

## ***You were so sweet when you were little***

### **CHARACTER LIST**

Orestes

Electra

Clytemnestra

Aegisthus

The Chorus The

nurse Electra's

followers The

teacher

The slave

The pianist

The violinist

The cellist

The double bass player

*When the curtain rises, Electra, dressed in black, is squatting on the step of a kind of platform which takes up most of the stage. On this platform, in the background behind the curtain, there is a large door that looks vaguely Greek. There is also a stone bench and a sort of tombstone somewhere on the platform. In the foreground, on a podium at the side of the stage, there are three music lecterns, some chairs, an upright piano and a coat rack, which seem to be waiting for some musicians. They enter the stage after a while with their instruments, take their places and begin to chat among themselves while hanging up their things.*

**THE DOUBLE BASS PLAYER, who glances over at Electra on entering.**

What's she doing there? You'd think she hadn't moved since yesterday evening.

**THE VIOLINIST**

She's waiting for her brother; she's waiting for Orestes.

**THE DOUBLE BASS PLAYER**

Ah! That family and its dramas..! All families have problems. They're not the only ones.

**THE VIOLINIST**

Yes, but for them it's like weeds, difficult to root out!

**THE DOUBLE BASS PLAYER**

I'm telling you, she was unhappy about her father being killed and everything they made her go through after that; but if she'd been my daughter, I would've said to her a long time ago: "That's enough, my dear. Now go and cry in the toilet!"

**THE VIOLINIST**

Some people are always unhappier than others!

**THE DOUBLE BASS PLAYER**

Selfish people! That's why they suffer so much. They think such a lot about themselves the whole time that their unhappiness takes on unimaginable proportions. Anyone would think they were the first to have taken a hard knock. I'm telling you, if they'd had to deal with as much as I have, what with running the household and looking after two incompetent children (and a man who was never satisfied with anything, like Monsieur Hortense when he was alive)... All of that on top of my duties in the orchestra, they wouldn't have had time to think so much about their misery, those Astrides!

**THE PIANIST, timidly.**

All the same, they're just two poor little children, at the end of the day, Madame Hortense...

**THE DOUBLE BASS PLAYER**

Oh, that's typical of you..! Always ready to make excuses for young people! Always ready to defend their corner!<sup>1</sup> I'm telling you, Monsieur Léon, without wishing to cause offence; as I see it, it's because you're not man enough! A man – a *real* man – would give his kid a good clout and boot him out the door if he played up, as soon as he was old enough. At least that's what he'd deserve after everything his parents had sacrificed to bring him up and see him through school.

**THE PIANIST**

We've got to try and understand young people, Madame Hortense...

**THE DOUBLE BASS PLAYER**

Far from it! It's when we try to understand other people that we get cheated. Do *they* try to understand us? No! You won't change my mind about this, Monsieur Léon, real men don't exist anymore! Big, well-hung men who stink. These days they're all intellectuals who preen themselves; geeks, the lot of them. If Monsieur Hortense hadn't had his stroke and if his kid had reached the same age as this little scoundrel, Orestes, then you'd have seen if he would've let our son get away with saying all the things this little brat says to his mother every evening! Men like Monsieur Hortense are sometimes brutal at home, but that means they respect the woman of the house.

**THE PIANIST**

All the same, we mustn't forget that his mother killed his father so she could live with her lover!

**THE DOUBLE BASS PLAYER**

That was just a rumour! All the same, at some stage in her life a woman has the right to some sensual pleasure. But what parents do is none of their children's business! (*To the cellist, sharply:*) Haven't you got any rosin? *You* say nothing, you're all sweetness and light! As if it would harm you to have an opinion and risk having to compromise yourself... Like when you have to go and ask the boss for a pay rise.

**THE CELLIST, *tight-lipped.***

I haven't been brought up the same way as you.

**THE DOUBLE BASS PLAYER, *sniggering.***

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<sup>1</sup> The French text reads "On vous a vu au mois de mai !" which could be translated literally as "You were seen in the month of May!". This is a reference to the student occupation protests in Paris in May 1968 which led to nationwide strikes and civil unrest.

Yes, I know! An Officer's daughter, the country estate, the private tutor, mummy's principles... Not to mention the concert for the war widows at the "Salle Gaveau", that chic Parisian venue where the minister kissed your hand. But all of that's finished now! You scrape a living in a little quartet that gets hired whenever it can, and that's all.

**THE CELLIST, *tight-lipped.***

People can have setbacks.

**THE DOUBLE BASS PLAYER**

Agreed. So long as they don't bore other people with them. That's what / would say to the Atrides, if we were allowed to step in!

**THE CELLIST, *tensely.***

Dread to think! We're only here for the interludes, thank God... I for my part don't like to interfere in other people's affairs.

*Clytemnestra and Agamemnon enter, dressed like a king and queen from a Shakespeare play with golden crowns (theatre props). They were once beautiful and handsome; they have now become fat.*

**THE VIOLINIST**

Ah! There go the other two... She still has the same beautiful face you see in the photos from her second wedding, but all the same, isn't it such a shame for a woman to let herself get fat like that?!

**THE DOUBLE BASS PLAYER**

She has got a bit round, yes; but he, on the other hand, he's still got a good manly figure.

**THE CELLIST, *scornful.***

Eugh!

**THE DOUBLE BASS PLAYER**

Oh, you! What do you know about anything?

**THE CELLIST**

I think they're an extremely vulgar couple despite all the publicity hype around them and all their millions!

**THE VIOLINIST**

People say she's got a crystal bath in the shape of a four-leaf clover, and that she bathes in the milk of a she-ass every morning. Women like her deny themselves nothing!

**THE PIANIST, *quietly.***

If you believe everything in the papers! First of all, there's no longer any such thing as a she-ass. There are only little motors.

**THE VIOLINIST, *knowingly, while touching up her make-up.***

Oh, but women like that! With their kind of money, you can be sure they find ways to get what they want!

**THE DOUBLE BASS PLAYER, *solemnly.***

Even if she puts her fat white backside into her crystal bath every morning, she's a woman like you and me, and it's obvious how she's suffered! Women are the ones who suffer most – always.

**THE CELLIST, *curtly.***

It would seem that they insult each other and fight like cats and dogs!

**THE DOUBLE BASS PLAYER**

So what? That has never got in the way of feelings!

**THE CELLIST, *becoming more and more tight-lipped.***

No one should ever hit a woman – not even with a flower!

**THE DOUBLE BASS PLAYER**

Who told you that? A florist? Monsieur Hortense put me in the picture straightaway when he met me as a young girl. When I did something wrong at home, he lashed out. And since he was a fair man, I endured my punishments. Under his arm I went, for a good spanking with my skirt lifted up. Back then, I used to scratch him and bite his thigh. And I have to say that afterwards the love between us was better. Later, I returned every blow he struck with whatever I had to hand in my kitchen... And we stopped going to bed together after that. We just put plasters on. Feelings are like everything else, they fade...

**THE VIOLINIST, *who is gazing at the royal couple, enraptured.***

They were once famous lovers! The paparazzi always chasing them. Pictured in all the papers!

**THE DOUBLE BASS PLAYER**

It has to be said that the murder of her first husband gave them enormous publicity! Agamemnon, the largest Greek fleet... The king of kings, as his comrades called him... Oil tankers on every sea of the world, and he started out with nothing.

**THE CELLIST, *sharply.***

She has a nerve to have killed her husband and then strut about with that crown on her head! I don't understand why we let such creatures off the hook!

**THE DOUBLE BASS PLAYER**

You know, with a good lawyer, when you plead a crime of passion... She could prove she was avenging her daughter's death. In truth, it's because Aegisthus had already got under her skin. But *that* couldn't be proven to the jury. And after that, with the old man's millions, they started to have a cushy old time: the Aegean Sea, the palaces, the cruises, naturally...

**THE VIOLINIST, *sighing.***

For some people life's a dream! If they grant us our three weeks' holiday, I intend to go to Palavas, do you know it? I've made myself a flattering little canary-yellow bikini... For a single woman, there's only the Med beaches: you're almost always sure to meet someone there.

**THE DOUBLE BASS PLAYER**

The way they begin to destroy each other all over again every evening, I don't see you getting a sun tan in the near future, my dear. You know, these Greek stories are thick-skinned..!

**THE VIOLINIST, *surlly.***

Atrides or not, they have to give us our three weeks. We're entitled to it!

*Aegisthus and Clytemnestra are sitting down on the bench. Aegisthus looks at Electra for a while, then suddenly asks her:*

**AEGISTHUS**

What are you doing?

**ELECTRA**

I'm waiting for Orestes.

**AEGISTHUS**

Are we going to go through all this again tonight?

**ELECTRA**

Yes. And every single night.

**AEGISTHUS, a little wearily.**

Orestes has already been, thousands of times, and he has avenged you...

**ELECTRA**

I'm still waiting for him. I'll never have anything else to do. When I was a little girl I was already waiting for him. I used to slip out of my maid's room when my day was over and go to the houses at the edge of the village, where the road disappears into the night of the open country, and I'd wait...I'd wait for footsteps on the road. Footsteps that didn't belong to the last of the late-night drunks making his way back to his hovel, unsteadily, as it turned out to be each night. The firm footsteps of a young boy who has come to Argos to set things straight. The footsteps of Orestes, at last! Ten years, I've waited. And you want me to stop?

**AEGISTHUS**

And you'd end up falling asleep, curled up in a nook in the wall and then when the cock crowed you'd be surprised to find your shawl covered over you to protect you from the cold night...

**ELECTRA shudders.**

Who told you that?

**AEGISTHUS, softly.**

I'm the one who covered you up. I, too, waited for Orestes at the end of the road, every night.

**ELECTRA cries out.**

So you could kill him?

**AEGISTHUS, shiftily, after a moment's hesitation.**

No.

**ELECTRA looks at him, troubled.**

You, too, were waiting for him? You were there sweating with fear in the shadows, every night, so close to me, and I didn't even know it? You should have let me be the one to see him first! You don't know how much that would have meant to me.

*The orchestra members are a little unnerved by this dialogue. The cellist asks the pianist in a low voice:*

**THE CELLIST**

What's happening? Have they started before our first lament?

**THE PIANIST**

No. They're chatting among themselves.

**THE CELLIST**

That's not in the right order!

**THE PIANIST**

Since their drama first began, they can't help but keep going over and over it.

**THE CELLIST**

Such sad lives! But when you interfere with the order of things... That's why I never wanted to get married. I looked after mum right up until the end, until she was paralyzed down one side... In the end, we had to cut back on our expenses, living in a provincial house that was too big for us. But we got by. And life was more or less the same as it was before, when dad was alive... Oh! We should never have to grow up!

**THE PIANIST**

I'm going to hand out the music, they're about to begin...

*He silently goes around the orchestra placing the music scores on the stands. On the platform, Aegisthus, who is sitting on a bench next to Clytemnestra, suddenly asks:*

**AEGISTHUS**

What's he doing?

**CLYTEMNESTRA**

Who?

**AEGISTHUS**

Orestes.

**CLYTEMNESTRA**

Is he keeping you from dying?

**AEGISTHUS**

He's keeping me from reaching the finish line. I'm like the little boy of long ago who is being led home at night, stumbling along the endless streets. I sleep standing upright: the house is too far away. At the first strike of Orestes' knife, with my head wrapped in my robe, I'll finally be able to lie down - I'll have arrived.



**CLYTEMNESTRA, *with a sort of restrained resentment.***

As for me, I loved to live. I *still* love to live! (*She drifts into a daydream, a little resentfully, and continues*): While he was away at war we hid because we were lovers; I felt your joy in taking me... It was me you had to eat to keep you nourished. Before the act of love, you feasted on the entire body of your stolen queen and you took your time... Your sword lying right next to you, as bare as our two bodies, to save your skin in case he sent his men to surprise us...

When he returned with that whore he'd brought back from Troy, all puffed up with glory and looking ridiculous with his medals, standing upright on his victor's chariot - I had to lie to him at first to entice him to the swimming pool, far from his guards. Purring, I undid the laces of his golden body armour, so that we could kill him more easily. He'd started to forget me, along with all his mistresses, when he was fighting the war, and his big vicious eye vaguely softened and was already undressing me. He slid his hairy hand between my legs. But I had finished unlacing his body armour, he was almost naked, you appeared and we struck the blow together – rapidly.

So I succeeded in proclaiming you as king in his place... Oh! That wasn't easy with the Assembly of elders who scrutinized us with suspicion, leaning on their walking sticks. We both reeked of adultery and blood... I had to play on the murder of my daughter by calling on the gods. I had to buy those who were for sale, the least dangerous ones, and frighten the others with my Nubian guards, who stayed by my side during all of these beautiful speeches – their swords unsheathed.

I did all of that for you, and only I could have done it! And they softened in the end, in the evening, when they grew wary of the scoundrel that was beginning to animate the streets... They thought that order would be kept with you and I in charge, even if our hands were red, and that with order maintained the city wouldn't lose money.

And then there went that slave, that hateful old teacher who fled into the mountains carrying the little one!

**AEGISTHUS, *in a dull voice.***

I wouldn't have done him any harm..!

**CLYTEMNESTRA *suddenly shrieks, aggressively.***

At last! We were rid of his constant dirty looks and his muteness. We could begin to live again, despite Electra. She never left the kitchen, we could simply ignore her. And when she was a little older, we'd have married her off to a gardener who'd have given her a litter of rabbits. She was only a girl, after all! You were a man and you were the king.

But from that instant, you began to wait for I don't know what... Anyone would've thought that you had erased me from your memory, this woman for whom you'd just

killed a man... I began to wander about the palace, invisible: you could no longer see me. In the evening, I had to beg you to take me and your bored hand would retrace its path over my body – but I no longer knew where you were...

Ah! My life as a woman has been short..! (*She glances over at Electra.*) My life as a mother too, with this other one who kept running away from me.

**ELECTRA**

In the kitchen, with the servants! I did the washing up for the whole palace, twice a day. (*She cries out, waving her hands.*) Have you seen my hands? Have you seen my red paws?

**CLYTEMNESTRA screams at her.**

Nobody ever made you do it!

**ELECTRA**

I know! I did it on purpose so people would say: “They make little Electra do the dishes, the daughter of the king they’ve killed! And in the evening, they make her sleep in the attic, above the stables, on a straw mattress on the ground!”

**CLYTEMNESTRA**

You’re the one who wanted it that way!

**ELECTRA**

Yes, I wanted it that way!

**CLYTEMNESTRA**

You had a very pretty bedroom, with pink rugs and curtains, in the Master’s quarters!

**ELECTRA**

Under the roof! With the winter wind blowing through the tiles, saltpeter on the walls, toilets which reeked in the courtyard below, just under the lantern... *That was* little Electra’s palace! That was where she felt at home! In the beginning, the stable boys were uneasy sensing my presence there – they asked themselves what it all meant... And then, with time, they grew bold; they came scratching at my door at night, shouting dirty things through the crack... And I thought to myself that one day, when they’ve had too much to drink, they’ll force the door open and rape little Electra on the straw mattress, the daughter of the King of kings!

**AEGISTHUS**

And it was good to think that, wasn’t it?

**ELECTRA screams at him.**

Yes, it was good! And all the holes in my dress were good as well, which showed my dirty skin, and so were my grazed bare feet in my shoes. Sometimes I would put my finger in the snag and pull on it to stretch the tear!

**AEGISTHUS smiles and murmurs.**

Poor little mite...

**ELECTRA**

And when I was very small, when nobody could see me, I'd rub my back against the black and white walls, like a skinny cat!

**CLYTEMNESTRA**

Your cousins were clean, pampered, adorned with ribbons, and we had to put up with you in rags! Never washed nor combed. Ah! I haven't been a happy mother..!

**ELECTRA screams at her.**

As if that's all that mattered? And me, have I been a happy daughter?

**CLYTEMNESTRA**

You didn't want to be! You had everything you needed to be happy..! (*Electra turns around for the first time and looks at her scornfully. Clytemnestra, under her dark scowl, stands up, troubled all of a sudden, and cries out:*) But what are we waiting for? Let us begin, come along now, so we can finish this..!

*Orestes enters and stops indecisively. He is a thin boy and his hair is too long; he is dressed ambiguously in clothes which could be Greek or those of a boy living in the present day. Aegisthus sees him first; he stands up.*

**AEGISTHUS**

Let's go back inside the palace until someone announces that a foreign traveller is looking for shelter. We can begin now. Orestes is here.

*He hastily leads the Queen away behind the curtains of the platform. Orestes and Electra are left alone, looking at one another from a distance. The lighting changes, isolating the scene. At a discreet sign from the pianist, the orchestra members take up their instruments and light their small lamps which create a separate world in the subdued light. Another sign from the pianist and the orchestra strikes up... As soon as the music begins, Electra, still looking at Orestes intensely, gets up reluctantly and disappears into the wings. Orestes, followed by the old teacher, who is dressed in ambiguous clothes (half-Greek, half-tramp), now moves forward at a slow pace, steps onto the stage and goes just as far as the tombstone. They both have travel*

*bags over their shoulders. The teacher holds back a little. The orchestra finishes the overture. Orestes begins the ancient text, very simply.*

## ORESTES

Infernal Hermes, behold my murdered father and become the saviour and ally I beseech. I am returning to my country; I am coming back from exile. On the mound of this tomb, I summon my father to lend me an ear and listen.

*With a snip of his knife, he cuts a lock of his hair, using slow gestures, and then places it on the tomb.*

In Inachos, I offered a lock of my hair in thanks for my nourished youth; I offer another here, to pay my respects to the dead.

I was not there to cry over your death – oh father! I did not stretch out my arms when your body left the home.

*Electra enters with a hieratic walk, carrying an urn. She is followed by two young girls wrapped in black veils, like hers. Orestes shrinks back a little to the side of the stage.*

But what is this procession of women advancing in such a way, in long funeral robes? Has a new grief struck the palace, or do these women bear the libations which appease the dead, for my father?

*The orchestra takes up again its syncopated music which drives the rhythm of Electra's step, along with her maidservants.*

## THE CHORUS

An order sends me out of the palace to accompany the funeral offerings that Electra carries for her deceased father. A dream has troubled the Queen in her sleep; Remorse, the prophet who speaks in this dwelling with the voices of the night, has let out his cry of terror and comes crashing down upon the ladies' bedchamber.

And interpreting this dream, men whose voices are sanctioned by the gods have proclaimed that beneath this earth, the slain bitterly complain and grow angry with their murderers...

And it is in the hope of repelling the misery that approaches her that this impious woman sends me here...

But does redemption exist for blood spilt upon the earth?

Once the drops have been drunk by the nourishing earth, the vengeful blood congeals, it no longer flows. He who has forced open a virgin's chamber can no longer amend for the wrong he has done.

And to purify the man with bloody hands, all of the rivers of the world, merging together, would attempt in vain to wash away the stain...

**ELECTRA**

Captives, thanks to whom order reigns in this palace, since you are my companions in this suppliant rite, be my counsel too. What should I say while pouring out these funeral libations? How can I find the right words? Which terms should I use to pray for my father?

Shall I say that I bring the gifts of a loving wife to her beloved husband? The gifts of my mother? I do not have the heart for it and I no longer know what to say as I pour this offering onto the paternal tomb...

Perhaps I should employ the consecrated words and pray for a happy compensation for those who pay this tribute? A compensation for their crime...

Or should I stay silent – outrageously – since my father indeed perished in this way – and all of a sudden pour the libations over the indifferent soil which shall drink them, and then hurry away, having discarded this empty urn, without looking back?

Assist me with your advice, my sisters, since all of us in this palace, daughter of the king and slaves alike, harbour the same hatred...

**THE FIRST GIRL**

Pour the libation Electra, and pray aloud for those who loved your father.

**ELECTRA**

And who are they among his people?

**THE FIRST GIRL**

You, first of all, and those who hate Aegisthus.

**ELECTRA**

So I shall pray for you and I?

**THE SECOND GIRL, gently.**

Look, look inside your heart, Electra. You know there is another name.

**ELECTRA**

Who, apart from us, in this palace?

**THE SECOND GIRL**

Far from this palace, in exile. Are you forgetting Orestes?

### **ELECTRA *cries out.***

Oh my little brother, never forgotten! *(She throws herself onto her knees on the tomb and begins:)*

Powerful messenger of the living and the dead, hear me, infernal Hermes, and heed my message. May the gods of the underworld, the avenging witnesses of my father's murder, lend an ear to my voice and you too, Earth, who alone gives life to all beings, and nourishes them, then receives anew the fertile seed... Drink this libation with its lustral water and carry it to him...

Oh my father, my departed father, have pity on me and your Orestes! May we be masters of our house! At this moment we are just poor vagrants, sold by the one who gave birth to us, and for a market price she had her lover! Aegisthus, your former servant, her accomplice, who helped her to kill you...

Since you've been gone, I have been treated as a slave; I sleep under the roof and my arms have been reddened by pig swill, and Orestes, your son who was chased away, hides like an animal in the woods. And all this time, they have lounged about in the luxury you earned by your hard work...

So hear my prayer, oh my father... Bid him come back with a knife in his hand, your son who has become a man, and grant your daughter Electra a heart more chaste than her mother's and hands more pious... *(Looking at them, with a weak smile she adds in a low voice:)* Poor hands all red and ruined, more pious... *(Then she stands up straight, picks up the urn from the ground and pours the contents over the tomb. She murmurs, distantly:)* It is done. The mute earth has drunk the libations... The prayers of men are perhaps nothing but futile sound. But what's that over there? I can see a lock of hair has been cut and left on the tomb...

### **THE FIRST GIRL**

Is it a man's or that of a virgin who wears a chastity belt?

### **ELECTRA**

Who, though, apart from me, would have had the right to make this offering?

### **THE SECOND GIRL**

There is only hatred in the one who also shares this right.

**ELECTRA *exclaims, holding up the lock in the sun.***

Look! Look! This hair is the same colour as mine!

### **THE SECOND GIRL**

Only Orestes, your brother, has hair like that!

**ELECTRA *cries out.***

It *is* Orestes' hair!

**THE SECOND GIRL**

He's been banished. How could he have dared to come to the tomb?

**ELECTRA**

He could have sent this lock as an offering via a messenger... So he hasn't forgotten? (*She cries out, pointing her finger:*) But look! Over there! There on the sand... It's my foot! The heel, the shape of my toes! Oh my little lost brother – in all the world only your foot could resemble mine in this way!

*The music takes up again and the chorus chants, while Electra, who has discovered Orestes, looks at him from a distance.*

**THE CHORUS**

Powerful Fates, by Zeus may all end with Justice.

And Justice, as each one merits, goes forth, crying in her mighty voice: may hatred pay for hatred! May blood pay for blood, and for one blow may there be another. For the guilty this punishment: it is decreed that drops of blood, once spilled onto the earth, call for new blood. Murder incites Erynnis, in the name of the first victims, to ensure that misery succeeds misery.

Because Justice, with a closed fist, provokes another injustice, which must one day be avenged...

And it is time for the scions of bygone murders to enter the house...

*The music stops. Orestes advances towards Electra.*