

POISONED THOUGHTS

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TOMÁS: Chilean academic

LUIS: colleague of Tomás

CARLA: waitress

KEN: stranger

Set in a restaurant in the United States. Tomás is talking on his cell phone near the table where Luis sits. First performed at *Hotel de las Artes* in Valparaíso, Chile, in August 2009 with Eduardo Zamaro Orrego, Andrés Aguilar Vera, and Elena Montenegro Olmos.

Directed by the author.

TOMÁS: I'm sure that Florida's as wonderful as everyone says, but I wouldn't survive a week without my computer. I have a lot to do. You have to let me take it with us. [*Pause.*] Of course I love you. [*Pause.*] That isn't true. I don't think you're less important than my research. It's just— Yolanda? Hello? Yolanda? [*Closes phone, returns to table.*] I'm sorry. What were we talking about?

LUIS: My relationship with Ruth.

TOMÁS: That's right. What I can't understand is why former spouses would continue spending so much time together. They haven't even gotten divorced. Doesn't that concern you?

LUIS: Not at all. They haven't lived together in years. I can't explain why they haven't gotten divorced, but they must have their reasons. I imagine they don't want to

spend a fortune on lawyers since there aren't any custody issues, and they've always kept separate bank accounts.

TOMÁS: But they see each other all the time. That isn't natural. Most people in their situation would do everything possible to avoid each other.

LUIS: Ruth still feels close to her parents-in-law, and they can't imagine going to the country club without her. It's where they all belong. They're very social people, which I like.

TOMÁS: You shouldn't be involved with a married woman.

LUIS: You've been involved with as many as I have.

TOMÁS: The difference is, I've been discrete about it. I've never been seen with them in public, much less with their husbands and parents-in-law. That kind of thing would never be tolerated in Chile, and even here it could be used against you. I'd be more careful if I were you.

LUIS: The university could only fire me if I committed a felony, which adultery is not. It's not even a misdemeanor. It's the only thing that saves marriages. In this case there isn't one to save, except on paper, but that isn't the point. We shouldn't spend all our time with research or alone with our partners talking about it.

TOMÁS: I would like to stay home and talk about my research with Yolanda, though she only seems to care about the latest music videos. She never turns off the television. The videos are always there in the background, and I shouldn't have to compete with them. There's no excuse for her lack of interest in my research. I could be writing cookbooks for all she knows or cares. She doesn't even have an advanced degree.

LUIS: So what? We need people to write cookbooks and make music videos. We'd be a lot better known if that's what we did. Our research doesn't reach many people.

TOMÁS: It reaches the people who matter. Policymakers pay attention to what we write, though you haven't written much in the last year.

LUÍS: It's true that I haven't spent as much time with my research as usual, but I have been discussing it and Ruth is a wonderful listener. She's also given me some very good ideas.

TOMÁS: If she cared about your research, she wouldn't insist that you go with her to the country club. You don't belong there. I'm surprised they admit Latin Americans. They must think we're all the same, and I doubt they even know where Chile is. Besides, they aren't academics. They're a bunch of people who've inherited their wealth and, unlike us, they've never had to work a day in their lives.

LUIS: How would you know? You've never been there or done anything to make yourself a part of this society.

TOMÁS: We'll never be a part of this society. For example, nobody's even noticed that we're here, and I'm tired of waiting. Let's go somewhere else.

LUIS: I think we should stay. The fettuccine alfredo is supposed to be exceptional, and they have Chilean wine, which should make you happy.

TOMÁS: It should make both of us happy, though you seem to be forgetting who you are and where you come from.

LUIS: I love our country as much as you do, but you have to admit, it isn't as important as the United States. When these people do something, it affects the entire planet.

TOMÁS: Usually for the worse. I would never be involved with a North American, and I don't believe that you're happy with yours. Once you seemed to be. You used to talk about her like a dream-come-true, like she was everything you'd been waiting for, but that was a very long time ago.

CARLA: [*Approaches.*] I'm sorry for the delay, gentlemen. I'll be your waitress.

My name's Carla. [*Offers menus.*]

LUIS: That's okay. We already know what we'd like—the fettuccine alfredo.

We've heard that it's outstanding.

CARLA: Yes, it's one of our specialties. It comes with your choice of soup or salad.

TOMÁS: But not both?

CARLA: You could order both if you like, sir, but I wouldn't recommend that since the pasta's very filling.

TOMÁS: Fine. Then just bring me the salad.

LUIS: [*To Carla.*] The soup for me. We'd also like to share a bottle of Chilean wine. What would you recommend?

CARLA: We have a chardonnay from the Maipo Valley that would be perfect. It's one of my personal favorites and an exceptional value.

LUIS: Very well then. We'll try it.

CARLA: Excellent. I'll be back with it shortly. [*Exits.*]

TOMÁS: Did you have to order a whole bottle?

LUIS: It isn't that much, unless you're pregnant.

TOMÁS: I'm simply trying to cut back. I've been drinking a lot with Yolanda since that makes the videos somewhat more tolerable.

LUIS: What is your problem with them? The world doesn't revolve around our research. Besides, there's a lot involved with making videos, and some of them are very artistic.

TOMÁS: They're simply entertainment.

LUIS: People need to be entertained, and we're no different. It's unhealthy to complain about being with such an attractive woman.

TOMÁS: You wouldn't find her attractive if you spent as much time with her as I do. I can't remember the last time we've had a meaningful conversation, and she's oblivious to the arts. I should've ended the relationship after she fell asleep at the opera.

LUIS: It isn't her fault that opera's so boring.

TOMÁS: There's no higher form of expression.

LUIS: That's what you always tell me, but I'm sorry. I think music videos are much more interesting. Nobody listens to opera these days. You need to start living in the twenty-first century.

CARLA: [*Approaches.*] I'm sorry, gentlemen. We don't have any more of the chardonnay I recommended. Let me suggest another from California that's very good.

TOMÁS: Not if it's from California. There must be others.

CARLA: We have one from Italy that's popular, though it's somewhat expensive.

LUIS: [*To Tomás.*] Let's try it.

TOMÁS: [*To Carla.*] Where exactly is it from?

LUIS: Why does that matter?

TOMÁS: Because I like to know what I'm drinking.

CARLA: I don't remember the specific region, sir, but the wine's been very favorably reviewed. Critics agree that it's first-rate.

TOMÁS: What critics are you referring to?

CARLA: The ones that work for the leading magazines, sir. Do you want it or not?

TOMÁS: I don't like your tone of voice.

LUIS: [*To Carla.*] I'm sorry. He isn't usually this way. What you've recommended sounds fine, thanks.

CARLA: As you wish. [*Exits.*]

LUIS: What is wrong with you?

TOMÁS: Yolanda wants us to spend a week in Florida, and she expects me not to take my computer. What would I do without it?

LUIS: There're a lot of things you could do. Florida would do you good, except you wouldn't need to speak much English.

TOMÁS: It's a barbaric language.

LUIS: That isn't the waitress's fault, and she doesn't deserve to be punished because you still haven't gotten used to living here. It would help if you improved your English.

TOMÁS: My students can understand me without any difficulty. No doubt they'd enjoy my courses more if that weren't the case. It's not easy trying to open their minds. They think they're superior to everyone else simply because they were born here. Their thoughts have been poisoned by the country's arrogance, as well as the language they speak. It's impossible to separate those things. They're equally mistaken and equally dangerous. That's why I don't feel any need to improve my English, and I couldn't imagine spending so much time with a woman who doesn't speak Spanish. It's true that Yolanda frustrates me, but at least she speaks our language.

LUIS: [*Cell phone rings.*] It's Ruth. I wasn't expecting her to call. It might be important. Excuse me. [*Steps away.*]

CARLA: [*Approaches.*] I'm sorry, sir. There's no more of the Italian chardonnay or the fettuccine. Perhaps you could try the vegetarian lasagna instead. It's equally delicious.

TOMÁS: You shouldn't have let us order the fettuccine if you knew there wasn't any.

CARLA: I just found out, sir.

TOMÁS: You should've checked beforehand. Even in Chile, this kind of service is entirely unacceptable. Maybe we aren't the most advanced nation in the world, but the food industry is something we know about. We've been here fifteen minutes and no one's even brought us water. What kind of restaurant is this?

CARLA: Perhaps I could give you two orders of the lasagna for the price of one. Let me talk to the manager. [*Exits.*]

LUIS: [*Approaches.*] What's the problem?

TOMÁS: They don't have any more of the wine or the fettuccine. These people don't deserve our money. Was it something important?

LUIS: The call? Not really. She invited me to an event at the country club tomorrow night, but I had to decline. If you don't have other plans, you should go in my place. I've told her a lot about you, and I think you'd like each other. She's extremely anti-American, and if she enjoys talking about my research, she would enjoy talking about yours.

TOMÁS: She can't be extremely anti-American. She was born here.

LUIS: In her perspective, that's all the more reason to be. Unlike most North Americans, she doesn't think of us like the Africans of the Western Hemisphere, and she recognizes that there's no excuse for this nation's intervention in our affairs. What are you doing tomorrow night?

TOMÁS: I was planning to start writing another article.

LUIS: That can wait. You've published enough for both of us. You need to learn to relax.

TOMÁS: Neither one of us belongs at a country club, and I wouldn't last a week away from my research. Unfortunately, Yolanda's already bought the tickets and made the reservations.

LUIS: Did you agree to that?

TOMÁS: Certainly not.

LUIS: Then I wouldn't feel guilty about leaving her. Just thank her for everything and say goodbye.

TOMÁS: That's your style, not mine.

LUIS: Perhaps I could be of assistance.

TOMÁS: How so?

LUIS: I wouldn't have any trouble convincing her that you aren't the man of her life. It would be enough to tell her how you talk about her, but don't worry. I won't since I prefer to do things my own way.

TOMÁS: What you're proposing is shameless. The English language has poisoned your thoughts.

LUIS: It has nothing to do with this. What I'm proposing only makes sense.

TOMÁS: It never would've occurred to you before you started going to a country club where they don't speak our language.

KEN: [*Approaches.*] Excuse me, gentlemen. Would you know where the restrooms are?

TOMÁS: We have no idea, and considering how bad the service is, it wouldn't surprise me if there weren't any.

KEN: I've also found the service disappointing, which surprises me since this place has such a good reputation. I think I've seen you before. Do you also work at the university?

TOMÁS: Yes, we teach in the department of political science. Let me add that our students fail to appreciate our perspective of the world since it's so different from their own.

KEN: Where are you from?

TOMÁS: Chile.

KEN: How interesting. I've also wanted to go there. Everyone says that it has nothing to do with the rest of Latin America, that the people are much more cultivated. I recently finished reading a book about the country, and it was fascinating. One of my fellow librarians recommended it to me since she's Chilean. You must miss it terribly if all the women there are as beautiful and as intelligent as she is.

LUIS: North Americans can be equally attractive in their own way.

TOMÁS: There's no comparison. Chilean women are the most beautiful and most intelligent in the Western Hemisphere.

LUIS: By whose standards?

TOMÁS: By anyone's standards if he has any, which you don't seem to.

KEN: Where's the waitress from? I find her attractive.

LUIS: She is. I don't know where she's from.

TOMÁS: I would imagine that she's Mexican since there're so many of them in this country, or maybe she's from here. Those are equally bad alternatives, as I see it. It's true that she isn't ugly, but she isn't beautiful enough to be Chilean.

KEN: Maybe not, but she isn't bad. Excuse me. [*Exits.*]

LUIS: He's right. She's very cute.

TOMÁS: So what? You know that you've been happiest with Chileans.

LUIS: I don't deny that, but one day I could be equally happy with someone from the United States or even from Mexico, and I should remain open to that possibility.

TOMÁS: You have no standards.

LUIS: That isn't true. They're more liberal than yours, but they do exist.

CARLA: [*Approaches. To Tomás.*] Excuse me, sir. I've spoken with the manager, and he's agreed to let you have two orders of the lasagna for the price of one. It's also one of our specialties, and I think you'd be equally satisfied with it.

LUIS: [*To Tomás.*] That would be fine with me.

TOMÁS: [*To Carla.*] What about the wine?

CARLA: You could choose another. Let me bring you the list.

TOMÁS: Didn't you think it might have been a good idea to bring it with you? I've never had such disappointing service in Chile. Sometimes I haven't been happy with the food, but I've never had to wait so long for a drink. Most restaurants serve you one the moment you sit down. That's called customer service.

CARLA: I was in Chile a few years ago and never experienced anything like that.

LUIS: Where did you go?

CARLA: I spent most of my time in Santiago. I went to dozens of restaurants, and no one brought me a drink so quickly. But I had a good time. It's such a beautiful country. What part are you from?

LUIS: Viña del Mar.

CARLA: I wish I'd been able to spend more time there. I felt as though I'd stepped into a dream, and the people there are nothing like the *santiaguinos*, if I remember the term correctly.

LUIS: Exactly, and he's one of them, which explains his impatience. What time do you get off work?

CARLA: In about an hour.

LUIS: If you don't have other plans, would you like to have a drink with me?

CARLA: I'd like that, though not tonight. I've been working all day, and you know how difficult some customers can be. I only want to go home and relax.

LUIS: Where do you live?

CARLA: A few blocks away in one of the new apartment buildings. A music video was recently filmed there. A lot of the residents complained about that, but not me. From a certain perspective, the building's been immortalized.

LUIS: We were just talking about music videos, and personally I think some of them are very artistic, don't you?

CARLA: Yes, though I prefer opera. I grew up listening to it and for me nothing compares. Today I don't have enough money to attend many performances, but I have a good collection of DVDs.

LUIS: What a coincidence. I love opera. What's your favorite?

CARLA: It's difficult to choose since they're so many. Do you have one?

LUIS: You're right. It is difficult to choose, though in general I prefer Mozart's. He was truly a genius.

CARLA: He was, and it's so good to meet someone who shares my enthusiasm for opera. There aren't many of us, you know.

LUIS: Maybe not here, but in Chile everyone loves opera, a fact that reflects our European ancestry. We aren't like other Latin Americans.

CARLA: I've heard that, and it must be true if everyone loves opera. What do you do, if you don't mind me asking?

LUIS: We're political scientists. A few years ago, we wrote a book that became an academic bestseller, which explains why the university gave us tenure. He still hasn't gotten used to living here, but I like it very much. Recently I decided to spend more time enjoying the arts. I would hate to become the kind of academic so obsessed with his research that he forgets about everything else. Honestly, opera's taught me more about life than my research has.

CARLA: I would be happy to show you my collection of DVDs if you don't mind waiting for me.

LUIS: Wonderful. Where should we meet?

CARLA: At the bar across the street in about hour.

LUIS: I'll be there.

CARLA: [*To Tomás.*] Are you sure you wouldn't like to try the lasagna?

TOMÁS: No, thanks. I've lost my appetite. [*Carla exits.*] You're such a liar.

LUIS: What I said wasn't completely false. You've convinced me of opera's artistic merit. Maybe someday I'll see one that I like. Which ones did Mozart write?

TOMÁS: I'm not going to help you deceive that woman.

LUIS: I thought we were friends.

TOMÁS: We are, which is exactly why I'm going to let you do whatever you please with Yolanda. I want her to forget about me, and I haven't been able to end the relationship

by myself. I lose my resolve whenever a woman starts to cry. I hope you won't disappoint me.

LUIS: Of course not, and I think you'll learn to enjoy the country club.

TOMÁS: I don't want to be involved with your North American or any other. All I'm asking is that you help me with Yolanda.

LUIS: I will if you help me with the waitress.

TOMÁS: Okay, but you must succeed.

LUIS: Don't worry. I always do. I'll be exactly what she wants me to be. I'll even be willing to go to Florida if she invites me, which I expect she will. I won't disappoint you or anyone else. Of that I'm certain. Now which operas did Mozart write?

TOMÁS: The most famous are *Don Giovanni* and *Così fan tutte*.

LUIS: *Don Giovanni* and *Così fan tutte*.

TOMÁS: Right, and the librettos were written by Lorenzo da Ponte.

LUIS: Lorenzo da Ponte. [*Distracted.*] Isn't that the secretary who works in the department of history?

TOMÁS: Why yes. I think it is.

LUIS: And she's alone. How perfect. I think I have time to speak with her before my rendezvous with the waitress.

TOMÁS: You should let me tell you more about the operas, or she'll realize what a liar you are.

LUIS: You've told me enough.

TOMÁS: Just give me a second.

LUIS: Excuse me. [*Exits.*]

TOMÁS: He never follows my advice. [*Answers cell phone.*] Hello? [*Pauses.*] No. You hung up on me. [*Pause.*] Listen. Luis has invited us to an event at the country club tomorrow night, and I think it might be interesting. [*Pause.*] I don't know what time exactly, but we should go out more, and Luis is very charming, as I've always told you. I'm sure that you would like each other. [*Pause.*] Just think about it. That's all I'm asking. [*Pause.*] Okay. See you soon. [*Closes phone.*] What am I doing? In Chile I never would've thought of doing anything like this. I never should've moved here. [*Exits.*]