

# James Miller

## *GIRL 3*

(Luisa Valenzuela, *He Who Searches*)

“Look, you’re tired and I’m going to tell you everything as if it were a story. It will do you good, it will change your ideas and I’ll tell it to you in the simplest way even though you won’t believe me.” I nod, letting her chatter on. She’s a nervy, pretty little thing, her pale face turned up and open, her brown eyes wide with energy. “In the morning, you see, I’m suspicious, anxious and paranoid. Worms run like fingers through my brain and I recite from memory, forwards and backwards, the text of the invisible fathers. What can be happening to the invisible fathers? What makes them put the few sons they have adopted to such torture? What makes them send their daughters far away?” The question, I assume, is rhetorical. Once again, I’m impressed by her facility with different languages. Her dementia takes many forms but what really astonishes me are the things she seems to know. It’s incredible. I make a note on my pad. She really is a fascinating case. On the table beside us the tape recorder is running, capturing her every inflexion, every shift and drop of her accent. “In the morning the light is too bright and I squint through my eyes at the sun. Oh, these inhuman pains.” She sighs and stares at the light in the ceiling. “I have a recurring dream where I walk dripping wet and dazed with my limbs bent out of shape and shards of rope still hanging from my wrists and ankles and I go, walking to the Plaza de Mayo, where someone, some loving mother will tell me who I really am.”

She shakes her head, sighing again and I wait for her to speak. “At least that’s the idea. But that never happens. Whenever she is about to speak I wake up. I always wake up. Sometimes I think the bed will be damp with the waters of the Río de la Plata and I will find scraps of rope with me, buried like secrets among the sheets. But no... Oh come on, please don’t look at me that way. Please. *Todos nosotros sabemos lo que pasa...* And so, over cornflakes and tea I squint at my parents. The light is so bright and I look for clues. There should be blood all over the hands of the man who

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calls himself my father, their should be gristle under his fingernails. But I don't see anything. With mother it's even worse. I have grown to resemble her. They say we are so much alike, my friends say it. Oh god. It's just a dream, I tell myself, a screen, a scream behind the screen, this life of mine. Brittle surfaces so bright I have to look away. Better not to look too hard isn't it? *Lo mejor es continuar como si nada ¿no crees?* Go to school and keep my head down. Of course, even here we're not safe. The cowards! You heard what they did? They took the students away. And for what? For organising? For daring to speak. They say some of the girls were raped. And this happens here, in this good country?" She shakes her head and curls her lip, making as if to spit. Involuntarily, I flinch. "Mornings are like starched sheets and I remember other things... I remember the nights. *Her* nights. One's own life can only be narrated if it does not involve others, if it does not stoop to anecdote. One can retouch it, perhaps? Rewrite it, maybe? What



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do you think? Sometimes I slip between the words. I fall out of language. *¿Qué piensas?* To do what I do I must do it alone and unarmed. But..." She hangs her head, brown hair falling over her face. I wait for her to sit up again.

"I tell the careers advisor that I want to study at the Universidad de Buenos Aires. She doesn't listen. She looks at me like I'm mad. I keep saying things I'm not supposed to. I was supposed to say I want to study at the university of Leeds, Manchester, Nottingham... you know, one of those places, dreary and English." She frowns. "I don't care what you think or what my parents say. I'm not who you think I am. I'm not really a schoolgirl at Godolphin and Latymer. This isn't really me. This place we're in, this isn't really London. There is an upside down me waiting on the otherside of the world. A city of the dead inhabited only by cats. Come night and the invisible fathers will stalk the streets their long limbs creeping through the shadows like monstrous spiders. This is what the bright lights stop me from seeing. *¡Madre de Dios!* I stick pins in all the photos."

The subject is a seventeen year old girl with marked schizoid tendencies. Initial diagnosis of a borderline personality disorder is, in my expert opinion, unable to account for the marked differences in her personality shifts. Each persona has certain clearly defined characteristics. At the same time, the subject's mania is intercut with moments of apparent self-knowledge, even irony, in which she appear to reflect critically on her competing personalities. The fluctuation seems most extreme between the English and Argentine identities. An Anglo-Argentine mania, we might call it.

"Is he a doctor or some other one? He comes for me in the evenings. The same patient concern in his eyes regardless of the different disguises. I act like I don't recognise him. Sometimes he comes dressed as a postman pretending to bring a letter with the wrong name. Sometimes he is a man to read the gas meter. A cheap transvestite or a teacher or a social worker or an undercover policeman. Everytime he goes he leaves just a little bit behind, *una pieza de memoria*, a trace of who he thinks he is or who he might want to be. I hide the disguises under the bed. I never give them back. It might be a fake eyelash or a soft blue scarf. A paperclip and a rubber band. A prescription for pain killers. A pamphlet for the Montoneros. He always comes very late, at three am, the last of the night or the first of the morning. I talk to him and he shuffles in and looks a little guilty, touches his face, fingering his disguises, the beard or the hat, the prothesis stuck to his nose. He wears fake tan and eyeliner, a glittery tiara, stockings and a tutu. *¿Quién se cree que es? ¿El hermano-tranvesito de Jorge Videl?* If only we could all be nice English gentlemen! Somewhere about him is a tape recorder and I know he takes home my words, hoards them, pours over them for secret