

AN ARM AND A LEG
Stephen Gnojewski

Character

MAGDALENA, an illegal immigrant, day laborer

Setting

A garment factory in the fashion district of New York City

Time

Now

“it (Greed) is a sin directly against one's neighbor,
since one man cannot over-abound in external riches,
without another man lacking them.”

Thomas Aquinas

SETTING: A garment factory in the fashion district of New York City

AT RISE: Darkness. The metallic sound of clinking coins and factory rhythms crescendo to the bright ring of a cash register. Lights reveal MAGDALENA seated center cutting strips of cloth. Bolts of blood red fabric are unfurled at her feet like a fallen banner.

MAGDALENA

\$5.75 an hour. \$5.75 to cut threads off shirts. But with rents rising and businesses shutting their doors, what else is there to do...what else is there to do if you have nothing to eat?

Now, the Poles, the Poles get paid more. The Poles get paid more because they are white. Still, we mustn't get angry, Alma. We mustn't feel sorry for ourselves. It is only business. Everyone here has an equal chance to find work. Everyone here lines up for the same reason. Because in this country...we're all immigrants.

Never let your guard down. Be alert. Be suspicious. And work with your eyes open. Always open. Then you will be okay. The other day—ah, Dios mío—such an accident. Poor girl got her hand too close to the needles. So much screaming. So much blood. Better to lose some pay than to lose a finger. And at \$5.75 an hour, who can afford an accident?

(Lights fade out. The metallic sound of clinking coins and factory rhythms crescendo to the bright ring of a cash register. Lights reveal MAGDALENA. She is missing an arm.)

Have you found a place to stay? (Pause.) Bueno. Ay que Bueno. Me alegro por ti. Such a dangerous journey to make...for money.

I followed my brother para el norte. Four of us. From the village. For a better life. We hired a 'coyote' to guide us across the border. Past plastic jugs, discarded clothes, toilet paper rolls, we stumbled through the desert. Brains baked by the sun. Eyes cloudy with dust. Too dry to even blink up a tear. When we ran out of water, we drank our own urine. My brother—que Dios lo tenga en paz—my brother chewed his face open on a cactus...hoping it held a drink. Four of us. From the village. Only three crossed under the barbed wire fence.

I imagined America would be a white room—white walls, white doors, white curtains. White with possibilities. Bleach white. Like heaven.

A few of us, every week, we pool our money together. Nothing much—a dollar or two—nothing more. At the end of the month, we each take turns sharing the pot. You let me know if you want in. This month, it is my turn. This month, I am going to buy a bus ticket to see my daughter. Haven't seen mi hija in a long, long time.

(Lights fade out. The metallic sound of clinking coins and factory rhythms crescendo to the bright ring of a cash register. Lights reveal MAGDALENA. She is missing both her legs.)

A dancer. My daughter es una balarina. Down in Miami. Carmen got her talent from me. Always wanted to be a great Flamenco dancer. Never had the resolve. But Carmen...Carmen's got spirit. Carmen's got cojones. After all, she is American. When she was just fourteen, she moved out on her own. I try to see her when I can, but she is very busy. Always traveling. Siempre viajando en lujo.

I miss her. I miss holding her in my arms...looking into her big, brown eyes, combing her long, black hair, and telling her stories about our family and the fiestas back home. Of Mama...in the kitchen baking pan de huevo. And Papa...strumming his guitar, drinking and singing until he cried. Before I left, I remember he whispered to me, "whenever you want to see me, all you have to do is close your eyes.

(MAGDALENA closes her eyes and sings.)

MÉXICO LINDO Y QUERIDO
SI MUERO LEJOS DE TI
QUE DIGAN QUE ESTOY DORMIDO
Y QUE ME TRAIGAN AQUÍ

La familia es importante. When I see Carmen again, I am going to give her the biggest hug.

(Lights fade out. The metallic sound of clinking coins and factory rhythms crescendo to the bright ring of a cash register. Lights reveal MAGDALENA. She is missing her other arm.)

Men are always wanting more, more than you bargained for. Bastardos córneos. A few weeks ago, a guy got one of the girls to go with him in a white van. Should have known better, if you ask me. "Extra pay," he said, "private job." Ha! Wouldn't let her out. When he tried to grab her, she honked the horn and ran away. Haven't seen her since.

When Julio left me, he took everything—everything that mattered most. What a fool I was—estúpida. For days, I just laid in bed unable to move. Part of me kept hoping, wishing he would return. That part is gone—desmembrado. I pretended he got deported, and went on. I went on.

When we were together, we fought all the time—mostly over money. There was never enough. He drank a bit, but he didn't beat me. Well, maybe once, but then he stopped. It wasn't his fault. That's how he was raised. Julio was more bruised than I'll ever be. He was a landscaper, but he fancied himself a 'cowboy'—reckless, rugged, free. Most nights he would go out drinking con sus amigos. Would come back, booze on his breath. Horny as hell. Then one night...he just didn't show up. And one night turned into nights. Weeks turned into months. No explanation. No goodbye. Nada.

Never told him about Carmen.

(MAGDALENA smiles.)

Tomorrow. Mañana. I am going to buy my bus ticket.

(Lights fade out. The metallic sound of clinking coins and factory rhythms crescendo to the bright ring of a cash register. Lights reveal MAGDALENA. Her entire torso is gone, only her face is visible.)

I warned you about the white van. Didn't I. He had a knife? Did he cut you? Are you bleeding? Ay Pobrecita. You must have been terrified. "Your money or your life." And no one saw this happen? No one got involved? Malditos. In America, everyone looks out only for themselves. Listen to me, Alma. You did the right thing. It was only money. And, no, don't call the cops. They are only trouble. Vi se te cura llamar a esos gringos puercos. They will only send you back.

Shhh. Shhh. No llore, mi amor. Do not cry. Your tears, they are worthless. Sávelos. Save them.

Money (Pause.) Money is a wicked magic. For better or for worse, it changes us. From men into monsters. Children into liars. Beggars into bosses. Mexicans into Americans.

You take this month's money. No. I insist. You take this month's money and repay me when you can. Take it. Take it.

Every morning, I line up with the others along Eighth Avenue and wait for work. I watch as they rush past: the executive on her cell phone, the student with his Che t-shirt and books about revolution, el turista overwhelmed by the surface of the city. I see how they do not see. Looking down. Looking through. Looking away. As if we were what? A penny. Just a penny on a sidewalk.

No. Our eyes must be open, Alma. Always open. Watching out for one another. You take this month's money. Por favor. There will always be another bus.

(Lights fade out. The metallic sound of clinking coins and factory rhythms crescendo to the bright ring of a cash register. Lights reveal the blood red fabric draped over an empty chair. After a moment of nothing, lights fade out.)

END OF PLAY