

THE MADAME SAFO

Written by

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TEXT OVER BLACK SCREEN

1930's Rosario was known as "The Argentine Chicago" because of its ruffians, hoodlums and mafia. At that time, Rosario's brothels and trafficking of women were controlled by the powerful Zwi-Migdal mafia. In "Pichincha", Rosario's red light district near the train station, The Madame Safo was the most luxurious brothel and was frequented by politicians as well as wealthy and powerful men. The Safo owned some 15 European women. This is the story of one of them....

FADE IN:

EXT. CAFE PARISIEN - NIGHT

Black velvet curtains block the interior of Cafe Parisien.

SUPER: ROSARIO, ARGENTINA. 1930

INT. CAFE PARISIEN - THEATER BAR - NIGHT

Elegant place crowded with WEALTHY MOBSTERS, PIMPS and RUFFIANS. Sitting at an exclusive table is GIOVANNI MALATESTA, 60s, a tall, sophisticated Italian with a violent nature. He demands drinks from the WAITER.

GIOVANNI

Two scotch on the rocks. Now!

His bodyguard PAISANO, 40s, mobster ruffian, with an eye-patch that makes him all the more intimidating, sits by his side.

GIOVANNI (CONT'D)

Let's see which one of the little whores comes back with us this time...

INT. CAFE PARISIEN - BACKSTAGE - NIGHT

In contrast to the elegant and glamorous seating area, off stage in the wings, we see eight terrified EUROPEAN GIRLS. They are all huddled together in fear, wearing transparent nightgowns and crying uncontrollably.

INT. CAFE PARISIEN - THEATER BAR - NIGHT

A bustling anxiety arises as the auction begins. As a gorgeous red velvet curtain opens, an ELDERLY MADAM appears. Very excited, Giovanni stands, claps enthusiastically.

ELDERLY MADAM

(Polish accent)

Good evening gentlemen. Tonight we have the finest European delights from France and Poland. The purest virgin delicacies in the world.

(in Polish, subtitled)

Let's get started.

The AUCTIONEER, 60s, slams the gavel while CRUEL RUFFIAN pushes the frightened, European Girls out onto the stage.

Elderly Madam forces European Girls to line up, while a powerful light blind them. Ruffians and Pimps whistle, totally entranced.

Elderly Madam pulls forward JAYA, a 16 year old Polish Jew whose neglect shows in her fragile white skin. Elderly Madam roughly fondles Jaya's legs, breasts, butt, torso and hair.

ELDERLY MADAM (CONT'D)

This is Jaya, sixteen years old, a Polish Jew, just arrived off the boat. But now she's ready to be docked.

The men all laugh. Giovanni winks at Paisano.

GIOVANNI

A virgin for the Safo.

PAISANO

Nice piece of stuff...

Giovanni laughs. Elderly Madam roughly opens Jaya's mouth, as if she were an animal.

ELDERLY MADAM

Don't take my word for it. Check it out for yourselves, she's even got all her teeth.

Tears fall down Jaya's face. Excited men bet, raise their hands, behave like children at an amusement park.

WEALTHY MOBSTER #1

1200!

Elderly Madam forcefully raises Jaya's hand up in the air.

ELDERLY MADAM  
1200! Who offers more?

Giovanni raises his hand.

GIOVANNI  
1500!

ELDERLY MADAM  
1500... gentlemen. Who will give  
more? Isn't she a beauty, pure as  
the driven snow? Young and healthy.

Jaya, terrified, closes her eyes. She can't believe what is  
happening to her.

WEALTHY MOBSTER #1  
1900!

ELDERLY MADAM  
1900... Do I hear more?

Boastfully, Giovanni stands up, shouts out a number.

GIOVANNI  
3000, damn it!

ELDERLY MADAM  
What a number gentlemen.

Everybody stares at Giovanni, several Wealthy Mobsters raise  
their glasses in homage. He bows, waives. The Auctioneer  
slams the gavel.

AUCTIONEER  
Jaya for 3000 pesos, going once,  
going twice. Sold!

Elderly Madam triumphantly raises Jaya's arm.

ELDERLY MADAM  
The Polish girl goes to Mr.  
Giovanni Malatesta.

Paisano and Giovanni celebrate their purchase with a toast.  
They all clap.

INT. CAFE PARISIEN - OFFICE - NIGHT

Giovanni hands a bundle of money to Auctioneer, who gives him  
Jaya's property title.

INSERT - JAYA'S PROPERTY TITLE

By this means I certify that Miss Jaya Gombrowickz has been acquired by The Madame Safo, on June 23rd of 1930 at the Cafe Parisien, Rosario, Argentina.

BACK TO SCENE

Giovanni and Auctioneer shake hands.

EXT. ROSARIO - CITY STREET - MORNING

Eclectic architecture reflects a time of heavy immigration from many countries. There are English buildings disbursed among Spanish colonial houses and French style mansions. The setting demonstrates the mingling of cultures.

SUPER: ONE YEAR LATER, 1931

MARIA RIBELLI, an Italian in her mid 20s, with the spirit of a warrior, strolls across the sidewalk, enjoying the sun as it warms her pale face.

EXT. ENTRANCE STATE SCHOOL - MORNING

Maria walks through the main entrance. On the façade there is a sign that reads: "State School N° 2.

INT. STATE SCHOOL - MUSIC CLASSROOM - MORNING

Maria, stands up in front of the group of 8 years old STUDENTS.

MARIA

Today I promised to give you flute lessons.

Very excited, the kids take the flutes out of their bags except for one GIRL STUDENT. Downcast, she looks at Maria. She doesn't own a flute. Maria approaches the Girl Student. She hides something behind her.

Filled with happiness, Boy Student grabs his new flute. Maria walks toward the Girl Student who's looking at her in expectation.

MARIA (CONT'D)

Laura, here's your flute.

GIRL STUDENT

Is it for me?

MARIA

Yes, my dear. It's yours now.

Girl Student jumps up impulsively, hugs Maria tightly, her eyes swell with tears of gratitude.

GIRL STUDENT

Thank you, Mrs. Maria. My mom will be very, very happy about this.

Maria, touched by her genuineness tries to hide her own tears.

EXT. CITY STREET - MIDDAY

Maria leaves the school building. Distracted, she walks by the front door of a bar. RUFFIAN #1 & RUFFIAN #2, both Italian immigrants, drink beer on the sidewalk. They are taken by Maria's innocent beauty.

They surround her, competing for her attention.

RUFFIAN #1

Hey, beautiful! Why don't you have some drinks with me?

(in Italian, subtitled)

This is your lucky day!

RUFFIAN #2

Don't you listen to him, *bellezza*. I've got way more to offer than him.

Maria fakes a smile, continues on, walks away.

INT. THE SILVERSMITH SHOP - MORNING

A SILVERSMITH, 70s, absorbed in his work, engraves the letter M in the center of a silver dagger's handle.

Silversmith sharpens the blade several times with a stone, looks at the dagger with approval, inserts it into its sheath. He places the newly finished silver dagger on the counter.

The dagger has an ornate handle and sheath. It's stunning.

FREDDO BOGLIONI, 30s, a emotionally-unbalanced, Italian ruffian enters. Though very good with the knife, he has a scar on his face.

Dressed like the other local ruffians "The Malevos", Freddo wears a modest suit, a freshly ironed shirt, a tango hat, and a white neckerchief. Silversmith welcomes him with a smile, hands him the silver dagger.

FREDDO

A gift for my beautiful wife,  
Maria. It's not easy to live in  
Pichincha. Especially for a woman.

Freddo unsheathes it, looks back at the silversmith with approval.

EXT. CITY STREET - MIDDAY

On the façade of an old grey Italian style house we see a sign painted in bright colors that reads: "*La Casa del Inmigrante*". Maria enters.

INT. MARIA AND FREDDO'S HOME - KITCHEN - MIDDAY

Reluctantly, Maria cuts vegetables, frequently glancing at the clock on the wall. She listens to the radio.

ANNOUNCER

As expected President General  
Uriburu called again for the  
Election Committee to disallow the  
candidacies of the Civic Union  
Party. Thus Agustin Justo, another  
conservative military man, was  
elected as the new President...

Freddo appears, turns off the radio, places the gift in front of her. Maria opens it: it's the silver dagger.

She unsheathes it, stares at the two sharp edges carefully. Maria forces herself to smile at Freddo.

MARIA

Thanks, Freddo.

Expecting to be thanked by Maria with a hug and a kiss, he gets angry.

FREDDO

Thank you. Is that all I get?

MARIA

What do you expect me to do?

Maria kisses Freddo on the cheek, then turns around, keeps cutting vegetables. Freddo hugs her from behind, kisses her on the neck. Maria pushes him away gently.

FREDDO

What the hell is wrong with you woman?

MARIA

I'm exhausted. It was a long day at the school.

FREDDO

I've told you a hundred times, I don't want you to work. Who's going to take care of the house while you're teaching music to those fucking kids? Am I supposed to cook my own dinner?

(beat)

If you want to work, why don't you come with me to the bar?

Freddo opens the dresser drawer, grabs a little box, opens it. There's only some loose change inside.

MARIA

There's no way I'm going to that filthy whorehouse. You know music is my passion and how much I love teaching those lovely kids!

FREDDO

(mocks her)

Mm lovely kids...

(beat)

Maria, where's the money? I had some money here. Where is it?

MARIA

(angry)

Excuse me? I earned that money myself and I spent it because it's mine. Do you have a problem with that?

Furious, he grabs Maria by the hair.

FREDDO

Do you want to kill me? I owe a lot of money, you fucking bitch.



MARIA  
 You're a bookie.  
 (in Italian, subtitled)  
 It's not my fault.

Freddo points at the clock on the wall, berates Maria for her behavior.

FREDDO  
 It's 1:30 already, I'm starving and  
 you're still cooking.

Freddo violently grabs the knife Maria is using, stabs it into the table. Maria screams. Freddo slams the door, leaving.

Maria takes the dagger, stares again at the sharp edge.

INT. FREDDO'S BAR - AFTERNOON

A gloomy, decrepit bar. Freddo drinks a beer at one of the tables, BRUNETTE PROSTITUTE is on his lap. They fondle each other.

At the bar, LONGSHOREMEN #1 and #2 flirt with a CHUBBY WAITRESS. SAILORS #1 and #2, and RUFFIAN #1 finish making a deal with CHEAP PROSTITUTES #1, #2 and #3. A COUPLE dances tango.

QUARRELSOME RUFFIANS #1 & #2 break in, with a cocky manner corner Freddo.

QUARRELSOME RUFFIAN #1  
 Freddo Boglioni... Freddo, Freddo.  
 Our boss sent us for his money.  
 Don't make me have to ask you for  
 it.

Freddo gestures for Brunette Prostitute to leave.

FREDDO  
 Just hold on a little longer,  
 Chicho. Give me a few more days.

QUARRELSOME RUFFIAN #1  
 You know the rules. If you don't  
 give me the money, I'll have to  
 kill you and I'm not really in the  
 mood...

FREDDO  
 I'm busy right now, come back  
 later.

He roughly grabs Freddo by the neck.

QUARRELSOME RUFFIAN #1  
Stop screwing with me, okay?

Just as Freddo breaks loose, Quarrelsome Ruffian #2 steps in and puts a knife to his throat.

FREDDO  
I'm just asking for a few days.  
Then you'll get your fucking money.

They stare at each other for a moment. Quarrelsome Ruffian #2 presses the knife into his skin. With one quick flick, he cuts Freddo's face.

QUARRELSOME RUFFIAN #2  
We'll come back in a few days...  
and if you don't pay up, we'll cut  
you the balls...

All eyes upon them. As both Ruffian leave, Freddo wipes the blood off of his face.

FREDDO  
(to the clients)  
What the hell are you looking at?  
Bastards. Mind your own business.

Everyone goes back to what they were doing.

INT. RICKY'S TENEMENT HOME - LATE AFTERNOON

Maria knocks at a door, looks around to make sure nobody sees her. RICKY, 40s, student, opens the door. Ricky escorts Maria inside. A knife is visible in his waistband.

ANTONIO, 40s, Freddo's friend, hidden in an external corridor, observes them.

INT. FREDDO'S BAR - LATE AFTERNOON

Antonio enters, respectfully stands in front of Freddo. Prostitute stands too, Freddo pats her ass, she leaves.

INT. RICKY'S TENEMENT HOUSE - EVENING

Seated at a table, Maria teaches Ricky how to write. Maria reads a sentence aloud and Ricky writes it out for Maria to check his grammar.

MARIA

You're getting better every day!

NANCY, Ricky's wife, approaches the table with two cups of coffee.

NANCY

Here's some coffee for both of you.  
I have to go to work now and I'm  
running late.

(beat)

Maria, did you think about our  
offer? Won't you come with us?

MARIA

Yes, Nancy. I'm coming with us.

Nancy and Ricky smile at Maria.

NANCY

I'm afraid one day he'll beat you  
so badly you'll end up in the  
hospital again.

Maria nods. Nancy kisses Ricky, she leaves.

EXT. SIDEWALK - LATE AFTERNOON

Freddo jumps out of the car, walks frantically with Antonio following behind. Some KIDS play soccer with a rag ball.

FREDDO

Hey kids, does Ricky live here?

KIDS

(overlapping)

Yes! He's on the ground floor.  
Down the hall. In front of the  
patio!

Freddo walks angrily toward the tenement complex.

INT. TENEMENT COMPLEX - HALLWAY - EVENING

Freddo's rumbling footsteps are heard throughout the hallway. As Nancy is leaving, Freddo bumps into her. He ignores her and keeps walking.

In a rage, he kicks a door. It flies open. A YOUNG MOTHER is inside breast-feeding her BABY. She screams, frightened.

INT. RICKY'S TENEMENT HOME - EVENING

Maria nervously looks at the clock on the wall.

MARIA

It's really late. What if Freddo arrives early and doesn't find me home?

Maria walks toward the door.

INT. TENEMENT COMPLEX - HALLWAY - EVENING

Freddo violently opens another door...

An ELDERLY COUPLE having dinner, look at him paralyzed with fear.

INT. RICKY'S TENEMENT HOME - EVENING

Maria and Ricky kiss each other goodbye.

MARIA

See you next week, Ricky. You really are getting much better.

RICKY

I'm very grateful to you Maria.

The door flies open. Full of rage, Freddo bursts in. Maria terrified hides behind Ricky.

FREDDO

How long have you been fucking around with this mother fucker, huh?

Freddo dumps Maria's purse upside down, pencils, a book, school supplies, a wallet, and the silver dagger fall out. He quickly grabs the silver dagger, unsheathes it.

MARIA

He's just a friend. I'm teaching him how to read and write.

Ricky lunges at Freddo trying to grab the silver dagger. They struggle. Freddo shoves Ricky to the floor. Ricky struggles to his feet.

RICKY

Stop it, Freddo. She didn't do anything wrong.

Freddo approaches Ricky, softly caresses his face with the silver dagger.

FREDDO

Let's take this outside. Whoever  
lives, keeps her.

Freddo steps out. Maria stands in front of Ricky.

MARIA

Don't go. Don't go. I know him,  
he'll kill you.

Ricky leaves.

EXT. TENEMENT COMPLEX - PATIO - NIGHT

Gloomy patio with peeling walls. Freddo and Ricky are brazenly preparing to duel putting everything on the line.

AN OLD MAN with yellow teeth, TWO FAT WOMEN, a HEAVY YOUNG GIRL holding her CHILD, OTHER NEIGHBORS form a wide circle surrounding them. They wait in silence for the duel to start.

Maria swiftly makes her way through the crowd, positions herself between Freddo and Ricky.

MARIA

Are you both crazy? What are you  
doing? What are you doing?

Maria lunges at Freddo, grabs his arm, desperately begs.

MARIA (CONT'D)

Please Freddo. I beg you. I was  
just helping him with his studies.  
My God, are you crazy?!

Freddo pushes her away, gestures for Antonio to take her back to a corner.

Ricky's hand trembles, Freddo's hand holds the dagger firmly.

THE DUEL

Ricky takes the first step, nicking Freddo's arm.

Freddo leaps back, tearing Ricky's shirt with an abrupt move.

Not feeling intimidated, Ricky attacks again.

With one quick move, Freddo blocks Ricky's knife.

The crowd, mesmerized, watches the fight in fascination. Maria tries frantically to free herself from Antonio.

MARIA

They'll kill each other!  
Why don't you stop them?

Freddo fights back, charges at Ricky.

Ricky blocks him.

Freddo quickly cuts him on the forehead.

Ricky, with blood dripping in his eyes blinding him, is enraged.

Determined, he moves forward to attack Freddo.

Freddo blocks him, stabs Ricky in the heart.

Ricky falls to the ground. Maria frees herself from Antonio, runs toward Ricky. She leans over Ricky, sobs.

Ricky's eyes close, dies. Maria shouts inconsolably. Freddo grabs her by the hair, caresses her face with the bloody silver dagger.

FREDDO

So you like to fuck, do you?  
(beat)  
Now you will fuck.

EXT. CITY STREET - RED ZONE - NIGHT

WORKING CLASS MEN, SAILORS, PROSTITUTES and Ruffians go in and out of bars and brothels. They talk cheerfully on sidewalks, walk through the vibrant party atmosphere of the neighborhood streets. Cats are on the rooftops, stray dogs bark.

A black car slowly drives by.

INT. FREDDO'S CAR (MOVING) - NIGHT

Antonio drives. In the back seat, Freddo holds a semi-conscious Maria. Her left eye is swollen shut and there are bruises all over her face and arms. Blood trickles from her lips.

EXT. CITY STREET - RED ZONE - NIGHT

As the car advances, the quality of the brothels improves dramatically. There are plaques on the walls: PETIT TRIANON, CHANTECLER, CHARLESTON, ROYAL, TORINO... Even the MEN and WOMEN are more sophisticated.

The car finally stops in front of a magnificent french-style mansion. On the wall a brass plaque reads: "THE MADAME SAFO".

INT. SAFO BROTHEL - ENTRY HALL - NIGHT

The luxurious entry hall is wide, with marble floors and an exclusive sitting area. As Antonio holds Maria, Freddo paces the entry hall.

Paisano, appears, goes directly to Maria, carelessly raises her chin.

PAISANO

Look at this girl. What did you do to her?

FREDDO

Well I guess I overreacted a bit, Paisano.

PAISANO

If the madame sees her like this, she won't want her Freddo.

FREDDO

You told me that everything was arranged. Don't forget that you owe me a big one.

PAISANO

The madame is not going to like this. Bring her back when she's in one piece.

FREDDO

Come on, Paisanito. I killed that bastard before he killed you. If I hadn't, you wouldn't be here now.

PAISANO

It's not up to me. Madame Safo is very picky. She only accepts girls in good condition.

Freddo takes the silver dagger from his waistband, places it under Paisano's eye pressing it a little, threatening to take his eye out.

FREDDO

I don't want to have to blind you.  
You can see, only because of me.

Paisano looks Freddo straight in the eye, without flinching grabs the dagger, pulling it away.

Paisano shoves Freddo away, holds the silver dagger tight, admiring the ornate handcrafted work on its handle. Paisano cleans the remaining blood with a handkerchief. He likes it.

Freddo changes his attitude, indirectly offers the dagger to Paisano to close the deal.

FREDDO (CONT'D)

How do you like it? This piece is  
an avenger.

Paisano considers the unspoken offer.

PAISANO

Let me see what I can do.

Paisano walks across the main room, leaving the cedar door half open. Maria, looking through it, makes out...

A lavish salon, SAFO PROSTITUTES in silk Charleston dresses, pearl necklaces, velvet shoes, walking around listlessly. A COUPLE dances tango, WEALTHY CLIENTS having a good time, drink, smoke, chat.

Antonio sits Maria on one of the couches. Maria in pain, leans her head on Antonio's shoulder. Freddo, impatient, peeks into the salon. At a distance he sees...

MADAME SAFO, 47, blonde French manager of the brothel, with mysterious eyes, arrogantly smoking a cigarette with her unique mother of pearl cigarette holder.

She chats with Giovanni and Wealthy Clients, who, enchanted by her magnetic personality, are fascinated at her.

FREDDO

Holy shit, the rich sure know how  
to party.

ANTONIO

Damn! You really beat the shit out  
of her.



FREDDO

Shut up, you bastard. Stand her up  
and hold her up straight. The  
Madame is coming.

Freddo combs his hair, adjusts his neckerchief. Antonio helps Maria get to her feet and holds her up with difficulty.

Like a royal duchess, waving her cigarette holder, Madame Safo, appears. She is escorted by Paisano and PAULINO, 40s, a kind hearted chubby, gay, servant.

MADAME SAFO

(In French, subtitled)

Nice to meet you. I'm Madame Safo.

She arrogantly extends her hand.

FREDDO

Good Evening, madame.

Intimidated by her presence, Freddo kisses her hand.

FREDDO (CONT'D)

This... this is Maria.

Madame Safo gets closer to Maria, gently examines her carefully. She acts as if she is buying a gem: raises her chin, opens her mouth, caresses her face, touches her hair.

Nostalgically, she stares at Maria for a few seconds, there's something endearing in her face that reminds her of happier times.

Paisano and Freddo exchange worried looks, anxious to know Madame Safo's response. There's tension in the air. After examining Maria, she turns around, speaks to Paulino without hesitation.

MADAME SAFO

Take care to nurse her back to  
health. We need her working as soon  
as possible.

Paulino gently lifts Maria, takes her away. Maria turns her head slightly, glaring at Freddo with contempt. Freddo stands in silence.