloth bag of papers by her feet.

ERNESTO

I'm sorry, Maria.

JOSEFINA

He wouldn't even take copies?

MARIA

He said there was no need.

JOSEFINA

And you waited three days.

MARIA

So, what now?

INT. MARTÍN'S OFFICE - LATER

Maria hands the cloth bag to Martín.

MARIA

Put them in the graveyard.

Martín puts them in the file drawer.

MARTÍN

I can't do anything. Your bishop won't do anything. So, what now, Sister?

INT. MILITARY TRANSPORT PLANE - COCKPIT

Jose Luis SHOUTS over the GROWL of the plane's engines to the pilot as he hands the pilot a form.

JOSE LUIS

This is from General Rios. You know what to do. Over the garrison at Rio Negro, then over the town, all right?

CARGO HOLD

Watched over by half a dozen soldiers are piles of large canvas bags, some moving as what's trapped inside tries to get out.

JOSE LUIS

(to soldiers)

You know what you're supposed to do, right?

The soldiers nod, several smirk.

COCKPIT

JOSE LUIS

Let's go.

EXT. RUNWAY

The plane's engines WHINE as the rpm's increase and the plane takes off into the waning light of evening.

INT. MARTÍN'S OFFICE

MARTÍN

So your precious church refuses to back you up. The noble forces defending your country can kill a man at 300 meters but can't call a spade a spade. The rebels -- feh! What a country.

The CRACK of broken wood as something heavy pummels the roof of the building. Then another. Then one more.

MARTÍN

Lieutenant! What is --

A soldier barges into the office.

SOLDIER

Colonel! Colonel!

EXT. GARRISON

The DRONE of an airplane as it passes overhead, several dozen bags on the ground. A soldier open one and immediately turns away and vomits. Martín inspects and see the mangled body inside. Maria and Ernesto open other bags, see the same mangled sight.

SOLDIER

Colonel.

The soldier hands Martín a walkie-talkie, out of which comes a GARBLE of frightened voices. Martín hands the walkie-talkie back, his face ashen

MARIA

What?

MARTÍN

(to Maria and Ernesto)

You should get back right now.

EXT. RIO NEGRO

The plane passes overhead, and bodies rain down onto the town square, the buildings, everywhere. Soldiers in a jeep watch the barrage, one speaking into a field radio.

EXT. CONVENT

The nuns gather people as they run by into the safety of the building.

INT. CHURCH

Huddled, fearful, several dozen people listen to the dull THUD of the bodies slamming against the roof.

EXT. MOUNTAINS

Several bodies come crashing through the trees, and several Monteneros, on patrol, inspect the bags, their faces twisted by pain at what they discover.

They heft the bags onto their shoulders and carry them off into the forest.

INT. CONVENT

People huddled around the nuns listen to heavy POUNDING of the bodies.

INT. MILITARY TRANSPORT PLANE - CARGO HOLD

Jose Luis looks at the empty cargo hold, then leans out the cargo bay to survey the disconnected pattern of dots the broken bodies make against the dry earth. Suddenly, THUNDER cracks the sky and heavy dark clouds roll in.

JOSE LUIS

(with joy)

Perfect!

INT. MILITARY TRANSPORT PLANE - COCKPIT

Jose Luis shouts into the ear of the pilot as rain BEATS against the windshield.

JOSE LUIS

Get us out of here.

EXT. MILITARY TRANSPORT PLANE

The plane makes a sharp left turn and disappears into the gathering storm clouds.

EXT. GARRISON

The rain quickly turns the dirt into mud as Martín commands the bodies moved into one of the car pool garages. THUNDER snaps, and the air frags with lightening.

Martín commandeers a solider to drive Maria and Ernesto back to the town.

MARTÍN

Go! Go!

INT. JEEP

The rain POUNDS the metal body of the jeep as the soldier peers through the thick sheet of water on the windshield.

He swerves to avoid the now-soaked corpse-filled bags on the road, slamming Maria and Ernesto against the body.

INT. GARRISON - CAR POOL SHED

Martín soaked, everyone soaked to the skin -- momentarily in shock as the rain HAMMERS the metal roof.

Soldiers lug in bag after bag, picked from the roofs of buildings, trailing mud from the compound.

Bag upon bag as Martín watches until he loses count at a hundred, the bags stacked like cordwood.

MARTÍN

Where is Lieutenant Jose Luis Garcia?

No one answers.

MARTÍN

Where is Lieutenant Jose Luis Garcia?

Again, no answer, the silence punctuated by the rain and the continued HISSING sound of bags being dragged over concrete.

SOLDIER

Colonel!

Martín walks to where a soldier holds open a bag. Inside, the body is clearly not dead and is very much in pain.

SOLDIER

What should I do? What should I do?

EXT. RIO NEGRO

The jeeps skids to a stop, and almost at the same moment Maria and Ernesto tumble out the door. The jeeps spins away and disappears.

All around them can see the bags. Ernesto's face is completely drained of any expression. Thunder CRASHES continually.

MARIA

Ernesto! Ernesto!

He shakes himself, as if waking up, stares at Maria with dull eyes.

MARIA

We have to do something now!

ERNESTO

(dead-voiced)

What? What can anybody do?

MARIA

(screaming)

Ernesto!

Maria slams her hands into his chest, tumbling him back into the mud.

MARIA

(screaming)

Ernesto! Ernesto!

ERNESTO

What should I do?

Maria drags him up from the mud, grabs his arm, pulls him toward the church. THUNDER again and again.

INT. CHURCH

Scared faces greet them as Maria, dragging Ernesto, pushes into the church.

MARIA

Juan, help me.

No one moves. JUAN points overhead.

JUAN

Judgment.

MARIA

On all of us. Help me. Help us.

JUAN

Father?

MARIA

(to Ernesto)

Say something!

ERNESTO

Help me.

EXT. CHURCH

Maria, followed by those huddled inside, wade into the mud of the plaza. They begin turning over the bags.

More and more people join them, coming from the refuge of the houses and buildings, turning over the bags, pulling them to a gathering point. Maria tries to direct the activity.

Ernesto trails, still stunned, inert.

EXT. CONVENT

Josefina, the rest of the nuns, and everyone taking refuge there, including Rosario, leave for the church.

EXT. RIO NEGRO

The rain begins to taper off.

JOSEFINA

(to Maria)

What are we going to do?

JUAN

Sister Peti! Sister Peti!

Maria joins him, followed by Josefina.

JUAN

He's not dead! He's not dead!

MARIA

Juan --

But Juan is already back-pedaling away, terror-stricken.

JUAN

What are we going to do? What are we going to do?

Maria kneels by the bag, watches the man's eyelids flutter, a thin GROAN escaping from his lips.

She puts her hand on his rough unshaven cheek, and unconsciously, without opening his eyes, he kisses the palm of her hand.

Maria looks up at Josefina.

MARIA

There's not a thing I can do.

Maria moves a strand of hair from the man's eyes. The man's breath goes out of him one last time.

INT. CAR POOL SHED

The body in the bag is clearly breathing.

SOLDIER

What should I do?

The question, like a magnet, clumps everyone together, waiting for Martín to answer.

MARTÍN

To one side -- put him to one side.  
The rest of you -- see if anyone else  
is alive.

(to soldier)

Get him out of that bag -- make him  
comfortable. What?

SOLDIER

He's a communist, sir.

MARTÍN

You know that for sure?

SOLDIER

Sir, if he isn't, why is he here?

ERNESTO

Why are any of us here?

SOLDIER

Sir?

ERNESTO

Nothing -- get it done. Now!

OTHER SIDE OF SHED

SOLDIER

This one's pregnant, sir -- and she's  
breathing.

A HUSH falls -- a dead communist male is one thing, a pregnant woman quite another. Everyone waits, the air filled with the SOUND of drumming rain.

Martín speaks to other soldiers.

MARTÍN

The five of you -- get the trucks here.  
Go! You -- bring the backhoe.

The soldiers scuttle away.

MARTÍN

(to the rest)

Put the dead on the trucks when they  
get here. The ones who survived --  
over there. Make them as comfortable  
as you can.

As the soldiers work, one whispers to another.

SOLDIER

Up to me -- kill 'em all.

Martín overhears them, slaps the soldier who spoke. Again, everyone stops, the air tense.

MARTÍN

Say it.

SOLDIER

What, sir?

MARTÍN

Say it.

SOLDIER

What?

MARTÍN

Say it!

The soldier hesitates, fear on his face, yet also defiance.

SOLDIER

If it was up to me, I'd kill them all.

MARTÍN

That's because you're an animal -- you  
don't know what it means to be a  
soldier. I will remember you.

(to the rest)

Get working -- now!

The double-clutching RUMBLE of the trucks underscores the movements of the men lugging bodies around as if they were simple sacks of grain.

EXT. GARRISON

Heavy trucks pull up and the soldiers toss the bodies into the beds. One truck has a trailer attached hauling a backhoe.

EXT. RIO NEGRO

Maria, the nuns, everyone there brings the bodies into the church, pulling them from the mud, from the roofs. Several men have brought carts. One rusted out but functioning truck. Everyone looks grim, frightened.

INT. CHURCH

Off to one side, Maria has formed a triage area, the doctor already there doing what he can. People have moved the pews and laid the corpses out as neatly as the space allows.

Ernesto still stands stunned amidst the chaos. Maria comes up to him.

MARIA

Ernesto -- now is the time.

But a blank look, no movement.

VOICE

Sister Maria.

She leaves him there, and he turns in slow circles, seeing everything, seeing nothing. His eyes take in the filthy morgue, the bags sliced open to reveal the tortured faces. His ears hear the barely stifled CRIES of the injured, the soft distressed VOICE of the doctor. Grey funeral light fills the church.

Ernesto looks at his own hands, flipping them front to back and front again, as if they were strangers to his own body. His blood POUNDS in his ears, his breath HISSES through clenched teeth.

Through all this, increasing in volume, Ernesto hears the deep GROWL of the military transport trucks ripping the air.

EXT. CHURCH

Just as the trucks roll to a stop, the rain ends, the clouds clear, and the sun bursts out.

Martín jumps out of a truck even before it SCREECHES to a halt. Maria comes from the church, Ernesto following but still dazed. Slowly a crowd gathers around the trucks.

MARTÍN

We have a problem.

Martín points to his trucks, then to the church.

MARTÍN

I'm going to suppose you have more in there.

MARIA

Why are you here?

Martín walks past her towards Ernesto.

MARIA

(louder)

Why are you here?!

Martín ignores her, so she follows him, as does everyone else. Martín suddenly senses the crowd around him.

MARTÍN

Father Ernesto.

Ernesto turns his dull eyes to him.

MARTÍN

Father Ernesto. We do have a problem here.

ERNESTO

Yes.

MARTÍN

Can we talk privately?

MARIA

No!

(to Ernesto)

Ernesto, no!

(to Martín)

Anything you say, you say to us.

MARTÍN

Father --

MARIA

Ernesto, don't!

A moment of hesitation as Ernesto, his eyes glazed, his face blank, peers around him as if lost in a land completely foreign to him.

ERNESTO

What -- what is it you want?

MARTÍN

Do you see that backhoe? You know what that's for, don't you?

ERNESTO

Yes.

MARIA

Ernesto!

MARTÍN

The thing you know how to do best --  
that's what I need you to do now.

MARIA

Ernesto!

MARTÍN

Before I bury them.

Ernesto pauses, then turns and goes into the church. Maria starts to follow him.

MARTÍN

(to Maria)

What do you expect me to do?

MARIA

I don't care about you.

MARTÍN

Do you think this was an accident?

Maria almost inside the church.

MARTÍN

Do you think --

MARIA

I don't care.

MARTÍN

You think it's only my life put on the  
line here?

INT. CHURCH - BY THE FRONT DOOR

Ernesto has retrieved his stole along with an aspergill and a small bucket for holy water. Martín at the door. The doctor, off to the side, tends to the broken bodies, their MOANS and WHIMPERS a commentary on the argument at hand.

MARTÍN

None of us is safe.

MARIA

Ernesto, you can't do this.

ERNESTO

Their souls must be saved.

MARIA

He's going to bury them away.

TRIAGE AREA

One of the survivors SCREAMS as the doctor touches a broken bone. A tight momentary silence, the air taut.

DOCTOR

Without any painkillers, the pain will kill them. Colonel, what are we going to do with them?

BY THE FRONT DOOR

MARTÍN

Not now.

DOCTOR

Then when?

MARTÍN

Not now!

DOCTOR

Shooting them is about the only painkiller we have.

TRIAGE AREA

Martín marches to the doctor, fury etching his face.

MARTÍN

They are not going to be shot!

DOCTOR

Maybe not by you -- but they will be shot. Jet fuel is too expensive for a second go-around.

(to survivors)

It's all in his hands now -- don't you all feel better?

Ernesto walks to the survivors, rains holy water on them as he whispers a prayer for them.

ERNESTO

The dead should be buried.

DOCTOR

(licking water off hand)

Just what I thought -- holy acid.

BY THE FRONT DOOR

Maria SCREAMS a long, despairing howl. All three men stare at her. Even the CRIES of the wounded stop.

TRIAGE AREA

DOCTOR

(sotto voce)

Exactly.

BY THE FRONT DOOR

Ernesto bears down on Maria.

ERNESTO

Their souls must be saved.

MARIA

He doesn't care about their souls!

MARTÍN

That's where you're wrong.

MARIA

He's just getting rid of the garbage!

Ernesto walks past her and out the door. Maria plunges after him.

TRIAGE AREA

DOCTOR

You might as well warm up your bullets now.

EXT. CHURCH

Maria hurries after Ernesto, desperate, pleading.

MARIA

Don't do this! You do this, it makes you as bad as they are. It makes you one of them. Again! Again! Think about your own soul, think about your own --

ERNESTO

(ignoring Maria)

All of you -- pray with me for the souls of these unfortunates.

Martín exits the church.

Maria frantically rushes from person to person, begging them not to pray, not to collaborate. She speaks especially hard to her fellow sisters, but they only look away. First one or two, then more and more, join in the prayer, faces scared, tight, ashamed.

ERNESTO

"Our Father, who art in heaven -- "

MARTÍN

(to soldiers)

Hats off! Now!

ERNESTO

" -- hallowed be thy name -- "

MARTÍN

(to soldiers)

Pray!

MARIA

Nooooo!

Only Penelope, who has wandered in, remains mute. Instead, she stands next to Maria and slips her arm through Maria's arm.

Once the prayer is done, Ernesto, murmuring his own blessings, sprays holy water over the trucks and their grisly cargo.

Maria watches everything with a look of astonished betrayal on her face.

INT. CHURCH

Ernesto continues blessing the corpses as the soldiers cart them out.

EXT. CHURCH

Bodies being thrown into the trucks.

INT. CHURCH - TRIAGE AREA

The doctor stands defiantly by his triage area. The soldiers try to take the wounded away.

DOCTOR

Get away -- get away!

MARTÍN

(to soldiers)

Leave them -- go on. Go on! You've more than enough to do over there.

The soldiers leave. The doctor looks dagger-straight into Martín's eyes.

MARTÍN

We'll be back.

Maria stands nearby, Penelope still fixed to her side. Martín wants to say something to her, realizes nothing he could say would ever bridge the abyss between them, and so simply walks away, directing his men to hurry up.

EXT. CHURCH

Martín orders everyone back into the trucks, and the air fills with their diesel ROAR. A moment where Maria, Ernesto, and Martín catch each other's eyes, then Martín leaves. The crowd slowly disperses.

MARIA

Penelope, go home.

PENELOPE

What about you?

MARIA

Go home.

PENELOPE

I am never going to find my son-- but I can't stop looking.

MARIA

I know. Go home.

PENELOPE

What about you?

MARIA

Go. Home.

Penelope turns to leave, then turns back.

PENELOPE

(pointing)

That face --

She makes the motion of sewing.

PENELOPE

That face --

Penelope leaves, keeping up the motion of sewing.

Maria and Ernesto look at each other, covered in dirt, covered in sunlight, and can say nothing to each other.

Maria looks straight into the sun, its hot white light fills her eyes, and she sways as if in a trance while her face twists in grief. Her whole brain, her whole body, fills with the scorching white light, and the last thing she can hear is her own VOICE WAILING with infinite sorrow.

INT. ALVAREZ HOME - SEVERAL MONTHS LATER

The hot white sunlight glares off the window as Belén looks outside at the tree swaying in the wind. She sits on a comfortable couch singing a song and reading a book.

MARIA'S MOTHER, BEATRIZ, brings in a sparkling glass of lemonade.

BEATRIZ

Something sweet for my Belén.

Belén tastes it, scrunches up her face, but doesn't put it down. She holds up the glass, question on her face.

BEATRIZ

Lemonade.

BELÉN

I've never had this.

BEATRIZ

Something new every day, yes? Maria is in the backyard.

Belén shakes her head "no."

BEATRIZ

You want to stay inside?

Belén shakes her head "yes."

BEATRIZ

You stay right here where it's safe.

EXT. ALVAREZ HOME - BACKYARD

Maria, now in civilian clothes, sits in a chair in the shade by the jasmine bush. In her hands she holds her veil.

Beatriz comes out of the house, two glasses of lemonade on a tray, sits in the empty chair beside her, hands Maria a glass, takes one herself, and sets the tray neatly underneath her chair.

BEATRIZ

Belén is reading.

MARIA

And singing, probably.

BEATRIZ

She seems happy.

MARIA

Seems, mother, it's only "seems."

BEATRIZ

Well, she seems happy, and that's a start. She still won't come outside.

MARIA

I can barely keep myself inside the house.

BEATRIZ

With you, mind wanders, body wanders.

MARIA

I'll go read with her in a minute.

Beatriz looks at her watch closely, then sits very still.

MARIA

I know what you're thinking.

BEATRIZ

No you don't -- not this time.

MARIA

You're thinking --

BEATRIZ

I was thinking about that -- but now  
it's something else.

MARIA

You're being very mysterious.

BEATRIZ

No -- I'm just scared to death for you.  
And her.

MARIA

At least we share that.

Maria gets up and lies down on the grass. She lays the  
veil across her chest. She presses one of the fallen  
jasmine blooms to her nose.

MARIA

I heard from the bishop.

BEATRIZ

And?

MARIA

He said he'll act on my request for a  
leave from the order.

BEATRIZ

That's nice of him.

MARIA

And I heard from the other bishop.

BEATRIZ

And?

MARIA

He wants me to work for him -- but as  
Sister Maria from Rio Negro of the  
Falling Bodies. He's invited the  
international organizations to take up  
house with him.

BEATRIZ

And the generals are spitting at him?

MARIA

He calls it the rain from heaven.

BEATRIZ

More like acid. Will you go?

MARIA

As Sister Maria?

Maria hesitates, throws away the blossom, picks up another. She sits up and lays her head on her mother's knee, her veil in her hand.

MARIA

The truth?

BEATRIZ

Ever anything else from you?

MARIA

I can't even smell the jasmine anymore.

Beatriz gently rubs her daughter's temple.

BEATRIZ

Your favorite smell.

MARIA

Gone.

Beatriz rubs for a few seconds more, then checks her watch again. Maria sits up.

MARIA

All right -- who's the secret lover?

BEATRIZ

No one.

Maria, in a comic way, mimics Beatriz looking at her watch.

BEATRIZ

Are you willing to try to get back your sense of smell?

MARIA

What are you up to?

BEATRIZ

And not a word to your father?

MARIA

Not a vowel or a consonant. What?

BEATRIZ

Say yes.

MARIA

Yes.

EXT. PLAZA DE MAYO, BUENOS AIRES

Dozens and dozens and dozens of woman, all clutching some memento -- a laminated photograph, a diploma, anything that marks an identify -- arrayed in ranks, the brash white of their kerchiefs glaring in the sunlight. Silently, with only the SHUFFLE of their feet to add to the slight RUSTLE of wind, they march in witness. Placards, signs spike about their heads.

Soldiers and police ring the Plaza.

IN THE CROWD

Maria, one hand clutching Belén's hand and the other her mother's, watches with astonishment the silent ranks of women pass by, unafraid of the guns arrayed against them.

BEATRIZ

(looking at Belén)

Keep her close. I come here, every Thursday.

MARIA

Does Papa --

BEATRIZ

Not a vowel. But I can't stay away. I have to come.

Beatriz pulls a small white kerchief from her pocket, nods towards Belén. Maria takes the kerchief, kneels down.

MARIA  
Belén?

BELÉN  
Yes?

MARIA  
Are you afraid?

Belén nods yes.

MARIA  
So am I. Do you know who they are?

Belén nods yes again.

BELÉN  
My mama.

MARIA  
Do you want to go home?

Belén points to her own head, and Maria quickly fixes the kerchief to her hair. Beatriz pulls out another kerchief, puts it on her own head, then a third one for Maria.

Instead, Maria pulls out her veil and puts it on. Hand in hand, they join the moving phalanx of women.

WITH THE MARCHING WOMEN

An OLDER WOMAN, looking very much like Penelope, slips her arm through Maria's.

OLDER WOMAN  
Thank you very much for joining us,  
sister --

MARIA  
Sister Maria.

OLDER WOMAN  
Sister Maria.

The sun bounces off the sea of white kerchiefs with a clean white glare as the women march on inexorably.

FADE OUT