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# **SECUNDUS**

*(for one actor)*

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*The lights rise to Secundus sitting on a long form. He is half-dressed/draped as an ancient Roman. The stage is set to give the impression of a Roman gymnasium. There is a javelin, a wooden target, a discus. A dull light is on Secundus. He is examining the discus.*

*(Half to self)* I was the second son. Hence the name Secundus. The first one died. We were quite young then. Just the two of us. And a sister.

*The lights gradually brighten.*

*(Waking up)* Anyway. That's nothing to do with the story. Nothing at all. I'm a Roman. From a village near Rome. Quite well off. Rich in fact. Our village was near the sea. I speak Latin. You're just hearing things!

My mother...

That's another story.

Latin. Born second century A.D. - in your terms. In the reign of Emperor Hadrian. There's a certain conciseness, a certain tautness, a precision in the Latin - the Latin of Caesar that is. Cicero (*pronounced Kickeroe*) - some say Sisero, at least some of you say Sisero - I prefer Kickeroe - doesn't matter - he was a bit flowery. Ornate Latin. Effeminate. I like Caesar better. Stronger. Stronger. Kickeroe, not Sisero. Kaesar, not Caesar. Iulius Kaesar. I like him.

He'd stand up and say it and sit down. Stabbed. I like him. Blunt. But that was a couple of hundred years ago.

My mother...

Doesn't matter.

*Secundus stands.*

ONCE, when we were small, my brother and I, quite small, about seven...

*(To self)* This is going no where... going no where...

*During this speech, Secundus gets more and more distraught/disoriented.*

I'm young, you see; I'm still young. I can't keep... anything. I give my word, but I can't keep my word. I give my promise, but I can't keep my promise. All straight lines in the universe are human lines - have you noticed? - and I can't stay on a straight line. Straight lines are perfection, and I can't be perfect. I can't. (*He begins to spin with the discus*) I saw in a blinding flash, in one moment, I saw that I, that, it was... (*He stops spinning*) I made a vow you see. It was a vow to be uncrooked, to mend my ways, to fix things up. It didn't work. Nothing works. I broke the vow. One minute ago I broke the vow. I was a cynic. I thought, in my youth, I would be contemptuous of pleasure, and ignorance, and fat people. I'd sneer at crookedness. (*He begins to spin again with the discus*) It's stupid youth that takes a vow, and it's stupid youth that can't keep it. Nothing works. If we are what we are, then it is useless. Useless, useless.

*He spins faster and faster, then collapses with dizziness on the form, dropping the discus. The lights darken into moon light.*

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*He takes hold of the javelin. During the following he uses the long form as the boat.*

It was a brilliant night. It was summer. In summer, sometimes you could hear the sea. A bit of moon hung somewhere in the night. Somewhere in the night some sunshine sung. I was little, quite little, but I remember it. About seven years. My father took my brother, and I went too. We went fishing in the night. In the sea. The waves ran gently, gentle races. A lonely island waded in the sea. I could see it with the moon. The little waves had white tops as they broke. But almost a mill-pond, almost. I liked my brother. He was bigger than me. The water sparkled with lights around my knees as we pushed our little boat out to sea. I'd never seen it before - the sparkles. My father said it was fallen gods. I loved my father.

*He sinks into a reverie, then livens up again, rowing out to sea. Suddenly he spears the water with the javelin.*

I caught a fish! It was my first fish! I don't know what it was. I looked into the water again. Then suddenly I saw it! A stingray! A great white stingray! A stingray! I speared it! I've got a stingray, I cried to my brother. Look! Look! But it was the moon! I speared the moon in the water! My brother and I laughed and

laughed and laughed. Secundus! Secundus speared the moon!  
And then he touched me, my father.

*Secundus cowers at the far end of the boat - so that the form is almost unbalanced.*

My father touched me. Sapphic Roman. He didn't mean to, he said. He didn't mean to; it just happened. He was Cato's man, he said. Caesar's man. But he had done it. He touched me.

Me and my brother.

*Secundus stands. He throws the javelin with great vehemence into the target.*

Not long after I was sent away, to a school, to be taught. I lived there at the school.

I was only seven.

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*This is chanted while he arranges the long form into a class. The lights return to normal.*

mensa  
mensa  
mensam  
mensae  
mensae  
mensa

mensae  
mensae  
mensas  
mensarum  
mensis  
mensis

table  
O table  
table  
of a table  
for a table  
by a table

tables  
O tables  
tables  
of tables  
for tables  
by tables

amo  
 amas  
 amat  
 amamus  
 amatis  
 amant

I love  
 you love  
 he loves  
 we love  
 you love  
 they love

amabam  
 amabas  
 amabat  
 amabamus  
 amabatis  
 amabant

I was loving  
 you were loving  
 he was loving  
 we were loving  
 you were loving  
 they were loving

amabo  
 amabis  
 amabit  
 amabimus  
 amabitis  
 amabunt

I shall love  
 you will love  
 he will love  
 we shall love  
 you will love  
 they will love

*Suddenly, now that everything is set up, the voice of the teacher - loud, threatening.*

Right! Latin! Latin class!

*(As Secundus, to audience)* We didn't of course - learn Latin like that - we learnt it - but we spoke the stuff. When you speak the stuff you don't... Tace! Tace! said the teacher. Shut up!

*(Dutifully translating from a book)* The leader selected certain young men out of his soldiers.

*It now alternates between the teacher and the pupil. Secundus becomes increasingly adolescent in behaviour.*

*(As teacher)* Puellae rosis aquam dant.

*(As Secundus, thinking)* The girl loves the sailor.

*(As teacher)* Hasta nauta agricolam vulnerat.

*(As Secundus)* The sailor loves the girl.

*(As teacher)* Morbus molestus est tenero filio.

*(As Secundus)* The farmer is sewing his oats. The sailor loves the farmer.

*(As teacher)* Servi sunt mali.

*(As Secundus)* The farmer's daughter loves the horn of the sailor. The boy reaps the corn of the girl.

*(As teacher)* Agricolae filia locum nautae monstrat.

*(As Secundus)* The farmer's daughter shows the place to the sailor. The horn of the army is bigger than Hannibal's elephant. The king gives a beautiful horn to the soldier. The knees of the elephants are hard. *(He drops his pencils on the floor but continues to talk as he picks them up)* Sharp needles are useful to women. Many things are hurtful to men. The slothfulness of the girl is troublesome to the mother. The father gives old wine to the boy. The grass is pleasing to the oxen. The roots of oak trees are very strong and very long. The farmer loves his wife. The farmer loves his wife. *(Singing)* Hey ho the deery O, the farmer loves his wife.

*Secundus jumps as if hit by a compass in the behind. He stands, turns and shouts.*

*(As Secundus, angrily)* Acriter pugnatum est dum nox advenit. If you are unskilled at swimming, do not fall into the sea. You are not a man whose friendship I value highly. By hesitating, I have lost a chance to drive out a cruel tyrant.

*(As teacher)* Sede! Sede! Gloriam flocci non facit.

*(As Secundus)* Glorious bit of fluff?

*(As teacher)* Non! Non! Non sum tua flocca.

*(As Secundus)* No! No! I'm not your bit of fluff.

*(As teacher)* As long as I live, I shall remember you.

*(As Secundus)* Even if I forget what you have taught me.

*(As teacher)* My clothes have been taken away.

*(As Secundus)* Why are you behaving as if you were mad?

*(As teacher)* Clamas perinde ac si surdus essem.

*(As Secundus)* You are speaking to me as if you were addressing a public meeting.

*(As teacher)* Habeo aliquid mihi dicendum est.

*(As Secundus)* There is something that I must say.

*(As teacher)* Habeo aliquid mihi dicendum est.

*(As Secundus)* I have no reply to make.

*(As teacher)* Frater tuus mortuus est.

*(As Secundus)* Your brother is dead.

*(As teacher)* Frater tuus mortuus est.

*(As Secundus)* Frater meus mortuus est? My brother is dead? My brother dead. Frater? Frater meus? My brother? Dead.

My brother.

*After an appropriate silence, the translating begins again - slowly at first but quickly growing out of the mourning.*

*(As Secundus)* The soldier marches at the horn of the army. The beautiful daughter of the farmer sees the soldier marching at the horn of the army. The soldier leaves the horn of the army and goes to the beautiful daughter of the farmer. They kiss passionately. The sailor also loves the beautiful daughter of the farmer. They kiss passionately. They do more than that. The soldier hoists his standard. Standards are lowered. The beautiful daughter of the farmer praises the standard-bearer. She praises the lord from Gaul. Osculant maxima cum ardore - they kiss with the

maximum possible ardour. The whole of Gaul kisses the beautiful daughter of the farmer with the maximum possible ardour. The beautiful daughter of the farmer is wasted man. Wasted. Wasted.

*(As teacher)* Omnes mulieres sunt meretrices.

*(As Secundus)* All women are sluts.

*(As teacher)* Omnes mulieres sunt meretrices; feminae bonae nondum compertae sunt.

*(As Secundus)* All women are harlots; the good ladies have not yet been found out. All women are harlots; the good ones haven't been found out yet.

*(As teacher)* Omnes mulieres sunt meretrices.

*(As Secundus)* All women are sluts. I don't believe that.

*(Turning to audience)* But soon I learnt not to mind. The years had passed. I had now almost finished my education, and was going to the army. Every one did. I was well practised in the way of sluts. But then...

*(He turns away again)* Dum absum, pater mortuus est. While I was away, my father died.

I went back home - to my village.

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*Secundus circles the stage.*

Omnes mulieres sunt meretrices. All women are harlots; the good ladies have not yet been found out.

I learnt that once again, with this house maid. I'd taken lodgings near my mother's home. And since I was a lot older, and much changed since I'd left home as a boy, I thought a few days of quiet observation, in the disguise of my older self, would be an interesting thing to do. Besides, I was still young enough not to want my mother to be restricting things.

But, about this girl in the village, this house maid...

*(As maid, flirting)* Did you really go to school? Oh that's just amazing. My uncle knew someone who went to school, but he wasn't there as long as you. What's it like? Oh that's just amazing. Do you wear anything special when you finish? My uncle said

that they wore something special on their arm. He was... Where? (*Looking at arm, as if Secundus is talking to her*) Just there? On my arm? Right up there? Oh, sir! (*She giggles, and sits on the form*) Not here sir! Did you have a girl friend at school? Oh that's just amazing. I had a friend but he went into the army and ran off with a farmer's daughter. It didn't matter because... (*She lies on the form*) Oh sir! You what? Oh that's just amazing. I just wondered what it was like to get such a long education.

*The character turns on the form on his side and becomes Secundus.*

(*As Secundus*) Do me a favour? I'll give you six gold pieces if you do this job for me. Eh? Six gold pieces. You want gold pieces? You know your mistress? That one. That one. Tell her I'll pay her if she sleeps with me. Yes I do love you. But if you love me, you'll do this. The one with the grey hair, your mistress. Fifty gold pieces. Fifty pieces is what I'll pay her. I'll tell you later. I love you. Just tell her I want to sleep with her. Tell her I've got the hots for her. Make it up. Say anything. I don't care. Just get her here. I don't know. You're the one getting paid.

*He gets up and speaks to the audience.*

Omnes mulieres... yes, all women are sluts.

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*Secundus circles the stage.*

Never was there such a woman bought for a cheaper price. I did it for a dare. If this matron, this maid's mistress, would sell herself - and she a respectable citizen - then it was true: all women are...

*He sets up the form with a candle and wines bottles. The lights darken to intimacy.*

And she came along. That evening. I had a meal prepared. It was a lovely meal. Romantic candles. Wine. We never mentioned money.

*He turns a cassette player on with soft music.*

Not that we had these things, but you get my drift.

*He sits down as if to a meal.*

I asked about her family.

(*As matron*) My children have grown up. They have left now, and I never see them. My husband is dead, but he was a good father to

his children, and I loved him dearly. I live alone now - with a few servants. The time goes quickly. The sun rises and sets again before I get time to even think the day has started. I garden a little. I cook sometimes, and entertain friends. But my greatest trial is that I never see my children. One day...

*Secundus stands.*

*(As Secundus)* And so she spoke on. She told me of her family and her husband. I heard of happy times, and the things that saddened her most. She told me of her garden and her cooking and her painting. Yes! She painted!

*Secundus sits. The matron's hands are in his.*

*(As matron)* I paint vases. Just little scenes. Of soldiers, and scholars, and emperors. Sometimes I paint an animal or a bird. Sometimes flowers. Simple things. I'm a simple person. A little educated.

*Secundus stands.*

*(As Secundus)* She was intelligent. She was refined. I liked her simplicity. Her charm. Yet I mustn't divert. I mustn't divert from my aim. And who was I? she asked.

*Secundus sits. His body language conveys a certain seductivity.*

Oh, someone, I said. Just someone, a student. A visitor. A wandering scholar. A peripatetic intelligence. *(To audience)* And she laughed. She laughed at that.

*Secundus stands.*

She liked it. Have more wine? Ah and she spoke of the sea. How she wandered there while she waited. A silent stretch of sand. A shell. A twitching sponge. An abstract log with sand-worn spars projecting into the rising breeze. Wind in the hair, and the sound, and the smell, and the gulls, and the gulls, and the gulls.

But in the end, triumph! Besotted a little with wine, and besotted more with me and the charms, on fire a little with my sweet panderings and suave attentions, she said...

*He gives the audience the thumbs up.*

And the fifty gold pieces?

*Secundus turns off the cassette player loudly, arrogantly.*

There and then - from a table, by a table, on a table - in the room  
 - amo, amas, amat - she took one from her shoulder - amamus,  
 amatis - and the other - amant - ah! every women is -

It is youth. In youth, innocence and passion are bed mates. Youth does not know the ignorance bred by discovery. It is the petulance and stupidity of one who can't laugh. The naivety of youth's presumptions. The denial of suffering - as if we were not noble. Sacrilege of the sacred. The cruelty wrought by arrogance. (*Voice rising*) Huh? Huh? The pride spawned by one young puny thought. The inexplicable revenge that ourselves brings down on selves. The mystery of the gods. Huh? Huh? The judgement by vagaries. Time's expediencies. Our complexities of simplicities. If we are what we are, then it is useless. Huh? Youth doesn't know the silent stretch of sand. A shell. A twitching sponge. An abstract log with sand-worn spars projecting into the rising breeze. Wind in the hair, and the sound, and the smell, and the gulls, and the gulls, and the gulls.

My mother.

(*Loudly*) I am Secundus! Your son! And you are my mother.

I am Secundus. Your son.

And my mother. Shamed, when all her joy, at once, at once, when all her joy... me... All she loved. What she had waited for. Never mind the garden, the painting, the walks on the beach. I never wrote. I never wrote. And her waiting. Her suffering and joy.

And then at once, at once all smashed. A painted pot. Smashed.

That night, she hanged herself.

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*Secundus circles the stage as the lights fade very low. He takes the candle, and with knees and elbows on the floor, he makes his vow into the candle.*

My tongue, which speaks my thoughts, has wrought ruin. And by a vow, by the gods, by life itself, I'll never speak again. Never. I swear, by the words of my mouth. *Silentia*. Never.

Never.

*He snuffs out the candle with his tongue. Darkness.*