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A.I.D.S.

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A.I.D.S.

a one-act play

The persons: OTTO, a victim of A.I.D.S.; EVAN, his best friend. The scene: today, in New York; a hospital room; the window is open; OTTO is looking with curiosity outside, through a glass-door; he is very sick, very weak; he suddenly turns to run back to his bed; he moves anyhow with difficulty, with pain; he must have seen someone approaching the door; EVAN, his best friend, enters the room.

EVAN (*alarmed, helping him*) What are you doing? Why are you up? You shouldn't, you know that . . . You are too weak . . . (*he succeeds in helping him back into the bed; a silence*) How do you feel today? (*a vague gesture; OTTO indicates that he feels "so-so"*) You're so pale, breathless. Why did you get up? Just call the nurse, if you need something . . . (*kindly*) Do you need anything? Water, orange juice? . . . (*OTTO indicates he needs nothing; a silence*) I'm late today because of the traffic, because of our Parade . . . Do you remember last year? We were together, hand in hand, happy, proud of being in that Parade, of our relationship, of our . . . (*he takes his hand; he hesitates*) . . . love.

OTTO Who was there?

EVAN Everybody . . . Jim, Rudolph, Tony, Michael, Pablo . . . a group of senior citizens, some couples—proud parents of "gays"— . . . policemen, soldiers—men and women— . . . A poster read: "Protect our Embassy in Moscow with "gay" soldiers. You can trust only them." (*OTTO smiles*) They were all amused by it and they applauded with enthusiasm. You see? Our sense of humor is not dead.

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- OTTO (*with a touch of sadness*) That will never die, fortunately. (*a silence*) Who was in the parade—from our bunch?
- EVAN Couples . . . Jim and Rudolph, Tony and Pablo, Mark and Phil . . . Fat Rose and her new girlfriend . . .
- OTTO David?
- EVAN I didn't see him.
- OTTO Art?
- EVAN Yes . . . in a wheel-chair . . . Moses was pushing him . . .
- OTTO Bill?
- EVAN (*after a hesitation*) I was told he went home . . . to his mother.
- OTTO How is he?
- EVAN (*carefully*) Not too well . . . They say it's the end . . . One more week, maybe . . .
- OTTO What about Conrad? Is he with him? Was he allowed to—?
- EVAN (*interrupting*) I went to his funeral, yesterday . . .
- OTTO Why didn't you tell me?
- EVAN It's not easy to tell a friend that—
- OTTO —that we are all dying, one after the other, implacably?
- EVAN It's not true . . . I'm still "negative."
- OTTO For how long? (*a brief silence*) I'm sorry . . .
- EVAN For ever, I hope.
- OTTO I hope so too. For me . . . it's over. (*suddenly; surprising* EVAN) What was that doctor telling you, in the corridor?
- EVAN (*surprised, hesitating*) Hah . . . He is the hospital director . . .
- OTTO What did he want from you?
- EVAN The kind of guy who knows everything and likes to talk. Medicines, complications, costs, last gossip from Europe

. . . (*OTTO studies him*) It seems a huge number of heterosexuals are getting it now. More and more. Especially in Africa. More than fifty per cent are heterosexuals there. Thirty per cent, drug-addicts . . . Prostitutes, two out of three . . . The pimps are furious. No business. They beat the poor girls up. One of them—just sixteen—was found with her throat cut—

OTTO (*interrupting*) What did he say about me?

EVAN He knows all the details, every case. He told me the poor fellow in the next room is in bad shape. Ten more days, at most . . .

OTTO (*insisting*) What did he say, about me?

EVAN Your case is not as desperate as—

OTTO How long?

EVAN Hoh . . . Much longer. He was telling me that—

OTTO (*interrupting*) One month? Two months?

EVAN (*avoiding*) . . . He was mentioning prices, costs . . . The Hospital is spending more than twelve thousand dollars for the ten days your neighbor has got—

OTTO What about me? How many more weeks?

EVAN Months . . . He said you've got months, many—

OTTO How many?

EVAN (*hesitating*) . . . Six, at least . . .

OTTO Are you lying to me?

EVAN No . . . I'm not.

OTTO Out of friendship?

EVAN Out of love, you mean? (*kisses his hand*)

OTTO Are you lying to me, "out of love?"

EVAN No . . . We have always been honest, with each other . . .

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- OTTO I know. (*he studies him*) But I know you too well not to sense that you're hiding something . . .
- EVAN Why? If you had only ten days or ten weeks, why would I lie to you? It's always better to know.
- OTTO It's better. Tell me everything.
- EVAN I swear it on our relationship, on the wonderful memories we share.
- OTTO Six months?
- EVAN At least—he said. Cross my heart. (*a silence*)
- OTTO You're hiding something else, then . . . What?
- EVAN (*uncertain*) No . . . I don't . . .
- OTTO Who else died?
(*EVAN hands him a newspaper, open on the obits.*)
- EVAN (*while OTTO is reading*) Three more. (*OTTO reads carefully*) A strange trio . . . A priest, a dancer and a doctor . . . Read the one about the doctor.
- OTTO Someone we know?
- EVAN No.
- OTTO (*reading carefully*) Are they blaming us?
- EVAN No.
- OTTO (*still reading*) We are lucky this time . . . They blame us for everything . . . (*discovering something*) Hah.
- EVAN He showed guts, didn't he?
- OTTO He is not the first one. (*he thinks; reflects*)
- EVAN (*curious*) What are you thinking about?
- OTTO How he did it. Just a plunge into nothingness.
- EVAN He wanted to avoid the agony of the last days . . . You should see the guy in room 911 . . . Frightening.
- OTTO To whom?

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- EVAN (*uneasy*) To those who see him . . . Orderlies, friends . . .
- OTTO Does he still have friends? I never saw anyone visiting him.
- EVAN He's not from around here. He comes from Texas. (*a silence; they stare at each other*)
- OTTO What are *you* thinking about?
- EVAN (*vague*) Nothing.
- OTTO If you're getting bored, just go.
- EVAN Me, bored? With you? Never!
- OTTO Maybe you've something to do, something urgent.
- EVAN Nothing, absolutely nothing. I can stay here the whole afternoon. For as long as they allow me. Until they kick me out. (*a pause*)
- OTTO I *know* you're hiding something from me.
- EVAN You *know*? What do you know? Who told you?
- OTTO I saw.
- EVAN What did you see?
- OTTO Outside, in the corridor.
- EVAN What did you see?
- OTTO That doctor—the director—gave you an envelope. What kind of envelope? Another bill?
- EVAN Oh no! They know we can't afford it any longer. You've sold your apartment, paintings, your furniture. They can't force me to sell anything . . . (*smiling bitterly*) I am not—according to the Law—a relative. What an irony! I am your most intimate friend and I'm not considered part of the family!
- OTTO Maybe they're blackmailing you. Either you pay or . . . ?
- EVAN Or . . . ? What can they do to me?
- OTTO Nothing to you. Maybe to me . . .
- EVAN What? (*joking*) Poison you?

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- OTTO Throw me into the street. There are so many sick people—homeless, in the streets of New York.
- EVAN They can't do that to you. I'm around. I'll defend you. The ones they kicked out had no one to protect them, to defend them.
- OTTO (*suddenly, again; a precise question*) What's in that envelope?
- EVAN (*vague*) Figures, statistics. He explained that each one of you costs more than one thousand dollars a day to the Hospital. They are afraid to go bankrupt. (*ironical*) They deserve to. They should. They are only interested in "profits."
- OTTO (*thinking it over, calculating in his mind*) Six months . . . If it's true, it's over two hundred thousand dollars . . .
- EVAN It's what they say. They always exaggerate.
- OTTO Do *you* agree on that figure?
- EVAN (*uncertain*) Well . . . Many papers mention that figure. It must be true . . . One thousand a day, at least.
- OTTO All right. Show me those statistics, that envelope. You know I love numbers.
- EVAN (*trying to change the subject*) What's OUR number?
- OTTO (*with a touch of sadness*) Eight . . . I should have at least eight months, if there were any justice in this world . . . (*they smile*)
- EVAN We met on the eighth—your birthday . . . We were both born in August—the eighth month. When travelling, we always asked for the eighth floor—a room containing number eight . . . The first months we always exchanged gifts, on the eight—
- OTTO Only the first months.
- EVAN Then we decided together—full agreement—to stop . . . Too many neckties, shirts, underwear, chocolates . . . We decided to lose weight, remember?

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- OTTO (*with a sense of humor*) I succeeded, look at me. I've lost forty-nine pounds. (EVAN, moved, kisses his forehead)
- EVAN You told me: forty-eight.
- OTTO That was yesterday. (*a silence*)
- OTTO (*insisting*) What's in that envelope?
- EVAN (*hesitating*) It will seem strange, to you . . . A check.
- OTTO (*surprised*) A check? What happened? They feel guilty, all of a sudden, and they are reimbursing us? You see? There is some justice in this world! And I should be ashamed of myself! I was in such a hurry to condemn hospitals and society! How much are we getting back? Did they admit they overcharged? (*a silence; EVAN is motionless*) Let me see. I'll figure everything in three minutes. How much we paid, how much we are getting back; and if they are shortchanging us.
- EVAN (*hesitating*) It's no reimbursement.
- OTTO What is it, then? Some award for good behavior? I'm no trouble here. I'm as quiet as a little tiny mouse.
- EVAN (*carefully*) An unusual, bizarre . . . proposal.
- OTTO Is it money or a proposal?
- EVAN Both.
- OTTO That is?
- EVAN A certain amount if . . . the proposal is . . . acceptable.
- OTTO How much?
- EVAN . . . Twenty thousand.
- OTTO (*very surprised*) That's a fortune, for us. What kind of proposal? Did you accept it? Say "yes" right away. We need that money.
- EVAN The proposal is . . . absurd.
- OTTO Accept it all the same. What's important today is that money.

In my will there is nothing left for you. What do they want from us? What must we do?

EVAN The money is not . . . for us. It's for the A.I.D.S. Foundation.

OTTO (*surprised*) Hah . . . That's strange . . . His personal gift? Who caught A.I.D.S.? His son? His brother?

EVAN It's not a personal gift . . . It comes from a Bank. Some special Fund . . .

OTTO For what? What purpose? A moral crisis? Guilt? Are they ashamed they're charging one thousand dollars a day for a dump like this? (*a pause*) Explain the proposal. (*a pause*) Am I part of it? (*Evan nods. He finally shows the envelope; he is ready to tear it up.*)

EVAN Let's tear it up and forget the whole thing.

OTTO (*intevenering*) No! You can't throw away twenty thousand like that. I must know. I'm involved in this. It's about me too,—you said so.

EVAN (*slowly, carefully*) You know how they think—these Hospital Directors . . . They're just accountants . . . They figure out the best budget, they are afraid to be fired if they don't make a profit . . .

OTTO What did he tell you?

EVAN (*uncertain, slowly*) That . . . as a rule . . . because of . . . considering . . . (*he cannot express himself clearly*)

OTTO Tell me something. Did he give the same proposal to the guy next door—the one who has just ten days left?

EVAN No.

OTTO (*slowly*) I begin to understand . . . That proposal is only for the ones who have eight more months to live. (*EVAN does not dare look into his eyes; he knows OTTO has understood.*) The pills? Did he give you the pills?

EVAN What pills?

OTTO The poison you're supposed to give me.

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- EVAN Oh no! The situation is . . . optional, absolutely optional.
- OTTO All right. I'll volunteer for it! Where are the pills? I'll take them "volunteerly."
- EVAN No pills. He doesn't supply anything.
- OTTO (*ironical*) What a gentleman!
- EVAN He does not want to be involved in . . .
- OTTO Naturally!
- EVAN He is being . . . correct, in a way.
- OTTO Very correct.
- EVAN He explained—with polite detachment—advantages and disadvantages.
- OTTO Tell me about the "disadvantages."
- EVAN The last days are . . . terrible.
- OTTO (*bitterly ironical*) I know. An infernal agony. I thought about it.
- EVAN About what?
- OTTO The agony. How to avoid it. (*a silence; they look at each other*) As you can see, they have read my thoughts, they have guessed.
- EVAN Guessed what?
- OTTO That I don't want that agony . . . That doctor (*indicates the newspaper*)—his method—a sudden jump from the tenth floor . . . I thought about that a thousand times . . . (*they both stare at the window; a painful silence*) Show me the check
- EVAN (*handing him the envelope*) Here it is . . . (*OTTO opens the envelope and stares at the check.*) Tear it up.
- OTTO It is not made out to anyone . . .
- EVAN Tear it up!
- OTTO To whom should we . . . make it out, in his opinion?

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- EVAN Give it to me. I'll tear it up myself.
- OTTO (*insisting*) To whom?
- EVAN (*after a pause*) To the A.I.D.S. Foundation.
- OTTO (*slowly, staring at EVAN*) No . . .
- EVAN Let's destroy it!
- OTTO He gave you a choice, obviously.
- EVAN What choice?
- OTTO (*slowly, studying him*) You could put your name, here . . .
- EVAN No! Never!
- OTTO (*calm; determined*) It is my last desire . . . You cannot say no to my last desire . . . You MUST put your name here . . . It is for you . . .
(*EVAN, tears in his eyes, shakes his head.*)
- EVAN No . . . No . . .
- OTTO YOU MUST . . .
It's my last gift, to you . . .

(*They hold hands tightly, desperately. EVAN kisses OTTO's hand. They both stare at the open window. A spotlight illuminates the window. Tableau. Blackout.*)

—curtain—