

A Subject of Interest

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ACT I

SCENE 1

Lights up on a dilapidated office. Worn-out desks and cabinets huddled against mold-streaked walls. A large, utilitarian metal table centerstage. A few outdated chairs scattered around. A ceiling fan hanging precariously, stirring dust into the stifling air. The distant noise of a bustling street filtering through a pair of large wooden windows, their shutters closed tight... allowing no daylight in. A bulky typewriter on a small table near the edge of the stage.

Then, lights up on American. Big. Corpulent. A striking face framed by a mane of luscious blond hair and blue eyes you can spot from a mile away. He sits in one of the better-looking chairs and smokes slowly.

Brazilian walks in abruptly, juggling a large briefcase and a huge black metal box. He's not necessarily a small man, but he doesn't take up space - he shrinks under the gaze, easy to miss were it not for his high-pitched, energetic cadency.

BRAZILIAN

Sorry, sorry, sorry.

Brazilian drops the heavy metal box onto a side table by the door and sets the briefcase down on the large metal table centerstage.

BRAZILIAN

(catching his breath)

Traffic. Always horrible here in Rio.

AMERICAN

(facetious... maybe)

Well... what isn't horrible here, huh?

BRAZILIAN

Yes, yeah... well, it can be horrible, you know, sometimes. (*points to the black metal box*) I also had to carry that up flight flight of stairs, you know. What is it, anyway?

AMERICAN

It's a battery.

BRAZILIAN

That big?

AMERICAN

It's a car battery.

BRAZILIAN

Oh...

American picks the battery up and places it on a table near the wall. It's large, about 8X8, and black, except for two metal terminals on top and a silver sign on its side bearing the US AID insignia: a handshake and the words "United States Agency for International Development".

AMERICAN

Thanks for carrying it up.

BRAZILIAN

You're welcome.

AMERICAN

Even if it did make you late.

BRAZILIAN

Sorry, sorry.

AMERICAN

Or was it the traffic? (*beat, is he joking?*) You're supposed to be the teacher here, aren't you!?

BRAZILIAN

I'm not sure what we're doing here is really me teaching.

AMERICAN

Eu estou aprendendo o português, não estou?

BRAZILIAN

(*actually impressed*)

Muito bem!

As American speaks, Brazilian starts to go through the papers in his briefcase, removing them haphazardly and organizing them into piles on the table.

AMERICAN

See... you *are* teaching me. Thus, you're a teacher. And in the US, the teacher is never late. The students... maybe, sometimes. But never the teacher. And traffic isn't an excuse, you know. Traffic is traffic.

BRAZILIAN

Yes. I'm sorry. Desculpa.

AMERICAN

No, it's... Não é uma problema.

BRAZILIAN

Um problema. Não é *um* problema.

AMERICAN

Oh. Ok. *Um* problema.

BRAZILIAN

Good.

AMERICAN

Um problema... *um* problema? This whole gender thing, it's the same in Italian. I don't... it's just... Rules I get. If a noun ends with an O, it's masculine. If it ends with an A, it's feminine. But *o* problema? It doesn't make any sense. All these Latin languages, they just... I like languages that make sense, you know?

BRAZILIAN

Like English?

AMERICAN

Of course.

BRAZILIAN

So... if I say to you... I don't know... "cite", what do I mean?

AMERICAN

Site?

BRAZILIAN

Yes. Cite.

AMERICAN

You mean a place, right? A historical site? Christ the Redeemer, for instance.

BRAZILIAN

No, I don't mean site. I mean cite.

AMERICAN

(pointing to his eyes)

Sight?

BRAZILIAN

Wrong again. Last chance.

AMERICAN

Oh, come'on. Site? Sight? Just... use it in a sentence.

BRAZILIAN

Sorry. This isn't a spelling bee. No "use it in a sentence". Just... cite. What is it?

AMERICAN

I've told you.

BRAZILIAN

No. You guessed "sight" (*points to eyes*). You guessed "site" (*points to floor and room*). But not "cite" (*points to mouth*). You know... to quote something. A poem. Part of a speech. To cite.

AMERICAN

Oh... OK. I get it. I get it. Like you can, I don't know... like you can stare at a stair!

BRAZILIAN

Yes... or see the seat. (*beat*) All languages are the same, you know. English, Portuguese, Italian. They don't make any sense. All that matter is we understand each other. Translation is the same, you know. If you try to figure out in your head exactly what one thing in English is in Portuguese, you can't do it. It's not the point, you know? You don't translate with your head. It's about meaning. Words are just... you know... letters.

American walks towards the large table, surveying the organized documents.

AMERICAN

Let's get to it, then.

BRAZILIAN

Oh yes, sorry, sorry.

Brazilian moves to the typewriter and sits down, getting ready to work.

AMERICAN

You say sorry a lot.

BRAZILIAN

Me?

AMERICAN

No. All of you. Brazilians. Always “sorry, sorry, sorry”.

BRAZILIAN

Don't people say sorry in Indiana?

AMERICAN

Only when there's something to be sorry about.

BRAZILIAN

Well... sorry for saying sorry all the time, then.

Sensing a stiffness in Brazilian, American moves over and places a hand on each of the young man's shoulders, squeezing them.

AMERICAN

Hey, I'm just teasing you, you know that, right? Nothing wrong with saying sorry. Heck, I say it at least a dozen times a day. Been married for twenty years, and the trick? Saying sorry. The key to a happy marriage. Remember that! You'll thank me when you're married.

American finally lets go of Brazilian's shoulders.

AMERICAN

Do you even have a girl?

BRAZILIAN

No.

AMERICAN

And why the heck not?!

Brazilian places a blank piece of paper behind the typewriter's cylinder, adjusting the ink ribbon.

AMERICAN

It's none of my business, I know. And you're young. But a man ought to be married. Have children. A home to go back to. It's important when you do the type of work we do.

BRAZILIAN

The type of work you do.

AMERICAN

Sorry?

BRAZILIAN

"Sorry"?

AMERICAN

That was... different. It was an interjection.

BRAZILIAN

Well... I'm still counting it.

AMERICAN

Fine. Count it. Don't count it. But you said it yourself, my friend. Translating is not just replacing words, huh? You're in this as much as I am.

A beat.

BRAZILIAN

Let's just get back to work now.

Another beat.

AMERICAN

Yes, sir!

BRAZILIAN

When you're ready.

AMERICAN

As you wish!

American takes a seat next to Brazilian and goes through a few of his notes.

AMERICAN

Ok, where were we?

BRAZILIAN

Location. "On the issue of location".

AMERICAN

Ok. Good.

American clear his throat and begins dictating as Brazilian types quickly, keeping pace.

AMERICAN

On the issue of location. Good. OK. Period. Continue. The essential steps required to prepare a safe house for operations, specifically focusing on ensuring it is fully secure and soundproofed for use in interrogation activates. Period. Next paragraph. Hum... First and foremost, identify a location that meets structural requirements. Period. Of paramount importance, colon, a basement that can be converted into a soundproof space. Semicolon. Garage with internal door is preferred, providing discreet entry and exit points. Semicolon. A distance of at least 800 feet from neighboring homes, coma, vital for maintaining privacy and reducing risk of detection.

BRAZILIAN

Reducing risk of...?

AMERICAN

Risk of detection.

BRAZILIAN

All right then... go on.

AMERICAN

Hum... yes, well... next paragraph. OK. Once location is secured, the next step involves a thorough inspection. Period. Agent must personally inspect every aspect of property, such as electrical installations, plumbing, structural soundness to ensure everything is up to standards. Next paragraph. Then comes the most critical aspect of the operation. Colon. Soundproofing. Period.

American takes a beat to observe if Brazilian is catching up, before continuing to read.

A blackout.

SCENE 2

Lights up as American stands far upstage, looking through the shutters of the closed wooden window.

Downstage, Brazilian sits at the typewriter and works, typing slowly as he checks for words and notes in documents around him.

American then notices something outside. He moves closer to the window, his face pressed against it.

He whistles. A cat-call, really.

AMERICAN

I'll be... This is unbelievable! *(he turns to Brazilian)* You've got to see this! *(no answer)*
I'm telling you. You've got to...

American turns back to the window, his face pressed against the wood.

AMERICAN

I'll be darned! It's just...

He cat-calls again.

BRAZILIAN

We've got, what... *(rummages through the documents)* twenty more pages to go and finish today.

AMERICAN

Oh, come on! We've been doing this for what... three hours non-stop? We need a break.

American takes quick steps towards Brazilian and places both hands on his shoulders.

AMERICAN

You need to see this. Trust me. *(beat)* If there's a man who needs to see this, it's you.

Reluctancy, Brazilian gets up and is guided by American all the way to the window upstage. He presses his head against the shutters.

BRAZILIAN

What am I supposed to be looking at?

AMERICAN

Across the street, the building. Third floor. Through the... the... the fanlight.

Brazilian sees something and turns around immediately, flustered.

BRAZILIAN

Oh!

AMERICAN

Isn't that just... I mean! Butt naked! (*beat, looks once more*) They have no clue we can see them! (*beat*) Right? I mean, they must... otherwise why would they... (*he turns back around, grins at Brazilian, who is still a bit embarrassed*) Unless they want us to see them. They know this building is all military men. It's a show my friend. For us! For you!

American grabs Brazilian by the shoulders again and tries to lead him to the window, but Brazilian refuses.

BRAZILIAN

I don't think they know. (*beat*) These windows don't even open, they have no idea and we shouldn't. You shouldn't.

AMERICAN

Why? Because I'm married?

BRAZILIAN

No. Single or married. It's not right to spy into girl's locker rooms.

AMERICAN

You're probably right.

American stares at Brazilian as he goes about getting the typewriter ready to continue working.

AMERICAN

I grew up in a big Italian family, you know. Catholic. I understand respect. I do. I have daughters and sisters and a mother and a wife. But you? I was told the tropical heat makes a man's blood boil. This... this prudishness... it's just... That sight there (*points at window*), those beautiful young ladies soaping up their naked bodies..., yeah it might be wrong, but for a young fella... hell, I'm old and it still sent my blood running to all the wrong places, if you know what I mean.

BRAZILIAN

It's just... I'm not sure we... hum... we shouldn't be looking at them, that's all. Not while we're working.

AMERICAN

You're right. You're right! (*beat*) We're working. We're working men. Professionals, right?

BRAZILIAN

Yes.

AMERICAN

You are. I admire that, I do. So young and already so serious. You're not like all the other Brazilian people I met. (*beat*) Do you like soccer at least?

BRAZILIAN

Will you be very disappointed if I tell you I do?

AMERICAN

Finally!

BRAZILIAN

I'm a... wooden leg?! Perna de pau, is what we say. I like it but I can't play it. I'm no... no Pelé. You know Pelé, right?

AMERICAN

Of course! Of course!

BRAZILIAN

So you know your futebol?

AMERICAN

Futebol, not really. Now football, that I know.

BRAZILIAN

You mean your football? American football?!

AMERICAN

Of course!

BRAZILIAN

Oh, come on... what's football about it? There's no ball and they barely use the foot. It's a bunch of men... all jumping on each other, and using their hands to throw this thing around that's like a... like a... well, not a ball! It makes no sense to me.

AMERICAN

Ha! I'd be offended... but as I'm a baseball man myself, I'll let it slide.

BRAZILIAN

Well, baseball makes no sense but at least there's an actual ball in it.