

THE FLIGHT TO ROME

Miha Mazzini

A play with a song, ver. 1.16

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CHARACTERS:

THE OLD MAN in his eighties, emaciated, sickly.

THE YOUNG MAN under thirty, in control, charming, cold,
rational, well-dressed, unremarkable in his
carefully assembled image.

THE AIRPORT CHAPEL

The airport chapel, a rather gloomy place, with rows of chairs positioned across the stage (two or three in each row, like a cross section), facing the right. The chairs are empty.

On the right, at the side, there is a crucifix, with Jesus, fixed to the wall. Jesus' head is leaning towards THE OLD MAN who is kneeling there, his hands covering his face - he looks full of despair rather than engrossed in prayer.

In the middle of the set, above the seats, there is a board showing plane departures. It is an old fashioned mechanical one where the lines consist of a number of squares, each with a different letter and number. When a plane takes off, the names of departure destinations, gates and times move up, the small squares flashing and rustling. From time to time, a female voice from a remote loudspeaker calls passengers to board their plane.

The Old Man does not move.

We hear the door on the left open, a ray of light enters the room, a long shadow falls across the rows of chairs and the Old Man.

THE YOUNG MAN, wearing a coat and leather gloves, walks in and closes the door. He has a briefcase in his left hand and a child's rucksack in the shape of a teddy bear in his right. He does not genuflect, but waits for his eyes to get accustomed to the semi-darkness. The squares on the departure board move once more and "ROME, GATE 2" appears at the bottom. There is an hour until the departure of this flight.

The Young Man notices the Old Man and quickly checks whether there is anyone else in the room. He hesitates for a moment, perhaps even steps back a fraction, then changes his mind and sits down in the back row. He places the briefcase and the rucksack on the shelf attached to the back of the chair in front of the empty seat next to him.

Silence, remote sounds, both men are completely motionless. This goes on and on.

The Old Man: It happened in 1940. I was reading the Bible
 when suddenly I heard God's voice.

This is said in a by-the-way manner, with no special emphasis at any point.

The Young Man, who was staring somehow through Jesus, tilts his head slightly towards the Old Man and focuses on him, but his face remains expressionless.

Neither of them says anything else or moves. The silence is becoming oppressive.

The Young Man: What did he say?

The Old Man: I don't know. He didn't speak in a human voice.

The Old Man moves his hands away from his face and stares into Jesus' face for a while. Slowly he gets up, it is quite an effort for him, and he stumbles towards the first row of chairs. He drops onto a chair and remains sitting, turned towards us. The Young Man watches him calmly with his hands in his pockets.

The Old Man: Am I disturbing you?

The Young Man: No.

The Old Man: If you've come to pray...

The Young Man: No.

The Old Man looks at The Young Man's hands thrust in his pockets, and nods.

The Old Man: You're not a believer?

The Young Man: No.

The Old Man: If you want some peace and quiet...

The Young Man: I don't care either way.

The Young Man pulls his hands out of his pockets and puts them on the shelf in front of him. He looks at his watch.

The Young Man: I've got 66 minutes. Tell me...

The Old Man: It'll sound silly...

The Young Man shrugs.

The Young Man: According to a study carried out by the National Institute of Mental Health, 25% of the population is frightened of flying and won't travel by plane. And quite a large proportion of those that do, feel somewhat uneasy. Talking helps most of them, 76%, more than alcohol,

which is in second place. But you're not flying, are you?

The Old Man: No.

Silence. It is clear that the Old Man is trying to decide whether to start talking or not. His eyes stop on the rucksack.

The Old Man: You're travelling with your family?

The Young Man: No. My family are flying to Rome. This is my eldest son's rucksack.

The Old Man: How many children do you have?

The Young Man: Two.

The Old Man: Sorry, but... am I being too intrusive?

The Young Man: You ask and I can either answer or not. When I stop answering, you'll know that you've been too intrusive. I won't lie to you because I don't like to.

The Old Man: (smiles) You're so decisive! I ... could never be.

Silence.

The Old Man: I've got a son. He lives on the other side of the world, haven't seen him for years. I've had wives, three of them. Not all at once!

He looks at The Young Man, who only just realises that it would be polite to smile, so he briefly moves the corners of his lips upwards.

The Old Man: But I haven't told any of them what I'm about to tell you. Or maybe I won't. Even now I'm prevaricating.

Silence.

The Old Man: Such horror came over me. And it won't go away, not even now. The fear of emptiness. The fear of death. I don't even know if the God that I heard was this God, His father. Maybe it was some other god, how am I to know?

I'm ready to die, I've had enough of everything. So I start to seek comfort in what we old people find comforting when we're trying

to cheat death. We become humble, we pretend to be small and worthless so that death won't want to bother with us. We say we're useless, that we have no future, that every morning is a miracle, that we're through...

But it doesn't help, because I know. I know that God gave me a special talent and that I haven't used it. Not once!

The departure board rustles again and Rome moves up a place. The Young Man looks at his watch.

The Old Man: Am I detaining you?

The Young Man: No. I'll get up and leave in 58 minutes.

He keeps shaking his head, obviously lost in thought for a few seconds.

The Old Man: Excuse me, but do you have a talent?

The Young Man thinks for a bit.

The Young Man: Yes, of course.

The Old Man: A special one?

The Young Man: Yes. Only 2% of the population has it. Which doesn't mean that they're all aware of it or that they all use it.

The Old Man: Do you use it?

The Young Man: Yes.

The Old Man: You lucky man! Every day?

The Young Man: Yes.

The Old Man: How lucky. When did you become aware of it?

The Young Man: I've been aware of it ever since I can remember. Well, that's probably not quite true. But it feels that way.

The Old Man: And you started using it straight away?

The Young Man: Yes.

The Old Man: You're lucky. I didn't know for a long time. I hesitated, searched, prevaricated. I heard God's voice and it was such an experience, it was so ... I'd give anything to experience it again. Because it felt like it was all over too soon. A few seconds, but - and this is going to sound corny - but those few seconds seemed shorter than all the other few seconds in my life.

The Young Man: That's quite normal. When our body is receiving positive impulses and doesn't have to be alert to danger it doesn't have to worry about time, so time seems to go faster. But when the impulses received are unpleasant, painful, time moves more slowly, so that we can find a way out of the painful situation. The same year is thus perceived as passing quickly by an optimist and as terribly long by a pessimist.

The Old Man: Forgive me for asking, but are you perhaps a scientist?

The Young Man: No. I'm a businessman.

The Old Man: Yours is a completely different generation.

The Young Man: I don't think it's got anything to do with generations. It's about talent, really.

The Old Man: Talent, yes ... Anyway, I didn't know. Then I began to wonder, if God really had spoken to me, why did he do it? Was I something special? That wasn't how it felt to me. Had he brought me anything? Had he given me a special characteristic, a talent? What haven't I tried! (He buries his head in his hands.) I even tried walking on water.

A long silence.

The Old Man: I can't tell you. I just can't. Have you been married long?

The Young Man: Three years.

The Old Man: And how did you meet your wife?

The Young Man: I searched her out. According to a study carried out by the Disease Prevention Centre, 74% of women who are looking for a serious

relationship join various workshops, courses and similar forms of social activity.

The Old Man: And that's what you did?

The Young Man: Yes.

The Old Man: And you knew straight away she was the one?

The Young Man: Yes. Most women experience a serious biological crisis at the age of thirty-five, as their bodies are ready for procreation but their reproductive period is coming to an end.

The Old Man: Are you trying to say you wanted children?

The Young Man: Yes.

The Old Man: That's nice. And now you have two?

The Young Man: Yes. One is three and the other a year and a half.

The Old Man: And they're going to Rome?

The Young Man: Yes. Because of work obligations, I'm only going to be able to join them in a couple of days.

The Old Man: She's older than you then?

The Young Man: Yes, eleven years.

The Old Man nods.

The Young Man: Perhaps you think I needed a mother figure?

The Old Man: Well ... I confess ... for a moment ...

The Young Man: No, I've had one mother and that is more than enough. What I needed was just an average family.

The Old Man: And when did you first sense this ... need or desire?

The Young Man: When the second plane hit the World Trade Center, on 11 September 2001. That's one of those days for which everyone knows where they were. I was having lunch in a small Italian restaurant, there was a television set in the corner, the waiters moved slower and slower, in the end they all just stopped and watched.

After the first plane I didn't know, perhaps it could've been just an accident, but then the second plane ... It became quite obvious to me that things would never be the same again. I wanted a wife and children.

The Old Man gets up with difficulty again and moves two rows closer to the Young Man.

The Old Man: That's ... That's really very nice. When everyone is trying to justify their self-centredness and laziness with the excuse that they don't want to bring children into this world, you want just the opposite. That's very nice, I'm really glad I met you.

The Young Man nods.

The Old Man: It seems to me that I've spent all my life focusing too much on my own talent to really be able to be with anyone. A talent is a strange thing. It keeps biting us, throwing itself at us and howling: Use me! We can pretend we don't hear, we can go to work, shuffle papers on our desk, play with our children, make love to a woman... What I'm talking about, of course, is an unused talent, your experience must be very different.

The Young Man: Yes, it is. If I weren't using my talent, it wouldn't be me.

The Old Man: So what is your talent?

The Young Man says nothing.

The Old Man: I understand, that was intrusive. Forgive me... You're right, I didn't tell you what my talent is, either.

Silence. The letters on the departure board rustle again and Rome moves up. They both watch the letters until they have stopped moving.

The Old Man sighs.

The Old Man: If I don't tell you, I'll never tell anyone. I thought, that I could write a letter to my son, I've got another night. But ... What use is a letter from somebody you've already forgotten.

How foolish that would be! Let him retain an image of me as I am now, forgotten, and not as the stupid old man that I would sound like in a letter. I so wish I could talk to him. Just the once!

I'm having an operation tomorrow, you know. It's routine in young people, but ... I come here often, for a long walk, it's so peaceful here, always empty. I sit for a while and then I head back. Today I knelt down and felt like praying for a happy outcome, but it soon became apparent to me that I was bothering God unnecessarily.

I've never really believed; perhaps only for a short while after He spoke to me, but later I stopped again. At the camp ... I completely lost faith. My attempt at prayer earlier was ... I don't know... A similar moment to one you probably haven't experienced yet, at least I hope so, when you remember that you have to talk to this particular person or meet that one, but then you suddenly realise they've both been dead for a while. That in your head you've been talking to memories.

He stops talking.

The Old Man: I won't survive the operation... that's why I started talking to you. I don't know for certain ... but I doubt anyone else in the whole world has my talent.

The Young Man: And you've never used it?

The Old Man: Not really. Occasionally, I would check if I still had it. But I felt bad while doing it. As if I was sinning; as if I were a writer who immediately burns everything he writes. Or an actor who acts to perfection in front of a mirror. How hard it is to resist, though. It's an addiction, a talent is a drug.

The Young Man: Every strong talent is a psychological disease, a malfunction of the brain. Creativity is a special form of schizophrenia.

The Old Man: I didn't know that. Is it really?

The Young Man: Yes. Every truly creative person has a schizophrenic in the family. It's all about bad

insulation between the synapses. Electrons jumping across unexpectedly. That's how ideas come into being. Schizophrenics, who are really badly insulated, can hear their own thoughts, which is what probably happened to you.

The Old Man: Are you saying I'm a schizophrenic?

The Young Man: Not necessarily. It's quite possible that there was just that one fall in the level of protective chemicals; if the condition was permanent, you wouldn't be trying to listen to God all the time.

The Old Man: Are you a doctor? A psychiatrist?

The Young Man: No, a businessman.

The Old Man: What kind of businessman?

The Young Man: An investor.

The Old Man: Investing in what?

The Young Man: Ideas.

The Old Man: A politician?

The Young Man: Ha!

Silence. The Old Man is nodding to himself.

The Old Man: Yeah, I thought so, too. At first. Not quite in those learned terms, but I did say to myself: you've gone crazy. Do you think a crazy person can know they're crazy?

The Young Man: Of course, when talking about schizophrenia, intellect is also important: a psychiatrist can explain to a clever person what is going on with his insulation and he'll start fighting the voices he hears.

The Old Man: Do you think that every time I tried ... the level of those chemicals fell ... every time?

The Young Man: Does your talent have something to do with hearing?

The Old Man: Yes.

Another shuffle on the departure board, Rome moves up once more.

The Old Man: How much longer do we have?

The Young Man: 48 minutes.

The Old Man: ... I was born in 25, well, I have to say 1925 now. A village in a valley surrounded by hills. A stranger was a rare occurrence ... We read about the start of World War Two, but I felt betrayed when the Italians marched in and occupied us. How on earth did they find us?

 ... Before ... My parents, many brothers and sisters, they're all dead. I was never close to any of them. Those were the days before childhood was invented. We were poor then and we started working as soon as we could. All our relations after that were based on hard work.

He looks at the Young Man, obviously expecting some scientific comment, but the Young Man says nothing.

The Old Man: I knew I wanted to get away. That I didn't want to keep digging that soil for ever, spilling hatred everywhere. That I wanted out, over the mountains. At school, I worked doggedly, in the literal sense of the word. I didn't read the Bible because I believed but because it was the only book we had. I hoped the priest would write me a letter of recommendation and I would be accepted at the school in the town, so that I could leave home and board at the school with a grant for children from poor families, but he didn't write it, no. Maybe he could see through me. See my lack of faith, my attempt to win him over... I had to pretend, I just had to. Do you understand?

The Young Man: Of course.

The Old Man: I went home, worked the fields, worked around the house, worked, worked, worked. Then one day, after a long time, I picked up the Bible and said to myself: I'll just open it somewhere, at random, and read a sentence. Maybe I'll know straight away what to do.

 So I opened it and then I heard His voice. The book fell out of my hands. When I came to, I picked it up and kissed it. I still wanted to see what it said, but there were so many tears in my eyes that I was blinded by them. I knew

it was God, I knew he had spoken, but I didn't know what he had said.

I felt that I had been given an assignment. But what was it?

Two year later the Italians marched in and sent me first for hard labour, then to a concentration camp.

Do you ever go to the cinema?

The Young Man: Yes, since I got married, my wife loves movies.

The Old Man: The last film I saw, was an Italian one. A comedy, they said, everybody praised it. I went to see it and there were Germans arresting poor Italians and transporting them to a concentration camp. I don't know if you can understand.

The Young Man: Yes. According to a study by McCormick and Kinsley, the demonstration of feelings between two people is by both parties perceived as an obligation; showing emotions in a film, on the other hand, is safe and uncommitted.

The Old Man: That's not what I was trying to say ...

The Young Man: I know. You were saying that your experience was drowned by a media lie.

The Old Man: Yes!

The Young Man: It is a well known fact that 99% of the news in the media is over-simplified, out of that 48% is inaccurate and as much as 16% completely false. These figures do not include hidden marketing messages. All it means is that the Italians are investing more money in the positive marketing of World War Two than the Germans.

The Old Man: But history ...

The Old Man jumps up, ignoring the physical pain.

The Young Man: (interrupting him) History is just a media subdivision.

The Old Man: But the truth ...

The Young Man: (interrupting again) The truth is a function of capital invested and the duration of the marketing campaign.

The Old Man: Where's the justice in that?

The Young Man: Justice is an emotional category.

The Old Man collapses on a chair another two rows nearer the Young Man.

The Old Man: How very right you are. There's that decisiveness again, that clarity of yours. Do you ever have any doubts?

The Young Man: I very often think, weigh up the possibilities, and then decide on the one that is more likely to succeed. I don't really see where there could be any room for doubt?

The Old Man: With me, there's never been anything but doubt, no weighing up of different decisions. I can't imagine how it is if the world is so clear. Is that a part of your talent?

The Young Man: Yes.

(he stops in mid-memory)

The Old Man: How was it possible, I thought later. How can somebody follow orders and feel nothing? How could they just turn off their humanity, then go home and become human again? Can a human be human only in relation to the chosen few?

The Young Man: Humanity is a statistical mean, the middle of the Gauss curve. Circumstances move it along the axis.

The Old Man: Doctors. When I first saw them at the camp, I thought ... They killed people by injecting them with carbolic acid. Can you imagine that?

The Young Man: On average, it is two minutes and 22 seconds before death occurs.

The Old Man: How do you know that?!?

The Young Man: I have a very good memory for figures. I read about it.

The Old Man bends his head, shaking it.

The Old Man: The house belonging to the commander of the camp and his family. Every day he went to the other side of that wall and embraced his children. I imagine the daughters, Nazis used to like adorning them by putting bows in their hair. His wife somewhere nearby. He embraced them with the same hands that killed us. And nobody noticed anything everything was normal, just as it had always been.

And those villages I could see in the distance. I still ask myself how was it possible they heard nothing, smelt nothing? How is it possible that they were there and they knew nothing?

The Young Man: They just turned off the ability to see your suffering. Not consciously. Lester Luborsky did some research showing that our brains do this on a subconscious level. The brain creates blind spots or, to use the scientific jargon, lacunae, which help us to survive in our own insulated bubbles, insulated cocoons, immune to anything that would shatter our image of the world. And if something does penetrate the bubble, people usually choose not to see it or to vehemently deny it, saying it's stupid. A trick. A lie. A conspiracy. Anything to keep their lacunae intact, still blind.

The Old Man stares at him for a long time.

The Old Man: How can you live in a world like that?

The Young Man: Like what?

The Old Man: A world you understand so completely.

The Young Man: Your torturers had an assignment to carry out. That's all people need. Some assignments are called a purpose, some a meaning, whatever. You say you've got a talent, but you don't know for what purpose, why you have it. So you don't have an assignment. If you knew how to use it, you'd get an assignment and a purpose with it. Your doubts would be gone, more or less.

The Old Man can not take his eyes off the Young Man.

The Old Man: You're right. Quite right.

The departure board rattles again and Rome moves up a row. When the squares settle down again, they both slowly turn their heads away from the board.

The Old Man: As you said earlier, Germans obviously have clearer tasks than Italians.

The Young Man: No, they just have different priorities.

The Old Man: What do you mean?

The Young Man: If you look at the statistical data about the richest industrial families in Europe, in Germany Krupp and Thyssen are in the lead, that is steelworks and steelworks. Or, to put it differently, the army and weapons. It's a similar story elsewhere - with the Russians, it's oil, with the Chinese electronics and so on. Apart from Italy. There, first place is shared by Barilla and Ferrero. Pasta and chocolate.

The Old Man laughs, but it hurts his insides and his laughter dies before it has even started.

The Old Man: How come you've chosen Rome?

The Young Man: It wasn't I who chose.

The Old Man: (smiling) Oh, these wives, when they get something into their heads...

The Young Man: I have to say it was me who put the idea there, though.

The Old Man: I don't understand.

The Young Man says nothing, then looks at his watch.

The Old Man: How much longer?

The Young Man: 35 minutes.

The Old Man: I didn't think about my talent in the concentration camp. Neither did I have any conviction that I would survive. I just waited, without hope. I was lying in the hospital... I knew that was the last station... But then ... Some of the prisoners ran to welcome our liberators and were electrocuted by the fence. Others, I heard, suffered a stroke from sheer happiness. Others again died because of food;

they tore it out of the hands of the American soldiers and their stomachs burst.

I neither slept nor hallucinated on the hospital bed. I was in a strange state, somehow fuzzy, when the door opened and a soldier walked in. A cigarette in the corner of his mouth, with smoke coming from it. The light behind him. Young, partly child-like, and at the same time rough and square, healthy, a farmer's face. As if he'd just been plucked off a field in Kansas, dressed in a uniform and transferred there. To good old Europe, the heart of death and destruction. It was like pure innocence walking into hell. His cigarette fell from his mouth. His eyes when he saw us! He was holding a gun in his left hand, his right hand instinctively lifted towards his nose - how bad the smell must have been! - but then it stopped midway. For a long time he just stood there looking. And then tears started running down his cheeks. He wasn't really crying, his tears just spilled over the edge and ran down that red skin. Then he sang a song that was popular in America at the time. Just a few verses, in a drawn out, tearful manner. Suddenly he turned around and ran out.

He secretly looks at the Young Man and sighs.

The Old Man: I don't really know if I can tell you. I'm afraid you're going to find an explanation for that, too, and it will seem natural to you, like everything else so far. That you'll come up with a simple explanation for something that I've been struggling with all my life.

The Young Man: Make your decision.

The Old Man: That's exactly my problem, decisions. I was married three times, always to domineering women who made all the decisions for me. The first one used to order me about, the second only hinted at what I had to do, and the third one again wanted to order me about, but we didn't see each other very often. What's your wife like?

The Young Man: She doesn't order me about.

The Old Man: I don't doubt it.

The letters on the board start rustling once more.

The Old Man: What if you told me about your talent?

The Young Man: I'm thinking about it.

The Old Man: And what's stopping you?

The Young Man: There are things a man in my position can't afford to do and one of them is what you'd call bragging.

The Old Man: Is it a secret?

The Young Man: Of course.

The Old Man: Yes, make your decision.

The Young Man: Ha. Touché. Maybe ... It's time. Just a moment...

He turns around and opens his briefcase. We can not see what he is doing, neither can the Old Man. But it is clear he has taken something out and dropped it into his pocket.

The Young Man: You really want to hear?

The Old Man: Yes.

The Young Man: There are two options: a long explanation first and then a short one, or the other way round. I'll choose the second one.

A short silence.

The Young Man: I'm a psychopath.

The Old Man: Sorry?

The Young Man: And now the long explanation.

The Old Man: Are you trying to say you're a murderer?

The Young Man: Of course not. You've been watching too many movies. Nothing so pompous. The explanation now, if you'll allow?

The Old Man: Please.

The Young Man: I'm a psychopath according to the definition of the word. R. L. Swank and W. E. Marchand carried out a study for the American army and established that 2% of the population (3-4% of

men and 1% of women) are aggressive psychopaths, as they called them, that is they have no built-in criteria of what is right and what is wrong, no feelings; and I'm one of these people.

The Old Man: Are you telling me you have no feelings?

The Young Man: Of course I have, but only those that encourage me to act: pain, hunger and so on. I don't experience the feelings that hold people back, such as love and fear.

The Old Man: And you consider that to be a talent?

The Young Man: A basis for a talent, yes. You see, some of these 2% really become murderers, usually hired assassins. Others become soldiers in elite units. Some are not even aware of their inability to feel. There are also those who, in vain, attend various therapies, trying to become "normal". I'm different in that I have accepted, so to say, my condition in its entirety and turned it into a virtue. Everyone has to establish very early on what they will do for a living. So, as I can't become a loving husband and father, why try?

The Old Man: But you are married? And the children ...

The Young Man: Yes, of course. But I can't benefit from having a family on an emotional level. It's as if I were deaf and blind and then went to the cinema. I needed a family because I can make a very good living from my talent.

The Old Man: I don't understand.

The Young Man: It's simple. When the second plane crashed into the tower it became clear to me that hijackers would be working in much more difficult conditions after that. And so I had an idea: I needed a wife and at least one child. We would live together for a few years, in the meantime I would find the best offer on the market. When I found the person who wished to blow up a particular plane, he would pay me an advance, I would accompany my wife and child to the plane, saying I'd join them in a day or two. A female suicide bomber is possible. But a middle-aged, wealthy, happily married Caucasian woman with a child, whose husband accompanies them right to

passport control and waves them off? Could she really be suspicious? Would they really examine the child's toys that closely?

The Old Man's head swiftly turns towards the rucksack, shaped like a bear.

The Old Man: Oh God!

He can barely breathe.

The Old Man: You're pulling my leg? Please, tell me you're pulling my leg!

The Young Man shakes his head. They both look at the rucksack.

The Old Man: My God! Oh, my God!

The departure board rattles again. They both raise their eyes. Rome moves up another row and is now in fourth place.

The Old Man: But ... you have two children!

The Young Man: Yes, the negotiations took longer than I'd originally envisaged. It was difficult to find the right connections.

The Old Man: Why Rome?

The Young Man: The wish of the person who commissioned me.

The Old Man: Oh, my God! Another 25 minutes! What ... What ...

The Old Man looks as if he might have a stroke at any moment. Suddenly he really reaches for his breast pocket, but the Young Man jumps up, grabs his arm and moves it away without taking any notice of the other's groans, and reaches in the Old Man's pocket, pulling out a mobile phone.

The Young Man: An alarm button for old people? No?

He quickly searches the Old Man.

He sits down in the row next to the Old Man, looks at the old-fashioned mobile phone and takes out the battery, then puts it back in again.

He drops the phone in his pocket and puts his hand on the shelf in front of the Old Man.

The Old Man stares at his gloved fingers.

The Old Man: And she suspects nothing?

The Young Man: No.

The Old Man: You sought her with this aim in mind?

The Young Man: Yes. Just before the expiry of her fertile period. She is not very noticeable, not very interesting, has no special characteristics. I pretended to be a film enthusiast and we started going to the cinema together.

The Old Man: And you've been looking for somebody to commission you?

The Young Man: Yes, of course. Discreetly.

The Old Man: Does she know anything about you?

The Young Man: No. I have to disappear today. When I've said goodbye to my family, I'll go back to our flat and sort everything out. It's all false, anyway.

The Old Man: Your name, surname, the story of your life?

The Young Man: Yes. That's well put: the story. I bought a few creative writing manuals and created the story of my life. The authors of the manuals suggested an unhappy childhood, so I put that in, women prefer men who have had to suffer before entering their protective embrace.

The Old Man: So she and the children are living with a man who doesn't exist, about whom they know nothing?

The Young Man: Yes.

The Old Man: Does she love you?

The Young Man: Very much, in my layman's opinion.

The Old Man: And you ...

The Young Man: Sorry, but that's outside my abilities.

The Old Man: Your children adore you?

The Young Man: Of course. I studied a few books on parenthood, too.

The Old Man: And you ... you'll kill them.

You're going to kill me.

The Young Man: Of course. According to a study carried out by Kinley, 87% of criminals are discovered because they start to boast about their successfully committed crime. When I started feeling tempted to tell you, I immediately asked myself whether I too have fallen into that trap. The answer was yes, but I estimated that it was safe to tell you. You can give in to temptation only when there are no witnesses.

The Old Man's eyes inadvertently look towards the door. Even before he looks back again, The Young Man reaches into his pocket with his right hand and pulls out a syringe in a protective cover. He waits for the Old Man to notice it.

The Young Man: Even if someone comes in, I have enough time to inject you and then grab you, pretending that I'm picking you up from the floor. I found you when I came in to pray for my family to have a safe journey.

The Old Man: And you've been like this since childhood?

The Young Man: I was born that way.

The Old Man: Did you have a happy childhood?

The Young Man: Of course. If you're born without any feelings, every childhood is happy...

The numbers rattle, Rome is now in third place. They both look at the board again.

The Old Man: You won't succeed. They check children, too.

The Young Man: It's possible, but the probability of success is high. Neither my wife nor the children will give anything away with their body language, as they don't know anything. I'll catch them at the last moment and hand them the rucksack they forgot at home. I'd rather wait here than risk being delayed by traffic.

At the bottom of the rucksack there's a toy that rattles. There's no fuse, no metal parts. I've taught my son to make a lot of noise with it, he loves it. He'll spin the wheel and the friction will be enough to set the explosive off.

The Old Man: (hopefully) And if he doesn't?

The Young Man: That's possible, but unlikely.

The Old Man: Then she'll come back and you won't be there?

The Young Man: Not a trace of me will remain.

The Old Man: She'll do some research and find that she's been living with a man who never existed?

The Young Man: Why do you keep going round and round this particular topic? Isn't it better to disappear than to get divorced?

The Old Man: Because I keep imagining how she'll feel, that's why! (into his hands, with despair) Oh God!

He looks up towards Jesus.

The Young Man: Isn't it your turn now?

The Old Man: What do you mean?

The Young Man: Your talent?

The Old Man: Oh, it's nothing, nothing.

He shakes his head.

The Young Man: OK. We can be quiet until the departure time.

Silence. It seems that The Old Man is thinking hard. He moans now and again.

The Old Man: You know, my mother ...

The Young Man: You won't be my Scheherazade. I'll get up in 15 minutes, give you the injection and go. Whether you tell me what your talent is or not.

The Old Man deflates like a balloon. Silence again.

The Old Man: It's so unimportant. I've been dealing with it all my life and now it's so unimportant. I've never confessed, always afraid that my secret would be revealed and now ... How unimportant it is in comparison with all the people getting on that plane, taking off to death. So many people ... You're the Devil incarnate!

The Old Man waves his hand.

The Old Man: Earlier I told you about the American soldier who on encountering horror sang a banal song. When I woke up, I was lying in hospital and one night, I don't know what came over me, I sang it, too. And that's how I found out how God had made me special.

Silence.

The Old Man: When I sing, you can hear violins in the air.

A second of silence, then The Young Man bursts into a short laugh, more like an outburst of air, a HA!

The Young Man: But that's exactly what I said earlier. Because of bad insulation you can also hear your stored memory of instrumental accompaniment.

The Old Man: That's what I thought, too, that it was in my head only. But, I tested it in different ways. Different songs. I sang in the bathroom and my wife asked me why I'd turned the radio up so high. These violins, you see, are everywhere, as if the air was full of musicians, as if the ghosts of a string orchestra were floating around me.

And others can hear them, not just my voice.

From his brief grimace, it is clear that The Young Man does not believe him.

The Old Man: As I've already said, I was ashamed to use such a talent in vain, but on the other hand, the question for what purpose kept gnawing at me. For what purpose? In a world such as it was then and still is, when we could really do with God's intervention, I was given a useless gift. Something that I could earn my living with in some entertainment park, and even there everyone would say it was a trick. Scientists would cut and inject me (his eyes involuntarily move to The Young Man's pocket with the needle), and in the end they would probably ignore me, as you said yourself, because I wouldn't fit into their image of the world.

A few years ago I noticed that more and more young people walked around with earphones on their heads, in order to listen to music in the

air, coming from nowhere. As if God was mocking the talent he had given me.

He turns around and looks at Jesus, so we can not see his face.

The order of departures flashes once more, Rome moves into second place.

The Old Man turns around slowly, it seems he has an idea.

The Old Man: I'll tell you about a couple of other attempts that ...

The Young Man interrupts him.

The Old Man looks towards the rucksack.

The Young Man: Would I be wrong to assume you're thinking about stopping me?

The Old Man: Maybe I had been looking in a wrong place all my life. Maybe my gift was just a joke, a delusion, something I kept focusing on, when in fact my real assignment was to stop you, prevent you from massacring the innocent. I looked at it from God's perspective, as much as I was able to: Maybe one of the descendants of the passengers flying to Rome today will do something or give birth to someone who will carry out another small task in God's Creation; all the rest of us in between, before and after, are just the carriers of genes for the performers of these small tasks. Maybe we don't feel and see God's intervention because it is spread across the generations and the centuries. Perhaps there is some purpose in the whole thing? Perhaps God does give us his attention but we pass too quickly for him to really notice us?

The Young Man: You've found faith.

The Old Man: Yes.

The Young Man: According to a study by Neill, this happens to 96% of people who are close to death.

The Old Man has a cunning look on his face, he obviously has a plan.

The Old Man: And you? Do you believe?

The Young Man: Of course, like everyone else. On the right side of our brain there is a centre for belief and we simply have to use it. I very early on became aware of the danger of using it for abstractions that in no way contributed to my functioning, so I keep it busy with the results of scientific research. When I say 96%, I believe it, so my centre for belief is busy and satisfied and doesn't need any other concepts.

The Old Man: So as far as you're concerned there's no punishment in the next world?

The Young Man: No.

The Old Man: But all those people, how many will you kill? A hundred, two, three hundred?

The Young Man: It's their own fault for flying to Rome on this particular flight. What's it to do with me?

The Old Man: You're such an egoistical monster!

The Young Man: Not at all. Don't be fooled by having been born (he points with his head towards Jesus) in this culture. In other cultures, ego comes first, for example in Zen or French Existentialism.

The Ancient Greeks might even have placed me on a Stoical pedestal.

The Old Man: My God!

The Young Man: There's nothing on that plane that's truly mine.

The Old Man: Oh, my God, my God!

The Young Man: The words "my" and "God" don't really go together. Yours is really just your centre for belief. How you employ it (he looks at his watch) during the next eight minutes, is your problem and yours alone.

The Old Man: Let those people live! Kill me instead.

The Young Man: I'll kill you anyway.

The Old Man: I'll ... I'll ... pay you ...

The Young Man: Oh, come on. You could never offer even a fraction of the fifty per cent already waiting for me in a Swiss bank. Besides, I've got a few

other projects on the go at the moment, so that I really don't need any money. And anyway, I don't do it for the money.

The Old Man: What do you mean?

The Young Man: I'm just using my talent, just like everyone would like to. Writers write, actors act and I do what I was born to do.

The Old Man: You're a criminal! A criminal!

The Young Man: Remember where we are.

Have you ever heard of eudemonism?

The Old Man: No.

The Young Man: Simpletons translate it as a belief in happiness. But it means more than that, at least it did to the ancient Greeks. It's a state in which you best fulfil your natural characteristics, that is you best fulfil your life. The assignment we talked about. In short, happiness is only the unavoidable consequence of this state.

Besides: is there anything worse than the moment when we remain alone with ourselves, the moment we call boredom? Why do you think you can persuade me to stop using my talent which - in addition to making me happy - amuses me immensely?

The Old Man lowers his head. He nearly whispers:

The Old Man: Pity?

The Young Man: We've been there.

The Old Man: Mercy? Compassion?

Silence.

Rome moves to first place on the board.

The Old Man nearly cries.

The Old Man: I'm trying to hold onto you, to find at least one human characteristic ... But there's nothing. Nothing. You'll regret it one day. You're bound to. Guilt and memories will consume you.

The Young Man: I'll forget you the moment I no longer see you.

He looks at his watch.

The Young Man: Four minutes left.

He takes the syringe out of his pocket and puts it on the shelf. He holds it between his index and middle fingers, ready to use. The Old Man lifts his head and stares at the needle.

The Old Man: One day somebody will stop you.

The Young Man: Possibly. The fact that I don't get scared is one of the elements of my talent I have to be careful of. I've studied quite a few cases of people who do everything to be stopped. They're suicides in action. As you felt yourself, Hitler was one of them. I don't even know whether he really knew no fear or whether he was just a balloon that wanted to be inflated until it came across a sharp enough nail.

Stalin, on the other hand, died a natural death, he wasn't stopped. And he was afraid of everybody and everything; fear helped him survive. When making a decision I force myself to choose the safest option, although I sometimes really have to hold myself back.

The Old Man: How can you be so cold?

The Young Man: When all goes according to plan, anybody can be cool.

The Old Man: Am I really not going to be able to break through your shield?

The Young Man: You don't understand anything. There is no shield.

A long and unpleasant silence.

We hear a call for passengers to Rome.

The Young Man: It's time.

The Young Man swiftly sticks the needle into the Old Man's shoulder and injects the poison. The Old Man cries out, tries to defend himself, but it is all done so quickly that all he can do is put his hand on his shoulder.

The Old Man: Please, let them go!

The Young Man gets up, puts the syringe in his pocket and picks up the briefcase and the rucksack with his left hand.

The Young Man: It was a pleasure meeting you.

He turns around and starts walking towards the door.

We can hear a female voice on a remote loudspeaker announcing the last call for passengers flying to Rome.

The Old Man stands there, watching the other man leave.

The Old Man: I know your weak point. When I started the conversation ... You couldn't resist ... you had to ask me ... You're curious!

His swaying is getting worse, he will not last much longer.

The Old Man: Are you sure you don't want to hear it? My talent? What nobody else has heard, ever before? And never will?

The Young Man stops right in front of the door and turns around quickly. He hesitates, looks at his watch and makes a decision.

The Young Man: I've always got some time to spare. It's two minutes this time. Go on then.

The Old Man nearly falls, the Young Man's hand is still on the door handle.

Slowly, with the last strength he can summon, the Old Man starts to sing. His voice is distorted by the extreme effort, he is singing the song he had heard from the American soldier.

The Old Man: Every time we say goodbye I die a little

Old, croaky voice, singing off key, agonisingly weak. The Young Man smiles and turns towards the door again.

At that moment the sound of violins appears. It is coming from everywhere, very loud, a clear sound, with the help of which the Old Man's voice becomes younger again and soars up.

The Old Man: Every time we say goodbye I wonder why a little

The Young Man lets go of the door handle and spins round. He opens his mouth wide in surprise. Meanwhile, he drops the briefcase and the rucksack onto a shelf and runs towards the Old Man. He grabs him by the collar and starts shaking him.

The Old Man is still singing, whilst his body has given up and is hanging limply over the Young Man's arms.

The Young Man is completely enraptured.

The Young Man: Splendid! Splendid!

The violins are echoing around us, the voice is still singing, the Old Man is opening his mouth.

The Old Man: Why the gods above me, who must be in the
know

The Young Man steps back, still holding the Old Man with his left arm and pats him on the shoulder with his right hand.

The Young Man: Bravo! Bravo! Keep going!

He is not mocking the Old Man, he really does not realise that a miracle has just happened, something completely incompatible with the world as he perceives it, and he is genuinely impressed with The Old Man's ability.

He turns around, grabs the briefcase and the rucksack and leaves.

The Old Man falls on his knees.

Using his last bit of strength, the Old Man turns his head towards Jesus and looks at him with astonishment.

The stage slowly dissolves into darkness.

Only the departure board, on which the squares rattle once more before they stop on the relevant letters and numbers.

The flight to Rome is no longer listed.

THE END