

Booth Three

Tragicomedy · 4-character play · 2 women, 1 man, 1 either · 55 min · Advanced

In Lisbon, over the three days of an international bridge engineering congress, Elena and Jonas, both interpreters, find themselves in the same booth. They lived together twenty years ago and haven't spoken since. With them are Sam, on placement, who needs ten minutes at the mic to qualify, and Alma, on the sound desk, who hears everything. They can only talk to each other with the mic off, and the speeches they interpret start answering for them.

Interpreting booth no. 3 in a Lisbon conference centre, over three days in October, the present day.

Casting

ELENA (Female role, Adult) 51, conference interpreter, has lived in Montreal for twenty years.

JONAS (Male role, Adult) 53, conference interpreter, lived with Elena for six years.

SAM (No gender marker, Young adult) 24, in the final year of interpreting school, on placement with Elena.

ALMA (Female role, Adult) 46, sound technician, has run the sound desk at congresses from city to city for fifteen years.

ACT ONE: DAY ONE

SCENE 1

(Booth 3: a window looking out over a large hall, a console, two microphones, two headsets, a third chair at the back with a third headset. Alma, a headset round her neck, is testing the mics.)

ALMA. One, two. One, two. Booth 3, left mic.

(She presses a button.)

ALMA. Booth 3, right mic. One, two. The bridges of Lisbon. One, two, three.

(Elena comes in with a bag, a thermos and a stack of files.)

ELENA. Good morning. They told me booth 3.

ALMA. They told you right. Sit wherever you like, but I'm warning you, the right mic crackles if you tap your foot.

ELENA. I don't tap my foot.

ALMA. Everyone says that. By the third day, everyone taps their foot.

(Elena puts her thermos on the console. Alma picks it up and puts it on the floor.)

ALMA. Nothing liquid on the console. There was a coffee, in Porto, five years ago. People still talk about it.

ELENA. Are you the sound desk?

ALMA. I am the sound desk. Alma. If you've got a problem, you press here, you talk, I hear you. If you haven't got a problem, you don't press.

ELENA. And this one?

ALMA. The cough button. As long as you hold it down, your mic is off. You cough, you blow your nose, you say rude things about the speaker. You let go, and the room can hear you again. And these mics only pick up what's very close. You talk quietly, the room hears nothing. You shout, it hears everything. Have you worked in a booth before?

ELENA. Twenty-six years.

ALMA. Then you know all that. I say it anyway. It's the house rules of my head.

(Sam runs in, a badge in one hand, a notebook under one arm.)

SAM. Hello. Sorry. Is this booth 3? Sam. I'm here for the placement. I'm supposed to find Elena.

ELENA. That's me.

SAM. Oh. Hello. I read your article on note-taking. Twice. I've got questions. Not now. Later. I highlighted all of it.

ELENA. Sit at the back. You listen, you take notes, you don't talk while we're interpreting.

SAM. Never?

ELENA. Unless the booth catches fire.

ALMA. It won't catch fire. It was redone last year.

SAM. And the mic? The school wants ten minutes live to sign off the placement. Ten minutes, in front of real delegates.

ELENA. We'll see. On the third day, maybe, on an easy speech.

SAM. Are there easy speeches, about bridges?

ALMA. The thank-yous. Nobody listens to the thank-yous.

(Sam sits down and opens the notebook. Elena looks at the booth door, where a card is slotted into a frame.)

ELENA. There's a mistake on the door.

ALMA. Which one?

ELENA. The second name.

ALMA. Jonas. That's your boothmate. He's been on the list since the summer.

ELENA. The list I got in July said "to be confirmed".

ALMA. He confirmed in August.

ELENA. Is there another booth for the same language?

ALMA. There are six booths and six languages. One booth per language, two interpreters per booth. It's arithmetic.

ELENA. I could swap with someone from another team.

ALMA. The other five booths work into five other languages. Fancy taking one on?

ELENA. I get it.

ALMA. I do the sound. I don't do the booths. The booths are coordination, second basement, and coordination had two hours' sleep last night. Do you want me to call them?

(A pause.)

ELENA. No.

SAM. Do you know him?

ELENA. We've worked together.

SAM. For long?

ELENA. Sam. The notebook.

SAM. Yes.

(Sam writes.)

ALMA. Would you like some water? Water is allowed on the console. In a sealed bottle.

ELENA. He's late.

ALMA. He's never late. He arrives two minutes before. I've watched him arrive two minutes before for twelve years. He says it keeps his head cool.

ELENA. He used to say that already.

(Alma looks at her, then puts her headset back on.)

ALMA. Right. I'm going back to my fishbowl, at the back of the hall. Opening in eight minutes. Booth 3, you're my favourite booth. Don't give me any feedback.

(Alma goes out.)

SAM. Does she say that to every booth?

ELENA. Probably.

SAM. Can I ask just one question? A question of method.

ELENA. One.

SAM. When the speaker says something you don't want to say. Something wrong, or nasty. Do you say it anyway?

ELENA. You say it. We're not here to have an opinion.

SAM. Never?

ELENA. You have an opinion in the evening. At the mic, you're the speaker. You take their voice, you take their mistakes, you take their jokes that make nobody laugh.

SAM. And what we think ourselves, where does that go?

ELENA. Into the cough button.

(Sam laughs, stops, writes.)

SCENE 2

(Beyond the window, the house lights dim. A hubbub of delegates settling in. Jonas comes in with a satchel and three pencils in his hand.)

JONAS. Morning.

ELENA. Morning.

(He stops for a second, then puts down his satchel.)

JONAS. Left or right?

ELENA. I'm already on the right.

JONAS. Then I'll take the left.

(He sits. Sam stands up.)

SAM. Hello. Sam. I'm on placement with Elena.

JONAS. Jonas. Welcome. You've landed in the right booth. She doesn't let anything slip.

ELENA. Who's starting?

JONAS. As you like.

ELENA. I'll take the opening. You take the Japanese, on relay. We swap on the half hour.

JONAS. Fine.

(They put on their headsets. Jonas shifts the right earpiece, puts it back, shifts it again.)

JONAS. You kept the thermos.

ELENA. It's a different one.

JONAS. It looks the same.

ELENA. They all look the same.

ALMA. Booth 3, can you hear me? Raise your hand.

(They both raise a hand, without looking at each other.)

ALMA. Lovely. Opening in thirty seconds. The congress president is Portuguese, she talks fast, she has a script and she doesn't stick to it.

(Elena switches on her mic. A small red light.)

ELENA. Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues, welcome to Lisbon. Welcome to the thirty-first International Congress of Bridges and Structures.

(Jonas writes a number on the pad and pushes it towards her.)

ELENA. There are twelve hundred of us, from forty-three countries. I see people in this room who have been building bridges for forty years, and people who destroy them. Sorry. Who demolish them. When it has to be done.

SAM. Is that her mistake or the speaker's?

JONAS. The speaker's. Elena doesn't make mistakes. She corrects herself as fast as the speaker does.

ELENA. Lisbon is a city of bridges. You arrive over one bridge, you leave over another. The longest is more than ten kilometres. They say here that you cross it thinking of what you've left behind, and that you can never think of anything else until you reach the far end.

(Jonas looks at her. Elena looks at the hall.)

ELENA. For three days, we will talk about fatigue, about cracks, about collapses. We will also talk, I hope, about what gets rebuilt. A bridge, dear colleagues, is a promise made to two banks. You can keep it for a hundred years. You can also let it drop.

SAM. Is she adding things?

JONAS. No. Listen to the floor, channel one. You'll see, the president loves an image.

(Sam puts on a headset, listens, nods, writes.)

ELENA. I would now like to thank our partners. The list is long, I won't read it out, it's in your pack, page four.

(A pause. Elena presses the cough button.)

ELENA. She's reading it.

JONAS. She always reads it.

ELENA. The Northern Engineers' Association, the Steel Foundation, the National Materials Laboratory, the City of Lisbon, the Port of Lisbon, the Cement Makers' Union...

(Jonas writes on the pad and pushes it towards her. Elena reads it, stops for half a second, presses the cough button.)

ELENA. What's that?

JONAS. The next name. You'd misheard it.

ELENA. I heard it perfectly well.

ELENA. ...and the Cable and Stay Company, whom I thank most especially. Enjoy the congress, everyone.

(Applause in the hall. Elena switches off her mic. A pause.)

JONAS. How's Montreal?

ELENA. Fine.

JONAS. Is it cold?

ELENA. In winter.

JONAS. Of course. In winter.

SAM. You live in Montreal?

ELENA. For twenty years.

SAM. And you, Jonas?

JONAS. Me, I live in booths. This one, the one in Geneva, the one in Vienna. The rest of the time I have a flat with nothing in the fridge.

SAM. So you've worked together before? Elena told me you'd worked together.

JONAS. She told you that?

SAM. That's all she said.

JONAS. Six years. We were the booth people booked in one go. Both names or nothing.

ELENA. A long time ago.

JONAS. A long time ago.

ALMA. Booth 3, the Japanese engineer is going up to the podium. No Japanese booth into yours, so you take relay from booth 5. Fair warning, booth 5 breathes heavily.

JONAS. Thanks, Alma.

ALMA. And Jonas: I've turned your volume up. Like you asked.

(Jonas switches on his mic. Elena looks at him.)

SCENE 3

JONAS. Thank you, Madam President. I am going to talk to you about something nobody sees. The fatigue crack.

(Elena pours herself some tea, on the floor beside the console.)

JONAS. A fatigue crack is born from a tiny flaw. A bubble in the steel. A weld done on a Friday night. Every lorry that goes over makes it grow by a millionth of a millimetre. For twenty years, you see nothing. You inspect, you tap it with a hammer, the bridge answers well. The bridge always answers well.

ELENA. A weld done on a Friday night. He added that.

SAM. No, it's in the original. Well, in the relay. Booth 5 said "on a Friday night".

ELENA. Booth 5 embroiders.

JONAS. And then one morning the crack reaches what we call the critical length. From then on, it no longer takes years. It takes a second.

(Jonas presses the cough button.)

JONAS. Could you please stop drinking tea? I can't hear booth 5 any more.

ELENA. I'm drinking tea a metre away from you.

JONAS. That's still too close.

JONAS. So the question is not: who made the crack. Everyone makes cracks. The question is: who saw it, and who said nothing. On the bridge whose photos I'm about to show you, only one person had seen the flaw. She reported it. Once. And she left before anyone answered her.

SAM. He didn't say that.

ELENA. Who?

SAM. The engineer. He said the report had been filed away. He didn't say the person had left.

ELENA. Write it down.

SAM. Write what down?

ELENA. That booth 3 embroiders too.

(Sam writes. Jonas nods towards the clock. Elena switches on her mic, he switches off his. They swap without a word, on the same second.)

SAM. How do you do that?

JONAS. Twenty-six years.

ELENA. Here is the first photo. You can see the main girder. You can't see anything. That's normal. There's nothing to see. The crack had been there since construction, and all that time the structure was left unwatched. Without a word. Without a letter.

SAM. He said "without inspection".

ELENA. Sorry. Without inspection. Without any inspection at all. For twenty years, nobody came to look. Nobody even phoned.

JONAS. Elena.

ELENA. What?

JONAS. There's no telephone in that bridge.

ELENA. It's an image.

JONAS. He didn't use an image. He's a Japanese engineer, he's got forty photos and not one image.

ELENA. Second photo. Here, the same girder, on the morning of the collapse. It split open all at once. Afterwards people said it was unforeseeable. It

wasn't unforeseeable. It was just very slow.

ALMA. Booth 3. Quick question from the floor. The Belgian delegate in row twelve would like to know whether the Japanese speaker is talking about a bridge or about his wife.

(Elena presses the cough button.)

ELENA. About a bridge.

ALMA. I'll pass it on. He looks relieved. He's the only one.

JONAS. Write that down too. Day one, first complaint. Eleven twelve.

SAM. I write down the time?

JONAS. You always write down the time. One day it comes in handy.

ELENA. Third photo.

(The lights go down on the booth.)

SCENE 4

(Evening. The hall beyond the window is empty. The headsets lie on the console. Jonas is alone, sitting in Elena's seat. He is holding the day's notepad. Alma comes in with a crate.)

ALMA. I'm collecting the headsets. You can stay, but I'm collecting the headsets.

JONAS. I'm leaving in a minute.

ALMA. You say that every evening, in every city.

(She puts the headsets into the crate one by one.)

ALMA. Three times.

JONAS. Three times what?

ALMA. Three times today you've asked me to turn the volume up. This morning, at lunchtime, and during the Greek. I'm already at maximum, Jonas. After maximum comes feedback, and after feedback comes me crying in the sound booth.

JONAS. Booth 5 talks quietly.

ALMA. Booth 5 talks like a booth. You're the one listening on one side.

(A pause. Jonas puts down the pad.)

JONAS. You promised.

ALMA. In Geneva, yes. I promised in Geneva. I said nothing in Geneva, I said nothing in Vienna, I'll say nothing here. But I can't invent decibels.

JONAS. I know.

ALMA. She's on your right.

JONAS. She's always been on the right.

ALMA. Change seats. Put her on the left. Tell her you've got a bad back, it's the sun, anything.

JONAS. She was already there when I arrived. I'm not going to ask her to move on the first day.

ALMA. And on the third day?

JONAS. On the third day, we'll see.

(Alma picks up the last headset, Jonas's. She hesitates, then holds it out to him.)

ALMA. I'll leave you yours. I've adjusted it. The left earpiece is louder. Don't tell the other booths, they'll all want one.

JONAS. Thank you.

ALMA. Don't thank me. You're my favourite booth.

JONAS. You say that to every booth.

ALMA. Yes. But you're the one I say it to last.

(Alma goes out with her crate. Jonas stays. He picks up Elena's pencil, left on the console, and places it in front of her seat, perfectly straight. Blackout.)

ACT TWO: DAY TWO

SCENE 1

(Morning. Elena is in her seat, on the right. She is going over a glossary. Sam comes in, a notebook in one hand, nothing in the other.)

SAM. I had two coffees. The security guard said: no liquids in the booths.

So I drank them downstairs. Both of them. I'm going to talk very fast today.

ELENA. Sit down.

SAM. I went over my notes from yesterday, on the tram. Eleven twelve, the Belgian delegate's complaint. Three o'clock, Jonas says "stay" three times in a row and the Greek speaker says "cable" three times in a row. Four forty, you tell the room "enjoy your meal" instead of "enjoy the break".

ELENA. It was four forty. That's understandable.

SAM. And I noticed something else. You never look at each other. Not even to swap mics. You swap on the same second, without looking.

ELENA. That's the job. You don't look at your colleague, you look at the speaker.

SAM. At school they teach us the opposite. The glance, the nod, the hand on the shoulder when the other one is tiring.

ELENA. At school they teach you a lot of things.

SAM. Were you together?

(A pause.)

SAM. Sorry. That's not a question of method.

ELENA. No, it isn't.

(Elena closes her glossary.)

ELENA. Six years. We worked together, we lived together. We left on Monday, we came back on Friday, we slept in hotels that all had the same carpet.

SAM. And?

ELENA. And one day, in Vienna, on the last day of a conference on agricultural budgets, I asked him a question. Mic off. He was on the mic. He went on interpreting.

SAM. What question?

ELENA. A simple question. The kind you answer with yes or no.

SAM. And what did he answer?

ELENA. He answered cereals, dairy quotas and sugar beet. Right to the end of the session. That evening he didn't say anything either. A week later, I'd gone.

SAM. To Montreal.

ELENA. I'd been offered a post there. I was asking him if he'd come.

SAM. Maybe he didn't hear.

ELENA. Jonas hears everything. He hears a speaker stammer in the next booth. He hears a grammar slip ten metres away. He used to hear the rain before it fell.

SAM. You never asked him again?

ELENA. You don't ask a question like that twice.

SAM. I'd ask it twice. I'd ask it ten times.

ELENA. You're twenty-four.

SAM. Can I tell you something? I don't know if I want to do this job.

ELENA. You've got two more days of placement to find out.

SAM. Yesterday I watched you both all day. You talked for six hours, and you didn't say anything. Nothing that was yours. "A promise made to two banks", that was the president. "Enjoy your meal", that was tiredness. And "nobody even phoned", that was you. That was a mistake.

ELENA. That was a mistake.

SAM. It was the only sentence all day that belonged to anyone.

(A pause.)

ELENA. Then don't do this job to say your own sentences. Do it for other people's. Keep yours for the evening.

SAM. And you, in the evening, who do you say them to?

(Jonas comes in. Elena opens her glossary again.)

JONAS. Morning.

ELENA. You're early.

JONAS. One minute fifty. I'm getting old.

(He sits on the left, puts on his headset, shifts the right earpiece.)

SCENE 2

ALMA. Good morning, booth 3. Day two, the collapses session. A reminder that yesterday we had zero feedback. Zero. I wrote it on the board in the sound booth. Don't make me wipe the board.

JONAS. Promise.

ALMA. The speaker is Norwegian, she talks softly, she has a lullaby voice. Don't nod off, I can hear you snoring from here.

(Jonas switches on his mic.)

JONAS. Good morning. I am going to tell you the story of a bridge that talked for ten years, and nobody listened.

(Elena looks up from her glossary.)

JONAS. It was a small bridge, at the end of a fjord. Two hundred metres. A village on each side. From nineteen ninety-seven... Sorry. From nineteen eighty-seven, the people who lived there began to complain about a noise. At night, the bridge creaked. A long noise, like a door.

SAM. Was it eighty-seven or ninety-seven? Booth 5 said both.

(Jonas doesn't react. Sam leans towards Jonas's right shoulder.)

SAM. Jonas? Eighty-seven or ninety-seven?

(Jonas carries on. Elena looks at Sam, then at Jonas. She writes "87" on the pad and pushes it towards him. He reads it without turning his head.)

JONAS. Eighty-seven. The villagers wrote to the council. The council replied that bridges make noise. It's true. Bridges make noise. The metal expands by day and contracts by night. A bridge that makes no noise is a bridge that no longer moves, and a bridge that no longer moves is going to break.

SAM. Can't he hear me?

ELENA. He's working.

SAM. I spoke to him twice.

ELENA. When you're working, you don't hear anything. Isn't that what they say at school?

SAM. They say you hear everything and you choose.

(Elena looks at Jonas. She doesn't answer. Jonas nods towards the clock. They swap mics. This time, they look at each other.)

ELENA. But the noise changed. By nineteen ninety-five it was no longer just

at night. It was there in the daytime too, and it was higher.

JONAS. She has a lovely voice, the Norwegian.

ELENA. You can hear her?

JONAS. I can hear booth 5 hearing her.

ELENA. One of the villagers recorded the noise, on a little tape recorder. She sent the cassette to the ministry. The ministry filed the cassette.

JONAS. Did you get married?

(Elena presses the cough button.)

ELENA. Not now.

JONAS. You've got the button under your finger. It's now or tonight, and tonight you're on a plane.

ELENA. Tomorrow night.

ELENA. We found the cassette again, two years ago, in the archives. We listened to it.

ELENA. A bit.

JONAS. A bit married?

ELENA. Four years. An engineer. He was very good on snow.

ELENA. On the cassette, you can hear the bridge. And you can hear the woman talking over it, to date the recording. She says: "I don't know if anyone will ever listen to this."

(A pause. Sam takes off the headset.)

SAM. She really said that. I swear. It's in the original.

JONAS. I know.

ELENA. And you?

JONAS. No.

ELENA. Never?

JONAS. I have a flat with nothing in the fridge.

ELENA. The ministry engineers came twice. They measured, they tapped with a

hammer. The bridge answered well.

JONAS. Did you have colleagues, over there?

ELENA. Eleven.

JONAS. Eleven.

ELENA. Not one of them pushes the numbers the way you do. They write them too big. Or too late.

JONAS. I write them at the right moment.

ELENA. You write them early. You used to write them before the speaker said them. It drove me mad.

JONAS. You said it was cheating.

ELENA. It was cheating.

SAM. You do know you're talking to each other?

ELENA. Sam. The notebook.

ELENA. The bridge collapsed in nineteen ninety-seven. One morning in March. There was nobody on it. It's the only thing that went right.

(A pause. The speaker's words go on in the headsets. Elena lets them go by, one second, two seconds.)

ALMA. Booth 3, I've got dead air. Everything all right?

ELENA. Sorry. The speaker asks what we should have done. She answers: all it would have taken was to ask the bridge a question. Just one. And to wait for the answer.

JONAS. She said that?

SAM. She said: all it would have taken was to install a sensor.

(Elena looks at neither Sam nor Jonas.)

ELENA. A sensor. All it would have taken was to install a sensor.

(Elena takes a sip of water. The lights go down on the booth.)

SCENE 3

(Afternoon, the last session of the day. Beyond the window, the hall is less full. Jonas is on the mic.)

JONAS. Thank you. I am Polish, I am an engineer, and I am going to talk about load tests, which means I am going to talk about lorries. A lot of lorries.

(Elena looks at her hands. Sam writes.)

JONAS. Before a bridge is opened, it is loaded. You put twenty-four thirty-two-tonne lorries on it, at precise points, and you measure how far it goes down. If it goes down four centimetres, all is well. If it goes down forty, you call the lorries back.

ELENA. Jonas.

(Jonas doesn't turn his head.)

JONAS. The first test took place in two thousand and eleven, on the Vistula. Seven hundred and sixty-eight tonnes in all.

(Elena leans towards him and speaks louder.)

ELENA. That day, in Vienna. You didn't hear me.

JONAS. The deck went down by thirty-one millimetres...

ELENA. Is that it? You were working. You were deep in the sugar beet, in the quotas, and you didn't hear me. Like Sam, this morning. Twenty years I've been telling myself you didn't want to answer, and you simply hadn't heard.

JONAS. I did. I heard you.

(A silence. Beyond the window, heads turn towards the booths. Jonas looks at his mic, the red light on.)

JONAS. ...thirty-one millimetres, for a predicted deflection of thirty-three.

ALMA. Booth 3. Booth 3, you're on the channel. I repeat, you're on the channel. The whole room just heard you. The Belgian delegate is waving at me.

(Elena stands up. She takes her bag.)

JONAS. Elena.

(She goes out. The door closes softly. Jonas carries on, more slowly.)

JONAS. The second test... The second test was carried out on a cable-stayed bridge.

JONAS. The lorries were placed... They were placed on the main span. In total...

(He presses the headset against his left ear.)

JONAS. How much? Sam, how much?

SAM. Three thousand two hundred tonnes.

(Jonas doesn't react. Sam looks at Jonas's right shoulder, then gets up and goes round to the other side, to Jonas's left.)

SAM. Three thousand two hundred.

JONAS. In total, three thousand two hundred tonnes. Which is, I believe, a record for Poland and perhaps for Europe.

(Jonas presses the cough button.)

JONAS. Sit there.

SAM. Where?

JONAS. In her seat. Take the mic.

SAM. I can't. It's the Polish, I haven't prepared anything, I haven't got the glossary.

JONAS. Nobody's prepared the Polish. He's talking about lorries. You know what a lorry is.

SAM. I'm meant to do it on the third day. On the thank-yous.

JONAS. The thank-yous are tomorrow. The lorries are now.

(Sam sits in Elena's seat and puts on the headset. Jonas switches off his mic. Sam switches on the other one. The red light. Silence.)

ALMA. Booth 3, I've got silence. Is that a deliberate silence?

SAM. The... Sorry. The lorries. Ladies and gentlemen, the third test... The third test was carried out at night, because in the daytime the road was open.

(Jonas writes a number and pushes the pad across. Sam reads it.)

SAM. Forty-eight lorries. We drove them on one by one, very slowly, and we listened to the bridge.

(Jonas makes a sign with his hand: keep going.)

SAM. I will now show you the measurements. I know you like measurements. So do I. That's why I have no friends.

(A laugh, in the hall, beyond the window. Sam stops and looks at Jonas.)

JONAS. That's him. It's his joke. Keep going.

SAM. The maximum deflection was forty-four millimetres. The bridge returned to its position in six minutes. It returned exactly to where it had been. A bridge always comes back, as long as you haven't overloaded it.

(The lights go down and come up again. Time passes. Sam is still talking, faster, without stopping. Jonas has stopped pushing numbers. Applause beyond the window. Sam switches off the mic.)

SAM. How long was that?

JONAS. Twelve minutes.

SAM. I said "deck" instead of "span". The whole time.

JONAS. So did he.

SAM. I said "I have no friends".

JONAS. So did he.

(A pause. Jonas takes off his headset.)

JONAS. Earlier, you changed sides.

SAM. On the right, you couldn't hear me. Yesterday either. Yesterday I asked you three times if you wanted some water. You only said yes when I asked from the other side.

JONAS. Don't write that down.

(Sam looks at the open notebook, then closes it.)

SAM. I didn't write it down.

SCENE 4

(Evening. The hall is emptying beyond the window. Jonas has gone. Only Sam is left in the booth, a sheet of paper in hand. Alma comes in, a cloth and a marker pen in her hands.)

ALMA. Zero feedback. I'd written zero feedback on the board. I've just wiped it. Instead I've written: one confession.

SAM. It wasn't feedback.

ALMA. It's worse than feedback. With feedback, people cover their ears and

then they forget. A confession, they talk about it over drinks. The Belgian delegate is already telling his version at the Korean table.

SAM. Where's Elena?

ALMA. Gone. She stayed outside the door till the end of the session, and then she got a taxi. Jonas went down. Too late. You did good work, on the Polish.

SAM. You were listening?

ALMA. I listen to everything. It's my job. Fifteen years of hearing what people say when they think nobody's listening. Booth 6 eats crisps. Booth 2 sings during the breaks, always the same song, and out of tune. Once, an interpreter proposed to someone, mic on, in front of two thousand vets.

SAM. And?

ALMA. The vets applauded. The answer was no. And I learned something. People never say anything important into a mic. Except by accident.

(Sam hands her the sheet of paper.)

SAM. This morning I had to go down to the basement, to coordination, to fetch tomorrow's badges. The coordinator was asleep on the table. He told me to tidy the assignments folder. This was in it.

ALMA. Assignment request. Second of August. "Booth 3, with Elena if possible, Montreal. I know she's on the list. It's my last congress, it matters." And his signature.

(A pause.)

ALMA. Put that back in the folder.

SAM. She thinks it's chance. She asked to change booths on the first morning.

ALMA. It's not our business.

SAM. "It's my last congress." You know why it's his last.

ALMA. I do the sound.

SAM. It's his ear. He can't hear on the right any more.

(Alma puts the cloth and the marker down on the console.)

ALMA. Who told you?

SAM. Nobody. I changed sides.

ALMA. Then you know as much as I do. I promised to say nothing. Two years ago, in Geneva, he cried in my sound booth, between two sessions on dam safety, and I promised.

SAM. I didn't promise anything.

ALMA. No. You didn't promise anything.

(A pause. Alma picks up her marker and her cloth again, and goes to the door.)

ALMA. I'll rewrite the board. Zero feedback, one confession. Tomorrow I'd like zero confessions. But I'm not counting on it.

(She goes out. Sam folds the sheet in two, then in four, and puts it in a pocket. Blackout.)

ACT THREE: DAY THREE

SCENE 1

(Morning. Alma, a headset round her neck, is testing the mics. Elena comes in with her bag and an index card. No thermos.)

ALMA. One, two. Booth 3, left mic. Zero confessions. One, two.

ELENA. Good morning.

ALMA. You came back.

ELENA. I signed a three-day contract.

ALMA. Some people sign three-day contracts and leave on the second evening. I've seen it. A Turkish interpreter, in Porto. She left her headset on the console, with a note: "Sort it out yourselves."

ELENA. And did you sort it out?

ALMA. Not at all. That was the time with the coffee.

(Elena sits in her seat, on the right. She puts the card down in front of her.)

ELENA. Yesterday I called coordination. There's a reserve interpreter, at the hotel. She can be here in half an hour.

ALMA. For the closing session?

ELENA. For the closing session.

ALMA. And you?

ELENA. I've got a flight tonight. I can get an earlier one.

ALMA. Did you say yes?

ELENA. I said I'd call back.

(A pause. Alma tests the other mic.)

ALMA. Booth 3, right mic. One, two. Nobody ever calls back.

(Sam runs in.)

SAM. Good morning. Sorry. The tram.

ELENA. Sit down. I've got your form.

SAM. My placement form?

ELENA. The school wants ten minutes live, in front of real delegates. You did twelve, on the Polish, with no preparation, no glossary, and without me.

SAM. You weren't there. How do you know?

ELENA. I was outside the door. The corridor has loudspeakers.

(She holds out the form. Sam reads it.)

SAM. "Held the floor for twelve minutes with nobody alongside. Made the room laugh with the speaker's joke, which is the hardest thing in the job." You heard the joke?

ELENA. The whole corridor laughed.

SAM. I didn't make the room laugh. It was his joke.

ELENA. It's always the speaker's joke. You're the one who makes it land.

(Sam holds the form close.)

SAM. I still don't know if I want to do this job.

ELENA. You've got time. I only know on certain days.

(A pause. Sam takes a sheet folded in four from a pocket, unfolds it and lays it on the console in front of Elena.)

SAM. I have to give you this. I don't know if it's right to give it to you. But if I don't, then I'm the one choosing for you, and I don't like that either.

(Elena reads.)

ELENA. Second of August.

SAM. It was in the coordination folder.

(Elena reads on. Under the console, her foot starts to tap. A crackle. Alma raises her headset to her ear.)

ALMA. Third day.

(Alma lets the headset drop back round her neck. Elena puts the sheet down.)

ELENA. He knew. The first morning, when I was reading the door, he'd known for more than two months.

ALMA. I'm going to the sound booth.

ELENA. You knew too.

ALMA. I knew he'd asked for booth 3. Everyone asks for booth 3. It's the one with the best view.

ELENA. "My last congress." Why the last?

ALMA. That's for him to say.

ELENA. And you?

SAM. It's not for me to say either.

ELENA. The two of you know something, and I'm the one in the booth.

ALMA. He'll be here two minutes before. He always arrives two minutes before.

(The door opens. Jonas comes in.)

ALMA. Or not.

SAM. You're early. Twenty minutes early.

JONAS. I had something to do before the session.

(Alma goes out. Sam stands up.)

SAM. I'll go and get some water. In a sealed bottle.

(Sam goes out.)

SCENE 2

(Jonas puts down his satchel. He doesn't sit down. Elena pushes the sheet across the console towards him.)

ELENA. Second of August.

JONAS. Last night, I went down. Your taxi was turning the corner.

ELENA. Second of August, Jonas.

JONAS. The coordinator sleeps on his folders.

ELENA. You saw my name on the list.

JONAS. In July. There were thirty names. Yours was the twenty-second. I read the list four times to be sure it was you. There aren't that many Elenas who live in Montreal and work in bridges.

ELENA. I don't work in bridges. I work in whatever they give me.

JONAS. So do I.

ELENA. And you filled in a form. Twenty years without a word, and then an assignment request form, in triplicate.

JONAS. Just the one copy.

ELENA. You could have written. A letter. A message. A postcard with a bridge on it.

JONAS. I tried. I've got a drawer full of beginnings. I can't do beginnings. I can do what comes next. Someone speaks, and I carry on. I'm very good at carrying on.

ELENA. Then carry on. Vienna.

(A pause. Jonas sits in his seat, on the left.)

JONAS. Vienna. The Finnish delegate was reading out the dairy quotas. Twenty-seven countries, two numbers per country, the old one and the new one. He never looked up. I was on the ninth country when you said "Montreal". On the eleventh when you said "Will you come with me?"

ELENA. You remember.

JONAS. The eleventh was Ireland. I remember. I told myself: I'll finish the list and then I'll answer. You don't let go of a number in the middle, you know that, if you let go of one number you lose all the ones after it. I finished the list. He went straight on to sugar beet. I told myself: I'll finish the sugar beet. After the sugar beet came the cereals, after the cereals, the questions from the floor. And with every sentence the answer got harder, because I'd also have to explain why I hadn't given it the sentence before.

ELENA. It was yes or no. Yes or no doesn't take up any room.

JONAS. At the end of the session, you were putting your pencils away. I watched you put your pencils away, one by one, in the little tin box. And I understood that if I said yes, I'd have to leave. And that if I said no, you'd leave. So I said nothing. As long as I said nothing, you were still there.

ELENA. One week.

JONAS. One week. It was the best week. You were there, and nothing was over.

ELENA. It was the worst week of my life. I waited at every meal. I waited on the stairs. I waited whenever you picked up your keys.

JONAS. I know.

ELENA. No, you don't. I waited a year before I threw out your toothbrush.

JONAS. I didn't have a toothbrush in Montreal.

ELENA. I'd bought one. For when you came.

(A silence.)

JONAS. I was scared.

ELENA. Of what? The snow?

JONAS. Of being the one who follows. In a city where nobody knew me, with someone everybody wanted to book, who'd end up tired of seeing me waiting outside the booths. I was scared you'd turn round one day and wonder what I was doing there.

ELENA. I would never have wondered that.

JONAS. You say that with twenty years' hindsight.

ELENA. I say it with twenty years of snow.

JONAS. And you? You never wrote either.

(A pause.)

ELENA. Three times, in twenty years, I saw your name on a list. Geneva, twelve years ago. Seoul, seven years ago. Vienna, last year. Vienna, imagine. Three times, I turned down the contract. I said I already had something. I had nothing. I stayed in Montreal, I watched the snow, and I told myself: right now he's in a booth, pushing numbers to somebody else. And this summer, the Lisbon list arrived. Your name was on it, and next to it: "to be confirmed". I signed the same day.

JONAS. Why?

ELENA. Because it said "to be confirmed". I told myself: he won't come, he never confirms anything. And a small part of me, a very small part, the part that writes numbers in the margin, said: and what if he did.

JONAS. And on the first morning, you asked to change booths.

ELENA. I can't do beginnings either.

(A pause.)

ELENA. And why now? Why is it your last?

JONAS. Because at fifty-three, you stop.

ELENA. Nobody stops at fifty-three. You used to say you'd die in a booth, in the middle of a sentence, and they'd bury you with your headset on.

JONAS. I've changed my mind.

ELENA. You're lying. You used to lie exactly like that, without looking at me, looking at the speaker.

JONAS. There is no speaker.

ELENA. Exactly.

(Jonas looks at the empty hall beyond the window.)

JONAS. I wanted to answer you. In a booth, since it was in a booth that I didn't. I thought that if you were sitting there, next to me, with a mic and a speaker and a notepad, I'd manage it. That it would be like carrying on.

ELENA. Then answer.

JONAS. It's not the same question any more.

ELENA. It's the same one. I never changed it.

(Jonas opens his mouth. The house lights dim. The hubbub of the delegates.)

ALMA. Booth 3, closing session in one minute. The Portuguese president is back. She's got three pages. She won't stick to them.

(Sam comes in with a sealed bottle of water, puts it on the floor and sits at the back.)

ELENA. I'll take the closing.

JONAS. No. I will.

ELENA. You haven't slept.

JONAS. It's the last one. I'm taking it.

(Elena looks at him. She leaves him the mic. Jonas puts on his headset and presses the left earpiece against his ear. Sam sees it.)

SCENE 3

(Jonas switches on his mic. The red light.)

JONAS. Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues. Three days. Three days of cracks, of lorries and of bridges that creak in the night. I see tired faces. I also see faces that had a late dinner down by the river, and I shall say nothing.

SAM. Did she really say that?

ELENA. She says it every year.

JONAS. Before I close, I would like to say thank you. Not to the partners, don't worry, they're on page four. I would like to thank the people you don't see. The technicians, first of all, who got through three days without a single squeal of feedback.

ALMA. Thank you, Madam President.

JONAS. And the interpreters. They're behind the windows, up there. For three days they have taken on our voices and our mistakes. They have told you things they didn't think. At least, I hope so. Yesterday, in one of the booths, there was a small incident.

(Elena looks at Sam. Sam looks at the notebook.)

JONAS. I don't know what was said. I don't speak that language. But I thank

the booth concerned. It was the only moment of the congress when the whole room was listening at the same time.

(Laughter in the hall. Applause. Jonas carries on, louder.)

JONAS. For three days we have talked about what breaks. I would like to finish with the way we build. A great bridge... A great bridge is not...

(He presses the earpiece against his left ear. He falls silent. In the headsets, the speaker's distant voice goes on.)

ALMA. Booth 3, you're very loud. I'm turning you down.

JONAS. A great bridge...

ALMA. Booth 3, I've got dead air.

(Jonas doesn't move. Sam stands up.)

SAM. Elena. He can't hear on the right any more.

(Elena looks at Sam, then at Jonas.)

ELENA. Since when?

(Jonas presses the cough button.)

JONAS. Three years.

ELENA. The volume. The headset. "I can't hear booth 5 any more." The last congress. And you left me on the right. Three days.

JONAS. You were already there when I arrived. She's speaking, Elena. The president is speaking.

(Elena picks up her chair, moves it round to the other side and sits on Jonas's left. The lead of her headset won't reach. Sam pulls off the headset and holds it out to Elena. She puts it over one ear only.)

ELENA. Repeat what I tell you.

(She moves Jonas's left earpiece aside and leans towards his ear. She says the speech in a low voice, half a beat ahead of him. He says it again into the mic.)

ELENA. A great bridge is not built from one bank to the other.

JONAS. A great bridge is not built from one bank to the other.

ELENA. It is built from both banks at once.

JONAS. It is built from both banks at once.

ELENA. Each team moves towards the middle, out over the void, without seeing the other.

JONAS. Each team moves towards the middle. Out over the void. Without seeing the other.

ELENA. For months, there remains a gap between them that nobody can cross.

JONAS. For months, there remains a gap between them that nobody can cross. You calculate, you aim, you doubt.

ELENA. She didn't say "you doubt".

JONAS. She could have.

ELENA. And one day, give or take a few centimetres, the two halves meet.

JONAS. And one day, give or take a few centimetres, the two halves meet.

ELENA. We call it closure. It's the most beautiful day on a building site. On that day, nobody makes a speech.

JONAS. We call it closure. It's the most beautiful day on a building site. On that day, nobody makes a speech. The teams meet in the middle, and they shake hands above the river.

ELENA. Safe journey home. And come back.

JONAS. Safe journey home. And come back.

(Applause in the hall, long. Elena takes off Sam's headset and puts it on the console. They don't move.)

ALMA. Booth 3, that's it. Thank you. You can switch off.

(Jonas doesn't switch off. The red light stays on. The hall empties beyond the window.)

ELENA. So that was your answer? A form and a closing speech?

JONAS. It's all I know how to do. Carry on.

ELENA. You won't be able to carry on.

JONAS. No. In a year, I won't hear anything on this side.

ELENA. Then I'll stay on the other.

(A pause. Elena leans towards his left ear.)

ELENA. Will you come with me?

JONAS. Yes.

(A silence.)

ALMA. Booth 3. Your mic is still on.

JONAS. I know.

ALMA. The hall's almost empty, but the recording is running. It goes to the congress archives. Shall I cut it?

JONAS. No.

ALMA. All right. I'll leave it.

(Sam opens the notebook, looks at the console clock and writes.)

SAM. Eleven twelve.

(The red light stays on. Blackout.)



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