

SALSA

IN 13 LESSONS

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SCENE 1

OLIVER, A CHINESE MAN IN HIS 40S, ENTERS THE THEATER, WITH A BAG OF WHO KNOWS WHAT. IN HIS HANDS HE'S CARRYING A HANDFUL OF LIGHTERS, WHICH HE SELLS TO THE PUBLIC.

OLIVER:

When you light it, you can see a woman... for only a dollar, mister... this is cheap, give me two! Two for 1.50! (HE LAUGHS AT HIS OWN JOKE)... look what happens when you light it... a woman, for one dollar... one dollar, mister one dollar, Mister One...

OLIVER FINISHES HIS ROUTE SELLING LIGHTERS AND REACHES THE STAGE. IN THE MIDDLE OF THE STAGE THERE'S A TWO STORY BUILDING. ON THE SECOND FLOOR, AN EXTREMELY SMALL APARTMENT IS LIT UP, ALL THE FURNITURE LOOKS OUT OF SCALE AS IF FOR CHILDREN, SO MUCH SO THAT WHEN OLIVER ENTERS, HE LOOKS LIKE A GIANT AMIDST SUCH A SMALL SPACE. DECORATED WITH AN ABUNDANCE OF CHINESE OBJECTS, IN A STATE OF OBVIOUS ABANDONMENT. HE LIGHTS ONE OF THE SMALL LAMPS IN HIS HOUSE, THERE ARE MANY OF THEM SPREAD OUT THROUGHOUT THE SPACE.

MARIA IS FIXING HER LOOK, STARTS SINGING WHILE BROOMING THE FLOOR.

OLIVER TAKES A FRAMED PHOTO OF A WOMAN IN HIS HAND. HE BRINGS IT CLOSE TO HIS CHEST AND THEN SPEAKS DIRECTLY TO IT IN CHINESE.

OLIVER: (TO THE PORTRAIT IN A CHINESE IN A TONE OF COMPLAINT)

&%^\$@EW!QS\$%&*&KU^%\$#E@

PAUSE.

...Tell me something...

THE SALSA DOWNSTAIRS GOES ON AGAIN. HE CAN'T CONCENTRATE. HE KNOCKS ON THE FLOOR. THERE'S SILENCE. HE LOOKS AT THE PICTURE FRAME WITH THE WOMAN WITH RESENTMENT.

OLIVER: (TO THE PICTURE FRAME)

...Give me a sign... just a sign... it's not too much to ask for. I need to be sure, to know if it's worth it... to continue... Accumulating water in the oceans, wind in the branches, blues in the sky and sighs in a day....

AGAIN HE CAN HEAR THE SALSA COMING FROM BELOW. HE KNOCKS ON THE FLOOR, THIS TIME MORE VEHEMENTLY, UPSET. WHEN ALL OF A SUDDEN HE HEARS THE KNOCKS BEING RETURNED FROM BELOW. HE INSISTS, SHE INSISTS... THEN SHE STOPS. HE IS PARALYZED.

BLACK OUT.

SCENE 2 MARIA'S APARTMENT.

THE APARTMENT ON THE SECOND FLOOR LIGHTS UP. MARIA IS HOME, IT'S A TINY APARTMENT, AGAIN OUT OF SCALE WITH MINITURE FURNITURE, RIGHT BELOW OLIVER'S APARTMENT, IT IS DECORATED WITH ALL SORTS OF GIRLY OBJECTS, PLANTS, DOLLS, SAINTS, CUSHIONS, LAMPS WITH LITTLE BOWS, VERY FEMININE, VERY LATIN. MARIA SINGS WHILE BROOMING. SHE HEARS THE KNOCKING FROM THE UPPER FLOOR, SHE ANSWERS THEM. THE PHONE RINGS.

MARIA: (TOWARDS THE PHONE)

Hello? Yes, this is María... yes... yes... yes, I understand you... no, yes I understand you perfectly... Believe me, you speak better Spanish than I speak English, how old did you say you were? Very good... ok... \$10 an hour... at seven... and what time does the opera end? Ok, until midnight... perfect... yes, tell me, I'm writing it down... (WITHOUT WRITING IT DOWN)... number 405 on 62nd street on Madison, apartment 45 C... don't worry... at seven o'clock.. bye... (SHE HANGS UP)... Yes!!! 50 bucks! ...and in Spanish! I'm glad they finally got that Spanish is the language of the future... if those gringos don't get their act together they're going to end up becoming strangers in their own land (SHE LAUGHS AT HER OWN JOKE)... in the meanwhile...

MARIA TURNS ON AN ENGLISH CLASS, FROM A RECORD, WHILE OLIVER READS THE SAME LESSON FROM A BOOK.

OLIVER/VOICE RECORDING:

Irregular verbs. Repeat after me... arise, arose, arisen

MARIA:

Arise, arose, arisen...

OLIVER/VOICE RECORDING:

Sing, sang, sung...

MARIA:

Sing, sang, sung... (SHE LAUGHS)... sin sazón... ay sin flavor...

OLIVER/VOICE RECORDING:

Forbide, forbade, forbidden...

MARIA:

Forbide, forbade, forbidden...

HE CAN'T STUDY ANY MORE. IT IS DIFFICULT TO HIM, HE FEELS THE NEED OF STAYING STICK TO HIS CULTURE. HE SINGS.

MARIA HEARS CHINESE OPERA BLASTING. PERPLEXED SHE TURNS OFF HER ROSETTA STONE. SHE CAN'T BELIEVE IT. IT'S LIKE THE CRIES OF A FURIOUS CAT.

MARIA:

It's the exact same opera from Peking! Just the thing to learn English in 13 lessons...

MARIA TURNS ON HER SALSA AGAIN. SHE HAPPILY DANCES. SHE HEARS SOMEONE KNOCKING FROM ABOVE. SHE GRABS THE BROOM AND ANSWERS BACK. THERE'S A PAUSE. SHE INSISTS ON SENDING ANOTHER MESSAGE. SHE GETS A RESPONSE FROM UPSTAIRS. SHE IS FASCINATED BY THE DISCOVERY

COMMUNICATING THROUGH KNOCKS. A DIALOGUE OCCURS BETWEEN THE CEILING AND THE FLOOR. SHE KNOCKS TO THE RHYTHM: TUC, TUC, TUC... TUC, TUC... ALTHOUGH SHE'S NOT SURE IF WHAT SHE SAID WAS UNDERSTOOD, OR IF SHE UNDERSTOOD WHAT WAS SAID TO HER, SHE FEELS SATISFIED. SHE DECIDES TO GIVE THE BROOM ANOTHER USE AND STARTS SWEEPING THE FLOOR WHILE SHE SINGS. UNTIL SOMEONE KNOCKS ON HER DOOR. SHE OPENS IT AND FINDS HERSELF FACING OLIVER FOR THE VERY FIRST TIME. IT'S NOT HARD FOR HER TO CONCLUDE THAT IT'S HER NEIGHBOR FROM UPSTAIRS, THE KNOCKER, SO SHE AUTOMATICALLY BECOMES DEFENSIVE. SHE RECEIVES HIM AT THE DOOR.

MARIA:

Yes?

OLIVER:

I don't speak English, speak to me in Spanish...

MARIA: (EXTREMELY PERPLEXED)

That's pretty weird...

OLIVER: (EXPLAINING HIMSELF)

I lived in Havana... (WITH AMUSEMENT)... I know a thing or two about rice and beans... moros y cristianos!

Maria:

How funny!

Oliver:

What I never learned was how to dance salsa.

MARIA: (SUSPECTING A COMPLAINT)

Well, it's true... I know I sometimes turn on the music too loud... but you also blast your opera and we can't have it like that either. It's a matter of coming to an agreement, don't you think? Everyday from 2 to 9, you can play your opera, because nobody is here... and Sundays and Fridays at night, too, because I'm babysitting...

OLIVER:

So you can Monday night?

MARIA:

Actually, Mondays no because I'm home... it's a matter of size, when there's noise, the sound occupies the whole space and then I don't fit anymore, me entiendes?

OLIVER:

But we could do it in the hallway.

MARIA:

What are you talking about? I think we're not understanding each other... Why don't you tell me in English, to see?

OLIVER:

Because I don't speak English.

MARIA:

Oh... so, you're fresh off the boat?

OLIVER:

I got here years ago.

MARIA:

And how is it that you've survived without speaking English?

OLIVER:

... because I never left China.

MARIA:

Of course... now I understand... you live in Chinatown, you work in the kitchen of a Chinese restaurant... or in a Chinese dry cleaner... or in a Chinese hardware store, owned by your mom's aunt's cousin... and Sundays you play mayón with your Chinese neighbors... or do you live with your family?

OLIVER:

How much do you make babysitting?

MARIA:

\$10 an hour, why?

OLIVER:

I'll pay you the same.

MARIA:

For how many children?

OLIVER:

I don't have any children.

MARIA:

So?

OLIVER:

I can pay you \$11 an hour.

MARIA:

But I think you're a little too big for a babysitter... you're not getting the wrong idea, o si? Let me get it, you want to pay me \$11 an hour, to do what?

OLIVER:

... To teach me how to dance salsa.

MARIA LAUGHS HEARTILY.

OLIVER: (INTIMIDATED BY MARIA'S LAUGHTER, HE TRIES TO JUSTIFY HIMSELF)

And... well... so I can practice my Spanish too...

MARIA: (EXTENDING HER HAND)

All right. My name is Maria, Maria Castellano, we start on Monday, at \$11 an hour, in the hallway. What about at 7?

OLIVER: (HAPPY)

Perfect. 11, at 7. Mi gato se está quejando, que no puede vacilar...

BOTH LAUGH HEARTILY. OLIVER LEAVES. MARIA CALLS AFTER HIM BUT HE'S DISAPPEARED IN THE DARKNESS OF THE HALLWAY.

MARIA:

Hey, hold on... I still don't know your name... ¡!yuju!!!... Well... his name is probably something like Ying or Yang... (THINKING)

Is it possible that Chinese people think we all look alike, in the same way we think they do?

BLACK OUT.

SCENE 3 HALLWAY

FIRST SALSA LESSON. THEY BOTH GET READY. MARIA BRINGS THE CD PLAYER TO THE HALLWAY.

MARIA:

Look Ying Yang, it's all about the feeling: more than just one, two, one two, three... it's about the amount of heart you put into it. Leave that casino style salsa to the Gringos or Europeans who don't understand. I'm going to teach you how to dance without adding or subtracting, without numbers or math. In the Caribbean we don't play with numbers. I'm going to teach you how to dance, with that desire you have to learn. First and foremost, listen... feel the drums, they're the heart of the music, identify them... let them take you, (GOOSEBUMPS) ¡Uy! Do you feel that? Everywhere, let it take you, drums like the blood pumping... close your eyes, do you feel that? Deep inside you? (AS IF IN A TRANCE) Listen to the rhythm, follow your heart, y dice: one, two, three, one, two... like the sun when it sets, don't think about it, one, two, three, one, two, don't think about it, suave negro... suave, suavecito Chino, that's it... let it out, the secret key, move it, don't think, just like that, one, two, three, one, two... one, two, three, one, two...

BLACK OUT.

SCENE 4 OLIVER'S HOUSE.

MARIA IS SITTING ON CUSHIONS ON THE FLOOR EATING OUT OF A BOWL WITH CHOPSTICKS. IN BETWEEN EACH MOUTHFUL SHE LOOKS AT EVERYTHING WITH CURIOSITY. OLIVER SERVES HER AND THEN EATS BY HER SIDE. LEANING AGAINST A TINY STOOL.

MARIA:

What's that stool for?

OLIVER:

It's my pillow.

MARIA: (DETERMINED TO BE RESPECTFULL DESPITE HER SURPRISE)

And this one over here?

OLIVER:

To Pray.

MARIA:

What made you leave China?

SILENCE. MARIA REALIZES HER QUESTION MAKES OLIVER UNCOMFORTABLE. SHE TRIES TO FIX IT.

MARIA:

And what did you put in these beans? Because this isn't your everyday rice and beans. They have that sweet and sour Chinese flavor, so Chinese... humm... delicious Chinese plantain... if mi abuela could see me. You should know she was the queen of plantains: she prepared them cold, in the oven, boiled, wrapped, in a tortilla, cake, puree, soufflé... what she would have never been able to imagine, is plantain crowned with soy sprouts. It's delicious, Ying Yang! I love it!

OLIVER: (SWEET AND CONTENT, HE LOVES THAT SHE LOVES IT)

I love it too.

MARIA:

Not to mention the salsa.

OLIVER:

The salsa is an ancient recipe from Pekinese cuisine, the most rural in China. It's the most popular sauce, in the China that is eaten everywhere in the world, because all Chinese people know how to make it.

MARIA:

I was referring to the salsa you dance.

OLIVER:

Ah! That, not many Chinese know how to dance it.

MARIA:

And much less with so much *guaguancó* like you have. It must be all those days you spent in Cuba, right? What surprises me is that you didn't learn how to dance there.

OLIVER:

That's in the past.

MARIA:

But the past can be remembered.

OLIVER:

... And also forgotten. I thought very differently back then. Saw things differently. Nothing matched, not even the sun or the palm trees... When I got to Cuba, the tropic was still far away. That's why it has been so easy to forget.

MARIA:

I don't understand. You mean it was raining a hurricane hit you?

OLIVER:

There are no beaches in bi-national exchanges. I went to heat up the clouds to make it rain. But it didn't rain. So I returned to China without ever having worn a bathing suit. There's nothing to understand. Do you want more?

MARIA:

Yes, give me more. What do you mean by...?

OLIVER: (INTERRUPTS HER)

More plantain! I have nothing more to say about it.

MARIA:

Bueno... if that's all there is, then give me more plantain.

OLIVER SOFTLY TOUCHES MARIA'S HAND WHEN TAKING HER PLATE. SHE STOPS HIM AND TAKES HIS HAND. SHE CARESSES IT.

MARIA:

Ying Yang, your skin is so soft! I've never felt anything like it... (JOKING, TRYING TO REPAIR HER EXCITEMENT) what lotion do you use?

OLIVER: (MOVING HIS HANDS IN A GRACEFUL MANNER, LIKE A DANCE)

The skin of a surgeon has to merge with the patient's and be able to enter it without harm, leaving no trace so as to soothe the pain.

MARIA: (EXCITED WITH CURIOSITY)

Wuau! So you used to operate with your hands, Ying Yang? I've heard about Chinese surgery without a scalpel.

OLIVER:

... Back then... over there. Not anymore. (CHANGING THE TOPIC INTENTIONALLY)... Now I want to dance salsa! (DOING SOME STEPS)

MARIA: (DOESN'T FOLLOW HIM)

Ok, I understand: now you want to dance salsa; before you used to operate with your hands and you don't want to tell me why you left China or how you got here, or what you went to do in China or why you don't want to talk about everything that happened before you decided not to want to talk about it... I don't even know your name... you're not going to tell me who's the woman in the picture frame either?

OLIVER LOOKS AT HER NOT SAYING ANYTHING, EXPRESSIONLESS.

OLIVER:

You are very curious, Maria.

MARIA:

I just want to get to know you.

OLIVER:

You get to know things because you live them, not because someone told you the story. There is no math in that either, because it is what happens inside, that counts.

MARIA:

Ying Yang, come on, let's reason: it's very hard to get to know each other if you don't show your baggage. I mean: where do you come from, who is your family, where did you learn your customs, where did you get your preferences.

OLIVER:

That's the past.

MARIA:

Without our past we're nothing, what's the present made of? ...of what we used to be. The explanations, the reasons are all rooted in the past, Ying Yang!

OLIVER:

My reasons are in the future.

MARIA:

Aja, without a past but with a future... what would you call that?

OLIVER:

The present. That's the only thing we have: the present.

MARIA:

I give up! Maybe you're right... Anyway, my present is over. I have to move on to another story, located...

(REMEMBERING) 405, 62nd street... on Madison, apartment 45 C... at 7 o'clock... My life is worth \$10 an hour. That's how sometimes I lose my present... for 10 dollars.

MARIA LEAVES. OLIVER STAYS PICKING EVERYTHING UP.

OLIVER: (WITH HIS HEAD DOWN, ANGRY)

I lie. I live without a present, because I have no land to place my feet, to feel the cold or the warmth. I don't know what to do with my days. It is so hard to live in the past, if every morning I wake up in the present? Why did you escape, is it worth it for me to keep going...? Give me a sign... I'm not asking for much, just a sign...

BLACK OUT.

SCENE 5 MARIA'S HOUSE.

WE SEE MARIA COMING BACK FROM THE STREET CARRYING A WIDE ARRAY OF THINGS AND A STACK OF PAPERS SHE JUST GOT IN THE MAIL. SHE TALKS TO HERSELF. SHE LEAVES THE DOOR OPEN.

MARIA:

I can't believe all the paper these people waste, it's too much! As if once it's printed it all becomes true... Fabricating trash, intimidators by trade... they enter your house through your mailbox... always with the idea of making you feel like you are less so you buy more, and this way maybe you can look more like the photos in that catalogue, and become more... (SHE OPENS ANOTHER LETTER) But what's this? Forlini went crazy! I can't pay this! How can he raise my rent more than 30% at once? No, que va! I won't pay that for this hole.

OLIVER APPEARS AND FINDS THE DOOR OPEN WITH ONE OF THE BAGS ON THE FLOOR. HE TAKES IT AND COMES IN, TO HELP.

OLIVER:

You don't have to talk to yourself, Maria. You can send me a sign.
(POINTING TO THE CEILING)

MARIA:

Tell me one thing, Ying Yang, did Forlini raise your rent?

OLIVER:

He's been trying for many years. But my apartment is rent control. He can't raise my rent until I die.

MARIA:

Pues, you're going to explain to me how I can put in my request for rent control until I die, right now! Because honestly, Ying Yang, somebody has got to protect us, because if they continue like this, they're going to destroy all the cities in the world. Do you realize that? They're leaving cities without a soul, evicting their true inhabitants. Just to bring in people with money, who by the way are looking for the authenticity that is just about to die. Because if they kick out the Chinese, pues se acabó Chinatown!

OLIVER:

The Chinese people aren't going anywhere. Don't worry. We don't have where to go. Because the Chinese are always in China, no matter in what city they live in.

MARIA:

What I'm trying to say is that once you die, dies with you the city you make possible, me entiendes?

OLIVER:

Yes, I understand your point: the city doesn't exist after I die.

MARIA:

Yes, but it's not that the city stop existing because you die, Ying Yang. I know where you're going with this, don't get all Confucius on me please... If you die, you're buried and the avenues continue as if nothing has changed. People will continue to run around from one place to the next, prices going up, Forlini taking advantage, life continues, otro Chinito will rent your apartment and maybe will work in the kitchen of the restaurant making the same salsa you make...

OLIVER:

And the salsa you dance? You will have to give this new Chinito a few lessons...

MARIA: (INTERRUPTING HIM)

No, Ying Yang. I don't think the next Chinito will want to learn to dance salsa. That's what I'm talking about. You are unique.

OLIVER LEAVES WITH A SWEET SMILE ON HIS LIPS. MARIA SEES HIM LEAVE. SHE CONTINUES CHECKING HER MAIL. THROWING ONE LETTER OUT AFTER THE NEXT, UNTIL SHE ARRIVES AT AN IMPORTANT ENVELOPE. SHE ANXIOUSLY OPENS IT. SHE READS IT, WITH AN EXPRESSION OF HORROR ON HER FACE.

MARIA:

¡Coño, Jose Luís!

SHE BRINGS THE ENVELOPE CLOSE TO HER CHEST AND CRIES.

FADE TO BLACK.

SCENE 6 MARIA'S HOUSE.

FADE IN. SUNRISE. MARIA WAKES UP BECAUSE SHE HEARS THE DOORBELL. SHE GOES TO OPEN THE DOOR IN HER PIJAMAS. IT'S OLIVER. HE LET'S HIM IN. HE HAS A PACKAGE.

OLIVER:

Good morning, Maria.

MARIA: (LOOKING LIKE SHE HASN'T SLEPT WELL)

Looks like Ying Yang woke up early today?

OLIVER:

There are only 5 lessons left.

MARIA: (IN BETWEEN YAWNS, SHE PUTS THE COFFEE ON)

But now you can go through life dancing. You can defend yourself. You have talent, mi Chinito. When you go back to China you can start your own salsa school over there... because you do plan to go back to China, no? To visit your family, because you do have family in China, no?

OLIVER:

No matter when the sun rises, you always want to know more.

MARIA:

Don't you miss your people?

OLIVER:

I belong to a new world... now.

MARIA:

But you still eat Chinese food, dress like a Chinese, live in a Chinese neighborhood. You don't speak English, because you work in the kitchen of a Chinese restaurant where everybody speaks Chinese. What new world are you talking about? You yourself said you've never left China.

OLIVER:

Why do you always want to talk about the same thing?

MARIA:

Because we're here, not there, which doesn't mean we don't want to be there... I know the feeling. I know it hurts. And since it hurts you too, between the two of us, it might hurt less.

OLIVER:

So talk to me about your tropic.

MARIA:

Not today, Ying Yang. Today I can't.

OLIVER:

You see? The story can't be told because you just can't recount it.

MARIA:

It's not the same story we're talking about here. I think what's going on with you, is that you don't have any papers. And that's why you don't want to talk about your past, or about your people, or say anything that will place you or that relates to you, no compromise... is that it? You don't exist, and that's how you are left alone.

OLIVER:

We all want to be left alone.

MARIA:

... but not exploited, with no rights. To live in peace you have to start to fight. How much do they pay you at the restaurant?

OLIVER:

It's not the numbers that matter. Didn't we agree on that? No math.

MARIA:

I know a guy that can get you papers. You're just an immigrant, no less than those born here! On the contrary, we're more, we're so many, and everyday more... we all have the right to have a good life!

OLIVER:

You're sad Maria.

MARIA: (MOVING OUT OF THE WAY)

I didn't sleep well.

OLIVER:

You also want to live in peace. But there's something that doesn't let you.

MARIA:

Of course I want to live in peace but it hasn't been enough to move away to escape what tortures me. I can still hear the shootings in the streets of my childhood. It's my blood that runs through those streets, it's not enough to speak in another language, Ying Yang. You carry with you your baggage wherever you go. More than that: you're responsible.

MARIA CAN'T HELP THE TEARS. SHE ESCAPES BY GOING TO MAKE COFFEE. A PAUSE OCCURS. GRAVE.

MARIA:

Do you want coffee?

OLIVER: (DISTURBED, PERPLEXED, STILL WITH THE PACKAGE IN HIS HANDS)

I just wanted to thank you. (GIVING HER THE GIFT)

MARIA:

But Ying Yang, you don't have to thank me. You pay me for the classes. I'm simply offering you a service.

OLIVER:

I brought it back from China a long time ago and I hadn't found someone to give it to until now.

MARIA:

Ay Ying Yang, I don't know... no me parece. I can't accept this. I don't know, chico, I just don't think it's right.

OLIVER:

How can it be wrong to be thankful? I don't understand.

MARIA:

Well... To tell you the truth... I'm dying to open the package! (OPENING THE GIFT, EXCITED, SHE DISCOVERS A BEAUTIFUL CHINESE DRESS). It's beautiful! It's so delicate, so precious, Ying Yang... so fine... this is silk, right? I like it a lot. Chico, pero que pena, it must have cost you a fortune! No Ying Yang, I don't know, I don't want to give you the wrong idea... I can't accept it.

(HOLDING ON TO THE DRESS) I don't know what your intentions are...

OLIVER: (INTERRUPTING HER)

To thank you. Muchas gracias María.

OLIVER SE DISPONE MUY PARSIMONIOSO A RECITARLE UN POEMA DE MACHADO A MARIA, DE MEMORIA:

MARIA: (MOVED BY WHAT SHE BELIEVES COULD BE A DECLARATION OF LOVE, CLUMSILY EXPRESSES HER UNEASE)

Ying Yang... estem... your Spanish has improved so much!!!

OLIVER LEAVES THE HOUSE WITHOUT SAYING ANOTHER WORD, FEELING VERY SATISFIED BY HAVING IMPRESSED MARIA. MARIA IS LEFT PARALYZED WITH THE DRESS IN HER HANDS. UNTIL SHE FINALLY ADMITS TO HERSELF HOW MUCH SHE WANTS TO PUT IT ON. SHE HOLDS IT UP, SWAYING IT IN FRONT OF THE MIRROR, WITH ILLUSION. WHEN ALL OF A SUDDEN SHE REMEMBERS HER SADNESS. SHE'S CRUSHED.

MARIA:

¡Coño, Jose Luís!

BLACK OUT.

SCENE 7 HALLWAY.

ANOTHER SALSA CLASS. THIS TIME MUCH MORE ADVANCED. THEY DANCE HOLDING EACH OTHER'S ARMS, WITH RHYTHM, IN UNISON. THEY ARE SWEATY. IT'S THE END OF THE SONG.

MARIA:

¡Wuu! Ying Yang! You're ready to compete.

OLIVER:

I still want to learn those turns you do.

MARIA:

All right, let's do the turns! First you do the sign of the cross, it doesn't matter if you don't believe in it. That's the way things are. You do it just in case. Then you let the music take you... (LISTENS TO THE MUSIC AND SIGNALS) With more impulse in your right leg, with less doubt... just like that. Tres golpes, and return, do you understand?

OLIVER:

Me... understand. I understand. I just need my body to understand.

MARIA:

We're heading there. Get in position crocodile. That's it, eso es caimán, on the lookout, waiting... Eso sí, wait til the music lets you... don't get wet...

wait, wise, tú sabes como, you don't need me to count the rhythm, you know... Now, ready, go! That's it my Ying! And again, one, two, three, Yang, on the lookout! One, two, three, one, two... that's it, attack, don't wait for the maraca, just do it... Perfect Ying Yang, perfect!

MARIA HUGS HIM FILLED WITH PRIDE AT HER KIND STUDENT HAVING ACHIEVED SUCH EXCELLENCE. HE LET'S HER HUG HIM... AND KISSES HER. MARIA PULLS BACK QUICKLY AND PUSHES HIM AWAY. CONFUSION ARISES. OLIVER LOOKS AT HER WITH GLASSY EYES, PARALYZED. A DIALOGUE OCCURS ABOUT THE CLUMSY MISUNDERSTANDING.

MARIA:

Ying Yang I think you've misunderstood.

OLIVER: (EMBARRASED, SWEET, QUICKLY)

I let myself go... I...

MARIA (BEWILDERED)

... It's just that...

OLIVER: (INTERRUPTING HER)

I never wanted to...

MARIA: (BEWILDERED, CONFUSED, DISAPPOINTED)

Ah, you never wanted to?

OLIVER:

... I got confused, yes...

MARIA (PISSED OFF)

Who did you confuse me with? Jennifer Lopez?

OLIVER RUNS AWAY.

BLACK OUT.

SCENE 8 OLIVER'S HOUSE.

OLIVER ENTERS QUICKLY AND CLOSSES THE DOOR. HE LOCKS IT A FEW TIMES. HE BREATHES WITH DIFFICULTY. HE'S CONFUSED. HE STARTS TURNING ON THE LAMPS, ONE BY ONE, UNTIL HE REACHES THE PICTURE FRAME OF THE WOMAN AND HE DISCOVERS THAT IT'S NOT THERE. IT'S BROKEN ON THE FLOOR. THE PHOTO HAS DISAPPEARED.

OLIVER:

Where did you go? Far ... where is far? If far isn't here, where is it? I want to go that far where you went... Explain it to me, tell me, how do I get there... to you?

PAUSE.

OLIVER:

I understand. There won't be any more signs. But it's only natural ... what's so wrong with wanting to kiss... eh (HE CORRECTS NERVOUSLY)... to dance?

BLACK OUT.

SCENE 9 MARIA'S HOUSE.

MARIA PREPARES HER THINGS IN A BACKPACK. SHE'S DESPERATE. SHE CAN'T PACK EVERYTHING SHE WANTS TO TAKE. SHE STARTS TO UNPACK TO ORGANIZE IT BETTER. WE GET TO KNOW HER BY THE THINGS SHE PACKS.

MARIA:

(PACKING A BIKINI) This is perfect for Mayerling, because in Cumana it's always sunny and the beach is always full of hot nice guys, and she's at that very age... (PACKING A BUNCH OF MEDICINES) This is for my uncle Antonio's headaches, that don't go away unless he takes medicine in English. (PACKING COSMETIC CREAM) And this is for my mom's wrinkles, she doesn't want to get older even though years go by and she insists on staying with Nepo who only gives her a hard time and more wrinkles ... And for Nepo... the asshole... -I would give him arsenic-(SHE SHRUGS HER SOLDIERS)... I'll take him a yankee's cap, he loves base ball...

SHE SITS TO ONE SIDE AND TAKES THE LETTER FROM HER CLEAVAGE AND REREADS IT, DEJECTED.

MARIA:

Coño, José Luís... my dearest brother. Why didn't you come with me? None of this would have happened. En el barrio you don't play games as if you have any right to be happy with the salary in your pocket and a girl around your arm. In the barrio bullets travel freely. Pendejo, I told you. Any macho born in the barrio, has to kill if he wants to live. Everybody knows that.

THERE'S A PAUSE. MARIA VERY DEJECTED, TAKES OFF HER EARRINGS AND NECKLACE.

MARIA:

This stays right here. I don't want it to cost me my life too. (SHE BREATHES, DEEPLY. SHE RECOVERS, AND PACKS A DRESS). I'm going to take this for Maigualida, because she loves anything coming from NYC!... I wish I could have gone to your graduation, Maigualida. I hope you don't give up now and end up with a baby... Where is that I love New York t-shirt, Chichita asked me for? Where did I put it?

MARIA SEARCHES AMONG ALL THE THINGS PILED UP NEXT TO THE SUITCASE.

MARIA:

Nothing is free. Everything happens for a reason. Maybe the three bullets in your body make you react and you finally decide to quit, to leave the country. You are going to kill my mother with so many sleepless nights worrying about you. Always anticipating the worse. After what happened, you can't have a life in the barrio. You have to listen to me, hermanito... my cowboy to the rescue every time this native princess was in danger... mi hermanito bello, who wanted to be a doctor... and only became a clerk in a pharmacy...

MARIA CRIES, AND CONTINUES PUTTING THINGS IN HER BAG UNTIL SHE GETS TO THE DRESS THAT OLIVER GAVE HER. SHE LOOKS AT IT ADMIRINGLY.

MARIA:

I'm taking my dress... in case there's a party. In case I happen to get the chance to tell everybody that I may be falling in love with a Chinito. ... Because, those things when they happen, need to be told. (SHE SMILES ILLUSIONED). And what could have happened to Ying Yang, that he hasn't gotten here yet? (LOOKS AT HER WATCH)

THE DOOR BELL RINGS

MARIA:

Chinese punctuality. Where did I put those CDs? I'm coming!

MARIA FIXES HERSELF QUICKLY, BEFORE OPENING THE DOOR. IT'S OLIVER, HE BRING TAKE OUT CHINESE FOOD.

MARIA: (QUICKLY)

Hola, Ying Yang... this music is so you can practice while I'm away.

OLIVER: (VERY WORRIED)

What? Where are you going?

MARIA: (EFFICIENT)

I already talked to Marisol and she says she's willing to give you the rest of the classes.

OLIVER:

Why are you leaving? Is it because of what happened last week?

MARIA: (INTERRUPTS HIM)

I'm going to look for my brother.

OLIVER:

Why doesn't he come to you? Why do you tempt destiny so dangerously?

MARIA:

I know how to deal with destiny in my land, don't worry.

OLIVER: (WORRIED)

I'll wait for your return... because you are coming back, right?

MARIA:

I'll come back, Ying Yang. And I'll be the same María, just a couple of weeks later. I do have all my papers in check, don't worry. What I don't want is for you to lose the rhythm... Marisol will help you. She will keep you warm.

OLIVER:

Don't leave Maria.

MARIA: (VERY SERIOUS, TAKES HIS HANDS)

I have to go, Ying Yang.

OLIVER:

You've filled my life don't take it away from me.

MARIA:

What I gave you is yours. Now you know how to dance on your own everywhere you want. Salsa is universal. The only thing you need is to keep warm. Trust me: Marisol is a better teacher than me. She is Mar, from the sea, and Sol, from the sun, do you understand? Caribe, pure tropics. On the other hand, I'm simply Maria, as the song says...

OLIVER:

I'll wait for you to come back. Simply Maria...

MARIA: (EXTENDING A PIECE OF PAPER)

Here is Marisol's number. She already knows and is waiting for your call.

OLIVER: (WORRIED)

I swear it won't happen again. It was just an impulse, caught up in the moment... it's friendship... gratitude...

MARIA: (MISCHIVIOUSLY)

Are you saying it's never going to happen again...? (YES BUT NO)

OLIVER: (EXCITED)

You changed my life. Now I live wanting to kiss (HE MAKES A MISTAKE, BLUSHES, AND CORRECTS HIMSELF) I mean, to dance, sorry... I would say, to dance.

MARIA: (VERY MISCHIVIOUSLY)

Humm... I think it will be best if you wait for me, then. I don't want you to find the palm trees you missed in Cuba, in Marisol. Give me that. (HE TAKES THE PIECE OF PAPER FROM HIS HAND). But promise me you're going to practice on your own with the CD's. It's very important you don't lose the rhythm, you keep warm.

OLIVER:

The harm's been done. Don't worry. I'll wait for you, simply, Maria...

MARIA SMILES VERY SATISFIED.

MARIA:

And what's in all those bags? (SHE SMELLS DELIGHTED) hummmmmmm...

OLIVER: (GIVING HER THE BAG, DILIGENTLY)

Sesame chicken... for a safe depart...

MARIA: (JOKING AROUND, SINGING)

... con el pio, pio, pio, con el pio de los pollitos el zum zum de los mosquitos no se puede descansar! (TAKING THE PACKAGE WITH AN APPETITE)

Humm, what else?

OLIVER: (CONTENT)

Broccoli in oysters sauce from distant coasts.

MARIA: (INSATIABLE)

My mouth waters with so much literature.

OLIVER:

Noodles in ginger sauce... nature, pure, soft...

MARIA:

... Chinese delicacies, with no remorse...

THEY BOTH EAT. WITH AN ALMOST EROTIC INTENTION

OLIVER:

Li Chi... a bite of sky...

MARIA: (TRYING IT)

... if heaven had a taste, it would taste like you said... Li Chi...?

OLIVER: (RESTLESS BECAUSE OF THE FAREWELL)

I'll wait for you.

MARIA: (MISCHIVIOUS)

Do you want to hear the truth?

OLIVER:

I do...

MARIA:

I don't want to miss your salsas either... I'll come back.

OLIVER LEAVES.

MARIA:

Could I love a man who instead of a pillow uses a stool under his neck?

(PAUSE) ... Could find a more beautiful heart than Ying Yang's?

MARIA IS FILLED WITH ILLUSION.

BLACK OUT.

SCENE 10 MARIA'S HOUSE.

MARIA: (ARRIVING)

Home sweet home... it's sad to feel at peace solely because you left your land... (NOTING A CHANGE) What's with all these candles? Incense... perfumes... oils... Coño, Marisol just loves anything esoteric.

MARIA TAKES HER PHONE AND CALLS.

MARIA: (TOWARDS THE PHONE)

Marisol? Hola, friend... yeah, I just got back... tú sabes, in the South, it's hard to make things go as planned. If you think something is going to take you two days it take's a month; when you think everything is going great, you get shot three times... Yes, he's all settled in Cumana with la tía Mercedes. It was the only way out, because that boy loves to dance and in the barrio all the parties end in bullets... in the south life seems to worth less... Oh, really? how strange (MAKING AN EFFORT TO LIE)... he told me he wanted to continue with his classes... Who knows, maybe he changed his mind at the last minute. I'll have to ask him. (UF! SHE CAN BREATHE RELIEVED NOW THAT THEY GOT THAT OUT OF THE WAY) Yes, everything's fine, perfect, mi amor, tan bella, you had to be Latina, always smelling of shampoo and a broom at hand... Yes, I saw... how strange, and where did the bad smell come from? And did you ask Forlini? No, I don't smell anything... only those perfumes you left in the house... I thought that you had become a Hare Krishna, into Kundalini meditation or a Guru Maharashi fanatic... hahahahaha... ok, see you tomorrow.

MARIA HANGS UP THE PHONE. SHE CONTEMPLATES FOR A MOMENT. SHE LOOKS AT THE CEILING. SHE PUTS ON SOME SALSA, SHE TAKES THE BROOM AND STARTS KNOCKING ON THE CEILING. SHE WAITS, NOTHING HAPPENS.

SCENE 11 HALLWAY.

MARIA IS PACKED WITH *BOCADILLOS DE GUAYABA*, TORONTOS, TODDY, *HARINA PAN*, *DIABLITO*... NATIONAL TREASURES, ALL PRESENTS FOR YING YANG. SHE FINDS ALL OF YING YANG'S THINGS PLACED ALL ALONG THE HALLWAY, HIS BOOKS, HIS ORNAMENTS, THE LIGHTERS HE SOLD. SHE DOESN'T UNDERSTAND WHAT'S GOING ON. SHE GOES UP AND FINDS ANOTHER CHINESE MAN (THE SAME ACTOR WHO PLAYED OLIVER DRESSED UP AS SOMEBODY ELSE) TAKING THE REST OF THE THINGS OUT.

MARIA:

Pero, what happened here?

CHINESE:

Don't speak...

MARIA:

Where is Ying Yang? Where is the man who was living here?

OLIVER:

He passed away.

MARIA:

What???

THE CHINESE MAN GIVES HER THE UNIVERSAL SIGN FOR DEATH BY
SIGNALING HIS NECK WITH HIS FINGER.

CHINESE:

Dead.

MARIA:

But how... when?

CHINESE:

Three weeks ago. The smell. Three weeks.

MARIA:

But, why are you putting all his things away like that? Didn't you call his family?

CHINESE:

No family.

MARIA: (INDIGNANT)

¿Cómo que no family? Everybody has a family!!

CHINESE:

Don't know. Don't know. Ask Mister Forlini. Don't know...

MARIA:

You can't throw away his things as if nobody cared. As if he was an animal without a home... without a family... I know he had a family. Not here, but he had a family, who would want to know about him, know that he died. How can they be so heartless? Where is the portrait? The portrait that was right there, where is it?

CHINESE:

Don't know nothing about Oliver. Ask Mister Forlini.

MARIA:

¿Oliver? ¿Se llamaba Oliver? Oliver was his name? How do you know? Did you know him? Did you find some identity papers in his things? His passport, maybe?

CHINESE:

No passport.

MARIA:

O sea, Ying Yang didn't exist... so I imagined him. Or is it that you don't have a heart?

CHINESE:

Ask Mister Forlini.

MARIA:

I don't give a damn about Mister Forlini. Do you hear me, "ask Mister Forlini"? You better get going, in case it's Mr. Forlini who wants all the Chinese in the building dead so he can raise their rent? Do you know how much you're worth? Te veo mal parado: a Chinese man with no papers is worthless in the first world. There, we're killed by guns; here, we're gentrified. Where will we be able to live in peace? When is it our turn?

CHINESE:

Ask Mister Forlini.

MARIA:

Yeah, you're right. Maybe I should ask Mister Forlini. Because maybe Mister Forlini is the only one who knows how Ying Yang died and who thinks nobody cares.

MARIA SNATCHES THE BUDDHA FROM HIM AND THE STOOL HE'S ABOUT TO TAKE OUT.

MARIA:

But I do care. I did know him. His name was Ying Yang, he knew about rice and beans, moros y cristianos, although he didn't want to talk about Cuba, he wanted to learn how to dance salsa and he lived in the present... And he had the softest hands in the world. He was a nice man, a splendid human being, I met him. He did exist and will continue to exist in the most beautiful way, in every day's present moment, you were right Ying Yang, in the present! ... Living with the desire to learn, to dance... to kiss... (SHE CRIES)... why did you stay in the past, then? What do I do with this need I have to kiss you now? Who do I complain to?

MARIA CAN'T KEEP TALKING. SHE GRABS AS MUCH AS SHE CAN SOME OBJECTS AND CDS... SHE FINDS THE LIGHTERS.

MARIA: (REMEMEBERS WITH SADNESS. SHE LIGHTS ONE)

One woman, for one dollar, mister... you light it on and off... (SHE LIGHTS IT AND THEN OFF, ALTERNATING BETWEEN ILLUMINATING HER FACE)... Comes and goes... I didn't understand you. I didn't know, that the kisses you don't give, can't be given after.

MARIA CRIES.

MARIA TALKS TO THE PUBLIC.

MARIA:

"IF YOU DONT'T SEE YOUR NEIGHBOR IN A COUPLE OF DAYS, KNOCK ON HIS DOOR, FIND OUT IF HE NEEDS SOMETHING, DON'T WAIT FOR THE SMELL".

THE END

Lupe Gehrenbeck