

Son of the Revolution

by Michael Olsen

Characters: COLONEL ROBERTO ELIAN, 63, retired colonel in the junta
ISABEL CORDOBA, 42, a member of the Human Rights Commission

Lights come up on a large dining table. We hear a car crunch to a halt in gravel. COLONEL ROBERTO ELIAN enters holding a business card. He sits at the head of the table and resumes his breakfast.

A smaller table SR has a large bowl of water, a hand towel and a smooth flat rock. Another small table SL has a photo of a beautiful woman.

There are two suitcases beside the door.

ELIAN: *(reading, frowning)* Isabel Cordoba. Human Rights Commissioner.

Elian dabs his mouth with a serviette.

ISABEL: *(off)* I am unarmed. Is this—hey! That's my personal briefcase! How dare you—

ISABEL stumbles in, smoothing down her hair and her clothes, clutching her briefcase.

ELIAN: One can never be too careful these—*(Pause, frowning, looking at the card, then at Isabel. Elian puts on a pair of glasses.)* Isabel?

ISABEL: Yes?

ELIAN: It's really you. *(nodding to himself)* Señora Cordoba.

ISABEL: *(patting down her clothes)* Your servant is very thorough.

ELIAN: Felipe's just following orders.

ISABEL: Felipe doesn't say very much.

ELIAN: That's because he has no tongue.

Isabel recoils. Elian rises with the aid of a walking stick, and steps towards Isabel.

ELIAN: No no. It wasn't me. *(gesturing to the table)* Please. Sit.

Elian slides a chair back for Isabel, who sits at one end of the table.

ELIAN: Try some patacones. I know they're not hot from the skillet, but they're delicious.

Elian starts to fill a plate of patacones in front of Isabel.

ISABEL: No. Thank you. I—

ELIAN: You always liked them in the morning when I made them.

ISABEL: Colonel that was—

ELIAN: You can call me Roberto, surely, after all this time...

Pause. Elian stops dishing out the patacones, spears one and eats it.

ELIAN: *(shaking his head)* After all this time...! The smoke used to fill the kitchen, do you remember? And I would bring them to you in bed, and you would drag yourself up and you would scoff them down as if it was your last meal.

ISABEL: That was 20 years ago. I am not here to relive the past. The past is over.

ELIAN: Ah, but the past is never over in our country. Why else am I summonsed to appear before your Commission if not to tell about the past?

ISABEL: *Our* past is over.

ELIAN: I can't forget the last time I saw you. At the wharf in Porto Agrere.

ISABEL: The junta was in the process of taking over so—

ELIAN: That's right and your father had ordered you to Venezuela. For safety.

ISABEL: And I obeyed.

ELIAN: And I was there to see you off.

ISABEL: No doubt you were already earmarked to join the Intelligence Corps.

ELIAN: I still have it!

Elian goes to the small table and picks up the rock.

ELIAN: I gave this to you and said: "Don't forget me."

Elian hands Isabel the rock.

ISABEL: And I gave it back and said the same thing.

Isabel hands the rock back to Elian but he has already moved away.

ELIAN: You took more than yourself that day on the ship. You left with a piece of me that you'll never return: those nights in the old district, our bed, the smell of tortillas cooking in the neighbourhood, you beneath me as if—as if —

Pause

ISABEL: As if what?

ELIAN: As if that's all I ever needed.

ISABEL: Obviously I was not all you needed.

Isabel finally puts the rock back on the table. Pause.

ELIAN: Try some tea at least. That, I can promise you, revives the spirits enormously.

Isabel is about to protest, then thinks better of it and allows Elian to pour her a cup of tea that she never drinks. Elian pours a cup for himself.

ELIAN: I have so few visitors it's important to me people feel welcome, and you, of all people...

ISABEL: *(spying the suitcases)* You're going somewhere today?

ELIAN: A friend of mine has a yacht. We're going on a little cruise.

Isabel goes over to the suitcases.

ISABEL: That's an awful lot of luggage for a "little cruise." Your friend wouldn't be David Tomas Gonzalez?

ELIAN: Yes.

ISABEL: He was arrested this morning on charges of money laundering and tax evasion.

ELIAN: *(snorting)* You've come a long way to tell me this.

Isabel sits down again.

ISABEL: The Commission suspected you might be interested in heading for "international waters."

ELIAN: *(smiling, innocent)* I have no passport. Your Commission saw to that.

ISABEL: Yes, but you still have the international passport that's good everywhere: money.

ELIAN: *(smiling)* I always knew you paid attention in my lectures. You'd parrot everything back to me. For some reason you always liked Henry Ford: *(standing)* "It is well enough that the people of this nation do not understand our banking and monetary system, for if they did, I believe there would be a revolution before tomorrow morning." *(Pause. Elian frowns)* What is it?

ISABEL: For a moment I felt like I was back in a lecture.

ELIAN: Are you here to take me in now?

ISABEL: *(taking some files out of her briefcase)* Your summons is due next Wednesday. I'm here merely to make a preliminary assessment of you and possibly your testimony. It'll all go to form part of the Commission's final ruling.

Elian nods.

ELIAN: And what is it that you did all those years ago? After you left?

ISABEL: I became a librarian.

Elían stands and moves to look at the car.

ELIAN: A librarian. (*chuckling*) Now it takes a librarian and—how many men did you come with? Four? It takes a librarian and four men to—is that Alberto Dalvan?

Isabel stands and looks out the window.

ISABEL: Do you know him?

ELIAN: I trained him. He was one of my top interrogators at the Citadel.

ISABEL: He's made a full disclosure to the Commission. He's been granted amnesty.

ELIAN: Will I receive your precious amnesty as well?

ISABEL: That depends on your testimony.

ELIAN: Alberto was one of the best. He was like a priest: everyone wanted to confess to him.

ISABEL: And the electrodes on their genitals had nothing to do with it.

ELIAN: And now he drives you around. (*Elían shakes his head and sits down.*) Your revolution is nothing but practical.

ISABEL: How "practical" was it to kill the president all those years ago?

ELIAN: He committed suicide, which at least demonstrated some level of honour about him.

ISABEL: Major Deltano admitted killing the president a day after I left for Venezuela.

ELIAN: Deltano probably acted in self defence.

ISABEL: Deltano lined the president and all his staff up against a wall and shot them in the back of the head and had their bodies burnt.

ELIAN: Efficient.

ISABEL: "Efficient?"

ELIAN: We were fighting a war.

ISABEL: He was the democratically elected president of the country!

ELIAN: People don't always know what's best for them.

ISABEL: And you do?

ELIAN: You certainly do, otherwise you wouldn't be here.

ISABEL: At least my revolution won't be forming roaming death squads to keep order.

ELIAN: It's still early days. (*Pause. Isabel moves away.*) Tell me why they sent you.

- ISABEL:** I volunteered.
- ELIAN:** You volunteered? Do they think I'll confess to you?
- ISABEL:** I don't think you'll do anything you don't want to do, but I hope in the end you'll want to tell the truth.
- ELIAN:** "And the truth shall set you free." Is that it?
- ISABEL:** It's what you taught us all those years ago. (*picking up the rock again*) To name something by its proper name. To understand what a word means. To see the world for what it is, and not pretend, but you were wrong. There are things you choose to see. Things you choose not to see. We need to give people back the choice.
- ELIAN:** (*moving towards Isabel*) You know I chose to let you go.
- ISABEL:** What?
- ELIAN:** I chose to let you live.
- ISABEL:** When?
- ELIAN:** Does it matter?
- ISABEL:** Tell me.
- ELIAN:** Do you remember? It was the night before you left for Venezuela. Before you left me. The night of the Carnival of Santa Margarita. I don't know how you fell asleep with the fire crackers going off and the fireworks above the city, but I stood at the window and watched you, your neck so white in the moonlight. To think that you could be with anyone else but me! Instinctively, I raised my pistol, but then a huge firework went off, and for a moment the room was lit up, and I saw your whole life there, your books, your bags, your clothes, the food we'd eaten, and for some reason I couldn't fire.
- ISABEL:** A choice.
- ELIAN:** A choice. (*shaking his head*) The whole idea of having a Human Rights Commission still amuses me greatly.
- ISABEL:** Amuses you?
- ELIAN:** What about the 10,000 who've died already for your revolution? Where are their human rights?
- ISABEL:** I'm not here to defend the revolution. The revolution doesn't need defending. It speaks for itself.
- ELIAN:** No, you need me to make the junta look worse than you.
- ISABEL:** We need justice.
- ELIAN:** You think your Commission knows about justice?

- ISABEL:** We can smell it before a man even steps into the room. Last week Major Daniel Somoza was convicted of gross violation of human rights under Section 17 of our new constitution.
- ELIAN:** Somoza is a good man. You gave him 25 years.
- ISABEL:** Too lenient in my view.
- ELIAN:** (*shaking his head*) You'll never be satisfied. Like when you were at the carnival and you insisted on a third helping of gelati even though we both knew it would make you sick. You want too much.
- ISABEL:** And how do you think we should achieve it?
- ELIAN:** (*waving his walking stick around*) You haven't understood this country. All its history shows that the only justice that exists is the justice you take into your own hands. I remember at the academy years ago my instructor told us that when you feel someone's life escape them, when you hear that last breath, that's when you have achieved justice.
- ISABEL:** We don't operate under the law of the jungle. The junta did that, but we don't.
- ELIAN:** You mean you have no secret police, no military intelligence?
- ISABEL:** Of course we do. That's what you taught us. I remember very clearly when you spoke about the fact that everyone lives downstream from someone else, and every state needs salmon that swim upstream to learn everyone's secrets.
- ELIAN:** I never learnt your secret.
- ISABEL:** I had none to tell.
- ELIAN:** Everyone has as at least one secret. An uncle who was too busy with his hands. Those girls from school who never let you alone. Or maybe—
- ISABEL:** (*loudly*) I gave everything to you. I held nothing back. I was amazed simply by how much I wanted you to touch me. You only love like that when you're young because as you get older you realise there's so much you don't want to lose.
- Pause*
- ELIAN:** (*quietly*) Nothing is lost.
- ISABEL:** What?
- ELIAN:** Porto Agrere is like yesterday. You've come back. Why did you volunteer?
- ISABEL:** I have sought—
- ELIAN:** This isn't mere chance. Can you forget the day we met?
- ISABEL:** No of course not I—

- ELIAN:** On the tram. I literally bumped into you—do you remember?—and your books went flying—
- ISABEL:** —and you said I should not be reading McDonald and Eisler as they didn't know / what the hell they were talking about.
- ELIAN:** (*overlapping*)—/ what the hell they were talking about. We started arguing.
- ISABEL:** We've been arguing ever since.
- ELIAN:** And it's been magnificent.
- Eliau holds out his hand.*
- ISABEL:** You still don't understand.
- ELIAN:** Understand what? We're here now. That's all that matters.
- ISABEL:** Even before your revolution I had a thread of self preservation, and I hung onto it. The student has come back to tell the teacher she no longer needs him.
- Pause. Eliau smiles.*
- ELIAN:** You forget the crucial part about our lives.
- ISABEL:** Which is?
- ELIAN:** You created me.
- ISABEL:** What?
- ELIAN:** After you left, I was—what is the word?—ah yes: I was bereft. I was lost. I joined the Army to fill the void you'd left.
- ISABEL:** That's rubbish. I have never met anyone so driven as you. No-one has ever told you what to do, what to say, what to think. If you front the commission I'll consider it a miracle.
- ELIAN:** If I talk, or don't talk, I will be condemned.
- ISABEL:** It's your choice. I think you're a man of honour and you'll do the right thing.
- ELIAN:** I've defended my country to the best of my ability. That's all. Just as you're doing.
- ISABEL:** You? Patriotic?
- ELIAN:** A man must believe in something, even something as ephemeral as a country.
- Having finished breakfast, Eliau stands and goes over to the large bowl of water and the hand towel.*
- ISABEL:** You were in charge of the Citadel, the country's top military intelligence complex. 7000 people lost their lives there.

Elían washes his hands, dries them.

ELIAN: You have to think of the junta as being like a surgeon: we were simply cutting out a cancer.

ISABEL: That “cancer” as you call it had family, friends, colleagues.

ELIAN: Yes, it was very strong.

ISABEL: And you did not succeed in eliminating it.

ELIAN: This's why I don't want to talk to your Commission. It'll be like a kindergarten. Like children we'll all sit down and tell each other stories.

ISABEL: These are the stories by which we know who we are.

ELIAN: It's easy for me to see you reading to a group of children. *(Pause)* What happened after you left? You went to Venezuela—

ISABEL: —and returned last year.

ELIAN: Yes yes but in Venezuela, you—what?

ISABEL: Got married.

ELIAN: To...

ISABEL: Emilio.

ELIAN: And how long was that after getting off the boat?

Isabel gives Elían a look as if to say: "Are you serious?"

ISABEL: Three years.

ELIAN: And you had children?

ISABEL: Two daughters.

ELIAN: So why did you come back?

ISABEL: This is home. No matter where you go home's like a tide you can't fight against. I came back as things were starting to fall apart. I thought I could help. Your legal training came in handy.

ELIAN: It's a rule of the universe: there can be no successful revolution without lawyers.

ISABEL: And you?

ELIAN: As you say, I joined the Intelligence Corps, rose to the rank of Colonel, and saw the junta lose control not so much of the people but the banks and the support of the Americans, who always want things done their way.

ISABEL: You got married, too.

Isabel walks over to the photo, picks it up.

ELIAN: Yes.

- ISABEL:** But you never had any children.
- ELIAN:** Why do you ask questions you already know the answer to?
- ISABEL:** *(looking at the photo)* Because you need to say it. Out loud.
- ELIAN:** I loved my wife.
- ISABEL:** That's not what I asked.
- ELIAN:** You really want me to say it out loud.
- ISABEL:** Yes.
- Pause*
- ELIAN:** My wife was 8½ months pregnant when she died.
- Isabel stands, walks around the room.*
- ISABEL:** A boy or a girl?
- ELIAN:** A boy.
- ISABEL:** I don't know why you never remarried. Moved on. This hacienda needs children to fill it. Little girls screaming, boys running around with big dogs. Yes, definitely boys. Sons to leave it all to. Sons with your name.
- Elían stands.*
- ELIAN:** *(coughing)* There is a nephew.
- Isabel nods.*
- ISABEL:** But it's not the same, is it? *(Pause)* Is it?
- ELIAN:** No.
- Isabel sits.*
- ISABEL:** *(quietly)* It was a horrible way for your wife to die.
- ELIAN:** The bomb was meant for me. I ordered the doctors to leave in a piece of the shrapnel, so I'd never forget.
- Elían taps his leg with the walking stick, then stands.*
- ISABEL:** You were lucky.
- ELIAN:** Lucky?
- ISABEL:** You could bury them. Lay them in the ground. Know exactly where they are. A mercy so many of our countrymen have been denied.
- ELIAN:** The only thing that mattered was those responsible.
- ISABEL:** Communists?

ELIAN: I tracked them all down. Every single one. (*waving his walking stick around for emphasis*) A small cell near Santa Grenada. I needed help, though.

ISABEL: Help? For what?

ELIAN: To keep them alive. I had a doctor administer drugs.

ISABEL: Why?

ELIAN: For when I went to work on them. It's the only time in my life when the personal and the professional crossed over.