

Vittorio Franceschi

**DAPHNE'S
SMILE**

two acts

*Daphne's
Smile*

Translated by Marla Moffa

Characters

Giovanni, called Vanni – About 60 years old.

Rosa, his sister – A few years younger.

Sibilla – Twenty-six years old.

The set

In the center of the room there is a table full of books and papers. Among the papers there is a magnifying glass. On the right side of the room, a single bed. At the foot of the bed a window with curtains. Near the window there is a low table with a plant of modest dimensions. Under the table there is a hood made of rigid canvas sometimes used to cover the plant. The left wall is entirely taken up by a bookcase overflowing with books that reach the ceiling. In the middle of the bookcase there is a small door that leads to the bathroom. On the back wall, to the left there is a door. Next to the door, on the wall, there is a faded blue stain. To the right, a closet. In the middle of the wall, a chart in color, as large as a map, representing a herbarium. Next to it, a few photos of Vanni with his feet in water among mangrove trunks. Above the door, hanging on a nail, a violin. Every once in a while, the sound of a bell-tower clock chiming is heard in the background.

Between scenes, variations of Mendelssohn's concerto for violin in E minor are played.

ACT I

Scene 1

It is the middle of the night, the set is dark. The plant is without its hood. Vanni is in bed. He grumbles tosses and turns in his sleep and awakes with a scream. He gasps.

VANNI – Rosa! Rosa! The Daphne! (Rosa enters the room in her nightgown)

ROSA – What is it, dear God?

VANNI – The plant is missing!

ROSA – What do you mean missing? Who do you think would have taken it?

VANNI – She's gone!

ROSA – It's over there.

VANNI – (With difficulty, he tries to lift himself up) I don't see her.

ROSA – (Lifting the vase) Do you see it now?

VANNI – Put her down! I've told you a thousand times not to shake her.

ROSA – You've had a bad dream.

VANNI – You have to treat her well.

ROSA – I have palpitations. Your damn plant.

VANNI – My Daphne. You know you have to treat her well.

ROSA – Yes, I know.

VANNI – You have to treat her well like what? Answer me.

ROSA – Like a bottle of Barolo... (Puts down the vase)

TOGETHER – of '64. (Vanni falls back onto his pillow)

VANNI – What a fantastic year. Is the soil wet?

ROSA – I watered it last night.

VANNI – I had a nightmare.

ROSA – That plant of yours I'm going to throw it out the window, so you stop dreaming about it at night.

VANNI - You'd be better off throwing me out.

ROSA – I'll throw you out too. (Exits)

VANNI – You can't show her to anyone!

ROSA'S VOICE: You've told me a thousand times.

VANNI – It's a secret!

ROSA'S VOICE - Two thousand times.

VANNI – What time is it?

ROSA'S VOICE - Four in the morning.

VANNI – At this hour all the calendulas begin to open.

ROSA'S VOICE – And all the bakers turn on their ovens. And the road sweepers sweep the streets. Good night, little brother.

VANNI – (To himself) And who can sleep now? (Remains motionless for a few seconds, then he pushes the blanket aside with difficulty. He reaches out for the pavement with his hands, and lets his legs fall with a thump. His hands give out as well. Vanni rolls on the floor and lets out a scream. Remains motionless and pants) Rosa. Rosa!

ROSA – (Enters) Giovanni! What is it? What happened? Vanni, Vannino! (She goes to him and helps him back onto the bed)

VANNI – Until last week I could still do it.

ROSA – Blockhead. You had the flu.

VANNI – What flu?

ROSA – It weakened you.

VANNI – Nonsense. It was just a cold.

ROSA - That's what Pragotto said.

VANNI – Doctors don't understand anything. They've never understood anything.

ROSA – Be quiet. Without doctors you'd already be dead.

VANNI – Why, do I seem alive? (Rosa goes out and returns with a wheelchair and helps Vanni onto it)

ROSA – You're so ungrateful. With all the shots you've had. Here. Your arm. Think about all they've invented. Are you comfortable? Think about how much progress they've made. All the vaccines. And penicillin, sulphamides. And aspirin. Try to imagine the world without aspirin.

VANNI – And Alka-Seltzer? You forgot to mention Alka-Seltzer.

ROSA – Jackass!

VANNI – You confuse doctors with medicine.

ROSA – I don't confuse any such thing.

VANNI – And your husband, then? Let's talk about your husband. At 47.

ROSA – Cancer is cancer. Pragotto has always taken good care of you.

VANNI – You say that because you're a widow and Pragotto is a bachelor.

ROSA – I've already got one bachelor. That's more than enough for me.

VANNI – You've laid your eyes on him.

ROSA - Oh please.

VANNI – He's ten years younger than you.

ROSA – Eight.

VANNI – He's got pudgy hands.

ROSA – Like yours are any better.

VANNI – How is your daughter?

ROSA – Liliana is well.

VANNI – And her husband?

ROSA – Giorgio is well too. (Goes out leaving the door open)

VANNI – And the kids?

ROSA'S VOICE – Also Luca and Valeria are well.

VANNI – I'm very pleased.

ROSA'S VOICE – But if you don't even remember their names. Let me get some sleep now. (The sound of a door closing)

VANNI – Azara microphylla. Liriodendron tulipifera. (Pushes himself in his wheelchair to the bookcase) Parrotia persica. Salix babylonica. (Picks up a small book hidden behind the others which then falls from his hands. He tries to pick up the book but the effort is too great for him, so he gives up. Moves towards the plant. Looks at it and sighs) Daphne Giovannina of Borneo. (Blackout. Music).

SCENE 2

The next morning. Vanni sleeps in his wheelchair in the same position in which we left him. The light is still on. A ray of sunlight enters from the closed window. Rosa appears and turns the light off.

ROSA - Vanni... (Vanni awakens) You fell asleep there. You might as well have stayed in bed. Wake up. (Picks up book from the floor and puts it on the bookcase.) It's not good for you to sleep sitting down. Good morning. There is bad news.

VANNI – It's from the beginning of time that there is bad news.

ROSA – There's been a flood. Vienna is submerged.

VANNI – Vienna?

ROSA – The Danube has overflowed. The TV said so.

VANNI – The beautiful blue Danube?

ROSA – Don't joke. Everything's flooded.

VANNI – Even the botanical garden?

ROSA – The water has reached the first floors. So much damage.

VANNI – It's not possible.

ROSA – I tell you they go by boat.

VANNI – Delinquents! Do you know what the *Fockea crispa* is?

ROSA – You know that I don't know.

VANNI – Listen well, woman without brains. It is a plant with such a great lymph reserve that it can resist more than you, than me and Pragotto put together, including your daughter and that imbecile of your son-in-law. In Vienna, there was the most ancient specimen grown in a vase. Do you know how old it was?

ROSA – What do I know. Ten? Twenty?

VANNI – Two hundred years old. Vienna's botanical garden is as old as Shakespeare and Caravaggio, it is more ancient than Mozart, Garibaldi, Benjamin Franklin and your Bernadette! Cactus, palms, inimitable orchids, unique specimens of carnivorous plants! There, there is the *Lodoicea maldivica*, the most beautiful specimen that exists in the world, do you know what it is, no of course you do not, it is the coconut of the Seychelles. Do you know how much its seed weighs? One and a half kilos.

ROSA – I thought more.

VANNI – And now there is nothing left. Those murderers have destroyed everything.

ROSA – What do murderers have to do with it? It's been raining for over a month!

VANNI – With you there's no hope of speaking rationally. Thousands of innocent witnesses to the toil of creation now buried under the mud of a smelly river polluted from industrial waste and from that fucking Mitteleuropean nostalgia full of its shitty waltzes. We'll never know.

ROSA – What won't we ever know?

VANNI – How the subdivision occurred in dicotyledonous and monocotyledonous. Granted that it was in fact a subdivision. One day something happened.

ROSA – Something also happened tonight. A deluge on all of Europe: Austria, Germany, France. Even Prague is in danger.

VANNI – Prague doesn't have a botanical garden.

ROSA – In Dresda they've evacuated the hospitals. A patient fell while they were loading him onto the helicopter and he drowned.

VANNI – He took the shortcut.

ROSA – You have no heart. And you're also a bit sick in the head.

VANNI – There are ninety-nine possibilities out of a hundred that he was an idiot. Eighty out of a hundred that he beat his wife. And at least fifty that he smoked two packs of cigarettes a day. And at least sixty that he spat on the floor while going down the stairs. It's taken more than a million years of evolution for the human race to produce such a superb specimen. Do you really think we'll miss him?

ROSA – Maybe he had small children and a wife who is now crying. Not everyone is as arid as you. Thousands of nice people are now homeless.

VANNI – Those nice people have pulled the earth's neck. For centuries they've done the sign of the cross just to stretch out their arms, and now let them go by boat in their cathedrals.

ROSA – Do you want some tea?

VANNI – No.

ROSA – Is that a definite no?

VANNI – Is there sliced bread?

ROSA – Of course there is.

VANNI – Then it's not definite. There was a book here on the floor.

ROSA – I put it away.

VANNI – Give it to me.

ROSA – I don't know where I put it.

VANNI – What do you mean you don't know where you put it?

ROSA – I put it somewhere. I'll find it later.

VANNI – What do you mean later? I want it now.

ROSA – Now have your breakfast. Do you want jam?

VANNI – Don't change the subject. It's a very ancient book. I have to reread a point, there is something I don't remember well. And to think that I knew it by heart! The paralysis has reached here. (He touches his forehead)

ROSA - Blueberry or prune?

VANNI – Blueberry. *Vaccinium myrtillus*.

ROSA – Amen. Here's your napkin. (She ties it around his neck like a bib)

VANNI – Remember when we were little and mother used to prepare tea for us?

ROSA – The worst moment of the day. Since you liked it I had to like it as well. Sit up straight. (She helps him sit up) I used to get pimples, I was allergic to tea.

VANNI – Because you wanted to be a doctor.

ROSA – What does that have to do with it?

VANNI – It does. The medical calling causes rashes. Thank goodness you dropped out of school.

ROSA – I had to, I was pregnant.

VANNI – Of a beautiful undesired baby girl weighing four kilos. You were better off...

ROSA – Be quiet. I don't do that sort of thing.

VANNI – But you drowned the kittens.

ROSA – Father didn't want them. And then I was little, I didn't understand.

VANNI – Where is it written that the life of a cat is worth less than the life of a man?

ROSA – Jesus spoke to men and not to cats.

VANNI – If he had spoken to cats he wouldn't have died on the Cross.

ROSA – Don't be blasphemous.

VANNI – *Gramigna acquatica*, *Glyceria fluitane*; *Gramigna bianca*, *Trisetum flavescens*, *Gramigna canina*, *Agropyrum repens*...

ROSA – I don't know what I would do today without Liliana. I can't imagine it.

VANNI – But if she lives in Germany, you never see each other.

ROSA – But she is there. Every night I pray for her and for my grandchildren.

VANNI – And for your son-in-law?

ROSA – Of course, for him too.

VANNI – But a little less.

ROSA – That's not true.

VANNI – He's not your blood. You prefer to pray for his ice-cream shop. God, please grant us warmer and warmer summers so that Germans form long lines outside his shop and he makes a lot of money.

ROSA – I also pray for you. That the Lord opens up that hard head of yours and blows inside some common sense.

VANNI – Common sense comes from the devil, like the middle course.

ROSA – You don't know what you're saying.

VANNI – Come on find me that book. Sibilla is coming today.

ROSA – Still that Sibilla. Wasn't she in America?

VANNI – She came back yesterday. She wants to ask me a few things, some advice. She's writing a scholastic manual.

ROSA – A manual for what?

VANNI – For what? Botany, of course.

ROSA – That girl is using you.

VANNI – Don't say "that girl". Sibilla's a young woman who... come on, find me that book.

ROSA – It will pop up when you least expect it.

VANNI – It's urgent.

ROSA – Think about getting better. That girl uses your name to publish her manual.

VANNI – A scientific atlas for schools. It's a good idea. We need to start with children.

ROSA – You never needed manuals.

VANNI – Because I'm a lucky man. I was blessed with faith.

ROSA – You?

VANNI – Faith in botany. Which is not much different than faith in God. It only requires a larger watering can.

ROSA – I'll get your tea. (Exits)

VANNI – (Yells after her) Violets already existed on this earth before the apeman appeared. And the rose existed even before its declension in Latin. (To himself) Phototropism... movement provoked by light... with attraction, positive phototropism, with repulsion negative phototropism... obviously. If a dark place is reached by a single light source... the vegetation moves towards that light. The famous ray of sunlight... seen by optimists. Or the usual deception... of poets. (Rosa enters with a tray)

ROSA – Here is your favorite slops. I burnt the toast.

VANNI – It's better that way. "Di quella pira l'orrendo foco..."

ROSA – And here is your mirtillum vaccinorum jam. Buon appetito.

VANNI – (He tries to pour himself some tea but can not lift the kettle) Wait.

ROSA – What is it?

VANNI – Help me. (He tries to move his fingers) Not yet this morning... but already yesterday...

ROSA – What do you feel?

VANNI – Like an anesthesia.

ROSA – Your arm fell asleep. (She pours the tea for him)

VANNI – Both of them.

ROSA – You shouldn't tire yourself. (She sits down and butters a piece of toast)

VANNI – You speak like that idiot Pragotto. (Drinks lifting the cup with both hands)

ROSA – Poor Pragotto. He's so caring, so scrupulous.

VANNI – Since Molière's time, doctors haven't changed. If it is soft it can not be hard, if it is liquid it can not be solid.

ROSA – When is that Sibilla coming?

VANNI – That Sibilla is coming today and you will do me the courtesy of treating her well and not coming in here every five minutes. We will not do all of those disgusting things that men and women do when left alone in a room, and don't worry I don't intend to marry her, I won't leave her my portion of the house. This house one day will belong entirely to you and your grandchildren, who after having taken you to the cemetery, will come here to live with their nice big families full of winter jackets and computers. I can't stand being interrupted while I work. And, listen carefully: that violin has to stay there. I'll put it in my will.

ROSA – Violins have to be played, they get ruined staying there.

VANNI – Who says that violins are made to be played?

ROSA – You're totally nuts.

VANNI – Violins hate music, that continuous thunder in their stomachs. When a violin sees a violinist it recommends itself to God!

ROSA – When will you decide to have a normal conversation in your life? Once, just once.

VANNI – Violins adore silence, the rustle of the branches of when they were still pure, tender and green wood. A violin has a vegetal soul.

ROSA – Then also this table has a vegetal soul. And that chair had leaves and birds made their nests in it! And this bookcase also had leaves, and so did the beams of the ceiling, and my kitchen ladle was full of small branches! And all of these poor vegetal souls have to listen to your gibber.

VANNI – Oh, what a carefully thought out word!

ROSA – Do you remember what our father used to say? Fools talk gibber! He had already understood what sort of son he was raising. After all, what can you expect from someone who drinks tea.

VANNI – It's one of my limits, I know.

ROSA – Are you finished?

VANNI – There is one thing I still haven't understood. Do I put up with you or do you put up with me?

ROSA – I'm younger so you put up with me. (Exits carrying out the tray)

VANNI – That's what I thought, just wanted to make sure. (Pushes himself in his wheelchair near the plant) If I only had the heart... dear Daphne Giovannina of Borneo. (Blackout. Music).

SCENE 3

Later that afternoon. Vanni is in his wheelchair near the closed window. Rosa is seated at the table, putting order in Vanni's papers.

ROSA – I've never seen anyone so messy in my life.

VANNI – Look who's talking. The book still hasn't reappeared.

ROSA – This bill is from two years ago.

VANNI – Two years ago I could still walk and I could open the mailbox on my own.

ROSA – These bills could have been detracted. Here's another. All money down the drain.

VANNI – It was one of the things I loved doing most: opening the mailbox.

ROSA – Our father taught us to have respect for money.

VANNI – In fact he died unhappy.

ROSA – Be quiet.

VANNI – I instead am going to laugh.

ROSA – Don't be a boaster.

VANNI – I'm already laughing. And you have to promise me that you won't cry, that you won't call the priest and that you won't dress me with my best suit, that in any case, I don't own. I pity those cadavers all made up, with their pressed suit and their tie perfectly knotted, which hit their nose

against the cover of the casket each time the hearse hits a pothole. You will have me cremated in my underwear. I'll put it in my will.

ROSA – Can we speak of something else?

VANNI – We can speak of your funeral if you prefer. You'll be wearing a dress with the seven dwarfs and all your friends will be there. Your daughter will dry her eyes with tissues which she won't know where to throw away and your grandchildren will pull her skirt saying they have to pee, while your son-in-law will stay in Germany because he has to keep the ice-cream shop going.

ROSA – Have you ever been optimistic? At least once?

VANNI – Yes. When I found that plant in Borneo. It was in the middle of a carpet of ferns and buttercups. It could have been a calycina, but it was not, with those succulent and serrate leaves; it could have been a centaury or a most banal squill but squills don't have down and neither do centauries. And that little blue flower that rose above the ferns, with its violet pistol spotted with silver. I had never seen nor read about it in any catalogue.

ROSA – It must be nice to make a discovery like that.

VANNI – It's exciting, you feel the sweet tepidness of the primordial placenta. Maybe astronomers feel the same when they discover a new star and name it. But that star could have been dead ages ago while the creature you have in front of you is undoubtedly alive.

ROSA – If our grandparents only knew...

VANNI – Had known.

ROSA – You're famous. You're in the encyclopedia, you've named so many unknown plants ... when you will make this one known too they'll give you the Nobel.

VANNI – It's possible, now they give it to just about anyone. By the way, did you tell somebody about it?

ROSA – Even if I had, they'd think it wasn't worth much. It has such an unexciting name.

VANNI – I gave it my name.

ROSA – Giovanni is nice. But Giovannina... that's a name for a cleaning lady.

VANNI – Daphne Giovannina. Of Borneo.

ROSA – Why Daphne?

VANNI – Like the nymph who made Apollo fall in love.

ROSA – And Apollo would be you?

VANNI – I wasn't so bad when I was young. You were proud of me.

ROSA – I'm still proud of you. My brother is a discoverer.

VANNI – Is that what you told the milkmaid?

ROSA – Also the green grocer. Once he asked me: “What does your brother discover?” And I said: “Plants.” “Is that all? Look at all the plants I have!” And he showed me all of his vegetables.

VANNI – When I realized that it was an unknown plant I began to scream. And the jungle became silent. The animals understood. But my joy was punished because my discovery coincided with the onset of my disease. I felt the first symptoms on my journey home.

ROSA – You never told me.

VANNI – On the ship. I wanted to go up on the deck when I felt a cramp, here in the middle of my back, and soon after a sharp pain and then a kind of anesthesia in my right leg. I stopped on the stairs and a passenger behind me said “anytime now”... and I answered, “go ahead” and I moved to one side. That was the beginning. You know, you should name something important that you’ve discovered too.

ROSA – Me?

VANNI – You, you.

ROSA – What are you saying?

VANNI – Your meatballs with radish. They are one of the greatest discoveries of this century. You should call them radishballs and get a patent for them. Granny Rosa’s Radishballs. (Rosa laughs) In no time you’ll become rich despite the ice-cream shop of that idiot son-in-law of yours.

ROSA – Hush! Giorgio is not brilliant, but his ice-cream is super. And he cares a lot about the children.

VANNI – And about your daughter?

ROSA – Liliana has an edgy temper. A good wife should always adapt to her husband’s temper.

VANNI – Even if her husband’s an imbecile?

ROSA – You use words that I would never use for someone of the family.

VANNI – Then let me use them and don’t pull such a wry face. You’ve wasted your life.

ROSA – Moments of peace never last long with you.

VANNI – Sit down! When the electroencephalogram of a terminally ill patient goes flat one says that he lies in a vegetal or vegetative state. Is it, or is it not true?

ROSA – (With tears building up) But you are not terminally ill. You can get better, it will take time but you can go back to being almost like you were before.

VANNI – This is the bullshit Pragotto tells you to keep your spirits high, aside from that “almost” which says a thing or two. Who speaks about a vegetal state doesn’t understand plants, their vital impulse, their most pure energy, their continuous dialogue with the sun and the elements. Never mind vegetal state, a man with a flat electroencephalogram is simply a man restored to himself. And

that's exactly what I do not want.

ROSA – You keep confusing me.

VANNI – I feel it laying in ambush in my hands and in my arms. Fifteen days, twenty at the most, and I will barely be able to open my mouth. Are you ready with the straws, the I.V.'s, the saliva tampons. You'll have to spray many lavender air fresheners in here, sick people smell bad.

ROSA – I feel you'll get better and that's it.

VANNI – You live by the rules of the Christian faith, you believe in miracles. You've always lived by the rules, whatever they were. For this reason I can only ask you for a cup of tea. To avoid falling into temptation you'd be capable of tearing her from the vase.

ROSA – What are you saying?

VANNI – Do you want to marry me, Rosa? (Rosa laughs through her tears)

ROSA – When I was twelve years old I wanted to marry you.

VANNI – We would have been a nice incestuous couple. I would have taken you on my trips and in the near future you would have profited from my pension. But you're my sister and sisters don't inherit anything by right.

ROSA – I've told you a thousand times that I don't want to talk about these things. I'll go back to work. It's hard to find tailors who do small jobs nowadays. Who shortens for you a pair of pants? Who alters your suit? There will be a long line and I'll make a lot of money.

VANNI – Don't put it in the piggybank. Take a trip, find yourself a lover from Thailand, play the roulette, have some fun. You are still young enough to stuff yourself with sardines. Do you remember the Spanish sardines?

ROSA – God, they were good! Breaded and fried.

VANNI – Scorching hot! The fish-bone came away in one piece! How many did we eat that time?

ROSA – Four portions.

VANNI – Three for you and one for me. (Rosa laughs) With that light white wine.

ROSA – Call it light wine. We were drunk after just one glass.

VANNI – And had greasy fingers. You kept saying: "don't touch your shirt, don't touch your pants."

ROSA – The Catalonian sardines.

VANNI – It was the last vacation we took together.

ROSA – It was also the first.

VANNI – It was also the first. Careful that your son-in-law is capable of selling the house and putting you in a nursing home with the excuse that there's a nice garden. A German nursing home.

Maybe you'll like it.

ROSA – Stop it!

VANNI – If not, go to a nunnery. Do you know who says go to a nunnery?

ROSA – The priest?

VANNI – Hamlet.

ROSA – Hamlet!

VANNI – You know who he is?

ROSA – Of course I do. The one of to be or not to be.

VANNI – Good for you!

ROSA – It was in an advertisement. And who does he want to send to the nunnery?

VANNI – Ophelia, his girlfriend. (He goes to the window)

ROSA – Why?

VANNI – Because she doesn't have the right to a pension, and he worries about giving her a home. Here she is! Go get the door. (Rosa instead goes to the window) Hurry!

ROSA – She's thin. I've never liked her.

VANNI – She's not as thin as she looks.

ROSA – And how do you know?

VANNI – Go get the door.

ROSA – Let her at least cross the street.

VANNI – She walks fast. Go!

ROSA – You're too anxious. Women don't like that. Wait until she rings the bell.

VANNI – Quiet. (He wheels himself to the table) Put me in order. Am I presentable?

ROSA – Men in love are so ridiculous.

VANNI – Love, don't say such foolish things, I have little time and so I'm in a hurry, a terrible hurry. Why doesn't she ring the bell? (The door bell rings) Open the door!

ROSA – I would have given anything to have a man love me like that.

VANNI – Hurry!

ROSA – But I had a potato-shaped nose. You can't love a woman like that, with a potato nose.
(Goes to leave)

VANNI – Wait! The hood.

ROSA – Oh, right. (Takes out a hood and covers the plant) Not even she can see it?

VANNI – It's a surprise. Go!

ROSA – (Starts to go, then stops) Don't ask her if she wants tea. Don't force me to make it for her too. (Starts to go, then stops again) Why do you say that I've wasted my life?

VANNI – Does it seem like the moment to ask me such a question? Go. And don't come in here unless I say so. (Rosa starts to go, then stops again)

ROSA – And by the way we're out of tea.

VANNI – But if you just made me some.

ROSA – It was the last pinch. There are only teabags left.

VANNI – I hate teabags! I brought a kilo from Bangkok.

ROSA – Three years ago. It's finished. (Exits)

VANNI – Three years already.

ROSA'S VOICE – Yes.

VANNI – (Looking at his hands, he tries to move his fingers) Wait, wait just a little longer. What does it cost you?

ROSA'S VOICE – Third floor.

VANNI – (Looks at the plant) Tell me Daphne: does this seem possible to you at my age?
(Blackout. Music).

Scene 4

Evening. The window is closed. The plant is covered with its hood. Sibilla is on a ladder near the bookcase. She has a few books in her hand but she seems to be looking for one in particular. Vanni directs her from his wheelchair.

SIBILLA: Is it this one?

VANNI: No, I told you it has a brown cover.

SIBILLA: There are many with a brown cover.

VANNI: But that one's special. If you look askance at it, the canvas has small rhombuses.

SIBILLA: Askance?

VANNI: Askew. What would you say?

SIBILLA: I don't know... obliquely... at an angle... or simply the wrong way.

VANNI: No, the wrong way makes me think of...

SIBILLA: (Drawing out a large book) Here it is!

VANNI: The epiglottis.

SIBILLA: Here are the rhombuses. I found it.

VANNI: Good for you.

SIBILLA: Plants of the Indo-Chinese underbrush.

VANNI: That's the one. Now come down, it's dangerous.

SIBILLA: In Boston there was a ladder six meters high.

VANNI: Six meters? From that height a Bible can kill you. (Sibilla laughs and comes down the ladder quickly) Slowly, that ladder is a bit...

SIBILLA: (She looks through the book) It's beautiful.

VANNI: I'll lend it to you. You can take it home. You'll find all the classifications, they will be useful for your atlas.

SIBILLA: Thank you.

VANNI: You are the only person who can make good use of it. But make sure you bring it back.

SIBILLA: Of course.

VANNI: Promise.

SIBILLA: You don't trust me?

VANNI: I want to be sure that you'll come back to see me. (Looks at her) Have you...

SIBILLA: Put on weight. Say it.

VANNI: You look wonderful. Don't touch that "primavera".

SIBILLA: This "primavera" has to lose at least two kilos.

VANNI: If you put down that book you've already lost them. (They laugh. Sibilla puts the book on the table) You can't find it anymore. Sold out in less than two years: 350 copies. It's a record for botany.

SIBILLA: You have a goldmine here.

VANNI: Don't have scruples about using it. In the other room there are just as many and in the basement two cases.

SIBILLA: Have you read them all?

VANNI: Except for the ones I wrote. My sister lost the most important book. It's here somewhere but she can't seem to find it.

SIBILLA: It will pop up when you least expect it.

VANNI: I've already heard this.

SIBILLA: I'll never be able to do that.

VANNI: Do what?

SIBILLA: Read so many books.

VANNI: It's probably best. Do you know what reading them did to me? Made me afraid of death.

SIBILLA: You've always had this wood-worm in your head, Giovanni.

VANNI: Never mind wood-worms. A regiment of locusts. (They laugh, then silence) There was a time when you used to call me Vanni.

SIBILLA: Yes, but then we went back to being formal.

VANNI: Botany is such a mess. You always have the impression of stepping on something precious.

SIBILLA: Yes. Something unique that will never grow back.

VANNI: Will it be an illustrated atlas?

SIBILLA: I think so. Kids love pictures. With pictures you can explain many things.

VANNI: Photos or drawings?

SIBILLA: There isn't a photo that is worth the precision of a drawing.

VANNI: I couldn't agree more.

SIBILLA: I would hope so. I learned it from you.

VANNI: Really?

SIBILLA: You held a lesson on this theme. And I came to pay my compliments. And you looked me

in the eyes and said clematis flammula.

VANNI: I love the demure plant that burns inside.

SIBILLA: You are a “stil novo” poet.

VANNI: No, I’m a most banal lyricist. Heart, love, pain. (Sibilla looks out the window) When I was little, from that window, I used to aim a peashooter at the girls that passed by. They used to look up with the arrows in their hair and yell “idiot”. I would stay hidden here inside thinking when I’m big I’ll feed you to the carnivorous plants. I owe my interest for botany to them. I truly thought they ate human beings. I imagined terribly frightening duels between a carnivorous plant and Hercules. The plant triumphed.

SIBILLA: They days are getting shorter.

VANNI: Because they have little to say.

SIBILLA: In Boston I met a guy.

VANNI: In Boston there are no guys, only brats. The poorest will inherit two banks.

SIBILLA: He doesn’t have a dime to his name.

VANNI: Then he’s not from Boston.

SIBILLA: In fact he’s from Seattle. From the opposite side. He’s a math assistant.

VANNI: You don’t go to America to get married with a penniless soul from Seattle. Do you love him?

SIBILLA: I don’t know.

VANNI: In love, I don’t know means no. Dump him quickly and return all his gifts.

SIBILLA: He hasn’t given me any.

VANNI: What do you mean no gifts? What kind of a boyfriend is he?

SIBILLA: He is not my boyfriend. And he doesn’t have a dime, I told you, he still goes to college.

VANNI: (Yells) When I was young we would have sold our trousers to buy a gift for our girlfriend. Never mind going to college. We slept in unheated rented rooms and wore those horrible shirts that you don’t have to iron after washing, the richest guys had two, I only had one.

SIBILLA: Don’t yell.

VANNI: (Yells louder) You will do me the courtesy of sending him to hell. I didn’t teach you botany to see you end up in the arms of a lanky, four-eyed American who votes for Bush and buys stickers of heroic firemen.

ROSA’S VOICE – Vanni...

VANNI – Everything's fine, stay where you are! (Sibilla with the book still in her hand, starts to leave) Give me back that book! (Sibilla goes to Vanni and slams the book on his knees) You're not going back to Boston!

SIBILLA – What right do you have...

VANNI – Please don't go. Today is a bad day for Capricorns, you'll probably get stuck in the elevator.

SIBILLA – I'm not Capricorn. I'm Cancer.

VANNI – This is unforgivable.

SIBILLA – I even told you once.

VANNI – You told me?

SIBILLA – In Sumatra.

VANNI – Oh yes... now I remember.

SIBILLA – It was my birthday and you gave me a ring.

VANNI – With pearls.

SIBILLA – Blue pearls.

VANNI – I remember very well now. You were quite busy with a suitcase.

SIBILLA – I had bought those unbleached curtains and couldn't fit them in.

VANNI – Yes, I remember very well.

SIBILLA – I still have them. I even brought them to Boston.

VANNI – Then how did we manage?

SIBILLA – To do what?

VANNI – To close the suitcase.

SIBILLA – I put the curtains in a shopping bag.

VANNI – Oh right. (He hands the book to her. Sibilla takes it)

SIBILLA – They were six wonderful months.

VANNI – Just six months?

SIBILLA – The most wonderful months of my life. You were writing this book.

VANNI – With your help. Without you I couldn't have done it. I even thanked you in the preface.

SIBILLA – It was my first trip in such a far away country.

VANNI – Looking for sprouts. Would you believe it? How much time has passed?

SIBILLA – Three years.

VANNI – Already?

SIBILLA – Hardly.

VANNI - Are you angry?

SIBILLA – Very. I have nothing of a Capricorn.

VANNI – It's my head. It doesn't work like it used to.

SIBILLA – Don't go on again about your age.

VANNI – It's the disease. It has also reached here. I try to do exercises, repeat things by heart, names... (He moves his fingers) You see, we joke so much about death...

SIBILLA – Don't say that word anymore.

VANNI – There's been an acceleration in the last weeks. We are galloping towards the infinite.

SIBILLA – I never know when you are joking and when you are speaking seriously.

VANNI – Do you think that a man in my condition wants to joke around?

SIBILLA – You are capable of everything.

VANNI – I'm speaking very seriously.

SIBILLA – Then you can't just stay there and wait. We have to do something.

VANNI – Leave everything in order.

SIBILLA – In America there are specialized centers.

VANNI – No debts.

SIBILLA – I'll call Bill. In Boston they are very well organized.

VANNI – Bill? His name is Biiiiiiiiill! (Yells) Hurrah!

SIBILLA – Have you gone mad?

VANNI – In America! I'm going to America to see Bill. (He moves in his wheelchair back and forth in the room) Boston! For a million dollars they'll give me two shots of vitamin C. And then I don't speak English, I studied Latin. In America someone who's studied Latin has only one possibility for survival: baseball! No, it's useless, thanks for understanding and say hello to Bill. Hey there,

friend... I'm very thankful. Get it straight: there's nothing left to do, actually, yes, there would be one thing to do. (Knock at the door) What is it?

ROSA – (Peeps in) Pragotto called and said he'll stop by tomorrow morning to see you. You have to check your temperature every three hours and you have to take Lisecantox-two before meals. Excuse me. (Exits)

SIBILLA – Maybe I didn't understand well.

VANNI – No, you understood perfectly well. Pragotto is an imbecile and I'm dying. Oh, no not right away. We'll still have enough time to finish your book. I wonder if one loses vowels or consonants first.

SIBILLA – What are you saying Vanni?

VANNI – It's Giovanni. There will be a moment when I will no longer be able to speak and I was wondering... why don't you have a seat? Would you like a cup of tea? Rosa will be happy to prepare it. I'll call her.

SIBILLA – Please. I'm very worried.

VANNI – I'm very worried, too. But at the same time I adore worldly pleasures. A bottle of '64 Barolo. I would be happy to open my last bottle for you. It's a bottle fit for a museum.

SIBILLA – Please.

VANNI – My niece's husband has an ice-cream shop in Germany. If the bottle falls in his hands he is capable of making an ice-cream with it. Barolo flavored ice-cream. You can't imagine how many crimes are committed inside domestic walls. Shall we make this toast?

SIBILLA – That bottle will have to wait a long time. I want you to get better.

VANNI – Grapes die as grapes and are reborn as wine. It is the only example of resurrection that I know. I long to be in Sumatra.

SIBILLA – Don't change the subject. First of all, I need your tests. Ask your sister, or better yet, I'll ask her. (Goes toward the door)

VANNI – Where are you going?

SIBILLA – Tomorrow morning you are going to the clinic. Do you have clean pajamas?

VANNI - Don't treat me like an old man!

SIBILLA – We still have a lot of years in front of us. We can still write many books together.

VANNI – Get it in your head, I'm finished.

SIBILLA – And I instead am at the beginning. And I need you. (Yells out the door) Rosa! (Rosa immediately appears) Please bring me all the tests.

ROSA – The tests?

SIBILLA – Your brother’s tests, all the documentation.

VANNI – Don’t give her anything.

SIBILLA – Quiet! My father knows a lot of people, important people. His best friend has a clinic. There’s no time to lose.

ROSA – Pragotto has all the tests.

VANNI – Pragotto...

ROSA – He has everything.

SIBILLA – Have him bring everything, please.

ROSA – He’s coming tomorrow morning.

SIBILLA – Now, now, there’s no time to lose.

ROSA – Dear God, what is happening?

VANNI – You still haven’t figured it out.

SIBILLA – Give me the address of this doctor. I’ll go, just inform him.

VANNI – (To Rosa) America has gone to her head.

ROSA – Vanni, what am I supposed to do?

VANNI – Her father hates me.

SIBILLA – A thing of the past. In any case he loves me and he’ll do what I ask. I’m not that little girl anymore.

ROSA – What little girl?

SIBILLA – Come. We have to talk. (She starts to go, taking Rosa with her)

VANNI – Sibilla! (Sibilla stops) When you called me, remember? I told you about a plant.

SIBILLA – Yes, an unknown plant.

VANNI – (Lifts the hood from the plant) In all this confusion you forgot to say hello to her.

SIBILLA – Is it her? (She goes towards the plant)

ROSA – He calls her Daphne Giovannina. He’s crazy.

SIBILLA – I even doubted that she really existed. (She looks at the plant in silence) She’s beautiful.

VANNI – Yes, she’s beautiful.

SIBILLA – Even more beautiful than how you described her.

VANNI – Because there are no words for such creatures. Look at that smile. Daphne Giovannina of Borneo. (Blackout. Music).

SCENE 5

The next morning. Vanni is sleeping in his wheelchair. The window is closed. Rosa enters quietly followed by Sibilla.

ROSA – (Whispers) He hasn't slept all night. He fell asleep around six.

SIBILLA – It would be better to give him something to sleep at night.

ROSA – He doesn't want anything. He says sleeping pills are addictive.

SIBILLA – At this point...

ROSA – What point, excuse me?

SIBILLA – There's no hope.

ROSA – Is that what they said?

SIBILLA – Doctor Micheli looked at the tests and X-rays. He can live six months at the most. (Rosa breaks into tears) The terminal phase will be the most painful: he won't be able to speak and will have to be artificially fed.

ROSA – Our Father who art in heaven... fortunately he's not suffering.

SIBILLA – It's hard to tell.

ROSA – Doctor Pragotto assured me.

SIBILLA – Your brother is a very sensitive person.

ROSA – Ah, yes, if you mean that he torments himself... but I was referring to the physical pain. (She dries her tears)

SIBILLA – For that there's morphine. But for the other there's nothing. May I look at the plant?

ROSA – Go ahead... but be quick.

SIBILLA – Does he speak to you about her?

ROSA – He only tells me that I have to treat it like a bottle '64 Barolo. For Vanni Barolo is a religion. But I've never seen him drunk.

SIBILLA – I have. Of ta-chim.

ROSA – What's that?

SIBILLA – A liquor they make in Sumatra.

ROSA – Must be disgusting.

SIBILLA – There they are crazy about it. It's a bit aphrodisiac. Vanni was particularly euphoric those days. (Rosa gives Sibilla a magnifying glass so that she can observe the plant more closely) How marvelous.

ROSA – He brought it back from a trip, more than a year ago. A flash of a trip. He was supposed to be away for three months but he returned suddenly after just two weeks. I was surprised but I didn't ask anything. He's so crabby! He was capable of picking up and leaving. And, when he leaves, I'm always worried. Sometimes he seems like a child and all sensible things have to be pulled out of him with pliers. When it comes to speaking nonsense instead... It wasn't the first time that he brought back a rare plant but for this one he immediately had a special feeling.

SIBILLA – This one is more than rare. It's unique.

ROSA – You mean there isn't another one like it in the world?

SIBILLA – Well, in Borneo it's possible. Perhaps in some inaccessible part of the forest. But here it's unknown. It's not classified, so it does not exist. No other botanist has seen it before him. And he has been able to keep it alive for over a year.

ROSA – Actually, I'm the one who waters it. And without him knowing I add coffee grinds to the soil.

SIBILLA – Coffee grinds?

ROSA – It's an old trick. They are good for plants.

SIBILLA – They can be dangerous for its system.

ROSA – Nonsense, look how beautiful it is. You botanists only know how to look at plants with a magnifying glass, I, instead, have a green thumb. (Sibilla continues her observation) He's never shown it to anyone. He even dreams about it at night.

SIBILLA – It's strange.

ROSA – What?

SIBILLA – The pistil. Magellan mentions a flower.

ROSA – A flower like this one?

SIBILLA – Very similar. I wonder why it came back to mind.

ROSA – This Magellan must be a swindler. All botanists are swindlers, my brother always says so. Both botanists and doctors.

SIBILLA – He says the same about journalists, waiters and nuclear scientists. Even about the boatmen in Sumatra.

ROSA – In any case, he is the one who discovered the Daphne.

SIBILLA – But he hasn't made the discovery public yet. I don't understand why. (She puts the magnifying glass on the table)

ROSA – Haven't you spoken about it?

SIBILLA – Only on the telephone.

ROSA – My brother is so pigheaded. He could have gotten the Nobel.

SIBILLA – Well...

ROSA – Why not? Now they give it to just about anyone. It impresses me. It doesn't even look real, in a year it lost only one leaf, the one at the top. But what does he say about it?

SIBILLA – Who?

ROSA – The one who says to have seen the plant before my brother.

SIBILLA – Oh, you mean Magellan. No, nothing in particular. Maybe I'm getting mixed up. It's something I read a few years back, when I used to read travel books. And come to think of it, it wasn't even Magellan, but Pigafetta I think, who speaks of Magellan... anyway, it's quite a complicated story.

ROSA – It sounds it. (Vanni begins to wake up) Now please go. (Sibilla looks at Vanni) You have seen the plant, go on.

SIBILLA – I'm staying.

ROSA – This is not your house, Miss, and I already did something I shouldn't have done.

SIBILLA – I'm very grateful.

ROSA – If he sees you he gets agitated. (Vanni awakens) See.

VANNI – Oh, what a surprise. Rosa!

ROSA – Yes?

VANNI – Have Miss Sibilla sit down.

ROSA – May I sit as well or do I have to remain standing?

VANNI – Go in the other room and open the bottle of Barolo.

ROSA – In the morning?

VANNI – It's the best way to begin the day. And bring two glasses.

ROSA – I don't exist, right?

VANNI – Since when do you drink?

ROSA – You're crazy.

VANNI – You like wine?

ROSA – Of course. Have you forgotten the Catalonian light wine?

VANNI – Oh, right... ok, bring three glasses.

ROSA – For you I don't exist, you don't see me. I could drop dead here.

SIBILLA – I can go get it. If you tell me where it is.

ROSA – No, don't bother. The master has given his orders. Shall I put it in a carafe?

VANNI – What sort of questions. The color needs to be appreciated as well. Hurry up. But don't shake it! (Rosa exits) I imagine you have something unpleasant to tell me, so please, sit down. But don't worry, I already know. See, I don't even go to bed anymore. Yesterday I hit my head and today I don't even bother to try, I don't want to make a bad impression in front of you. (Moves his fingers) It comes and goes but mostly it comes. (Sibilla sits down) I heard what the two of you said.

SIBILLA – You weren't sleeping?

VANNI – I watched you while you were observing the plant. (Pause) It's not the plant described by Magellan, his was spotted with grey, not silver.

SIBILLA – Are you sure?

VANNI – Yes. I was fooled too. As soon as I had it in my hands I thought this is Magellan's plant. I was very excited, I had to urgently reread his diaries but I didn't have them with me. This is why I anticipated my return. I anxiously searched for those pages and when I reread them my disappointment was enormous. It was not the same plant, but it was still an unknown one. Then looking at it carefully, another book came to mind that I had stolen the year before from the library of the Bologna University.

SIBILLA – You steal books?

VANNI – Oh, yes, quite often. Now don't get the wrong idea, I bought all of these, at the most fifty are stolen. (Sibilla laughs) They are there getting all moldy, you open them and the pages are glued together due to centuries of humidity and oblivion. At least I read them. Well, getting back to us: I reread the diaries and the disappointment transformed itself in pure euphoric energy.

SIBILLA – What did you discover?

VANNI – This is Karmynszki's plant.

SIBILLA – Karmynszki?

VANNI – A polish adventurer. His right arm was missing. Some say because of a tiger, others because of a cannon ball. He was looking for the *Cryspis canina*, an aphrodisiac plant. The one they use to make ta-chim. He had been commissioned to look for the plant by a marquis from Limoges who was hiding out in Krakow to escape from tax creditors. What a story. And he found her. Or more precisely, one of her ancestors, but identical to her. Plants resemble each other more than humans do.

SIBILLA – Yes, you always said so.

VANNI – I often repeat myself. When he returned to his homeland he wrote a memoir that was quickly suppressed because it spoke with enthusiasm about polygamy, practiced in certain tribes, which apparently led to happy living. All copies of the book were burned but one copy, no one knows how, escaped the stake and after many misfortunes, it ended up in the hands of a Hungarian monk, amateur botanist, who translated it into Latin. We are in the middle of the 1600's. Today botanists no longer speak Latin, in fact they don't understand much. Except those here present, of course. I am the only one who has ever read that book.

SIBILLA – And do you own a copy?

VANNI – (With anger) It's missing, my sister has put it in a hole somewhere. See if you can find it for me, it has a parchment cover.

SIBILLA – And Karmynszki?

VANNI – He died almost soon after. Requiescat in Pace.

SIBILLA – And he speaks about this plant?

VANNI – He describes it in great detail. And speaks about the use that the natives make of it.

SIBILLA – What use? (Sound of glass shattering)

VANNI – No. (Yells) Nooo!

SIBILLA – The Barolo!

VANNI – I want to die.

SIBILLA – Stay calm, we can buy another one.

VANNI – (To himself) They don't know what they say, they don't know what they do. (The door opens and Rosa appears smiling)

ROSA – It was the carafe. The bottle is safe.

VANNI – I don't believe it. You're lying.

ROSA – (Showing the bottle) Here it is.

VANNI – Don't shake it!

ROSA – How many times have I told you to get that step fixed.

VANNI – Now it would be my fault! Do you realize? When are grandparents were still alive that step was already broken. You don't fix a broken step that is more than a century old! It would be like straightening today the Leaning Tower of Pisa! (There is silence, and then Sibilla laughs. Vanni joins in and finally Rosa does too)

ROSA – Should I open it?

VANNI – Yes, quickly before you really drop it. (Rosa begins to open bottle) Sibilla, bring the glasses.

ROSA – Oh, yes, the glasses.

VANNI – Not you. Don't move. They are in the other room on the console. (Sibilla goes out) Slowly. Tilt it gently. Don't lose a drop. It's the blood of Christ.

ROSA – Don't be blasphemous! I'll drop the bottle. (Sibilla enters with three glasses)

SIBILLA – Here are the glasses.

VANNI – For a wine like this you need Bohemian crystal. I said it so many times to my sister: buy me a chalice, a Bohemian chalice!

ROSA – They cost millions.

VANNI – Be quiet. And open gently. '61 was a good year too, but '64... (The bottle is opened) Hurrah. (Rose pours the wine in the glasses) There it is, divine source. Look at the color: ruby red that blends into amaranthine. Bacchus, great botanist. That's enough. Just a little. (Sibilla brings a glass to Vanni, who holds it with difficulty with both hands) Open the window. (Sibilla opens the window) It is the beginning of a new day, that it may be fruitful. Bibo ergo sum, sum ergo bibo. And I'll kill who ever dares to say cheers.

ROSA – To our health.

VANNI – Ours? Hers. (They all lift their glasses towards the plant) Propino tibi salutem...

SIBILLA - ...Daphne Giovannina of Borneo.

ROSA – Cheers. (Vanni gives a start but controls himself. Sibilla smiles. They drink. Blackout. Music).

End of the First Act

ACT II

Scene I

A few days later, afternoon. Vanni is in his wheelchair, with a blanket on his knees. He is observing the leaves of the plant with a magnifying glass. Rosa moves about nervously in the room. The window is closed.

VANNI – *Hibiscus syriacus, hibiscus pentacarpus...* (To Rosa) Where is she?

ROSA – (Yells) How am I supposed to know? I can't ask her where she's going, she's not a child.

VANNI – The sisters of sick people don't shout. Hibiscus mutabilis, hibiscus esculentus...

ROSA – You would even make God Almighty shout. Forgive me Lord, but you gave me a brother...

VANNI – It's just that I remembered about a note that I must explain to her. I don't want it to get sucked up by that black hole that is my memory.

ROSA – Did you write it down?

VANNI – I can't feel the pen, I make such scrawls.

ROSA – Would you like to dictate it to me?

VANNI – Can you write?

ROSA – I can sign my name. (Rosa pushes Vanni in his wheelchair to the table)

VANNI - Hibiscus coccineus, hibiscus roseus, hibiscus militaris...

ROSA – (She sits at the table and takes out a pen) Go slow, please.

VANNI – Botany is the key to understanding who we are but we can only understand botany if the mystery of our origin is accepted...

ROSA – Slow down! To understanding who we are but...?

VANNI – Botany without mystery is a sterile seed that impends in the emptiness. Seems incredible but we may have to return to myth to generate new science.

ROSA – (Rosa puts the pen down) I don't understand anything, you're talking too fast.

VANNI – Maybe I'm becoming closer to God, it's happened to many people on the brink of death.

ROSA – I wish.

VANNI – You no longer get upset when I say that I'm dying. You are getting used to the idea and perhaps you have already started the silverware inventory. (Rosa makes a gesture to exculpate herself) No need to ask for forgiveness, if I had been in your place I would have thrown you down the stairs at least a year ago and now you'd be all alone in a hospital. I'm not charitable and I hate sick people.

ROSA – You might as well say you're a murderer.

VANNI – There are hundreds of people I would have wanted to murder, you first of all.

ROSA – Me?

VANNI – When you were born I wanted to put cyanide on our mother's nipples. What did that dreadful shrieking frog want from me? I was the king of the swamp.

ROSA – I wanted to kill Aldo when he got me pregnant. I kept telling him: "Be careful, be

careful...” and he would say: “Relax, I’m not a little boy...” You’re right, I’ve wasted my life.

VANNI – In any case I don’t think you would have been able to do more than you’ve done. The waste was part of the package.

ROSA – If I were a nun I would have been more useful.

VANNI – If I had been.

ROSA – I could have gone to a poor country to help the needy. Feed the hungry.

VANNI – I can see it now. I leave for Africa in search of rare plants and find my sister, dressed like a nun, eating them in a salad.

ROSA – There are so many suffering children.

VANNI – It’s not the children who suffer most. Give a colorful pebble to a child and he’s happy even in the middle of the mud. But his parent knows that the bowl is empty. (Moves his fingers) Why isn’t she back yet?

ROSA – When I realized I was pregnant I wanted to die.

VANNI – Why didn’t you tell me about it right away?

ROSA – You were in Japan.

VANNI – One can’t be away for five minutes.

ROSA – It was your first trip after your college graduation. And then, I knew what you would have told me to do. I was sixteen. When I told mother about it we were in the car. She said: “Let me pull over. I feel dizzy.” For the next five minutes she didn’t say anything, and already she spoke little. Then she began crying and said: “What am I supposed to do now?” It seemed like she was the one pregnant, not me.

VANNI – Typical of our mother, temperament of a protagonist.

ROSA – We remained for two hours in a no parking zone in front of a shoe store, I still remember the prices. She was crying and I kept quiet. Those who passed by would look at us inside the car. At a certain moment I saw a policeman crossing the street and I said: “Mother, a policeman.” That helped her regain her energy. She started the car and said: “You’re the one who’s going to tell your father. And I don’t want to be home when you do.” Knowing daddy, I wanted to die. In fact, he didn’t think twice before hitting me. When mother came back from our aunt’s house my nose was bleeding. Later I understood the true reason behind all that anger. It wasn’t because I was pregnant but because Aldo was a plumber. Moreover, he was forty, exactly daddy’s age. That was just too much for him to bear. He calmed down only two years later, when he realized that Aldo was earning more money than he was.

VANNI – What’s the point of being an accountant?

ROSA – You heard him say it too?

VANNI – No, but I can imagine.

ROSA – Aldo was also a gentleman, he married me. But my life should have stopped there. Shortly after, he got sick and it was nothing but suffering, the little savings we had finished quickly. They used to put amianthus in furnaces.

VANNI – See how many things you learn being on a wheelchair.

ROSA – You were always out of town and you were not even here when you were here. With your little plants and that green house you had built yourself in the backyard. If at least you had a girlfriend...

VANNI – Had had.

ROSA – What?

VANNI – Nothing, nothing.

ROSA - I could have confided in her.

VANNI – You still think that life is sacred?

ROSA – Sacred does not mean cheerful.

VANNI – That's true, God makes us suffer, in whatever form wishes. And the suffering sent by God is so strong that it makes the one caused by people seem secondary. Give me something to drink. (Rosa goes to the table and gets a glass filled with a green liquid. She brings the glass to Vanni who is trying to move his fingers) I have cramps. As I did in my legs, on the ladder of the ship. (Rosa helps him drink by holding the glass)

ROSA – I put some mint in it.

VANNI – Thank you. (Utters a groan)

ROSA – What is it?

VANNI – A pain. It hurts when I swallow. Now, it's gone.

ROSA – A little more?

VANNI – But if I just told you that it hurts when I swallow!

ROSA – Right, sorry. (Sits on the bed) That young woman who used to come here for a while... You haven't seen her anymore?

VANNI – What young woman?

ROSA – The German one.

VANNI – Frida? She disappeared.

ROSA – I liked her, she was nice.

VANNI – It's been six or seven years now, who knows where she is.

ROSA – Good heavens, seven years.

VANNI – She probably got lost in the black forest. Or maybe she hanged herself. She was the type, if she found the right tree. It's the purpose of botany.

ROSA – To hang yourself?

VANNI – To find the tree.

ROSA – You must have bile in your veins instead of blood.

VANNI – And you a hectogram of jujubes in place of a heart.

ROSA – She had two very nice braids.

VANNI – Ever since your daughter moved to Germany you've become crazy about Germans.

ROSA – Crazy?

VANNI – Because they are all potential customers of the ice-cream shop. (Rosa laughs) How old are the kids now?

ROSA – Luca is eleven, Valeria eight.

VANNI – Has it been long since you last saw them?

ROSA – Since Christmas. More than once a year it's difficult, and every time it's a shocking.

VANNI – What words you use! Turn that TV off. Say a joy, a surprise.

ROSA – Well, I can hardly recognize them. Luca is so tall and Valeria is very smart.

VANNI – Do they speak our language?

ROSA – A little, what they hear at home. But always less and less. And such an accent... Luca says "Grendma Rosa" And Valeria says "brekfest". But they are very well behaved, truly adorable children. And they care so much about me. (With tears in her eyes) Liliana asked me why don't I move there, but I don't feel at home, I don't speak German. And I don't want to burden them.

VANNI – Has the Pragotto hypothesis already faded? (Rosa laughs between her tears)

ROSA – Oh please...

VANNI – He's balding quite nicely, he always wears a tie, he has a good practice, and with those big hands of his he is very skilled at giving shots. Don't let him get away, let him taste your radish meatballs. You're still an attractive woman.

ROSA – Stop it.

VANNI – You have nice breasts and a nice ass; you know how to iron, how to cook and how to

answer the phone.

ROSA – I have a potato-shaped nose.

VANNI – In Germany you'd have lots of success. (Rosa laughs out loud)

ROSA – Nobody can make me laugh like you do.

VANNI – If you marry Pragotto, you can live here. This could be his consulting room. But the violin must remain there, on that wall, hanging on that very nail. I'm going to put it in my will. My first love. Remember? My dream was to become a violinist. Mendelssohn's violin concerto in E minor. How many times I practiced it.

ROSA – We couldn't take it any longer.

VANNI – Markus Djorovic. Who remembers him? One of the few musicians who hasn't given his instrument a stomachache. I, dear little sister, wish to be buried in a wood of mangroves.

ROSA – What are they?

VANNI – They are plants that grow in the water.

ROSA – Goodness knows how much slush!

VANNI – Yes, slush, mud, mire. You'll have to wear boots and instead of chrysanthemums you'll bring me white and pink water-lilies. Isn't it wonderful? (He tries to move his fingers)

ROSA – Do they hurt?

VANNI – Yes! Why hasn't she come back?

ROSA – She had to get some information, it takes time.

VANNI – Information about what?

ROSA – When you may go to the clinic.

VANNI – I don't want to go anywhere. Leave me alone! I don't intend to put up with this for long, with the faces of these idiotic doctors who don't have a clue of what they are doing. There is nothing left to do, don't you see? It advances day by day and I'm glad, finally I'll know what it's about, when I'll be in the sight of God, finally I'll say to him: "Good God, would you mind finally explaining this damn mystery to me?"...

ROSA – Don't be blasphemous!

VANNI – God is not so stupid as to be shocked: I'm sure He's going to take me by the hand: "Come here, Vannino, now you may know what it's all about". And He's going to tell me something so simple, so elementary, at the limits with what is most banal ... such as notes in a row: do re mi fa... and I will reply: "How could I not think of it?"... and He will say: "What about me then, what would I be here for?"...and lots of giggles will be heard all around and Markus Djorevic, who is close by, will play Mendelssohn's concerto in E minor. (The doorbell rings) Finally! Quick, go get the door. (Rosa hurries out) Have her come here. Immediately! Tell her I'm angry. Very angry. And

that I'm not going to the hospital. (Moves his fingers) I don't want any doctors about. (Rosa peeps back in, smiling)

ROSA – It's Doctor Pragotto. Shall I let him in? (Without waiting for an answer, Rosa covers the plant with its hood and goes out. Vanni turns to look at the plant)

ROSA'S VOICE – Yes, doctor. Come on up.

VANNI – You see, Daphne? This is life. Should I regret it? (Blackout. Music).

Scene 2

The same day, early evening. Rosa pushes Vanni in his wheelchair while he dictates to Sibilla who is taking notes at the table. The plant does not have its hood. The window is closed.

VANNI – We call dependence the state of subordinate activity... in which the functional faculties of the vegetal organism find themselves... (Sighs) Do you think kids will understand?

SIBILLA – Of course they will.

ROSA – I wouldn't understand.

VANNI – You don't count. Your name is Rosa but you are not in my catalogue.

ROSA – Look who's talking, Napoleon.

SIBILLA – In any case, these are notes for the preface. The manual is written in a very simple language.

VANNI – Right. If we observe... (Makes a grimace and moves his fingers)

ROSA – Even if I don't count, am I supposed to keep pushing?

VANNI – Yes, if we keep moving... even the concepts circulate better.

SIBILLA – I'd rather stop.

VANNI – I'm almost done. Push. (Rosa obeys) If we observe the locomotion of certain parts we see that depending on the level of evolution of the organism... we're talking about botany but it's like we are talking about me... it differs in a clear way. For example, if we linger over the elementary phenomenon... known as spore dispersion... we discover that in a simple organization... (With one hand he hits the back of his other hand) Wake up! Wake up!

SIBILLA – That's enough. We'll continue tomorrow. (She gets up and goes to the window)

ROSA – It was about time! (Vanni collapses to one side)

VANNI – Daphne, sweet Daphne.

ROSA – Try to sit up straight. (She helps him sit up)

VANNI – Give me something to drink.

ROSA – But if it hurts when you swallow...

VANNI – It doesn't matter, I'm thirsty.

ROSA – With mint?

VANNI – Water, pure water. (Rosa gets the glass from the table and exits to the bathroom)

SIBILLA – It's beginning to cloud over.

VANNI – There is that line by Ungaretti: "My torment / comes when / I think myself / out of harmony...". I feel in harmony only when I'm lifting the edge of a new leaf. Oh, then yes: that's the only blessing of which I have had cognition for a long time.

SIBILLA – Only that? (Rosa enters)

ROSA – If you ask him questions, obviously he's going to answer you. You mustn't talk. (Helps Vanni to drink) The water in the bathroom is always cooler than the one in the kitchen. I never understood why. (Vanni drinks and makes a grimace)

VANNI – Rosa, go to the other room.

ROSA – I wouldn't dream of it.

VANNI – Do as I say if you don't want me to break that violin on your head. (There is the sound of thunder) Look, a nice thunderstorm is on its way. Go to the terrace and bring in the laundry.

ROSA – There isn't any laundry to bring in. And we don't have a terrace.

VANNI – Please, leave us alone.

ROSA – What is it that I'm not supposed to hear?

VANNI – Something that does not regard my suffering... but hers.

ROSA – And who worries about mine? (Goes towards the door, slams the glass on the table and exits)

VANNI – Now there is more space but I'm not sure whether we'll be able... to fill it all.

SIBILLA – The sky's become dark all of a sudden.

VANNI – Please, bring me to the window. (Sibilla pushes Vanni to the window) Sunny days are all the same. But thunderstorms... there aren't two exactly alike. (Lightning) Were you expecting that lightning bolt? I sure wasn't. It's magnificent.

SIBILLA – How do you feel Vanni? (She touches his shoulder)

VANNI – We shouldn't be on such familiar terms. We don't want to become pathetic, do we? I feel fine. (Sound of thunder) I was lying in wait for you. You're a foreseeable grumbler. Like my sister. Publish the book without my notes. They are boring and complicated, I keep repeating over and over the same old lessons, no one writes like that nowadays.

SIBILLA – Without your name they will not accept it.

VANNI – Imbeciles. Editors don't understand anything, they're worse than doctors. Will you return to Boston?

SIBILLA – They offered me a position as a researcher.

VANNI – What kind of research?

SIBILLA – Mosses and lichens. Research applied to medicine. Better yet, to drugs.

VANNI – With all the money they have, they've never thought to create... a botanical garden. Anyway congratulations, it's a very good job.

SIBILLA – I didn't accept it. I mailed the letter this morning.

VANNI – That's a very courageous choice. And a very stupid one, too. Congratulations again.

SIBILLA – I think I'm going to move to Sumatra.

VANNI – Sumatra... (Suddenly he seems lost)

SIBILLA – I'm not cut out to be in a laboratory. I need to be in touch with nature, to smell it, to catch every living signal. I don't want to betray my dreams. Besides, for me, Sumatra is the place of knowledge. Something happened there... which will help me understand... now that each needle has found its own cushion... without hurting too much.

VANNI – It's a nice image.

SIBILLA – It's not mine. It's Olga Baladina's, a 19th century Russian poetess. We each quote our favorites.

VANNI – And that cushion... would that be your heart? (Sound of thunder) Would you please ... take my hands? I have a sensation... of cold. (Sibilla goes behind the wheelchair and leans over Vanni so she is able to hold his hands) I am losing them, but it is comforting... to think of them ... in yours.

SIBILLA – Remember that bungalow... where we lived the first two months?

VANNI – Oh, yes... It was beautiful. With that garden... of palms and bamboo.

SIBILLA – I looked into it. It's still there. We wanted to buy it, remember?

VANNI – We also wanted to tame a monkey. (They laugh) So that it could bring us the highest fruits from the coconut trees... the ones that see the sun first.

SIBILLA – I'll buy it.

VANNI – What will you buy?

SIBILLA – The bungalow.

VANNI – And how are you going to do that?

SIBILLA – My father has agreed to give me an allowance. I need little to live. That is going to be my house. Forever.

VANNI – And are you going to bring Bill? (Sibilla laughs)

SIBILLA – Are you jealous?

VANNI – I hate them all. (Sibilla caresses his hands) This is my ring!

SIBILLA – It's been a long time since I last wore it.

VANNI – Pearls from Sumatra. They sell them on street-corners.

SIBILLA – They have a special property. Did you know that?

VANNI – They make cramps go away?

SIBILLA – They make the rain come.

VANNI – It's incredible. Sometimes... So unexpected. And deafening. Remember? The geese used to flee under the flooring of the bungalows.

SIBILLA – And the parrots fluttered as gossips do. Then silence fell all of a sudden. Only the boatman's voice could be heard, calling for the last trip. We were truly alone... like in Eden.

VANNI – Yes.

SIBILLA – I was twenty-three years old and I never thought that a night of rain could be so devastating. With the howling and creaking of the wind. I thought that if one day I should know what love is I would want it to be that powerful and frightening. And that the foundations of my house would tremble. And that the rain would soak me to my marrow and that the thunder would deafen me till faint. In contact with that kind of nature, the cities I'd left behind in Europe appeared like cribs made of breadcrumbs inhabited by gnomes. And I felt gigantic, because I was conquering my land: if I outstretched my arms, I could touch both poles and place my flags. I have never felt so eternal, in such harmony, as your poet would say.

VANNI – And I? How... did I behave... in your eyes?

SIBILLA – You were my unaware hero. And as the days went by, I placed you more and more in my womanly life. I'd never been in love before. The days of research, and those strange sing-songs in the evening... lighting a fire... having a sip of ta-chim... I never drank before, I was very rigorous about that, but you corrupted me. Everything flowed together in the center of my life, that was a small voracious volcano whose mouths became larger and larger, ready to swallow with their

lava an entire green plain. The candlelight stretched the shadows as well as the desire that can invade a young body that doesn't wish to defend itself. You were wonderful, in the carelessness of your hair and with those words that you only knew and those hands you used to wave in the air, when you calculated the distance between our village and the sea using the pirogue to take measurements, sending to the devil the meter and mile that seemed so arid to you; and most of all when you'd tell me about your childhood, something you did a lot in those days, I wonder why... that childhood so different, it was like a buzzing cocoon. It seemed you wanted me to get to know it so that I could better understand your anguishes of being an old man, as you used to refer to yourself.

VANNI – I'm thirsty, thirsty. Terribly thirsty. (Sibilla gets the glass from the table and hurriedly goes to the bathroom to fill it) What I needed down there was a bottle of Barolo. I would have been satisfied even with a Barolo from 1970. (Sibilla enters with the glass full and helps Vanni to drink, he does so and then makes a grimace and yells) I could have been your grandfather!

SIBILLA – (Yells) What did it matter? What does it matter now?

VANNI – This is the matter. Grandfathers are in wheelchairs!

SIBILLA – I would have been happy to take care of you! I would have given you everything: my youth, my work, my health. All the things we could have done together! Do you know how much I cared to go to Boston with that damned scholarship! Do you know to how many Bills I shut the door! You're a murderer! A coward! You let love get moldy in the refrigerator, when the world is full of people who invoke it! I hate you! (She hits him with anger) Where am I ever going to find another man like you? (She cries and throws herself next to him)

ROSA'S – Vanni!

VANNI – Stay where you are. I've never been better!

SIBILLA – I want to spend the night here. We'll put a mattress and I'll sleep on the floor. I won't leave you anymore. (Silence. There is only the sound of rain and distant thunder)

VANNI – Listen... This morning I was telling you something but we were interrupted.

SIBILLA – What was it?

VANNI – About the polish monk. And the properties of the Daphne Giovannina. (Moves his fingers with difficulty)

SIBILLA – Does it hurt a lot?

VANNI – A slight pain. I was telling you about the use... natives made of it.

SIBILLA – Yes, I remember.

VANNI – Well, do you want to know? Poison for arrows.

SIBILLA – Poison?

VANNI – It gives a gentle death. Immediate, no pains nor spasms. Natives call it saha ulma which means gentle wind. They use it against tigers and certain kinds of sacker hyenas which ravage hen-

houses. Both the tiger and the hyena are sisters brought by the same wind which brought us, the natives say. They must die so they can't damage our villages. But their end needs to be as light as that wind. This is what Karmynszki describes which is what he learned from an old man there.

SIBILLA – My God. The poison is in the leaves?

VANNI – Not exactly. When you remove a leaf from the caulis, you'll see a small white drop forming in the sheath. That is the poison. The edge, the stem and the caulis are harmless. So are the roots. This is the great mystery of the Daphne Giovannina. One drop per leaf.

SIBILLA – Why should I remove one?

VANNI – It's a fair question, there are no tigers nor hyenas here. But if you think about it just a little you'll find the answer by yourself. (Silence, then Sibilla brings her hands to her mouth) Good for you. It's a poison that doesn't leave any trace. The doctors won't have a clue, they'll say any such nonsense like meninges infarction or extra-corporeal collapse. (Thunder. The rain is much louder now) Listen to the rain in the bungalow.

SIBILLA – I'll never do it.

VANNI – In six months you've given me a very long life. We tore the sky with our fingernails. We howled to the moon. We sucked honey from the honeycomb. Now you have duties towards me.

SIBILLA – Where's Karmynszki's book?

VANNI – It fell on the floor, Rosa put it away and doesn't remember where. We must find it. It's the only existing copy in the world and the world will keep on turning happily even after you'll have burnt it. (Sibilla looks at him shocked) Let's allow ourselves this little fire. We've destroyed millions of vegetal and animal species, we won't have any scruples destroying that unimportant booklet that nobody knows. (He collapses to one side) I feel like a bow... after the arrow has been shot. Rosaaa! (Rosa appears immediately)

ROSA – (Enters yelling) Why are you yelling? I didn't run away!

VANNI – You were behind the door!

ROSA – Where do you want me to go, huh? And let me take your temperature even though it's useless! (To Sibilla, still yelling) There are rules, right? Let's respect at least those. (To Vanni) You don't want people to say I didn't do my duty, do you?

VANNI – You're right. Give me the thermometer. And Lisecantox-two.

ROSA – (Yelling) Where is it? Where did I put it? (Looks for the thermometer, while Sibilla looks through the books) Here it is! (She puts it under Vanni's armpit.) What is she looking for?

SIBILLA – A book.

ROSA – What book? She's stealing your books!

VANNI – Be quiet, stupid! The book you picked up from the floor the other day.

ROSA – It's there. (She points to the bookcase and Sibilla finds the book.)

VANNI – I'll kill you! Do you even realize?

ROSA – I just remembered! Is that allowed? Or isn't it?

VANNI – Open your ears. When the moment comes, that plant will go to Sibilla. (Rosa is about to answer) I said when the moment comes! Be quiet. She is going to take it with her. Nobody must notice, nobody must know that plant has been here. Is that clear?

ROSA – Why?

VANNI – It's a gift!

ROSA – So that she can get the Nobel.

VANNI – Don't talk nonsense! Calm down and be quiet, this is tiring for me. That book is also hers. Please put it in your purse! (Sibilla puts the book in her purse) And you, bring a mattress. And a blanket. Sibilla is staying here tonight.

ROSA – Why? I'm here. And besides there aren't any mattresses.

VANNI – What do you mean, there aren't any mattresses? That poor plumber of a husband of yours didn't sleep on a mattress?

ROSA – I've never undone my bed, not even for one day and I'm surely not going to undo it now!

VANNI – Would you stop it with these rules of Sister Clothilda. You still believe that your husband is watching and protecting you from above? And that he is keeping an eye on the integrity of your conjugal bed? The same one where he got you pregnant right under the eyes of our late grandparents? What counts here doesn't count up there.

ROSA – How do you know?

VANNI – There are good probabilities.

ROSA – Well, I believe it does, and every evening I talk to him. (Looks up) Hi Aldo!

VANNI – If you want to talk to me you're going to have to look towards the cellar, because I'm going to go down very low.

ROSA – That's for sure, they don't want you up there.

SIBILLA – Enough! I can do without a mattress. He will sleep on the bed and I on the wheelchair.

ROSA – Why don't you go back to your own house? You don't trust me? Besides, what right do you have? You don't want to drain him out completely with all those questions for that damn book of yours!

VANNI – Take out this thermometer.

ROSA – You are so naive. You believe this man's capable of loving a woman?

VANNI – Come here.

ROSA – At your service.

VANNI – (Whispers) She doesn't have a potato-shaped nose.

ROSA – What?

VANNI – Are you deaf? She doesn't have a potato-shaped nose! (Vanni laughs and Sibilla shakes her head and smiles)

ROSA – What's so funny? It was a big problem for me. Have you ever had a potato-shaped nose at fifteen? (Looks at the thermometer) Thirty-six point five. No fever. You see that you're better. (Rosa goes out and Vanni looks towards the plant)

VANNI – Yes, I'm better. Isn't that true, Daphne? We've broken the ice and I'm feeling much better. (Blackout. Music).

Scene 3

The following night. Sibilla is sleeping in the bed and Vanni is awake on his wheelchair reading a book in a half-light. The light is on in the corridor. After a brief moment, the light goes out and there is the sound of someone tripping and a quiet moan. Then the light comes back on and Rosa appears massaging her foot.

VANNI – (In an undertone) Now don't blame the step.

ROSA – (Undertone) It was dark.

VANNI – Aren't you clever, you turned the light off.

ROSA – You two forgot it on.

VANNI – We left it on so you wouldn't trip.

ROSA – If you have turned it off I wouldn't have come in.

VANNI – If you had turned it off.

ROSA – What?

VANNI – Nothing, nothing.

ROSA – Do you want to check your temperature?

VANNI – I can't wait. When I'm in hell they're going to put me in the circle of the damned who are

forced to check their fever every five minutes even though they don't have it. It's a torture Dante didn't plan for. (Sibilla suddenly awakens)

ROSA – You woke her up. (She turns the light on in the room)

VANNI - You woke her up.

SIBILLA – What time is it?

ROSA – The clock hasn't chimed yet, so it's not even six o' clock.

SIBILLA – Which clock?

ROSA – The clock of the bell-tower. The bell used to ring at every hour of the night.

VANNI – At the half hour and quarter of an hour, as well.

ROSA – It wasn't so loud at the half and quarter.

VANNI – We couldn't sleep. The entire neighborhood couldn't sleep.

ROSA – So they called a referendum to abolish the bell from ten in the evening to six in the morning. And they won, those Godless people.

VANNI – We celebrated with fireworks.

ROSA – Without all those Maghrebs you wouldn't have won.

VANNI – True. It was a civic and multiracial victory.

ROSA – The bell at night kept me company. (Starts to go, Vanni yells out loudly, the two women rush towards him) What is it?

VANNI – A sharp pain... in my throat. Ah...

ROSA – I'll call Pragotto.

SIBILLA – Yes, quick.

VANNI – No! It's going away. (Breathes deeply) It's gone.

SIBILLA – Just like that, all of a sudden?

VANNI – No, a warning bell went off a moment ago. It was... as if barbed wire... was being wound up... around my neck. But it's the first time that... (He lets himself fall to one side) Peace.

SIBILLA – The clinic can receive you as early as today. I spoke to the head physician.

VANNI – May I take Daphne with me?

SIBILLA – I don't think so.

VANNI – Then I'm staying here.

ROSA – Would you like for me to make you some tea?

VANNI – You bought it?

ROSA – Yes.

VANNI – This is love.

ROSA – (To Sibilla) Would you like some too?

SIBILLA – Thank you, yes, please.

ROSA – Yes, please. I'll never understand. (Goes out)

VANNI – Do you believe in God?

SIBILLA – I refuse to answer.

VANNI – Pretend you are still in college. You must earn a good grade.

SIBILLA – I believe in a mystery that is under everybody's eyes.

VANNI – Easy, let's move on. Is this mystery telling you it's doing good?

SIBILLA – If it spoke our language it would no longer be a mystery.

VANNI – Miss Sibilla, you're hesitating. I'll rephrase the question. When a person suffers do you think this mystery is pleased?

SIBILLA – No.

VANNI – The exam is over. You pass, but I sense you are a little dubious about this mystery. Please apply yourself.

SIBILLA – I'll make a referendum to re-establish the bell. (They laugh)

VANNI – The leaf to remove is always the one nearest to the top, the poison is more concentrated there. That is what Karmynszki says.

SIBILLA – I don't think I can do it.

VANNI – It's going to be a long and terrible agony. They'll put probes and tubes in my nose, my throat, my stomach. I'll be artificially fed, even with pineapple juice, which I never liked. I'll understand everything but won't be able to speak. And this is the worst part because I won't be able to oppose myself to the doctors' violence. I'll start to cry from all the anger and the head physician will say conjunctivitis, so five times a day they'll give me eye drops which will burn to death. Soon after, I'll lose my hearing. I'll begin wandering in a noiseless limbo, full of pangs and anguish, trying to decipher the movements of all the lips hanging over me, but as you well know doctors speak Ostrogoth. Then I'll also lose my sight and the poor vegetal full of unexpressed lymph will begin to enter into that mystery of which you spoke of earlier, and my sister will give a tip to the

nurse who cleans me every morning. Then they'll stop watching me, they'll only watch the machine to which I'll be connected, to understand whether my heart, my kidneys and my liver are responding to the therapies. There will be a lot of beeps in that room, and each beep will correspond to a mechanical impulse able to infuse vital energy in my body for the joy of Rosa who'll be able to say today you have a nice coloring or better yet today you don't have a temperature. I'll lose the cognition of time, therefore, while still alive, I'll know the eternity of pain. I'll have sores in my nostrils, my gums will be all swollen and my throat will be covered with plaques and small ulcers; in that darkness with no return I'll be all alone with my remorse and, as the ghost of King Hamlet says with "all my sins remembered." And in the very end, but this will happen after a long time because the end is going to be exhausting, the test-tubes with my urines, my feces and traces of my liver and spleen, which by then will be mostly decomposed due to the repeated biopsies, will be put in a plastic bag and thrown in the incinerator while my clinical folder will end up in the archive on the top floor, sealed in an orange bag, and is going to lie there forgotten by everybody on top and to the left of the third shelf, between that of a boxer and a masseuse, waiting for that day of Judgment which never comes. I beg you, my dear: if you can, spare me all this. (Sibilla has listened with her head down)

SIBILLA – But I am the one killing you, do you understand? I, who cultivate sprouts... who study lymph circulation... I, give you death. (Rosa enters with a tray)

ROSA – I must turn my nose the other way because just the smell gives me pimples. (Puts the tray on the table) You can pour it yourselves. There's sugar and milk. I've already put some lemon. (Sibilla goes to get the tea) Be careful it's hot. (She goes to Vanni and puts a hand on his forehead) You instead are nice and cool. See? You never can tell. Pragotto is coming tomorrow afternoon. He invited me to his niece's First Communion.

VANNI – Hurrah! I hear wedding bells.

ROSA – On the one hand I'm glad but on the other not so much because I have to buy a present. There are such prices... And then, I never met this niece. Who knows what she likes. Maybe a purse. Or a hat. (Sibilla brings the tea to Vanni and helps him drink it with a teaspoon)

SIBILLA – What about a backpack?

ROSA – Oh, no, I hate backpacks. On the bus kids always bang them in my face. Maybe a fountain pen.

VANNI – If you don't choose the right present Pragotto is not going to marry you.

ROSA – Cut it out. A pair of gloves. A diary.

SIBILLA – I received a music box. I still have it.

ROSA – It's a good idea!

VANNI – What song did it play?

SIBILLA – Doctor Zivago. It made me cry.

ROSA – I saw one in the window, down at the stationer's shop: a merry-go-around with little horses. I'll go there tomorrow morning. (Vanni yells out due to a sudden shot of pain)

SIBILLA – Call an ambulance. To St. Margaret's. (Rosa rushes out)

VANNI – You're not worth much, just like the rest of them. I thought you were stronger. Have pity on me, please. Call her back.

SIBILLA – (Yells out) Rosa! (Rosa reappears) Wait. Maybe later.

ROSA – Why later?

VANNI – I'm better.

SIBILLA – Let's wait ten minutes... maybe it's not that urgent.

ROSA – I just don't understand you. I can see that you care about him. But you behave vice versa.

SIBILLA – We all do the same more or less.

ROSA – If you want to lie down in the other room... you look like you haven't slept much.

SIBILLA – No, thank you. Maybe what I need is a good cup of coffee.

ROSA – Now we're talking. I'll go make it.

SIBILLA – He dozed off.

ROSA – Let him sleep. (Rosa picks up the tray and goes out) All because of this disgusting stuff.

SIBILLA – Are you listening?

VANNI – Yes.

SIBILLA – It has nothing to do with the fear of God or the fear of ending up in jail. It's the action in itself that I can't conceive. I, who give you the poison. Why me?

VANNI – The person who loves me most. Never ask philosophers. Let alone theologians or the poor in spirit.

SIBILLA – Why didn't you do it yourself?

VANNI – Dante, Inferno, Canto III.

SIBILLA – The neutrals.

VANNI – We might as well say cowards. I told myself who knows, maybe, not necessarily... The truth is my heart trembled. Once I removed a leaf. I saw the droplet. I smelled it. It has a vague smell of camphor. All I needed to do was extend the tip of my tongue. I wish this tongue that talks so much had done it, in spite of the hand which held the leaf. It would have been like taking your Communion when you are a child. But the tongue withdrew itself and so did the hand, maybe they had an agreement. So I ended up in the Canto III.

SIBILLA – Therefore I should do it.

VANNI – I don't love myself enough.

SIBILLA – What did you do with that leaf?

VANNI – It's among the pages of Karmynski's book. The drop fell there. There's a purple spot. (Sibilla goes to get the book and looks at the pages. From one page she pulls out a dry leaf) You'll put the other leaf there, too. Afterwards, you'll burn the book with the leaves. Burn, remember. Burn. A sacred fire. I thank you now, afterwards I won't have the time.

SIBILLA – You are so certain that I will do it?

VANNI – Ever since you came back it's been my only hope.

SIBILLA – That is why you were so happy to see me.

VANNI – No, see... there are many reasons... but they have a changeable shape and they're terribly intertwined among themselves. You're the woman who made me feel ashamed of my body. And you're the woman who made me feel like a prince and a master.

SIBILLA – Why did you leave?

VANNI – Because I didn't want to become necessary for you.

SIBILLA – By then you already were.

VANNI – Then I beg your forgiveness.

SIBILLA – Maybe I can help you die. But I'll never forgive you. (Rosa enters with the coffee)

ROSA – You woke him up. (She shakes her head at Sibilla)

VANNI – I woke up by myself. This I can still do.

ROSA – I put two teaspoons. Is it all right for you?

VANNI – (Desolated) She takes it without sugar.

ROSA – Just don't stir it.

VANNI – Couldn't you ask before?

ROSA – I put two teaspoons, Pragotto puts two teaspoons, every normal person on this earth puts two teaspoons. Only you used to put one, but everyone knows you're crazy, and I don't know how I managed to convince you to put two.

VANNI – You didn't convince me, you forced me.

ROSA – Now I also have to worry about this Sibilla! How am I supposed to know that this Sibilla drinks it without sugar? In which botany book is it written?

SIBILLA – Please, Rosa, it's not a problem. Two teaspoons are fine.

ROSA – Unfortunately, I've already stirred it.

VANNI – Then why did you say not to stir it?

ROSA – Because this is what you say in these cases. Shall I prepare it again for you?

SIBILLA – No, it's fine. I need some sweetness.

ROSA – Then add two more. Do you want some?

VANNI – No. I want tea.

ROSA – Barolo for breakfast and tea at night!

VANNI – What's so strange about that?

ROSA – Tea is to be drunk in the morning or in the afternoon at the latest.

VANNI – And where did you read this? In the mass book?

ROSA – Don't be blasphemous right now!

VANNI – Now when? What do you mean right now? Do you mean my time has come? Am I going to die tomorrow morning? At seven? At eight? Quarter after nine? Sibilla, quick, I beg you. I can't take it anymore.

ROSA – You can't take what anymore? What do you mean Sibilla be quick? (Vanni closes his eyes and doesn't answer)

SIBILLA – I must finish that book soon.

ROSA – But hadn't you finished it already? Didn't you just have the preface to do?

SIBILLA – The footnotes. I need to finish putting them in order.

ROSA – You have your entire life in front of you. (The bell-tower clock chimes six times) Six o'clock. The nights are long. (Rosa looks at the plant) So, you'll take it with you.

SIBILLA – Yes.

ROSA – Where are you going to put it?

SIBILLA – I haven't decided yet.

ROSA – Once every fifteen days you must give it coffee grinds.

SIBILLA – Yes.

ROSA – My next-door neighbor had beautiful geraniums.

SIBILLA – They'll be good for her, too.

ROSA – For sure. It lost only one leaf. In a year. (Looks towards Vanni, to make sure he is sleeping)
Poor Daphne.

SIBILLA – Why poor?

ROSA – She was very attached to my brother. (The two women look at each other. Blackout.
Music).

Scene 4

The following day. Vanni is immobile on his wheelchair. He speaks with difficulty. Sibilla reads him the preface of her book. From the closed window a few rays of sunlight shine through.

SIBILLA – We must pay attention to the dramatic problem of the tropical forests, whose systematic destruction has already caused serious environmental unbalances to the point that it is foreseen, in a few decades, there will be irreparable effects not only on the climate but also on the peaceful organization of the planet's social life. Defending the environment from indiscriminating assault is not only an act of love toward nature which has been granted to us as a gift, but also an act of resistance to protect the rights of the poorest populations, the future generations, and peace in the world. In this vision, we believe it is essential to involve young people to whom we would like to provide, with this manual, the first bases to get acquainted and orientated in the very vast, fascinating and in many ways yet to be explored, botanical field.

VANNI – Good. This is the right tone. You know how to talk to young people. They need to understand that botany is not an abstract discipline practiced by a few funny looking gnomes with their chlorophyll-stained hands. Although protecting the planet from criminals and idiots seems to be an undertaking that's destined to fail. (Moans) Ah!

SIBILLA – Try not to move.

VANNI – I'd like to bite into the world as you do with an apple and spit out the worm. They'll destroy everything, from the gigantic sequoias to the little daisies in the meadows, from the alpine stars to the mangrove aggregations, with the risk that in about twenty years my forlorn skeleton will come to the surface scaring everyone to death. Oh, right, I haven't told you yet, I want to be buried among the mangroves. I'll write it in my will.

SIBILLA – Buried in the mud?

VANNI – It's the stuff that we are made of, never mind what Shakespeare says. The Bible agrees, as well. (Rosa enters)

ROSA – Budapest has also been flooded. And the Seine has reached the high-water mark. It's a deluge.

VANNI – It was about time.

ROSA – Thank goodness for the firemen, they are the ones rescuing people. They are making miracles. Never mind those plants of yours.

VANNI – Let's blame plants now.

ROSA – If you weren't a botanist you could've been a fireman.

VANNI – If you had not been...

ROSA – At any rate, you'd be more useful in case of a flood. (Goes to the window)

VANNI – A fireman in a boat is the operative image of human contradictions.

ROSA – It stopped raining but it doesn't look very promising. (Goes to feel the soil of the plant) Here instead the soil is dry. Some have too much, others have nothing. (Goes about the room. While Rosa speaks, Sibilla is motionless with her head down) My back hurts... there's too much humidity. (Gets the glass and exits)

ROSA'S VOICE - Pragotto says we live in the second most humid city in Italy. The first one is Venice. Pragotto says eels come out of the faucets there. (She laughs)

ROSA - (She re-enters with the glass full and goes to water the plant) Pragotto is so funny. Oh by the way, I asked in the stationer's shop. That music box is expensive, forty euros. Almost eighty thousand liras. It's not like I forge money here. It was nice, though, with the little horses that go around. He let me listen to the music.

SIBILLA – What music does it play?

ROSA – The man says it's a popular children's song. But I can't remember the title. (Vanni all of a sudden yells out and then begins to sing)

VANNI – Give me your little hand / I'll throw it to the beast / Give me your little head / I'll have it for a feast...

ROSA – He's gone crazy. (Vanni sings louder)

VANNI – Give me your little eyes / I'll prick them with a pin / Give me your little toes / I'll stick them in a tin...

ROSA – Giovanni! (Vanni sings loudly, exhausted)

VANNI – With your little ears / I'll make a recipe / with your pony tails / I'll hang you to that tree!

ROSA – Stop it!! (Rosa moves frantically around the room not knowing what to do. Sibilla is immobile) Virgin Mary Mother of God, Virgin Mary Mother of God!

VANNI – Ding dong! Ding dong! Tell me what time it is! Ding dong! Ding dong! (Pants desperately, then yells out) Daphne!

ROSA – Virgin Mary Mother of God. I'm calling the ambulance. (Goes out hurriedly, Sibilla rushes to Vanni)

SIBILLA – Vanni! Talk to me, please.

VANNI – (He looks at her) They'll be here in a few minutes.

SIBILLA – I'm scared.

VANNI – Go. I'm going to insult them and they're going to give me lots of sedatives, it won't be an edifying scene.

ROSA'S VOICE – (On the telephone) Hello? My brother is not well, he's going mad. He screams, jumps. Because he is paralyzed. I mean that he jumps because he is agitated, he has convulsions. Yes. Please hurry. 18, Pelagio Pelagi. Third floor.

VANNI – (To himself) Palagi, not Pelagi. She's never going to say it right. (To Sibilla) Go away. Don't even think of coming to the hospital. And don't forget Daphne. (Rosa re-enters)

ROSA – They'll be here in a few minutes.

SIBILLA – Maybe he'll need pajamas.

ROSA – His suitcase has been ready for some time now, what did you think? If he'd listen to me he would have gone to the hospital a month ago.

VANNI – Rosa... (Both women rush over to him)

ROSA – He called me. (Sibilla moves away) I'm here, Vanni.

VANNI – I see that you're there. You've always been there. Even when I wasn't.

ROSA – I've always tried to be there when it was necessary.

VANNI – If Pragotto doesn't marry you don't cry. The best revenge is to change doctors. Pick one out randomly in the yellow pages. (Rosa cries) Rosa!

ROSA – Yes?

VANNI – Find yourself a lover from Thailand.

ROSA – But I don't even know where Thailand is.

VANNI – Have Sibilla explain it to you. Go on, go get the door.

ROSA – They're not here yet.

VANNI – How do you know?

ROSA – We would hear the siren.

VANNI – Suppose... it's... broken.

ROSA – If it was broken that would really be something.

VANNI – If it were... that would...

ROSA – (To Sibilla) He doesn't know what he's saying anymore. (She goes to the window) What are they waiting for? (The sound of a siren in the distance) Here they are!

VANNI – It would be nice... if it were... the firemen... in a boat.

ROSA – He's so pig-headed! He's so stubborn! (The siren gets louder) Let's hope it opens. Sometimes it doesn't open. You should get the push-button changed. (Goes out drying her tears. Sibilla rushes over to Vanni)

VANNI – Whatever you wish to do in your life... in whatever moment you wish to do it... do it with a gentle hand... as if you were to protect... the very last species... of a delicate... and shy flower. (Sibilla's eyes are full of tears. She turns and goes towards the plant. The sound of the siren is now very loud)

SIBILLA – Will you come visit me in my dreams?

VANNI – I won't be able to do so any other way. And you, will you come to me in my dreams?

SIBILLA – Between my dream and yours the space is so small... that maybe the moment that separates them... is already gone. And I'm there waiting for you. (She removes the leaf on top of the plant and holds a hand underneath it. The siren stops.)

VANNI – Remember that night... in the bungalow... when you took off my boots?

SIBILLA – We had been walking all day... in the forest.

VANNI – My socks were in shreds.

SIBILLA – A great love can even begin like that. (She kisses him on the lips)

VANNI – “Everyone stands alone on the heart of the earth / transfixed by a sun-ray...

SIBILLA - ...and it is suddenly night”. Take your Communion, now. (She brings the leaf to his mouth. Vanni touches the leaf with his lips. He smiles to Sibilla and his eyes close) Forgive me.

ROSA'S VOICE – Is it open? And now? Third floor! (Blackout. Music).

Scene 5

The same room, a week later. Vanni's bed is undone, the mattress rolled up. The wheelchair is gone, along with the photos and the herbarium. The plant is in its place with its hood. There are some cardboard boxes in the room, some are open and filled with books. The bookcase is partly empty. Rosa is filling one of the boxes with books. The door bell rings. She goes to open the door then goes up on the ladder.

SIBILLA'S VOICE – Rosa? May I come in?

ROSA – I'm in here. (Sibilla enters, she no longer looks like a young girl but a grown woman)

SIBILLA – (Looking about) What a strange sensation...

ROSA – Tell me about it... (Silence)

SIBILLA – I came to get the plant.

ROSA – Yes, I'll come down now.

SIBILLA – I don't want to bother you.

ROSA – Oh hardly, from one moment to the other I found myself having so much free time...

Excuse me if I don't shake your hand but my hands are all dusty... (A postcard falls out of one of the books) Oh! (Rosa picks it up) I sent him this postcard. (She turns the postcard) 1957... greetings from Florence. I was ten years old. I wonder why he didn't throw it out. He always threw away the postcards he received.

SIBILLA – Your brother cared a lot about you. (Rosa lifts her shoulders)

ROSA – He kept everything inside and how is one to know what's inside the heart of others?

SIBILLA – Will you sell the house?

ROSA – Yes, I spoke with my daughter, I'll go live in Germany with her. At least I'll be a little more with the kids... they moved away when they were still so small... He could have told me that he liked the postcard...

SIBILLA – That's how he was.

ROSA – (Almost crying) That jackass! And to think that he spoke so softly with his little leaves... he would say "you're a pretty one, you instead are not so nice-looking". We argued for fifty years, every single day God put us on this earth. Hot-blooded quarrels not just petty family squabbles.

SIBILLA – Yes, I heard you.

ROSA – Even on the telephone. Once he called me from Egypt to wish me a happy birthday, because every once in a while he actually remembered about me. We had a quarrel that time... even the pyramids heard us. How many nasty things we said to each other. But that time I won.

SIBILLA – What sign are you?

ROSA – Capricorn. Do you see that stain over there? Once I came in without knocking and Vanni threw an ink-pot at me. He's never wanted to get rid of it. He used to say that one gets old with one's own stains. But he was an honest man. Even if he stole books.

SIBILLA – You knew?

ROSA – Of course I knew, he told you too? He would come home with that smart look on his face, then he'd whistle and pull out the book from under his raincoat. He would say: "sgraffignatus est!" And he would kiss it! He had his theory, he said that stolen books felt more loved. In other words, that he did it for their own good.

SIBILLA – Yes, these walls have sure heard and seen things.

ROSA – Once when I was little my father had me drown my kittens in the bathtub.

SIBILLA – Why did he have you do it?

ROSA – Maybe because he didn't have the courage. You know between saying and doing... you always need someone to take the chestnuts out of the fire. (Sibilla looks away) My mother saw me crying and made some tea to comfort me. Since then, tea... What I regret is that I didn't have the last word.

SIBILLA – Is there something you wanted to tell him?

ROSA – No, nothing special. Since he always wanted to have the last word, I used to say to him: “The last last one will be mine!” I would have liked to keep that promise, just for affection.

SIBILLA – Neither of you had it.

ROSA – I know. You did.

SIBILLA – There wasn’t a last word.

ROSA – Who knows.

SIBILLA – It’s the truth.

ROSA – True or false, at this point... as long as everything is done for the best. Thirty seconds went by. I went out for a moment, the time to open the door.

SIBILLA – He didn’t realize what was happening.

ROSA – The most important thirty seconds of our life. And I wasn’t there.

SIBILLA – You couldn’t have done anything.

ROSA – Who knows. Maybe if I had given him a pinch on the cheek, he’d have got better. I believe in miracles.

SIBILLA – (Silence) And the violin, where will you put it?

ROSA – It’s a week that I think about it. I can’t sleep at night. He wanted to keep it there. It’s a problem. How do you sell a house with a violin attached to a nail and the obligation of having to leave it there. What do I write: house for sale with violin obligation? Who’s going to buy it?

SIBILLA – Maybe the violin was only an excuse to prevent you from leaving.

ROSA – He always said he was writing his will but do you really think he left it. Do you see what scrapes dead people put us in?

SIBILLA – They should be treated as if they were still alive. And if they deserve a slap, give them one.

ROSA – Are you a botanist like Vanni or do you take botany in another way? Isn’t there a lighter way? Because he was a botanist in a really... he was an extremist.

SIBILLA – I still don’t know well what I am.

ROSA – Will you go back to America?

SIBILLA – No. I’ll publish the book and then leave for Sumatra.

ROSA – Where is Sumatra?

SIBILLA – In the Indian Ocean. Between Malaysia and Thailand. (Rosa’s face lights up)

ROSA – Thailand?

SIBILLA – Have you been there?

ROSA – No, it's just that my brother... would often mention it to me. (Silence) What happened in Sumatra? Vanni came back changed from that trip. He seemed twenty years younger and one hundred years older. But maybe I don't have the right to ask. A plumber's wife can't understand such things.

SIBILLA – Such things aren't understood even by those who live them.

ROSA – He could have been your father. Actually, your grandfather.

SIBILLA – There are books that go well together and you don't know why. One was written by a Turk, the other by a Chinese, one is thin, the other is fat, one was written a thousand years ago, one was written yesterday, you read them and it seems that the second one is the continuation of the first and you understand that the second one was written because the words of the ending were missing in the first one, and that the second one instead had them ready for a while because they were its beginning, but it didn't know where to put them, and it would ask where do I put these words, until finally it met the first one that had been waiting for them for more than a thousand years and that's how those words found a chimney, a bed and a table set for dinner.

ROSA – I didn't understand anything but I liked it. I had the impression of hearing my brother talking.

SIBILLA – In fact, they were his words. He loved metaphors. And I would write them down in my journal. (A book falls out of Rosa's hand. Sibilla goes to pick it up)

ROSA – You'll get dirty.

SIBILLA – Books aren't dirty. (Gives the book to Rosa and goes towards the plant)

ROSA – Did you see? It lost another leaf.

SIBILLA – I didn't notice.

ROSA – As a botanist you don't have an eye for things.

SIBILLA – Yes, you're right. It's just that my head these days... (Makes a vague gesture. Rosa takes the hood off the plant)

ROSA – It was the one on top. Also the last time it was the one on top. I looked for it on the floor, in the vase, under the bed... it's not there. Also the last time it wasn't there. Who knows?

SIBILLA – Maybe the wind. (Rosa looks at her) Took it away as a keepsake.

ROSA – Yes, the wind does these things. It was the wind for sure. (Sibilla takes the plant. Silence) How is Sumatra?

SIBILLA – There are beautiful parrots. Forests so thick that it seems to be night even during the day. There are rivers and volcanoes. And lot's of tea plantations.

ROSA – Then it is not the place for me.

SIBILLA – Maybe the place for you is only in this house.

ROSA – Until Vanni was here. But now...

SIBILLA – Now, maybe it is even more. One day your daughter will come back here. You always go back where you have been happy. This house is robust, with its old broken step and its stains on the walls. Don't abandon it. There are places that want only us; who created them, created them for us, whether they knew it or not.

ROSA – Can I ask you something? How old are you?

SIBILLA – Twenty-six.

ROSA – You speak as if you were my age. No, older.

SIBILLA – I'm growing quickly. Certain experiences make us take giant steps.

ROSA - Don't you have a boyfriend?

SIBILLA – Yes, I had one. Something like that.

ROSA – You broke up?

SIBILLA – It's as if my shoe got untied and I don't want to tie it. I'll go barefoot. (Opens the door. They look at each other) Goodbye Rosa. Take care of yourself. (Exits. Rosa remains motionless for a few seconds. There is the sound of the door closing. Rosa goes to the window and looks out without making herself seen)

ROSA – (Whispers) Goodbye Sibilla. If I had more courage I would have gone to Sumatra with you. (Mendelssohn's violin concerto can be heard. Rosa listens and then goes to the box of books. She takes a few out and looks at them hesitantly. Then, with a decisive step she begins putting the books back on the bookcase. She continues to do so, now more quickly as the music rises. Blackout).

THE END

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