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**REGULARS**

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree of

Master of Arts in Liberal Studies

by Michael Wiener

Guarini School of Graduate and Advanced Studies  
Dartmouth College  
Hanover, New Hampshire

May 14, 2023

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2023

## ABSTRACT

My thesis play unfolds in the wake of the pandemic we've collectively faced, which hovers over its dramatic landscape, but is rarely directly addressed, a narrative penumbra subtle enough to be merely suggestive, almost subliminal, even as today, in America and around the world, we navigate the pandemic's lingering aftermath by way of our quiet struggles, individual and collective, with mental health—an insidious, one might say endemic, pandemic of its own—that we ignore at our societal peril. My mother struggled with manic depression, which inflected our fraught bond in sometimes volatile ways and may have contributed to her early death, and my father is a child Holocaust survivor, whose father's relative unavailability was at least in part a product of recondite emotional scarring that redounded in our own relationship—though in both cases, the arc has ultimately been redemptive. Paralleling my filial experiences with mental health and generational trauma, this theatrical work refracts these ongoing interdisciplinary inquiries through both actual (Eduardo's relationship with his mother, Julie's with her father) and surrogate (among others, Dr. Joan Withers' and Dr. Anya Patel's relationships with their patients, as general practitioner and psychoanalyst, respectively) parental-filial dynamics, and through the contrapuntal lenses of two Holocaust refugees—a perpetrator, in the guise of a so-called Good German functionary not directly involved in the genocide, and a child survivor. Channeling social anthropologist Kleinman's conception of disease as multifactorial, a manifestation of, and reaction to attritive societal exposures, and psychiatrist Engels' complementary Biopsychosocial model, as well as my investigations around diaspora and migration—particularly the phenomenology of collective, and more specifically, cultural memory, including generational trauma's reverberant, repercussive effect on families—this is a sprawling ensemble piece in the spirit of playwright Tom Stoppard and the filmmaker Paul Thomas Anderson, tracing the invisible threads that connect us all. Abidingly syncretic in its ethos, this dramatic odyssey reflects my intensely collaborative body of work as a writer, actor, performer. While *vox clamantis in deserto* might resonate viscerally for us as Dartmouthians, MALS alums, and in the end, merely mortal human beings, we thrive when we coexist.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my beloved wife Elizabeth and my cherished father,

Thanks for believing in me. I've been buoyed by your enduring standards of excellence and unconditional love throughout, and your support has never faltered. My MALS degree stands as an embodiment of and a testament to the man I've been inspired to become—by you both. I love you more than words can say.

To my advisor, Professor Alan Lelchuk,

Our robust interlocutions and your incisive guidance have elevated my writing, and deepened my appreciation for literature in a more catholic sense. You've introduced me to hidden literary gems that have been revelatory to me as a thinker and human being, and raised difficult questions about my writing process—a generative creative reorientation indeed--and I'm resoundingly the better for our persistent engagement.

To my second reader, Professor Don Pease,

Your rigorous expectations where semantic clarity and linguistic *telos* are concerned, particularly, have been inherent to my play's construction, part of its innate fabric. My writing has become sturdier and more specific, my thought more lucid, and I hope my intentions as a dramatist are more fully realized as a result.

To my third reader, Professor Anna Minardi,

I'm grateful for your unflagging presence, pithy, all-encompassing insights, steadfast prompts—both practical and ontological—leavening wit. Speaking synecdochically, you've been an indispensable cynosure along this sometimes discombobulating one-and-three-quarter-year continuum.

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And finally, thank you, Wole Ojurongbe, for the opportunity, and Colleen Andrasko, Ashley Riley and the MALS administrative staff for your considerable support and

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Regulars

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DRAMATIS PERSONAE

WERNER, Male, late 90s, former Hitler Youth who became a Third Reich functionary, somewhere between Good German and Nazi, a voluntary exile, laconic, insinuating

MICHAEL, Male, late 80s, child Holocaust survivor, effusive, arch

JULIE, Female, white, 27, server at Pentimento, winsome, steely

DR. JOAN WITHERS, Female, black, early 40s, family practice doctor, ebullient, decisive, except when it comes to her own life

DR. ANYA PATEL, Female, Indian, early 50s, DR. JOAN WITHERS' therapist, blunt, perspicacious

EDUARDO, Male, Latino, 29, server at Pentimento, suave, haunted

XIAO PING, Male, Chinese, late 30s, acerbic, withholding

DAS VALKYRIE, Male, late 70s, drag performer at La Traviata after-hours club, a tender sadist, played by actor portraying WERNER

FRANK, Male, early 70s, well-preserved tough guy owner of La Traviata after-hours club, takes no guff, likes the ladies, played by actor portraying MICHAEL

JOHNISE WITHERSPOON, Female, black, early 40s, androgynous cabaret singer at La Traviata, electric, sensual, played by actress portraying DR. JOAN WITHERS

CHARLES, Male, white, late 40s, general manager at Pentimento, pedantic, pent-up

MR. JONES, Male, black, early 60s, homeless, gnomish, prolix

A NURSING ASSISTANT, Female, white, 27, played by actress portraying JULIE

JOE, Male, black, early 60s, technician at La Traviata, played by actor portraying MR. JONES

A PIANIST, any gender, any age

A MOTHER'S VOICE, played by actress portraying DR. ANYA PATEL

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE

*Evening, fall, West  
Village, Hudson Street,  
Manhattan, NYC.*

*Pentimento, a convivial  
restaurant, at the dinner  
hour.*

*Lighting is subdued, warm,  
ambient--one might say  
romantic.*

*The soundtrack is jazz  
tonight--right now,  
Thelonious Monk's  
"Straight, No Chaser".  
Music cues precede  
dialogue, and sometimes  
continue in diegetic form  
during scenes.*

*Several tables of varying  
sizes are arrayed around  
the dining room,  
accompanied by sleek steel  
chairs upholstered in earth  
tones that read as Italian  
aesthetically. White  
tablecloths, gleaming  
silverware.*

*It's a local joint, but a  
bit elevated, with the air  
of posh understatement  
that's de rigueur in this  
neighborhood. Bathed in  
light by day, the space  
feels intimate at night,*

almost womblike. A place where there are ultimately few secrets, but paradoxically, where regular customers come to hide from the world's seemingly relentless scrutiny.

JULIE, a server, hustles around the room, plucking dishes off tables with graceful alacrity and lining them along one arm, long, lean, irresistible, crossing paths in a kind of reactive dance with agile, charming EDUARDO. Periodically, EDUARDO brushes JULIE's arm with his hand, in the guise of comforting her, but really to make contact. At these moments, they stop, look each other dead in the face, and then the dance continues.

WERNER sits quietly by himself at a table, staring blankly at his half-full glass of pinot noir, lips pursed.

Diagonal from him, also alone, MICHAEL is savoring a comforting dish of grilled chicken, mashed potatoes and roasted carrots. He's drinking chardonnay.

Ghostly animated shadows projected on a scrim that lies behind the diners and also serves as a wall pulse three-dimensionally with energy, bustling through

*the space from the audience's perspective. They might be anonymous servers and busboys. Or the souls of Jews who perished in the Holocaust. Sometimes, WERNER and MICHAEL follow them with their eyes, as if trying to discern what or whom they are bearing witness to.*

*The space is split, a diptych. The entrance to the kitchen lies on the right side, or stage left. This is where JULIE and EDUARDO's romantically ambiguous friendship has room to unfold. A distinction between public and private space is made between the two sides of the set we behold in the opening scene, and in other stage environments later in the play. When there's dialogue on one side of the set, the action freezes on the other side, or goes altogether dark.*

*JULIE approaches WERNER.*

JULIE

What can I get you?

WERNER

(perusing menu)

Do you still have that bratwurst dish? With the sauerkraut? I don't see it here.

JULIE

Let me check.

(She disappears through the portal to the kitchen. MICHAEL, who seems to have overheard this

exchange, peers over curiously.  
WERNER raises his head slowly as  
if he senses MICHAEL's gaze,  
almost catches his eye, shifts,  
stares off into the distance.  
JULIE reemerges, brushes past  
MICHAEL en route to WERNER.  
MICHAEL stops her.)

MICHAEL

Excuse me. Did that man over there just order the  
bratwurst?

JULIE

Yes.

MICHAEL

(coily)

And?

(JULIE looks at MICHAEL  
quizzically.)

MICHAEL

(reddening)

Sorry. Is it still available? For future reference.

JULIE

Yes.

(MICHAEL nods tersely. JULIE  
continues to WERNER, stopping in  
front of him. She nods.)

JULIE

It's an off-the-menu item.

(winks)

For our *regulars*.

WERNER

(dry)

I'm honored. I'll have that, then.

(JULIE rushes off. As she passes  
through the doors that lead  
toward the kitchen, JULIE nearly  
collides with EDUARDO, who has  
just emerged from stage left and

crossed in the direction of the dining room at a brisk clip. During this exchange, MICHAEL and WERNER freeze, lost in thought--WERNER's wine glass mid-raise, MICHAEL's forkful of food on the way to his mouth. The Rolling Stones' "Let it Loose" plays.)

EDUARDO

Whoa.

JULIE

Whoa you.

EDUARDO

How goes it?

JULIE

It goes.

(EDUARDO gives JULIE a look of playful disdain, as if to say, you can do better than that, which she blithely ignores.)

JULIE

Don't mess with me. I've got a short fuse tonight.

EDUARDO

Why?

JULIE

Roommate sucks.

(EDUARDO raises an eyebrow.)

JULIE

Dude. She--she--I could hear her fucking last night. She was, like, screaming.

(EDUARDO smiles demurely.)

JULIE

She literally invaded my sleep. She and the guy she invited over slowed down for awhile, just murmuring sweet nothings, you know, pillow talk, and I drifted off. I had all these weird voyeuristic dreams--and that's really not

my thing. Like, I was lurking outside her room, pushing the door open really slowly, hoping it wouldn't creak and give me away, and just as I was about to get a peek, satiate my curiosity, she let out this orgasmic moan in the real world, jarring me awake and bringing me back to the uncomfortable reality.

(EDUARDO smirks.)

JULIE

You might want to hear that. I don't.

EDUARDO

You don't sound so disinterested to me.

JULIE

There's a difference between unconscious fantasy and what we actually desire, or need, in our waking life, smart-ass.

EDUARDO

(puckish)

So you say.

JULIE

Oh, fuck off.

EDUARDO

Fuck off?

JULIE

Such a wise man. So many insights.

EDUARDO

You need me.

JULIE

(nodding,  
sarcastic)

I need you.

EDUARDO

You need me.

JULIE

Dipshit.



EDUARDO

That's me.

(A pause.)

JULIE

(softening)

Hey, uh, how's your mom?

EDUARDO

(matter-of-fact)

So far so good.

JULIE

Let me know if there's anything I can do.

EDUARDO

I appreciate that.

(JULIE smiles tightly. A bell chimes. She leaves the conversation and the stage to go pick up her order. EDUARDO hovers in front of the portal to the dining room for a moment, as if suspended in this liminal space. Then he pushes the two doors open emphatically, enters and assesses the room. Sensing his presence, WERNER turns his head slowly. A patronizing, possibly contemptuous look creeps across his face. As if jolted to awareness, or simply because he feels like he's covered the territory, EDUARDO retreats to the kitchen.)

(BLACKOUT)

SCENE TWO

*Midday. Financial District office of DR. JOAN WITHERS. Waiting room on the right side of the stage.*

*White, clinical, strangely tranquil. Somewhat unforgiving glare of fluorescent lighting.*

*Four chairs face the audience from upstage, perched against a scrim "wall" like the one we saw in the dining room, two chairs on either side of a small side table, on which lies a tasteful assortment of magazines appropriate for the chattering class: **The New Yorker, Vanity Fair, Entertainment Weekly, Men's Journal, Rolling Stone.***

*On the scrim, molecular life forms come in and out of focus, coalescing, circulating, in a pattern that seems as entropic as it is rhythmic, shifting from pale blue to blood-red and back again, as if we're scrutinizing them under a microscope.*

*Ostensibly innocuous, fluffy pop music with a melancholy undercurrent wafts through the space--*

today, Foster the People's  
"Pumped Up Kicks".

XIAO PING waits for his  
appointment, alternately  
daydreaming and impatient,  
right leg resting on left  
at an acute angle. He flips  
through **Vanity Fair**  
expeditiously, a ruthlessly  
efficient reader, pausing  
when an article catches his  
eye. His right foot taps.

On the left side of the  
stage lies DR. WITHERS'  
examination room. An exam  
table sits upstage,  
extending downstage like a  
utilitarian plinth, swathed  
in a protective layer of  
tissue. To the right of it,  
there's a small desk, on  
top of which sits a  
computer. The desk chair  
faces away from the exam  
table. Another chair, for  
the patient to sit in, lies  
just downstage of the desk,  
facing left, toward the  
table from the audience's  
perspective.

A NURSING ASSISTANT  
suddenly enters from stage  
left.

NURSING ASSISTANT

Mr. Ping?

(There's a brief pause while  
XIAO finishes reading a  
particularly scintillating  
paragraph from a nuanced  
celebrity profile.)

XIAO PING  
(looks up)

Yes?

NURSING ASSISTANT  
We're ready for you. Come on back, please.

(XIAO rises and follows the  
NURSING ASSISTANT offstage.  
Lights down on waiting room.)

NURSING ASSISTANT  
(Offstage)  
Just down this hallway, Mr. Ping.

(Lights up on exam room. The duo  
arrives.)

NURSING ASSISTANT  
Have a seat.

(XIAO sits.)

How are you feeling?

XIAO PING  
Fine, thank you.

NURSING ASSISTANT  
Let's take a look at you.

(A flurry of activity as the  
NURSING ASSISTANT observes XIAO,  
her movements frenetic,  
scribbling notes on a little  
pad. During these procedures,  
XIAO peers up in the general  
direction of the NURSING  
ASSISTANT, blinking, mouth  
almost soporifically agape. He  
experiences these routine  
examinations as vaguely  
dehumanizing. First, kneeling  
somewhat, the NURSING ASSISTANT  
aims an infrared temperature gun  
at XIAO's forehead, checks the  
reading. Then, inserting the ear

tips of her stethoscope, the  
NURSING ASSISTANT kneels again,  
placing the diaphragm on XIAO's  
chest.)

NURSING ASSISTANT

(smiling)

This might be a bit cold.

(She listens intently. Finally,  
she retrieves a blood pressure  
cuff, smoothly wrapping it  
around XIAO's right upper arm.)

NURSING ASSISTANT

Relax, Mr. Ping. Let your fist go.

(She squeezes the bulb and  
continues squeezing, while  
watching the pressure gauge  
closely. She begins to deflate  
the bulb. Looks at the gauge.  
Continues to release the air.  
Then she goes over to the  
computer, begins typing).

XIAO PING

What was it?

NURSING ASSISTANT

I'm not sure what you're referring to, Mr. Ping.

XIAO PING

My blood pressure.

NURSING ASSISTANT

Oh. 123/85.

XIAO PING

(furrows brow)

That's a bit high for me.

NURSING ASSISTANT

(smiles)

Perfectly fine.

XIAO PING

Can you do it again?

NURSING ASSISTANT

That's really not necessary. You're within the normal range.

XIAO PING

You had my arm in a stress position, all stretched out like that.

NURSING ASSISTANT

It's right where it should be, regardless.

XIAO PING

I'm not supposed to be uncomfortable when I'm getting a blood pressure reading!

(The NURSING ASSISTANT smiles again. Pause.)

NURSING ASSISTANT

You can let Dr. Withers know. Her perspective may be helpful.

XIAO PING

(wags chin)

Okay.

(The NURSING ASSISTANT rises.)

NURSING ASSISTANT

She'll be right with you.

(The NURSING ASSISTANT exits. XIAO stares expectantly at the door, arms folded protectively, mouth firmly shut, a look of accumulating consternation on his face, still tapping his foot. DR. JOAN WITHERS enters)

DR. JOAN WITHERS

Mr. Ping. How are we doing?

XIAO PING

(aloof)

Fine, all things being equal.

DR. JOAN WITHERS

Anything out of the norm happening? Any complaints?

XIAO PING

There was an issue with the blood pressure reading.

DR. JOAN WITHERS

(sitting down at  
computer,  
squinting at  
screen)

How so?

XIAO PING

With all due respect, your assistant took it incorrectly.  
My body was contorted.

DR. JOAN WITHERS

I see your reading here. Not something to worry about.  
Blood pressure goes up and down. Nothing alarming jumping  
out at me.

XIAO PING

(forcing a grin)

I'm a bit of a perfectionist.

DR. JOAN WITHERS

Nothing wrong with that. Why don't we take a gander at  
you? How 'bout you jump up on that table?

(XIAO stands, walks over to the  
examination table, turns and  
hoists himself onto it, faces  
DR. JOAN WITHERS. Positioning  
herself in front of him, she  
kneels somewhat, extracts a  
light from her lab coat, thrusts  
it toward him, with coiled  
posture and a fixed gaze that  
echo those of the NURSING  
ASSISTANT.)

DR. JOAN WITHERS

Open your mouth, stick out your tongue and say "ahhh".

XIAO PING  
(adenoidal)

Ahhh.

DR. JOAN WITHERS  
(looking into  
Xiao's mouth,  
fights urge to  
giggle)

Mmmm. (pause) Very good.

(Calmly placing her left hand on  
XIAO's shoulder, DR. WITHERS  
reaches under his chin with her  
right hand, checking his lymph  
nodes.)

XIAO PING  
(jerks head back  
suddenly)

That tickles.

DR. JOAN WITHERS  
(leaning away)

I'm sorry.

XIAO PING  
It's okay. I just get uneasy.

DR. JOAN WITHERS  
(extracts reflex  
hammer from coat)  
That's not unusual. I'm in your personal space, after  
all. How are things going in general, Mr. Ping?

XIAO PING  
Nothing to complain about.

(During this exchange, DR.  
WITHERS checks XIAO's knee  
reflexes, with a series of fluid  
motions. His left knee doesn't



respond initially, so she taps it again, seamlessly, her attention and conversational focus never faltering.)

DR. JOAN WITHERS

How's business?

XIAO PING

Oh, you know. They keep me busy.

DR. JOAN WITHERS

(smiles)

The life of a data scientist.

XIAO PING

Information Security Analyst.

DR. JOAN WITHERS

Oh, sorry. A fine distinction, I'm sure.

XIAO PING

Actually markedly different roles.

DR. JOAN WITHERS

Understood.

(uncomfortable  
pause)

Getting enough rest?

XIAO PING

Most of the time. At least I don't have anyone in my life who depends on me.

DR. JOAN WITHERS

Nice to have personal freedom. But that can also be isolating. That's not necessarily a good thing. Do you have friends you can trust, that you can call on if you need to?

(XIAO shrugs.)

DR. JOAN WITHERS

(stern)

You're not an island. Social engagement is closely correlated with longevity.

XIAO PING

I've heard that.

DR. JOAN WITHERS

You want to live a long, healthy life, don't you?

(XIAO shrugs again.)

DR. JOAN WITHERS

I'm gonna cut to the chase. Help me do my job. Don't be such a lone wolf.

(They look at each other. Nobody flinches. It's a little confrontational, but also a moment of connection, mutual understanding, though it seems to go on for just a bit too long.)

(BLACKOUT)

SCENE THREE

*Pentimento, late Sunday  
afternoon.*

*The space is suffused with  
gauzy, diminishing daytime  
radiance. Stray shards of  
shifting sunlight proceed  
around the room, landing  
unexpectedly in diners'  
eyes, gleaming intensely  
but ephemerally on patches  
of clothing fabric.*

*CHARLES has just hastily  
arrived on the scene to  
address a simmering dispute  
between WERNER and MICHAEL.*

*The Judy Collins version of  
the Joni Mitchell-penned  
"Both Sides Now" bounces  
buoyantly through the sound  
system, an ironic  
counterpoint, or  
serendipitously palliative.*

CHARLES

What seems to be the problem, sir?

WERNER

(glowering)

He keeps staring at me.

MICHAEL

(dismissive)

No I don't.

WERNER

Yes you do.

MICHAEL

Oh shut up.

WERNER  
(to Charles)

Disgusting.

CHARLES  
(conciliatory)

Okay, you're both regulars here. We value your business. We'd like you to be able to coexist. How can we make everyone happy in this situation?

WERNER  
Move him away.

MICHAEL  
I don't want to move.

WERNER  
See? He's completely unreasonable.

CHARLES  
Gentlemen--

MICHAEL  
(gets up)  
Okay, fine, I'll move.  
(to Charles,  
priggish)  
Please bring my plate, my silverware and my wine  
over...there.

(Points across  
the room, and  
then, as he  
passes WERNER,  
under his  
breath:)  
Aryan scum.

WERNER  
(bristling, but  
not sure what  
he's heard)  
What? What did you say?

MICHAEL  
(triumphantly,  
over his  
shoulder)  
Oh, nothing.

(EDUARDO shares a confidence  
with JULIE on the other side of  
the portal)

EDUARDO

We were sitting around her dining room table after dinner talking about, I don't know, what we'd both been doing that day, and my attention drifted, I was daydreaming and I looked away for a second. She kept babbling, as she tends to do, but her tone kind of changed, and when I refocused my attention on her, I didn't even recognize the woman I was looking at. It was as though she'd put a mask on, that was how dramatic it was. She'd gone somewhere else. A place I didn't have access to.

JULIE

(bobs head)

I can't even imagine how that feels. Like you've lost the mother you've known all your life, even though she still exists materially. Like she's a hollow shell of what she was.

EDUARDO

I appreciate your concern, but that's not how I experienced it.

JULIE

Oh. Sorry.

EDUARDO

It's alright.

(pause)

But yeah, she's still here, still recognizable.

(smiles)

I think she's actually showing me more of herself than she ever did before. Exposing the layers underneath. Excavating her distant past...and unearthing something young, pristine. Dispensing with the facade. A rawer side of her, that she couldn't reveal until her defenses basically...melted.

JULIE

That's kind of amazing.

EDUARDO

Yeah.

JULIE

(hesitant)

But...the uncertainty has to be excruciating. That would be the hardest part for me.

EDUARDO

It broke my fucking heart to bring her to the inpatient facility, but I didn't know what else to do. She was deeply confused. As if a thread had been fraying inside her, and it suddenly just snapped. Fortunately, we were able to get her to agree to stay overnight for evaluation.

(eyeballs JULIE)

I asked her if she'd be open to that, and it was like I'd struck a chord--she seemed to snap back into a lucid state. Her face was all scrunched up, like that was the stupidest question in the world. "Of course, Eggie," she declared, tossing her head, ruefully, I might add, "Who do you think I am?" Then she let go of her shtick temporarily and gave me a meaningful look. "What do I have to lose?" she asked me.

(wistful)

That's what she's always called me. Since I was about three. "Eggie".

(surveys room)

It's a haunting feeling, surrendering your mother to an institutional setting. Saying goodbye, even if it might be transitory. Like somebody out there forced me to parent my own mother, against my and maybe her will. It sucks.

(JULIE puts her hand on EDUARDO's shoulder, traces a little circle there, massages it. She gazes at him with concern, his eyes far off. CHARLES returns from the dining room.)

CHARLES

What sucks?

JULIE

(tries to exchange private glance with EDUARDO, but he

has cast his eyes  
downward)

Oh, nothing.

CHARLES

I'll tell you what sucks. A couple of our senior  
regulars--

(JULIE rolls her eyes, nods  
knowingly)

CHARLES

--started screaming at each other about personal space.  
Thought I was gonna have to separate them. Looked like  
the whole dining room was gonna run for the hills. We  
can't have that level of conflict at Pentimento. Not good  
for business. Wrecks the vibe. And why did it happen?  
Because you two were in here, gabbing away, not paying  
attention.

JULIE

Eduardo--

CHARLES

Let him speak for himself.

EDUARDO

It was nothin', man.

CHARLES

"Nothin', man?" Is that how you speak to a supervisor?

EDUARDO

Sorry.

CHARLES

Come on, guys. I love you, you're the best, but let's be  
on our toes here.

EDUARDO

We got you.

(They disperse.)

(BLACKOUT)

SCENE FOUR

*Pentimento, closing time.*

*Lights up on dining room.  
Hushed, almost amber glow.  
Intimate. A feeling of  
deceleration.*

*Blaring of horns outside,  
like a discordant avant-  
garde chamber piece, the  
reverb of a particularly  
impatient driver echoing  
down the cavernous avenue.  
Pentimento's plate glass  
windows function as the  
lens through which this  
cinematic scene unfolds, as  
though seen through the  
uncannily attuned,  
unflinchingly humane eyes  
of Robert Frank. Mid-  
measure, the blare is  
punctuated contrapuntally  
by another driver's  
staccato honking technique,  
then a florid string of  
expletives delivered  
exuberantly out of a car  
window. The intrusive  
sounds of traffic rise and  
fall, in crescendo and  
diminuendo, an extended  
figure. What might sound  
egregious to a non-New  
Yorker makes a different  
impression in the urban  
environment where Phillip  
Glass flourished.*

*After midnight, when what  
was previously civilized  
descends into decadence.  
Gabbing of excitable voices  
fortified by cocktails. The*



*click-clack of high heels  
on hard pavement. We hear  
these noises from inside  
Pentimento.*

*Neon slices through the  
restaurant's storefront,  
ribboning the row of tables  
abutting the window.*

*TV on the Radio's "Wolf  
Like Me" grooves  
insistently in the  
background.*

*CHARLES and JULIE putter  
around, in the final stages  
of cleaning up. They  
arrange table settings for  
breakfast precisely,  
chatting as they move  
languidly across the dining  
room.*

CHARLES

What was going on with Eduardo today?

JULIE

I think I'll let him tell you.

CHARLES

I'm worried about the guy, frankly.

JULIE

You know, his mother--

CHARLES

I'm not saying he's a bad person. But he might be a bad  
influence on you.

JULIE

Charles, people have lives.

CHARLES

I realize that. I'm one of those people. But a mature  
person, an adult, is able to separate their work from  
their personal life.

JULIE

That's not always realistic. Eduardo's going through a crisis--

CHARLES

Lemme get to the point here. You have so much potential.

JULIE

I've heard *that* before.

CHARLES

You can do anything you want to do. Got the world by the balls. Young, smart, beautiful.

JULIE

Yeah, yeah.

CHARLES

No, really. Are you interested in the restaurant business?

JULIE

I mean, yeah, but--

(CHARLES takes Julie by the shoulders.)

CHARLES

Julie. I know your painting is important to you. I know that's what you went to school for. You can keep producing work. Maybe even get represented by a good gallery. But restaurants are the lifeblood that powers New York City. Where the social landscape of this crazy ol' town is cultivated. And now that the city's reawakening, it's a whole different situation. They gave us up for dead, but we're survivors. And we make people want to live here. Nothing sexier--or more creatively fertile--than the dining room of a great New York City restaurant.

(pause,  
impassioned)

You could have a voice here. Manage. We could collaborate on a restaurant project someday. You never know. Perfect back-up plan for an artist, I think.

(JULIE moves away, carefully  
folds a napkin, places it  
delicately on a table, arranges

a fork on top of it, continues  
with the place setting.)

JULIE

I'm flattered.

CHARLES

I wouldn't say it if I didn't mean it. I'm a sincere guy,  
Julie. You can count on that.

(Silence. A little tense, but  
CHARLES doesn't notice.)

CHARLES

You and Eduardo aren't dating, are you?

JULIE

What the fuck?

CHARLES

I mean, I don't really care. It's cool. Your business.

JULIE

Why'd you ask, then?

CHARLES

Good question. I dunno. Just making conversation, I  
guess.

JULIE

Okay.

CHARLES

I care about you, Julie.

JULIE

Appreciate that.

CHARLES

Sorry. I do want to see your work. Seriously.

(They regard each other. There's  
a sudden knock at the door,  
which lies beyond the stage,  
piercing the fourth wall, from  
behind the audience. JULIE  
swivels her head toward the  
door--and us--instinctively. She

looks back at CHARLES. He hasn't moved.)

JULIE  
Aren't you gonna answer that?

CHARLES  
Oh.  
(blase)  
I guess so.

(The rapping at the door continues.)

VOICE  
(offstage)  
Anybody home?

CHARLES  
Jesus.

(He saunters downstage, peers out toward the door--and audience.)

CHARLES  
Can I help you?

VOICE  
I'm hungry, man. Got anything good to eat?

CHARLES  
No, sorry, chief. Shut down for the night. Another time, maybe.

VOICE  
Aw, c'mon, man. You throwin' that shit away. Try a little tenderness.

CHARLES  
I'm sorry. I can't help you.  
(stern)  
Good night.

JULIE  
(sotto voce)  
Hey.

(CHARLES looks back over his shoulder toward JULIE.)

CHARLES  
(impatient)

What?

JULIE  
I didn't finish my staff dinner.

CHARLES  
(throws hands up)  
Fine. You want to give it to this dude? Be my guest.

(JULIE rushes off through the portal to the kitchen to get the food. CHARLES turns downstage.)

CHARLES  
(to the VOICE,  
and by  
association, us)  
I stand corrected. Got something for you. Just a sec.

(JULIE reenters the dining room, hands CHARLES her dinner box. CHARLES walks off the stage, up the center aisle, through the audience, as MR. JONES traipses up from the back of the room. They meet in the middle, standing several feet apart, surrounded by theatergoers.)

MR. JONES  
Greetings.

CHARLES  
Hi.

(CHARLES takes one step forward, hands MR. JONES the box. MR. JONES leans in, his arm outstretched, and takes it. They step back.)

MR. JONES

Remember when Bloomberg called this city a "luxury product"?

CHARLES

No, I don't.

MR. JONES

(addressing  
CHARLES at first,  
he sneaks  
glances at us as  
he speaks, and as  
he gains  
momentum, seems  
to forget about  
CHARLES entirely,  
at times-- as he  
draws us into the  
conversation, and  
by doing so,  
implicates us)

Well, I sure do. Now, it's no secret we underestimated the dude. We thought he was just a good businessman, mayyy-be visionary. Turned out he was a savvy politician, too, though more than a little cynical. But I got to admit the fella was prophetic. He saw the writing on the wall. Barely a year after 9/11, city just starting to recover, and my guy had the audacity, or maybe just the sheer, unabashed honesty to come up with that brutally reductive assessment of this town's inherent purpose that I greeted you with. He knew where New York City--and this world--were headin'. So he made the calculated choice to dazzle people with the glitter of aspiration, lure 'em in with the meretricious filigree of materialism, opulent objects of desire inaccessible to most. Smoke and mirrors, skin deep, man, but his target audience, they sucked it all up like one of them sleek pastel Dyson vacuum cleaners. He sang that siren song, and the suggestible rubes, the pompous swells, the prodigal sons and daughters, they came runnin', like gilded lemmings primed to jump off a gold-encrusted cliff, as long as they had a plush birds-eye view of Central Park on the way down. 'Member that Sex Pistols track?

(quizzical look from CHARLES)

MR. JONES

(apes English  
accent)

Oh we're so pretty, oh so pretty. We're vayyy-cuhnt.

(guffaws)

But yeah. We needed sumptuous edifices to house our vapid new overlords in, and sure enough, translucent apartment buildings sprang up like hothouse flowers, 21st century ziggurats, needle-like reflective towers peacockin' in the venal Wild West the Twin Towers unleashed as they fell. What's that Naomi Klein book?

(CHARLES' expression is blank)

MR. JONES

(strokes chin)

*The Shock Doctrine*, yeah. She calls it disaster capitalism. *Cui bono*? Always got to ask yourself that question. These bumptious brahmins rushed in wearin' the emperor's new clothes to fill the void, man. The new guard. Steppin' into the breach like somethin' out of *Animal Farm*.

(bereft)

Where does that leave a man like me? I was an ironworker. In the union. Successful blue collar guy. Made crazy money, bro. Honest labor. One day I got injured. Was on workers' comp for awhile, then they had to let me go. I was on my own. You know how much good private health insurance coverage costs now? Bloomberg rigged it, man. I was worthless, just like that.

(trains eyes on

CHARLES)

People get left behind every day. One day it could be you. Don't be so cocky.

CHARLES

I'm sorry.

MR. JONES

No, you're not. But thanks. I do appreciate this. And it won't go to waste. God bless you. I mean that.

(MR. JONES spins on his heels  
and walks out of the room.  
CHARLES stares after him for a  
long beat, his expression  
inscrutable. Then he turns

toward JULIE, who has been  
watching quietly.)

(BLACKOUT)



SCENE FIVE

*A weekday. Opening time.*

*Bright morning light that  
warms the limbs.*

*CHARLES and EDUARDO stand  
side-by-side in the dining  
room, arms folded, awaiting  
Pentimento's first  
customers for breakfast.*

*Rush's "The Camera Eye"  
throbs and subsides, ebbs  
and flows.*

CHARLES

How are you, my man?

EDUARDO

Not bad, not bad.

CHARLES

I've been thinking about you.

EDUARDO

Yeah?

CHARLES

Julie's worried about you. Says you're going through  
something.

EDUARDO

I guess you could say that.

CHARLES

Anything you want to share?

EDUARDO

Kind of a long story.

CHARLES

I'm here for you.

EDUARDO

Well, I had to check my mother into the hospital. She's under observation, for her own well-being. Temporarily, at least.

CHARLES

(genuinely  
surprised)

What? Are you serious?

EDUARDO

Yeah. She, uh, kinda regressed. Receded into the recesses of her porous mind.

(breathes)

I'm being dramatic.

CHARLES

Damn. That suddenly?

EDUARDO

(shrugs)

I'm sure this has been in the works for awhile.

CHARLES

(pats EDUARDO on  
back)

That's hard, man. I don't know how I would feel in that situation.

EDUARDO

(nods)

Just taking it one day at a time.

CHARLES

(throws up hands)

What else can you do?

(concerned look)

What's her prognosis? If you don't mind my asking.

EDUARDO

(wistful)

She's stoic, man. Stubborn, too.

(matter-of-fact)

I'm just happy she was self-aware enough to make the right decision.

(smiles)

She's still at the facility. Checked herself in.

(pause, he sighs,  
screws up eyes,  
raises head)

I visited her last night. She was full of energy, bouncing off the walls, really, but she seemed kind of detached. As though she's crossed a bridge to an island none of us are allowed on yet.

(suddenly, he  
laughs through  
his nose,  
snorting.)

But she did crack a joke.

CHARLES

Yeah?

EDUARDO

Yeah. She looks at me, and she goes, "Of all the hospitals in the world, you show up here." Then she winks and she says, in this husky, sultry voice, as if she's the ghost of Lana Turner, "We gotta stop meeting like this." She holds her hands out, palms-up, in this kind of theatrical gesture, to show me that she's laying some truth on me. "As you can see, Eggie," she says, her voice kinda low, "This is my place. If you wanna get past the guys who run this joint, you gotta talk to me. I'll put in a good word for ya." She has this twisted smile on her face, like she's really pleased with herself, and she points at a couple of the orderlies floating around the edges of the room. "These are my people now," she whispers, "I call the shots in this shithole. Can you believe it? Your old ma has become the boss." She's hovering, rooted to the ground, staring at me, daring me to say something.

CHARLES

Did you?

EDUARDO

(shakes head)

I fumble for the words, but nothing comes out. Finally, I blurt, "Good for you, mom. I'm impressed. Truly." Then she totally loses it. Catches me completely off-guard. Laughing so hard she can barely catch her breath. Finally, she calms down. "Sweetheart," she says, "I'm fine. Really." As if she's pleading with me. "Don't worry. I'm fine. It's gonna be fine. I was only kidding. I'm sorry, sweetheart." It seemed like she was about to cry.

(They stand there for a minute,  
looking at each other.)

CHARLES

Is it fine?

EDUARDO

I hope so.

(Pause.)

CHARLES

What about you and Julie?

EDUARDO

What about us?

CHARLES

Somethin' going on there?

EDUARDO

What do you mean?

CHARLES

Are you--

EDUARDO

We're not dating, if that's what you're asking.

CHARLES

It's okay if you are. Just...don't make it obvious. I don't wanna know.

EDUARDO

We're not.

CHARLES

Forget I said anything.

(pause)

Take care of your mom.

EDUARDO

Thanks.

(A pause, and then they break  
apart, begin to move around the  
space, check the table  
settings.)

(BLACKOUT)

SCENE SIX

A weeknight.

*DR. JOAN WITHERS is in her well-appointed living room after a long day at her medical practice, reclining on an expensive-looking couch with lime and mustard striped upholstery and sturdy, beaded rolled arms. A wall of windows with a majestic view of the city projected on the upstage scrim sweeps across the room behind her. Dainty end tables hug either side of the couch. A matching porcelain lamp of Japanese origin sits atop each table, one lamp imperial red, the other savoy blue. The lamps illuminate the couch area around them-- overhead recessed lights have been dimmed, and wash over the space with an additional gauzy glow.*

*She eats take-out stir-fry off Limoges china. The cartons and plastic take-out bag have already been disposed of. She uses her chopsticks expertly, spearing glistening pieces of zucchini, yellow peppers, broccoli and bringing them to her mouth.*

*The allegro vivace movement of Mozart's "Horn Concerto*

No. 4" percolates  
pleasantly at a hushed  
volume from her high-  
fidelity stereo system--a  
Denon receiver, Audio  
Technica turntable, JBL  
speakers--that occupies the  
central shelf in a tall row  
of bookcases situated on  
one side of the room, lined  
with a catholic array of  
literature--medical  
journals, literary fiction,  
philosophy texts, art  
tomes, travel books.

She nods her head in time  
with the music, picks up  
the phone, dials, waits  
patiently until DR. ANYA  
PATEL, the person she's  
calling for her weekly  
therapy session, which is  
taking place over the phone  
this evening, picks up.

At which point, the other  
half of the stage is lit  
brightly. DR. ANYA PATEL  
sits, like DR. JOAN  
WITHERS, facing the  
audience, in a functional,  
ergonomic black chair in  
front of an imposing  
antique wooden desk upon  
which sit a couple of  
stacks of paper that  
clutter, but do not obscure  
our view of her. Various  
potted plants-- tall,  
treelike species, with  
hanging foliage, cacti,  
flowering plants--create a  
jungle-like effect behind  
her. A small, nondescript  
gray couch sits to her  
left, against the wall. Her

*purse lies against the  
burnt umber back pillows.*

*DR. JOAN WITHERS puts down  
her chopsticks, picks up  
the remote, and switches  
the stereo off.*

DR. JOAN WITHERS

Hello, Anya.

DR. ANYA PATEL

Hello, Joan.

DR. JOAN WITHERS

Where do I start?

DR. ANYA PATEL

Don't think about it. Just explore the first thing that  
comes to mind.

DR. JOAN WITHERS

I don't know how much longer I can do this.

DR. ANYA PATEL

Do what?

DR. JOAN WITHERS

Keep my practice going.

DR. ANYA PATEL

That's understandable.

DR. JOAN WITHERS

It's been a long two-and-a-half years, Anya.

DR. ANYA PATEL

It has. For all of us.

DR. JOAN WITHERS

These patients...are oblivious. Absolutely oblivious. To  
what's going on inside themselves, and how it's affecting  
them. I swear to god, Anya, we're all walking wounded  
right now, just blundering into each other.

(pause)

And *blaming everything* on each other. That's what really  
disappoints me.



DR. ANYA PATEL

You expect too much of other people--not to mention yourself. You're a family practice doctor, not a social worker. You're not everybody's therapist. Take care of you-- and your practice. Don't worry so much about everybody else's behavior.

DR. JOAN WITHERS

That's just it. If not me, then who? They trust me. And they either can't afford a therapist, or think the whole idea of therapy is absurd...and possibly shameful.

DR. ANYA PATEL

You're not getting the full meaning of what I'm saying. I'm trying to encourage you to suspend judgement--of both yourself and other people.

DR. JOAN WITHERS

Oh.

DR. ANYA PATEL

And as far as attitudes toward therapy go, I think that's changing.

DR. JOAN WITHERS

Not in my experience. This one Chinese guy, I swear, he's so tense, so rigid, I feel like he might shatter into a million pieces one day while I'm talking to him, right there in my office. And I'll just have to sweep him up, the fragments of him, and put them in the hazardous waste receptacle.

DR. ANYA PATEL

That's a bit morbid.

DR. JOAN WITHERS

It's the way I imagine it. But yeah, he's congenitally reticent. Obsessed with his vitals, but unable to tell me how he's really feeling, what's going on inside his head. Doesn't seem to have much of a support system. I'm afraid he's going to wither on the vine, little by little, subsumed by his own spiritual desuetude.

DR. ANYA PATEL

(raises eyebrows)

Now you're being dramatic.

DR. JOAN WITHERS

I can't help it, Anya. I'm enacting these lurid *tableaux vivants* every night in my head. They torment me when I'm trying to get to sleep. And then they seep their way into my dreams.

DR. ANYA PATEL

You have control over what you choose to dwell on, you know. Might even help you sleep better.

DR. JOAN WITHERS

It's exhausting. I'm spent. To say nothing of the paperwork. And the interminable electronic health records.

DR. ANYA PATEL

It's a demanding job. Not for the meek. You know, I have a few forms to fill out, too. Not as comprehensive as yours. But enough that I know how you feel.

(DR. JOAN WITHERS gets up,  
strolls around the room.)

DR. JOAN WITHERS

Doesn't leave a lot of time for romance. I miss that.

DR. ANYA PATEL

Why don't you date?

DR. JOAN WITHERS

I don't feel I have enough of myself to give at the end of the day. I'm not confident anybody would want to deal with what I have left.

DR. ANYA PATEL

No harm in trying.

DR. JOAN WITHERS

Or is there? I see an irreparably broken heart in my future, Anya. I'm not comfortable with rejection.

(Silence)

DR. JOAN WITHERS

I guess you knew that already.

DR. ANYA PATEL

MmmHmm. That's something you have to get over if you want to rediscover what it means to have a relationship.

DR. JOAN WITHERS

(faint)

It's been a long time.

DR. ANYA PATEL

I realize that.

DR. JOAN WITHERS

Last one didn't end so well.

DR. ANYA PATEL

I know it didn't. But a lot of time has passed. You've evolved.

DR. JOAN WITHERS

Do we ever truly evolve?

DR. ANYA PATEL

If you believed otherwise, would you still be working with me?

(DR. ANYA PATEL rises, walks over to the couch. She ferrets around in her purse, digs out a compact mirror, opens it, checks her makeup. She sits down. With the compact in one hand, she darkens her eyelashes with a small brush, finishing and returning to her desk during the subsequent interchange.)

DR. JOAN WITHERS

There is this one guy.

DR. ANYA PATEL

Oh yeah?

DR. JOAN WITHERS

Yeah. At that restaurant I frequent in the Village. Pentimento.

DR. ANYA PATEL

I see.

DR. JOAN WITHERS

He's the manager there. I don't know, there's just something about him. He listens. He seems to care.

DR. ANYA PATEL

Good qualities in someone you might be interested in.

DR. JOAN WITHERS

Weird, though. To get hung up on a man who waits on you. There's an imbalance there.

DR. ANYA PATEL

Doesn't every relationship start with a perceived power dynamic?

DR. JOAN WITHERS

You know what I mean. It's unnatural.

DR. ANYA PATEL

Maybe you need to make a choice. Be a customer, or get a date.

(DR. JOAN WITHERS sinks back into the couch, sprawling out, stretching her body, relaxed. She inhales.)

DR. JOAN WITHERS

Yeah.

(BLACKOUT)

SCENE SEVEN

*A weeknight. On the scrim, a cycloramic view of the sun setting, a rosy orb descending between and framed by the buildings west of Pentimento's prime corner position on Hudson Street. From this vantage point, the sun resembles the anomalous yolk of a fried egg liberally infused with paprika, or spotted with blood--settled languidly beyond the Hudson River, draped over the iconic body of water as if poised on a plate.*

*WERNER stands in front of the restaurant--beyond the stage, adjacent to and facing the audience--savoring a cigarette. MICHAEL approaches Pentimento, strolling down Hudson Street--and the center aisle.*

*Tom Waits warbles his rousing dirge "In the Neighborhood."*

MICHAEL

Oh. You.

WERNER

That's right.

MICHAEL

Smoker, eh?

WERNER

One of the few vices I still indulge. What do you have to say about it?

MICHAEL  
Might as well speed the process along.

WERNER  
How inviting.

MICHAEL  
I find you a bit hostile.

WERNER  
You know nothing about me.

MICHAEL  
It's what you exude.

WERNER  
Didn't Freud call that projection?

MICHAEL  
The Germans tried to kill Freud.

WERNER  
He was sick. It was the cancer that killed him.

(The two men fall silent. They stand there for a moment, assessing each other without speaking.)

MICHAEL  
You seem to have the habit of sitting in close proximity to me at this restaurant.

WERNER  
I was going to accuse you of the same thing.

MICHAEL  
Are you German?

WERNER  
Isn't it obvious?

MICHAEL  
(nods)  
Not Jewish, though.

WERNER  
No. You?

MICHAEL

Yes.

WERNER

(smiles)

How nice for you.

MICHAEL

You think so?

WERNER

Jews have a lot of power in New York City. Culturally and economically.

MICHAEL

Perhaps. If so, it's well-deserved.

WERNER

I'm not disputing that. The Jews are a remarkable people.

(Pause.)

MICHAEL

Were you there, during the war?

WERNER

So many questions.

MICHAEL

I'm a curious cat.

WERNER

You haven't even introduced yourself.

(Silence. The men size each other up.)

MICHAEL

Michael.

WERNER

Werner.

(Pause.)

MICHAEL

So. Were you?

WERNER

(nods)

Yes. That's a long time ago now.

MICHAEL

And yet the memories persist. And ferment.

WERNER

(nods again)

For some more than others. That was a difficult period. I prefer to hold it at arm's length. To view it from a place of remove.

MICHAEL

That doesn't come as easily to me.

WERNER

Understandable.

(WERNER finishes his cigarette, tosses it to the ground, extinguishes it vigorously with his foot, grinding it into the pavement. He looks at MICHAEL, who seems frozen in place.)

WERNER

I'm going to go back inside now.

(MICHAEL stands there, phlegmatic, unswerving.)

WERNER

Perhaps we can continue this conversation sometime.

MICHAEL

Perhaps.

(WERNER walks upstage and into Pentimento. MICHAEL watches him for a moment, lurches tentatively in the direction of the restaurant, seems to think better of it. He turns, trudges unsteadily back up Hudson Street--and through the audience.)



(BLACKOUT)

(END OF ACT  
ONE)

ACT TWO

*Four in the morning at La Traviata, an after-hours club. Dim, sensuous light.*

*The club's entrance lies in the middle of a narrow, dark alleyway strewn with ribbed, sturdy steel trash cans, their lids firmly shut, attached by long, thin chains. Blocked from prying eyes by a fortuitously-placed, imposing brown dumpster, and indicated only by an overhead lamp, the entrance feels like a nondescript, yet unsavory portal to iniquity, like one might have seen in the Kreuzberg section of Berlin in the early 1990s. After intermission, it doubles as the entrance to the theater where the play we're watching is staged, a world within a world.*

*This initial impression is reinforced inside--directly behind the theater audience. Upon being granted entry after a series of knocks, and successfully articulating a constantly changing password, currently "swellegant," one enters a murky vestibule--where one is greeted either by the aged, and yet virile, sarcastic, and sometimes lascivious proprietor, FRANK, or a comely, much*

younger host, male or female. One is then ushered into the glamorously rough-hewn demimonde that lies beyond the vestibule with an unceremonious flourish, a simple wave of the hand.

La Traviata's infamous cabaret sets the club's tone. JULIE AND EDUARDO face the theater audience from the right half of the stage, as though they're watching **us**. Claspings drinks, they affect louche slouches on black folding chairs, around one of several small round tables draped in red velvet. FRANK struts up the center aisle past us and onstage, into La Traviata, like a desiccated peacock. He weaves his way through the club, leans over and whispers into JULIE's ear, turns his head to take her and EDUARDO's drink order and disappears offstage. Reappearing with the cocktails in question, he lurches forward to deliver them, the triangular martini glasses clenched loosely in his hands, sliding them smoothly onto the table, somehow contained, intact.

Behind them, to their left--JOE, ensconced in a control booth on a raised platform, huddles over a sound and light board, ears pricked, scrutinizing what he sees in front of him

onstage--and thus, **us**, as we come to realize--with his eyes. Sometimes, he murmurs into a walkie talkie, communicating with stagehands. The evening's entertainment is about to begin.

A scarlet, quasi-Austrian curtain is draped across the left half of the stage, where the cabaret will be performed. We hear whispers from behind it. A scraping noise, as what sounds like a chair is dragged across the floor. "Ouch," somebody exclaims. At this, JULIE and EDUARDO titter from the right, where the La Traviata audience sits. XIAO PING reclines nearby, alone, looking ambivalent. There's a squeaking sound as cables are pulled, and slowly, said curtain, and all of its voluptuous folds and scallops, begins to rise, in anticipation of the cabaret.

The pre-show music, Nick Cave's churning cover of The Velvet Underground's "All Tomorrow's Parties," a threnody **apres le deluge**, dissipates, as La Traviata's audience straightens expectantly, in anticipation of the show.

DAS VALKYRIE struts through the ascending curtain mid-raise, on the left half of the stage. Here, we see what JULIE, EDUARDO and XIAO PING are seeing, as

they regard **us** from the  
right half. In this way,  
DAS VALKYRIE is performing  
for both **us** and **them**.

DAS VALKYRIE

Good evening, ladies and germs.

(pause for  
effect)

And I do mean germs. You men are *disgusting*.

(EDUARDO laughs self-  
consciously. JULIE's lips are  
pursed coyly. XIAO PING is  
stone-faced.)

DAS VALKYRIE

No, really, welcome to La Traviata. We're so glad you're  
here.

EDUARDO

(calls out)

We're glad, too!

DAS VALKYRIE

(deadpan)

It's a beautiful night in the neighborhood. Or about as  
beautiful as we could hope for.

(teasingly)

I have a song for you. Would you like to hear it?

EDUARDO

Yes!

DAS VALKYRIE

(bats eyes at  
Eduardo, and us)

Maestro!

(A PIANIST, seated behind DAS  
VALKYRIE and to the left, begins  
to tickle the ivories with  
panache. DAS VALKYRIE sings, or  
more precisely, vamps, in the  
style of a torch song.)

DAS VALKYRIE

SHALL WE WALLOW IN OUR MEMORIES  
OR SIMPLY CAST THEM ASIDE  
LEAVE THE REFLECTION FOR ANOTHER DAY  
REVEL IN ABANDON INSTEAD

IS IT SNIDE  
OR IRONICALLY FEY  
THIS URGE TO BE RANDOM  
TO BURY THE DREAD

WE HAVE TO CONSIDER THESE THINGS  
'CAUSE WE ARE HUMAN BEINGS

WE DREDGE UP THE EARTH  
FEIGN MIRTH  
SEEK SOLACE  
LAMENTING LOVE'S DEARTH  
BROKEN PROMISES

OBSESSIVELY CALCULATING  
OUR OWN SENSE OF WORTH

WE AGITATE  
SEEK RECOMPENSE  
DWELL ON OUR GIRTH

A QUAGMIRE  
STAGNANT  
IS WHAT WE FORESEE

THE GYRE WIDENING  
A LIFE VAGRANT  
THE URGE TO FLEE

WHY NOT DARE TO IMAGINE  
SEEK TO UNLEASH

LOVE'S RICH PAGEANT  
OUR HEARTS UNSHEATHED

I BEG YOU TO LISTEN  
IN FACT I IMPLORE YOU

THERE'S A LIFE WE CAN CHRISTEN  
DO YOU KNOW I ADORE YOU

EDUARDO  
(clapping  
enthusiastically)  
Yes! Woo! Woo! Bravi! Encore!

DAS VALKYRIE  
(bowing head  
gracefully)  
Why, thank you. You're too kind. Really.

EDUARDO  
Encore! Encore! Woo! Woo!

(DAS VALKYRIE regards XIAO PING,  
who has been watching  
contemplatively.)

DAS VALKYRIE  
(jovially)  
You there.

(XIAO PING, surprised, tries to  
follow DAS VALKYRIE's eyes,  
scanning the room, and then,  
finally, points to himself, as  
if to say, "Me?")

DAS VALKYRIE  
That's right. Stand up.

(XIAO PING stands.)

DAS VALKYRIE  
Walk toward me, please.

(XIAO PING strolls nonchalantly  
to the front of the room on the  
right half of the stage,  
brushing nimbly past EDUARDO and  
JULIE. As he does, CHARLES, who  
has just strolled past us down  
the center aisle, arrives behind  
EDUARDO and JULIE with his date--  
DR. ANYA PATEL--and they slip  
into their chairs  
unobtrusively.)

DAS VALKYRIE

Stop right there.

(XIAO PING stands obediently in place.)

DAS VALKYRIE

Joe. My dear. A bit of spotlight on our special guest, if you would.

(JOE nods, bends over his board. We see his hand slide forward, and XIAO PING is suddenly caught in the spotlight's blinding glare. He raises one hand in front of his face, shielding his eyes.)

DAS VALKYRIE

Perfect. What's your name, honey?

XIAO PING  
(enigmatically)

Elvis.

DAS VALKYRIE

And what brought you here tonight, Elvis?

XIAO PING

I needed to get out of the house.

DAS VALKYRIE

Is that it?

XIAO PING

I wanted to meet someone.

DAS VALKYRIE

Have you?

(XIAO PING shakes his head.)

DAS VALKYRIE

Well, the night is young.

(XIAO PING nods, turns as if to head back to his seat.)



DAS VALKYRIE

Hey, Elvis.

(XIAO PING shifts back toward the front of the stage, toward *us*, taken aback, squinting in the searing glow like a deer in headlights.)

DAS VALKYRIE

You're not getting off the hook that easily.

(pause)

I want you to sing for us, Elvis.

XIAO PING

I don't know how to sing.

DAS VALKYRIE

I think you do.

XIAO PING

You're wrong.

DAS VALKYRIE

Oblige me.

XIAO PING

I'd rather not.

DAS VALKYRIE

Please.

(At first, XIAO PING appears to be livid. He stares out at DAS VALKYRIE--actually *us*, as proxy--unblinking. The room is hushed. EDUARDO, JULIE, CHARLES, DR. ANYA PATEL and JOE watch him--completely still. FRANK wanders into the room, positions himself off to the side, poised like a cobra, waiting, absorbing the spectacle. And then there's a twinkle in XIAO PING's eyes, as though he's recognized something, made a decision. A sneaky smile spreads across his face that might be bashful, if

not for the defiant curl at the corner of his mouth. His shoulders droop, his limbs hang loosely by his sides, his head lolls forward, like an impetuous scarecrow, and just like that, he gives us a spotless rendition of Elvis Presley's "Don't Be Cruel," swaying his hips in insouciant syncopation with the music, as if he's channeling The King himself. The PIANIST plays along gamely in support. As XIAO PING sings, DAS VALKYRIE is increasingly delighted, and finally, stupefied, jaw hanging open.)

XIAO PING

YOU KNOW I CAN BE FOUND  
SITTING HOME ALL ALONE  
IF YOU CAN'T COME AROUND  
AT LEAST PLEASE TELEPHONE

DON'T BE CRUEL TO A HEART THAT'S TRUE

BABY, IF I MADE YOU MAD  
FOR SOMETHING I MIGHT HAVE SAID  
PLEASE, LET'S FORGET MY PAST  
THE FUTURE LOOKS BRIGHT AHEAD

DON'T BE CRUEL TO A HEART THAT'S TRUE

I DON'T WANT NO OTHER LOVE  
BABY, IT'S JUST YOU I'M THINKIN' OF

DON'T STOP THINKING OF ME  
DON'T MAKE ME FEEL THIS WAY  
C'MON OVER HERE AND LOVE ME  
YOU KNOW WHAT I WANT YOU TO SAY

DON'T BE CRUEL TO A HEART THAT'S TRUE

WHY SHOULD WE BE APART?  
I REALLY LOVE YOU, BABY, CROSS MY HEART

LET'S WALK UP TO THE PREACHER

AND LET US SAY "I DO"  
THEN YOU'LL KNOW YOU'LL HAVE ME  
AND I'LL KNOW THAT I'LL HAVE YOU

DON'T BE CRUEL TO A HEART THAT'S TRUE

I DON'T WANT NO OTHER LOVE  
BABY, IT'S JUST YOU I'M THINKIN' OF

DON'T BE CRUEL TO A HEART THAT'S TRUE  
DON'T BE CRUEL TO A HEART THAT'S TRUE

I DON'T WANT NO OTHER LOVE  
BABY, IT'S JUST YOU I'M THINKIN' OF

(XIAO PING freezes, head cocked, hip jutting out, as if offering himself up to any filmmaker or photographer who might be documenting the moment for future generations, and then he gives a decorous ballet curtsy, stretching his arms fluidly like a swan, gliding one foot behind the other, bending his knees in a diamond shape, sweeping his arms in, stretching them out again, standing up straight, and doing the same with the other foot. The applause from the small crowd is uproarious. They cup their hands in front of their mouths, hooting and hollering with brio, clap again. He stands there briefly, soaking it all in--and then he turns his back and returns to his table, sinking into his chair. FRANK approaches JULIE, leans toward her ear.)

FRANK  
(intimate)

How's the show?

JULIE

Fabulous.

FRANK

Something I wanna show ya. Got a minute?

(JULIE glances over at EDUARDO.  
He half-smiles, amiably  
noncommittal, shrouded in his  
social mask.)

JULIE

Alright, sure.

FRANK

Great. Come with me.

(JULIE touches EDUARDO's  
shoulder lightly, just grazing  
it.)

JULIE

I'll be back in a sec.

EDUARDO

(confused)

Where you going?

JULIE

(bubbly)

Frank wants to show me something.

EDUARDO

(annoyed)

Okay. Whatever.

JULIE

I'll be right back. Promise.

(JULIE gets up from the table  
and disappears offstage with  
FRANK. EDUARDO turns to watch  
her leave, a cloud passing over  
his face. As his eyes sweep the  
room, he spies CHARLES. He waves  
a friendly salute. CHARLES  
offers a thumbs-up in response.)

DAS VALKYRIE

Well, *that* will be a hard act to follow. Please join me once again in a round of applause for our intrepid guest performer, Elvis!

(Everybody claps and cheers. XIAO PING nods modestly, looks around the room, acknowledges the small crowd. He at least *seems* pleased, in a self-effacing way.)

DAS VALKYRIE

Now, this next act is no stranger to the La Traviata stage. If you're a regular, you know her well. Would you please welcome a force of nature who has come to renew her glory, the luscious steel magnolia, JOHNISE WITHERSPOON!

(Applause, whistling. JOHNISE WITHERSPOON arrives onstage, sidles up to the mic, peers out intently at the incandescent fourth wall provided by the bright stage lights, eyes flashing.)

JOHNISE WITHERSPOON

Well, hello.

ALL

Hello!

JOHNISE WITHERSPOON

That wasn't quite enough for me. Let's revisit that. I'm gonna talk you through it. I'm gonna say good evening, and you're gonna say, good evening, Lady Witherspoon. Got it?

(The assembled group nods their assent.)

JOHNISE WITHERSPOON

Good evening.

ALL

(shouting)

Good evening, Lady Witherspoon!

JOHNISE WITHERSPOON

That's more like it. Y'all ready for me?

ALL

(shouting)

Yes, Lady Witherspoon!

JOHNISE WITHERSPOON

That's good, 'cause I'm ready for you.

(pause)

I got a new one for ya.

(She lowers her head, raises it, presenting herself to us. CHARLES and DR. ANYA PATEL have puzzled expressions on their faces. They squint--at us--at the same time, trying to determine if that's DR. JOAN WITHERS standing in front of them, or just a singer with an uncanny resemblance, catch each other doing it. The PIANIST begins to play, honkytonk style, mashing down on the keys with verve.)

DR. ANYA PATEL

She seem familiar to you?

CHARLES

Not sure. You?

DR. ANYA PATEL

Not sure.

CHARLES

(tilts head)

Strange. Something about this place. The one in drag, too. Resembles this guy who--

(JOHNISE WITHERSPOON begins to sing, gravelly and sensual at first, building to a devastating belt that cascades over the crowd like a baptismal wave, holding them in her thrall.)

CHARLES

Never mind. Tell you later.

(DR. ANYA PATEL nods in acquiescence. They turn their attention to the performance.)

JOHNISE WITHERSPOON

I WANNA TELL YOU SOMETHING ABOUT ME  
I NEED LOVE, TOO

FROM THE TIPPY TOP OF MY HEAD TO MY ITTY BITTY TOES  
MAMAS AND PAPAS, IT SHOWS

I NEED LOVE, TOO

I'M A' DROWNIN' IN LONELINESS  
WON'T YOU TURN THAT FROWN UPSIDE DOWN  
AND LOOK MY WAY  
MY OVERFLOWIN' LOVE IS THE ONLIEST ONE  
YOU'LL EVAH NEED  
CAN'T YOU SEE I RADIATE  
COME SATIATE YOURSELF IN MY BOTTOMLESS TROUGH  
TOO MUCH IS NEVER ENOUGH, BABY

(JOHNISE WITHERSPOON gestures at the audience to sing the chorus with her. During the performance, JULIE reenters the right half of the stage, squeezes in next to EDUARDO, who eyes her curiously, without rancor. Then he takes her by the shoulders and directs her toward CHARLES, who waves. She waves half-heartedly in return, forcing a smile, turns back to EDUARDO with a wide-eyed expression. They bring their eyes to the show--and thus, us--again.)

ALL

I NEED LOVE, TOO!

JOHNISE WITHERSPOON

I GOTTA SAY  
I'M NOT THE ONLY SLIPPERY FISH SWIMMING IN THE TURBULENT  
SEA  
BUT I CAN TELL YOU LIBIDINOUSLY  
I GOT ALL THE BODACIOUS TRIMMINGS  
YOU'LL THINK YOU DIED AND WENT TO THE PEARLY GATES  
ONCE YOU SPEND SOME TIME WHIRLIN' AND WRITHIN' WITH ME

ALL

I NEED LOVE, TOO!

JOHNISE WITHERSPOON

BUT THIS AIN'T NO CASUAL ASSIGNATION  
WE GONNA GET UP TO SOME VOLUPTUOUS REPLICATION  
AND I'M GONNA SHOW YOU  
EVERY TUMULTUOUS PERMUTATION  
OF WHAT A SCRUMPTIOUS CONSUMMATION THIS CAN BE

ALL

I NEED LOVE, TOO!

(JOHNISE WITHERSPOON stops singing. A long, grandiloquent pause. She turns her eyes outward, taking the gathered cabaret audience--and us--in, part beatific, part fire and brimstone. She raises one hand, as if to channel lightning, raises the other, looks to the heavens, then at the room again. Waving her hands with her palms facing out, she undulates her body as though flinging her voice, now deep, stentorian, like a hiphop MC, over all in attendance.)

JOHNISE WITHERSPOON

MY KISSES WILL REIGN SUPREME WHEN WE LOSE OURSELVES IN  
THE STAINED DREAM OF THIS MISE EN ABYME

(JOHNISE WITHERSPOON drops the mic, which lands on the floor with a thud, rolls in a half circle, and comes to rest. She walks off, stage right.)



ALL  
(thunderous)

I NEED LOVE, TOO!

(DAS VALKYRIE parades back  
onstage.)

DAS VALKYRIE

That's our show for tonight, ladies and germs. As always,  
take care extricating yourselves from this god-forsaken  
den of depravity.

(gives audience--  
and us--a cheeky  
look)

And we want you to get home safe. So please, miscreants,  
perverts, and their hangers-on...

(shakes head,  
admonitory)

You know who you are--be careful and don't get into *too*  
much trouble *en route*. We want you to end this lovely  
evening unscathed, if for no other reason than we want to  
see you here again.

(waves)

Ta-Ta!

(DAS VALKYRIE leaves stage  
right. JULIE slides her chair  
out. EDUARDO gets up and holds  
her coat outstretched, so that  
she can slip into the sleeves  
one arm at a time. During this  
exchange, XIAO PING departs the  
club unassumingly, walking up  
the center aisle through the  
theater audience. JOE steps down  
from his platform, exiting stage  
left.)

EDUARDO

So what were you doing with the owner, anyway?

JULIE

(shrugs)

Nothing, really. He showed me the basement. They're  
planning on opening a VIP lounge down there.

EDUARDO  
(nods)  
Interesting. Is that it?

JULIE  
Is what it?

EDUARDO  
Is that all you did?

JULIE  
God.

EDUARDO  
What?

JULIE  
Why are you asking me all of these questions?

EDUARDO  
I want to know.

JULIE  
(gives Eduardo a  
dumbfounded look)  
You're my friend.

EDUARDO  
Yeah.  
(pause)  
I just want to be sure that you're protecting yourself.

JULIE  
(narrows eyes)  
I don't need your help.

EDUARDO  
Fine. So nothing else happened--

(CHARLES approaches JULIE and  
EDUARDO from behind with DR.  
ANYA PATEL. He stands there  
hesitantly for a moment, until  
EDUARDO sees him.)

CHARLES  
Fancy meeting you here.

JULIE  
(looks over  
shoulder, turns)

Oh, hey.

CHARLES  
Quite a show, eh?

JULIE  
It wasn't boring.

(Awkward pause.)

CHARLES  
This is my friend, Dr. Anya Patel.

JULIE  
Nice to meet you.  
(pause)  
You seem familiar.

DR. ANYA PATEL  
(smiles)  
Really?

(JULIE nods.)

DR. ANYA PATEL  
I--I don't know why that would be. But...hello!

JULIE  
Maybe you just remind me of someone.

(DR. ANYA PATEL shrugs.)

EDUARDO  
Nice running into you guys.

CHARLES  
I'll see you two tomorrow.

JULIE  
Today.

CHARLES  
True.

JULIE

It's pretty late.

CHARLES

Yeah. We should really be going.

EDUARDO

Have a good night. What's left of it, anyway.

CHARLES

You too.

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF ACT  
TWO)

ACT THREE

SCENE ONE

*EDUARDO is alone onstage, lit by a followspot. It's a numinous space. He appears almost spectral, or holographic, and addresses the audience directly.*

EDUARDO

Everybody here has a mother, right? So you know what that relationship's like. How hard it can be, how inherent the health of that relationship is to your well-being. You gotta pay attention to it. You can't take it for granted.

(smiles

pensively)

I can't say much for how things went with my mom when my dad was still around. That was a dark time, indeed. Basically, as far as I'm concerned, she had decided before I was born who I was going to be, and any detour on that path was a threat to her grand scheme. Which, from my perception, meant I had no say in the matter. My hopes and dreams were irrelevant. My life would be modeled in her image. Kind of a stifling set-up that, as you can imagine, I chafed against. You could say it got a little volatile. But things changed once dad was gone, which happened to coincide with when I left home for college. Mom softened, got more receptive, and maybe I did, too. To put it reductively, we got real with each other. Got in the habit of speaking our minds, respectfully. That's love to me. Put it right on the table. Don't beat around the bush. Don't talk behind each others' backs because you didn't have the decency to address it directly. Show your cards, man. Don't be duplicitous. That's love. That's caring.

(looks down, then

back at theater

audience)

I always say, judge people by how they treat those closest to them. Right now, a lot of folks out there get all high and mighty with their ideals. They have notions about how you're supposed to behave, what your ethical practices should be. Pompous, pedantic, and inevitably

hypocritical shit, if you ask me. If they're to be believed, they're perfect. Never do anything wrong. Completely virtuous. It's like a social media post that's been digitally scrubbed free of any blemishes. Spotless. But that ain't what it is to be *human*. You gotta make mistakes, man. That's where you see the measure of people. How they learn. The adjustments they make. How they *redeem* themselves.

(nods)

I've been thinking about that since my mom started declining. She's not always polite these days, know what I mean? It's not easy for me to talk about. I like to present a calm front to the world, so I feel a little shame in airing my dirty laundry. But it does get to me. I'm just not sure who I want to share that with. And I know I shouldn't take it personally--I mean, she is suffering, even if she doesn't admit it. She's probably gonna die of this disease. And here I am, hung up on my ego, worried about my feelings. Seems kind of selfish to me. But I ain't gonna change at this point, and neither is she. Gotta be more patient, I guess.

(pause, peers  
around room)

I don't know, what do you guys do in that situation? You're probably bigger people than I am. I bet you're able to just put that aside. I gotta think that theater enthusiasts are tuned into humanity. Their own, and other people's. They're interested in human behavior. Which probably means you're self-aware. Part of that self-aware class. I don't want to get all confrontational about it and say that's a mark of privilege, that it's a luxury, but yeah. It *is*. To have the room in your life to be able to operate from that place of detachment, I mean. Sorry. I'm not mad at you. I'm just trying to put it all into perspective. Humor me.

(gazes up at  
ceiling)

I was over there for visiting hours the other night. Actually joined her for dinner in the dining room. Wasn't bad. Plastic tablecloths. Peach-colored walls. But they had real flowers on the tables, in vases. Daisies, marigolds, alliums, lilacs, lilies of the valley. Thought that was a nice touch. Anyway, we were sitting there by ourselves, and she was giving me the lay of the land. Which, for her, means talking about everybody in the room. She indicated this lady a couple tables over by jerking her head in the lady's direction. "See her?" she

said. I asked her to clarify. So she pointed, made it real obvious. Fortunately, a lot of the people in a facility like that are pretty oblivious, kind of lost in their own worlds. I feel for them, truly. "Okay, yeah," I said. "What about her?" "Total slut." That was her response. I asked her how she knew. "Oh, I know," she said.

(pointed look at audience)

Who am I kidding? These days, my mom is showing me who she really is, deep down, and I can't judge her for that. In fact, it behooves me to accept her, to celebrate her in all of her unvarnished glory. I should be happy about how she's acting. Shows me she's unapologetically *herself*. Up to her old tricks. When that irrepressible energy starts to diminish, when she starts to withdraw, I'm probably gonna miss it. I'm gonna mourn that loss, the abrupt attenuation of her *personality*. But yeah, she's just so sure she's right. It can be downright antagonistic.

(pause)

Doesn't it exasperate you, when people adopt that tone in a conversation? Like no one else's opinion matters, only theirs? They've done all the research, they have all the answers, there's no room for nuance, for another point of view. And even if there was, there's not gonna be a place reserved in the exchange for you to express your thoughts. You gotta *work* to get your voice *heard*. You gotta literally interrupt with no compunction and talk right over a person like that.

(shakes head)

My mom is *brusque* these days, and it's bringing back unwelcome memories from the past. But whatever, right? On this particular occasion, she started to go into the details. She clutched my forearm, and she was whispering. Her voice was kind of raspy. "Honey," she said, "She gave like three of these guys herpes. I can point them out to you if you want." I had my head in my hands, but she continued, undaunted. "Trust me, I know what I'm talking about," she went on, "Why would I make this up?" I tried to explain to her that it wasn't that I didn't believe her, it was just, why talk about it? Why focus your energy, spend your life *essence* embarrassing people, ridiculing, shaming them? I knew it was a lost cause. She did it for so many years, and now she's doing it again. But I couldn't restrain myself, couldn't hold back from commenting.

(confronts  
audience  
plaintively)

I guess I've always had limited impulse control that way. Even if I know deep down it's not gonna change anything, I still want to try. I want to make the relationship better. So I started to weigh in, but she was onto another topic. "How's your love life?" she asked. And though I knew from past experience it wasn't worth getting into this particular discursive tangent with her, I tried to have some sympathy for where she was. I knew it would make her happy if I entertained the conversation, so I threw her a breadcrumb or two, told her I was interested in someone at work. "Is it serious?" She was pressing me. I told her it was too soon to tell. And then she was off to the races. "One woman after the other," she proclaimed, totally impressed with herself, loving the sound of her own voice, and talking a bit too loudly for my sense of decorum. "You know what they call that? A Don Juan complex. I had a boyfriend like that, a boxer. He ended up beating me." She leaned toward me, all *sub rosa*, stroked my arm to demonstrate that she was taking care of me. "You sure you're not covering something up?" She took a deep breath, like she was measuring her words deliberately. "Do you think you might be gay?" She looked at me, totally convinced she had given me some kind of gift, like she was being thoughtful, a good mom. "Really, honey, I'm concerned about you," she purred. I wanted to punch that sanctimonious expression right off her face.

(BLACKOUT)



SCENE TWO

*A weeknight.*

*On the left side of the stage, XIAO PING sits in the tidy, sparsely decorated breakfast nook of his galley kitchen. A calla lily, still lovely but beginning to wilt, droops over the lip of an ivory vase that sits on the table. He's finishing a heaping bowl of ramen he had delivered from his favorite neighborhood spot. He slurps it up with relish, pinching the noodles with chopsticks held loosely in his right hand, alternately spooning up the broth with his left hand. Sometimes, he turns to appraise the nighttime sky through the small, boxy adjacent window. It's clear and, by NYC standards, full of stars, which are projected on the upstage scrim.*

*White is the prevailing color in XIAO PING's kitchen, with cream modular cabinetry on both sides, set off by butcher block countertops in their natural brown, and the latest stainless steel appliances.*

*Ryuichi Sakamoto's collaborative score for the film **The Revenant**, alternately foreboding and*

*lulling, drifts through the room.*

*He checks his Apple watch and, upon realizing what time it is, hurriedly deposits his bowl in the sink, where it rattles around with a clatter. He retrieves his phone from his pocket, looks down at it, dials, brings it to his ear.*

*DR. ANYA PATEL answers on the other end of the line, and the right side of the stage--where she sits, in the same office we saw earlier--is lit when she picks up.*

(XIAO PING pauses for a moment before speaking.)

Hello?	DR. ANYA PATEL
Uh, hello.	XIAO PING
Xiao Ping?	DR. ANYA PATEL
Yes, that's me.	XIAO PING
Nice to meet you.	DR. ANYA PATEL
Likewise.	XIAO PING
So, I gather Dr. Withers recommended me.	DR. ANYA PATEL

XIAO PING

Yes. I take it you know each other?

DR. ANYA PATEL

We do.

XIAO PING

In what capacity?

DR. ANYA PATEL

Let's focus on why you're here. What brings you my way, Xiao?

XIAO PING

Dr. Withers suggested this might be good for my health. I'm feeling a little skeptical, but I'll try anything once. I figured I'd take a shot, see how it goes. What's the worst thing that could happen?

DR. ANYA PATEL

That's a pretty reasonable approach.

(pause)

So, now that you're here, can you be a little more specific? What's on your mind?

XIAO PING

Not much, really. Drawing a blank.

DR. ANYA PATEL

Just let your thoughts flow. Don't judge yourself.

XIAO PING

(aggravated)

I mean, there are a thousand half-formed images whirling around my brain at any given moment. Not only do I not see the point in choosing which one to talk about, I don't even know where to begin. Seems like a maddening prospect, and my life is stressful enough already.

DR. ANYA PATEL

First thing that comes to mind. Go.

XIAO PING

Okay...fuck you.

DR. ANYA PATEL  
(a little  
perturbed)

What do you mean?

XIAO PING  
I mean there's a voice inside me, screaming out, fuck you, Dr. Patel, for making me scrutinize myself this way. It's just another instance of feeling pressured by the world around me. The weight I bear in being a Chinese-American man in New York City.

DR. ANYA PATEL  
Okay, that's a pretty substantial way to begin. Well done. What else?

(DR. ANYA PATEL gets up from her chair, kneels down behind it. As the exchange continues, she raises a pitcher and waters her plants thoroughly, replaces the pitcher, sits back down.)

XIAO PING  
I want to start a fire at the office. Not while anybody's actually there. I'll get in really early, before dawn, make sure the place is going up in flames, slip out undetected. By the time anybody shows up, it'll be a raging inferno.

DR. ANYA PATEL  
So this isn't a homicidal fantasy?

XIAO PING  
No. I just want to lay waste to the workspace, destroy departmental morale.

DR. ANYA PATEL  
Why?

XIAO PING  
It's not a pleasant place to be.

DR. ANYA PATEL  
Where do you work?

XIAO PING  
Credit Suisse.

DR. ANYA PATEL

And what do you do there?

XIAO PING

Information Security Analyst.

DR. ANYA PATEL

Which entails?

XIAO PING

I'm basically a gatekeeper. Boss calls me a database warrior. Office jargon's gotta be militarized these days, right? It's just how we talk now. The modern vernacular. But yeah, if you want to hack the bank's information systems, you'll have to get past me first.

DR. ANYA PATEL

Sounds kind of exciting, actually.

XIAO PING

The work itself isn't bad. It's the interpersonal dynamics I find unbearable. That's an understatement. The meetings I have to sit through make me want to scream so loud that I shatter the conference room windows with the prime view of Madison Square Park. Completely pointless. They said they wanted us back in the office after the pandemic, but why? I rarely have a meaningful or productive conversation.

DR. ANYA PATEL

Perhaps there's more value to these interactions than meets the eye.

XIAO PING

Perhaps. But I don't want to be part of a social experiment.

DR. ANYA PATEL

Who does? But why do you suppose this makes you so angry? There are so many reasons to be angry on any given day, Xiao. That's only human. What I'm concerned with here is the intensity of your animus.

XIAO PING

I've never seen a person of authority exercise good judgement on a consistent basis. They make a fine show of it at first, but they always reveal their hand eventually. Self-interested, narcissistic, making up for

some childhood deficiency. Not impressive. Not impressive at all.

DR. ANYA PATEL

Yes, you're taking a step many don't take. You're devoting your time and energy to taking a closer look at yourself. That takes guts, humility and a sense of commitment. You've made this a priority.

(DR. ANYA PATEL rises up. Popping open a cylindrical container of Seventh Generation antibacterial wipes, she extracts one, closes the top, and, during the ensuing stretch of conversation, walks around the office wiping down surfaces.)

XIAO PING

Haven't done anything yet.

DR. ANYA PATEL

You took a stab at it. That's the important thing.

XIAO PING

I'll accept the compliment.

DR. ANYA PATEL

Good. Is anything else on your mind today? We're almost out of time.

XIAO PING

I did have this experience at an after-hours club the other night.

DR. ANYA PATEL

I didn't know those still existed.

XIAO PING

This is New York City, man!

DR. ANYA PATEL

(laughs)

You're absolutely right. Oh ye of little faith, right?

XIAO PING

I'll never let you forget that one.

DR. ANYA PATEL

I'm sure I deserve it. So what about the club?

XIAO PING

This, uh...drag queen made me sing.

DR. ANYA PATEL

Drag or trans?

XIAO PING

Good ol' fashioned drag.

DR. ANYA PATEL

Okay. What do you mean, made you?

XIAO PING

I was put on the spot, told to entertain everybody.

DR. ANYA PATEL

And why did you? You didn't have to. You have boundaries, don't you?

(Pause.)

XIAO PING

I must have wanted to on some level.

DR. ANYA PATEL

Yes, you must have. Was it awful?

XIAO PING

No. It actually felt pretty good to be up there in the spotlight. But I'm still angry I was forced to do it. It didn't feel voluntary. More like an obligation. I felt kind of threatened in that moment. Like there would be dire consequences if I backed down.

(XIAO PING eyes the calla lily.  
He reaches out, touches it, and  
retracts his hand. His eyes stay  
there for awhile.)

DR. ANYA PATEL

Again, there's nothing wrong with being angry. What we have to investigate is the intensity behind that. That's how we do this work. Patiently peel back the layers of your psyche, as though it's an onion, metaphorically speaking. The deeper we get, the more we release, and the more we understand that the reactions you're having have

little to do with what's actually happening in the present moment, but are in fact a product of ancient, in relative terms, childhood history that hasn't been fully unearthed and digested.

XIAO PING

I can see the logic in that.

DR. ANYA PATEL

It also may feel illogical at times. Until you get a little perspective.

XIAO PING

I'll willing to ponder this.

DR. ANYA PATEL

What more can we ask for? See you next week?

XIAO PING

I'll let you know.

DR. ANYA PATEL

Sounds good.

XIAO PING

Thank you.

(BLACKOUT)



### SCENE THREE

*Sunday evening. Twilight arrives abruptly, a sudden influx of darkness gently but decisively wiping away every trace of the sunset's golden cast.*

*Inside Pentimento, it's business as usual at this stage of the week. Diners ease their way out of the weekend. Whatever their stage of life may be, it's a restorative meal--for some, preparatory, with the work week looming, for others, a detox, after a weekend saturated with late nights and jostling crowds. For WERNER and MICHAEL, it's in some ways an evening like any other along life's twilight continuum, to be lamented, in MICHAEL's case, or savored, in WERNER's. On this particular occasion, MICHAEL has reluctantly agreed to join WERNER for dinner. They're both having the bratwurst this time around.*

*EDUARDO and JULIE pass in and out of the dining room in their fluid, efficient way, barely looking at each other. At times, both reflexively glance--as surreptitiously as they can, mid-flight, without losing momentum, balancing dishes and holding glasses upright like well-trained*

*acrobats--at WERNER and  
MICHAEL, overhearing  
snippets of their  
conversation.*

*CHARLES emerges  
occasionally, arms clasped  
primly behind his back like  
a mid-century maitre-d' of  
the Italian neorealist  
cinema, making sure the  
room dynamics are flowing  
harmoniously.*

*Jeff Buckley's "Grace"  
threads through the space  
like a coruscating fog,  
wrapping its elegiac  
fingers around the diners,  
clenching and releasing its  
hold.*

MICHAEL

Why did you want me to sit here?

WERNER

You seem like a nice fellow. And I wanted to dispel some of the mystique. The preconceived notions we may have about each other. The war was eighty years ago!

MICHAEL

You mean the Holocaust.

WERNER

Okay, the Holocaust.

*(sips pinot noir)*

While we're on that topic, yes, there was a premeditated extermination of the Jews, one of the worst genocides the world has ever seen. Two-thirds of European Jewish lives extinguished. The Final Solution. Unimaginable.

*(pause)*

But Jews weren't the only ones who were murdered, you know. The Soviets and Poles suffered immensely. Millions upon millions of soldiers, civilians, Catholics and Orthodox killed. Hundreds of thousands, each, of Serbs, disabled, Romani, even Freemasons.

MICHAEL

(thickly)

It's not a competition.

WERNER

Of course not. But it's important to give a comprehensive accounting of the history, if we want to understand what happened. The more lucid our grasp of the specifics, the better equipped we are to notice the signs, when society begins to go awry, when the political tenor starts to shift--

MICHAEL

What do you care? You just stood idly by, didn't you?

WERNER

I've tried to explain to you there were pressures. I did the best I could. I had a desk job, supporting the war effort. My role did not impact the Jewish--

MICHAEL

You wouldn't call yourself courageous, would you?

WERNER

(grave)

No.

MICHAEL

What would you call yourself?

WERNER

Normal. Average. Nothing special.

MICHAEL

Well, there we have it.

(WERNER and MICHAEL freeze,  
their eyes fixed on each other.  
JULIE and EDUARDO pause wherever  
they are and begin talking  
animatedly, *in medias res*.)

EDUARDO

Believe it or not, I don't mind that you went off with that freaking dude. Though I do wonder what your motivation was. But whatever. It really doesn't matter. It's your business. My main issue is, you left me there

for too long. Sitting there smiling like an idiot, trying to put a good face on it.

(simmering)

You don't do that to a guy. I don't care if we're friends, lovers, or something in-between. You don't do that.

JULIE

First of all, we're friends, okay?

EDUARDO

Okay, friends, whatever. That's not the point.

JULIE

I still don't understand why it was such a big deal.

EDUARDO

I just explained why. It's a matter of consideration for the person you're with. And as a man--

JULIE

Man, woman, shouldn't make a difference. You have to stop making that distinction. It's kind of old-fashioned.

EDUARDO

You also might want to think about the context. It might not mean anything to you, but for me, spending half my time trying to take care of a mother with an apparently deepening case of early onset *dementia*, who rewards my efforts by belittling me on a daily basis--I just wanted to spend a night out with someone who happens to be female who means something to me, so I could forget about that for a little while. And maybe feel like I mattered to somebody.

JULIE

(hangs head)

Yeah, okay, I get it.

(long pause,  
straightens,  
teary-eyed)

And I'm sorry. But, you know, you're not the only person who's experienced trauma at the hand of your parents, okay? But you wouldn't know, because you haven't asked. You really don't know much about me. You say you want to be friends, but you seem more interested in my body than my feelings.

EDUARDO

(taken aback)

Fuck. I'm sorry too. I never meant to make you feel--

(JULIE and EDUARDO freeze.

WERNER and MICHAEL pick up where they left off.)

MICHAEL

So normality, as Anthony Fauci would put it, to you, is...going along with it. Even if "it" is malevolent and genocidal.

WERNER

I've already clarified this. I didn't "go along" with anything. I didn't participate directly. My allegiance was, and is to Germany. The German ideal. Not the Third Reich, which, to my mind, was a mortal threat to that ideal. I found a way to navigate the situation and survive. I'm no hero. Nor am I morally dissolute.

MICHAEL

Do you deem yourself an innocent bystander?

WERNER

I realize I fall short of that.

MICHAEL

(sour)

Too many people were like you. Too many people didn't speak up. Too many people decided the value of their own lives outweighed the fate of a people.

WERNER

What would you have done?

MICHAEL

I'm a Jew. I'll never have to answer that question. Jews will never perpetuate something so abominable.

WERNER

No? What about the biblical wars against the Canaanites? Or the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians during and after the Arab-Israeli War?

MICHAEL

(seething)

You compare actions during wartime to the systematic annihilation of a people?

WERNER

I'm simply saying the Jewish people are not pacifists.

MICHAEL

By necessity.

WERNER

Even so.

(sips wine)

You're still evading my question. I offer it as a thought experiment. In the unlikely event that, god forbid, you are, even tacitly, asked to bear witness to acts of malice and violence in which a sect of human beings is subjugated to the will of an authoritarian regime--and if outright, vocal resistance to, rather than passive acceptance of the political fiat that has played upon and successfully aroused society's most pernicious tribal instincts might endanger your life--what would you do?

MICHAEL

You infuriate me. The banality of evil, is it? How insipid. But more to the point, how exploitative and utterly insensitive. A pointless exercise.

WERNER

I understand. But please. Ponder the question. This could be instructive.

MICHAEL

(sips chardonnay)

I don't know.

(WERNER and MICHAEL freeze. DR. ANYA PATEL strides down Hudson St., approaching Pentimento up the center aisle. As she arrives at the edge of the stage--and the front row of the theater audience--she sees CHARLES, standing in a territorial pose in the middle of the dining room, clearly in a managerial mode. Something clicks in her.

She evaluates her options for a moment, comes to a decision, goes back the way she came. CHARLES hasn't noticed. JULIE and EDUARDO resume their heated exchange.)

JULIE

That's what Dad was like while I was still living with him. Put me on this weird pedestal. I had to live up to his exaggerated stereotype of what a young woman is supposed to be. It was like he was clinging onto a feminine illusion he had a desperate need to preserve.

(shakes head)

So instead of focusing our energies on finding an authentic connection with each other, it was as though I *represented* something to him. I felt like an archetype, a symbol, rather than a real, flesh and blood daughter.

(nods

assiduously)

I was definitely filling the void mom left behind. Children of divorce, right? We inevitably end up being victimized by our parents' shattered dreams. Gotta prop 'em up or whatever. It's like they need to steal a piece of our identity to feel whole.

(pause)

Pathetic. Makes me want to throw up.

EDUARDO

That's painful to hear.

(takes a breath)

I don't want to add to that. I'm here for you.

JULIE

You're too kind.

EDUARDO

It's the least I can do.

JULIE

(playful)

Alright...I'm gonna hold you to that.

EDUARDO

Please do.

(BLACKOUT)

SCENE FOUR

Morning. DR. JOAN WITHERS' office.

WERNER sits by himself in the borderline garishly-lit waiting room amongst the magazines, engrossed in a **New Yorker** piece, the esteemed general-interest literary **cum** current events journal resting languorously against his knees. He holds the pages adroitly open with his thumbs firmly pressed on their lower corners, legs breezily crossed, posture rather erect for a man of his age.

The scrim swims with images of shtetl life that, at first glance, seem to retreat before our very eyes, from recognizable history to romanticized folklore, leached of the hardscrabble, quotidian struggle of the time. And yet the images contain anguish, for a heritage, a civilization practically erased, a gap between a way of living that--once eradicated by force, nihilistic intention--can never be reproduced, as it is no longer of any use, superseded by the ravages of so-called progress. But there is resilience evinced here, too, evidence of the dogged triumph of the human spirit, in the end



impossible to repress--a reminder that if the strands of cultural memory might unravel over time, become less palpable, more elusive, collective memory endures, intrinsic to society's fabric. These photographs and paintings stand as an indelible testament: muddy, rutted village thoroughfares that have become treacherous under repetitive assault by the wheels of passing wagons, sturdy-looking homes with gabled roofs like isosceles triangles, the spectacle of lanky, elderly Jewish men with tightly-fitted, tall black fedoras propped on their heads, summoning the energy of god to dance deliriously at barely containable wedding receptions that threaten to run amok through town squares, markets teeming with well-acquainted merchants and customers haggling good-naturedly over the week's provisions, horses and buggies strewn across the bazaar in a shambolic array somewhere between orderly and chaotic.

Charles Aznavour croons a live version of his "Je N'ai Pas Vu Le Temps Passer" to a rapt audience through the office speakers, which have been mounted on the wall on two sides, up near the ceiling's corners. Despite

*their trebly, even tinny sound quality, the song's pithy distillation of the fleeting nature of experience, and the effulgent sense of regret conveyed in Aznavour's performance are undeniable—and infectious enough that WERNER, who has a surprisingly crisp singing voice, periodically hums along.*

*A NURSING ASSISTANT suddenly enters from stage left.*

NURSING ASSISTANT

Werner?

WERNER

(slowly raises head, bringing his full attention to the NURSING ASSISTANT, as if he's been expecting her to appear at exactly this moment.)

That's me.

NURSING ASSISTANT

We're ready for you. Come on back, please.

(WERNER rises and follows the NURSING ASSISTANT backstage. Lights down on waiting room.)

NURSING ASSISTANT

(Offstage)

Just down this hallway, Werner.

(Lights up on exam room. The duo arrives.)

NURSING ASSISTANT

Have a seat.

(WERNER sits.)

NURSING ASSISTANT

How are you feeling?

WERNER

Quite well.

NURSING ASSISTANT

Let's take a look at you.

(A flurry of activity as the NURSING ASSISTANT observes WERNER, her movements frenetic, scribbling notes on a little pad. During these procedures, WERNER regards the NURSING ASSISTANT impassively but betrays curiosity, eyes narrowed slightly in concentration, observing her, as though she, too, is a specimen to be assessed. He does so from a distance, a position of power that is, nonetheless, a defensive posture, surely learned from an early age, under the aegis of the Third Reich. It doesn't register as ill-intended, but the interaction is unsettling. First, kneeling somewhat, the NURSING ASSISTANT aims an infrared temperature gun at WERNER's forehead, checks the reading. Then, inserting the ear tips of her stethoscope, the NURSING ASSISTANT kneels again, placing the diaphragm on WERNER's chest.)

NURSING ASSISTANT

(smiling)

This might be a bit cold.

(She listens intently. Finally, she retrieves a blood pressure cuff, smoothly wrapping it around WERNER's right upper arm.)

NURSING ASSISTANT

Relax, Werner. Let your fist go.

(She squeezes the bulb and continues squeezing, while watching the pressure gauge closely. She begins to deflate the bulb. Looks at the gauge. Continues to release the air. Then she goes over to the computer, begins typing.)

WERNER

(calling out)

And how are you doing today, my dear?

NURSING ASSISTANT

(smiles)

Fine, thank you.

WERNER

Are they treating you well here?

NURSING ASSISTANT

(laughs)

No complaints.

WERNER

I certainly hope that's true. You're awfully nice. And so efficient.

NURSING ASSISTANT

I appreciate the compliment.

WERNER

How are my vitals looking?

NURSING ASSISTANT

You're doing fine.

(pause)

Quite well for a man your age.

WERNER

(waggish)

My age?

(The NURSING ASSISTANT smiles coyly.)

WERNER

No, really, I'm pleased to hear this.

NURSING ASSISTANT

You should be.

WERNER

Sometimes I think I don't deserve it.

NURSING ASSISTANT

Why?

WERNER

I've fallen short of my expectations for myself at times.

NURSING ASSISTANT

We can all say that.

WERNER

Some more than others.

NURSING ASSISTANT

I'll take your word for it, Werner.

WERNER

Do you think we should always be able to forgive ourselves?

NURSING ASSISTANT

Yes. Let the judgement come from a higher power.

(pause)

But our belief systems may be different, so I don't want to assume that resonates for you.

WERNER

It doesn't, but you're still a far better person than I.  
I'm a good judge of character. I can tell.

NURSING ASSISTANT

(smiles again,  
rises)

It's nice to meet you. Dr. Withers will be right with  
you.

WERNER

Stay sweet, my dear.

(The NURSING ASSISTANT exits.  
WERNER regards the room with an  
air of both wonderment and  
trepidation, as if he's seeing  
it for the first time, or trying  
to ascertain his place in the  
universe. DR. JOAN WITHERS  
enters.)

DR. JOAN WITHERS

Werner. How are we doing?

WERNER

According to your lovely nursing assistant, tip-top.

DR. JOAN WITHERS

(jaunty)

That's great to hear.

(sits down at her  
computer, squints  
at screen)

Your charts do look good. Anything you want to tell me?  
Feeling well generally?

WERNER

(dry)

That's a relative term.

DR. JOAN WITHERS

(laughs)

Well, you certainly persevere in having your wits about  
you.

(pause)

Why don't we take a gander at you? Could you have a seat  
on the exam table for me?

(WERNER brings himself to his feet with a surfeit of effort, strolls over to the examination table, turns and eases himself onto it, shifting until he finds a comfortable alignment. He faces DR. JOAN WITHERS. Positioning herself in front of him, she kneels somewhat, extracts a light from her lab coat, thrusts it toward him, with coiled posture and a fixed gaze that echo those of the NURSING ASSISTANT.)

DR. JOAN WITHERS  
Open your mouth, stick out your tongue and say "ahhh".

WERNER  
(singsongy)  
Ahhh.

DR. JOAN WITHERS  
(looking into  
WERNER's mouth)

Mmmmm.  
(pause)  
Very good.

(Calmly placing her left hand on WERNER's shoulder, DR. WITHERS reaches under his chin with her right hand, checking his lymph nodes.)

WERNER  
Fa-la-la-la-la, la-la-la-la.

DR. JOAN WITHERS  
(smiles)  
Holiday season seems to come earlier every year, doesn't it?

WERNER

And I thought I was the only so-called grinch in the general vicinity.

DR. JOAN WITHERS

(laughs)

You do have a nice voice, Werner.

WERNER

So they tell me.

(pause)

It's a disguise.

DR. JOAN WITHERS

It is?

WERNER

Yeah. I'm an imposter.

DR. JOAN WITHERS

(smiles)

Aren't we all?

WERNER

Yes, but for some of us, it's a necessity.

DR. JOAN WITHERS

(extracts reflex  
hammer from coat)

You'd be surprised how many people make devastating compromises with themselves over the course of life. It's the rule, not the exception.

(pause)

How are things going in general, Werner?

WERNER

(blase)

I'm drifting happily toward oblivion.

(During this exchange, DR. WITHERS checks WERNER's knee reflexes with a series of fluid motions, tapping them seamlessly, her attention and conversational focus never faltering.)



DR. JOAN WITHERS

Any hobbies these days? We all need a hobby.

WERNER

Does singing in the shower count?

DR. JOAN WITHERS

Absolutely.

WERNER

I do like to walk.

DR. JOAN WITHERS

That's a blessing at your age.

WERNER

I don't take it for granted. I've been lucky. For the most part.

DR. JOAN WITHERS

Do you have friends to walk with? I think that's important at your stage of life.

WERNER

(shrugs)

I've been getting around well enough on my own. Ever since my wife died.

DR. JOAN WITHERS

I'm sorry if my question came across as insensitive. I'm sure that's been hard.

WERNER

Thanks. It's been ten years, at this point. A fortifying exercise for me, learning how to be alone. We had a good run.

DR. JOAN WITHERS

Do see if you can find company for these outings. There are programs you can seek out if you're finding that process challenging. They'll match you up with a walking companion, taking your personal preferences into consideration.

WERNER

(shakes head)

I'm not interested.

DR. JOAN WITHERS

Isolation is lethal.

WERNER

So is being alive.

DR. JOAN WITHERS

You're not making this easy for me, Werner.

WERNER

I'll think about it.

(pause)

I've been alone so long it would almost feel like I was capitulating. Surrendering to societal expectations. Assuaging my own self-pity. I thought our magical capacity to vanish anonymously into the urban landscape was the whole reason we choose to remain in New York City--even as it suffocates every last vestige of our innocence.

DR. JOAN WITHERS

I can imagine. And your point is well-taken. But this is about your health and safety, nothing more.

WERNER

Sounds like that's more important to you than it is to me.

DR. JOAN WITHERS

You have room to evolve, even now.

WERNER

According to you, Dr. Withers.

(BLACKOUT)

SCENE FIVE

*Monday night. Manhattan is quiet, relatively speaking. The work week has begun, and the city's fabled nightlife institutions are closed for the evening.*

*It's already dark outside The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover, which occupies an avenue corner in Chelsea, a prime piece of real estate. The diner's appeal, even cachet, lies in its ordinariness, eschewing flash or trendiness for the well-worn charm of this restaurant's ilk, steadfastly standing its ground in the oppressive shadow of vampiric real estate developers, whose very survival hinges on sucking small businesses dry.*

*The scrim, extending behind both halves of our bifurcated stage, offers a panoramic view of a montage of archival footage depicting the cyclical development and decimation of New York City since the 1960s. This town has always been defined by the tension between preservation and renewal. Its skyline--its visual identity--is perpetually in flux, a dialectical struggle pitting "starchitects" bent on transforming the city's*

aesthetic imprimatur  
against ardent  
preservationists and  
impregnable co-op boards,  
who protect the finely-hewn  
grandeur of pre-war  
buildings at their most  
ornate. The Woolworth  
Building, One57, the  
Cathedral Church of St.  
John the Divine, Lever  
House. Cranes looming over  
the city like industrial  
Tyrannosaurus rex.  
Shimmering facades manned  
by window-washers buffeted  
by wind fifty stories up.  
Scaffolding, a prosthesis  
with a mind of its own,  
proliferating up and down  
every avenue like skeletal  
lichen. Buildings  
suspiciously aflame in the  
1970s, 80s and 90s, at the  
often untraceable behest of  
developers bent on the  
creative destruction of  
real estate infrastructure,  
upending the topography of  
the urban landscape.

Traffic rushes by, horns  
beep, but it's cozy inside.

The booths are  
authentically upholstered  
in obsessively-polished  
cherry red vinyl that  
glimmers under the high-  
wattage overhead lighting.  
Each comes with a miniature  
jukebox. Tables are  
Formica, buffed to a fine  
gloss.

CHARLES and DR. ANYA PATEL  
occupy one booth, on the  
left half of the stage.

*FRANK and JULIE occupy another, on the right. They've all ended up at the same place, a not unusual phenomenon in the uncannily synchronized tribal machinations of New York City, but they haven't noticed one another. The two pairs respectively sip coffee and talk through some issues.*

*Patsy Cline's mid-tempo, honky-tonk lullaby of longing "I Fall to Pieces" lilts through the stale air, cloaking the diners and coffee, milkshake and egg cream drinkers unwittingly in pangs of unrequited love.*

*While CHARLES and DR. ANYA PATEL speak, FRANK and JULIE are still. And vice-versa.*

*CHARLES and DR. ANYA PATEL share a piece of creamy cheesecake, with cherry glaze and a graham cracker crust, politely alternating forkfuls.*

DR. ANYA PATEL  
But you didn't tell me you worked there!

CHARLES  
A man needs to leave a little to the imagination.

DR. ANYA PATEL  
There's a thin line between a beguilingly slow reveal and a jarring surprise, my friend.

CHARLES  
Are we friends already? That's good.

(takes a bite of  
cheesecake)

I'm sorry if it felt like I ambushed you with that, Anya.  
I thought it would be fun to host you. I had the best  
intentions, really.

DR. ANYA PATEL

It was a good idea in theory.

CHARLES

So my execution was lacking?

DR. ANYA PATEL

You could say that.

CHARLES

What could I have done differently?

DR. ANYA PATEL

(has a forkful of  
cheesecake, licks  
it clean with  
relish)

Your approach was not the issue.

CHARLES

Then what was? Enlighten me.

DR. ANYA PATEL

I...I have a client that--no exaggeration--loves  
Pentimento.

CHARLES

That's good to hear. Who?

(DR. ANYA PATEL raises her  
eyebrows, shakes her head.)

CHARLES

You can't say. I understand. But what's the big deal, as  
far as we're concerned?

DR. ANYA PATEL

I don't know how to explain it. Let's just say--if you'll  
pardon my French--I don't shit where I eat. Kind of an  
oblique analogy in this particular case, but you get the  
gist, right?

CHARLES

(nods)

Boundaries. You have boundaries.

(shrugs)

That's what it always comes down to.

(shakes head)

I dunno. If I'm being polite, let's just say I'm...exasperated. There's always a catch.

(CHARLES aims at the cheesecake with his fork, under DR. ANYA PATEL's ruminative gaze. FRANK and JULIE begin talking. CHARLES and DR. ANYA PATEL stop where they are.)

FRANK

So, yeah, I could use a good cocktail waitress, but I want your role to be more multi-faceted.

(FRANK places his hand on JULIE's as she reaches for her coffee mug, leaves it there for a moment, lets it fall as she brings the coffee cup to her mouth.)

FRANK

I'm thinking of you as a creative partner. Honestly, seeing those shots of your paintings this evening--and I'm sure your phone doesn't do them justice--my mind is opening to the possibilities here. Have you ever thought about set design? This just came to me: you could be my in-house set designer.

JULIE

(sips coffee)

I can't say I'm not intrigued.

FRANK

(slurps coffee loudly)

This way you could have an outlet for your painting, and get involved in theater at the same time.

JULIE

It does sound fun.

FRANK

You ever think about singing? I bet you'd be great onstage. You got the look for it.

JULIE

Laying it on thick, aren't you?

FRANK

I don't mince words.

(FRANK reaches for his coffee.  
We catch CHARLES and DR. ANYA  
PATEL mid-exchange, as FRANK and  
JULIE gauge each other  
silently.)

DR. ANYA PATEL

I'm going to have to really reflect. Nothing like this has ever happened to me before.

CHARLES

You mean the conflict of interest?

DR. ANYA PATEL

(nods)

That's one way of saying it.

CHARLES

It's fucking bullshit. People should be able to follow their impulses.

(takes bite)

I realize it's a complicated situation.

DR. ANYA PATEL

They should. I should. I'm a person, after all.

CHARLES

So do it.

DR. ANYA PATEL

You're a good guy.

(stabs at  
cheesecake)

But you have an agenda here too, don't you?

CHARLES

I'm not sure I like the sound of that.



DR. ANYA PATEL

What do you want from me?

CHARLES

Whatever you're willing to give. What do you want from me?

DR. ANYA PATEL

It's too soon to tell.

(They look at each other. Back to FRANK and JULIE.)

JULIE

I dunno. Sounds like some pretty late nights. Is the money good?

FRANK

Oh yeah.

JULIE

How good?

FRANK

Very good. Not to mention the fringe benefits.

JULIE

Such as?

FRANK

To put it bluntly, you liked the taste of my coke the other night, didn't you?

JULIE

(blushes)

Yeah. It had been awhile. I felt it.

FRANK

I felt you feeling it.

JULIE

Come on now. Take it easy.

FRANK

Hard to with you around. Not that I'm trying to overstep my bounds.

JULIE

You're old enough to be my grandfather.

FRANK

How'd you like the taste of my kiss?

JULIE

It was fine. One time thing, though.

FRANK

That's okay. The offer stands, regardless of your availability in that department. Be good to have you on the team.

(They sit there. CHARLES and DR. ANYA PATEL continue their exchange.)

CHARLES

Well, let me know when you make up your mind.

(Both pairs regard each other wordlessly.)

(BLACKOUT)

SCENE SIX

*Sunday brunch at  
Pentimento. Early  
afternoon. A perfect day.  
The sky is eggshell blue  
and uncannily clear,  
limpid, like an iris,  
brushed with cirrus clouds  
smudging the immaculate  
expanse like whorls on a  
finger pad--as seen in  
projected form on the  
upstage scrim, on the left  
half of the stage.  
Surprisingly temperate for  
mid-fall, but not  
freakishly so. About sixty  
degrees. One of those New  
York City days that feels  
infused with magic,  
smoldering with untold  
possibility.*

*WERNER and MICHAEL are  
dining together again.  
MICHAEL has persuaded  
WERNER to try a brunch  
dish, Pentimento's nod to  
Jewish cuisine, the lox and  
onion scramble served  
alongside potato pancakes  
with an oily sheen. Their  
conversation is restrained,  
but not without its moments  
of bonhomie.*

*DR. JOAN WITHERS eats  
serenely by herself nearby,  
her movements precise,  
deft, her mien meditative,  
ritualistic, a faint smile  
on her face, as if she  
knows something we don't.*

*CHARLES presides  
proprietary over the  
dining room, just watching.*

*EDUARDO and JULIE loiter on  
the right half of the  
stage, between the dining  
room and the kitchen, face-  
to-face, hushed, discreet.*

*Television's "Venus" rings  
out like a triumphal  
clarion call, its martial  
percussive shuffle urging  
this city--weary in the  
wake of a period of  
pandemic-induced  
depredation--forward. New  
wave bard Tom Verlaine is  
nothing less than a  
Platonic embodiment of the  
doomed urban romantic, a  
modern-day Percy Bysshe  
Shelley, infusing the  
restaurant with intangible,  
ineradicable Downtown cool-  
-and a stoic aura, against  
the backdrop of a pervasive  
sense of loss.*

*Behind EDUARDO and JULIE,  
the first two stanzas of  
Shelley's "The flower that  
smiles to-day" are  
projected on the scrim in a  
large black Kirimomi Swash  
font:*

*The flower that smiles to-  
day To-morrow dies;  
All that we wish to stay  
Tempt and then flies.  
What is this world's  
delight? Lightning that  
mocks the night,  
Brief even as bright.*

*Virtue, how frail it is!  
Friendship, how rare!  
Love, how it sells poor  
bliss For proud despair!  
But we, though soon they  
fall, Survive their joy,  
and all Which ours we call.*

WERNER  
You Jews really know how to live.

MICHAEL  
(dubious)  
Come again?

WERNER  
(points to plate)  
Fabulous. I can't get enough of this.

MICHAEL  
(tentative)  
It is good, isn't it?

WERNER  
(indicates glass)  
And what did you think of the Gewurtztraminer?

MICHAEL  
(deadpan)  
Piquant.

WERNER  
Mmm...pithily expressed...and quite apt in this case, I  
would say. Could you taste the fruit?

MICHAEL  
There is a hint of sweetness, yes.

WERNER  
The dichotomy of life. Like your tart apples and honey on  
Rosh Hashanah.

MICHAEL  
(wrinkles nose)  
Why do you take such an interest?

WERNER  
That was a bit abrupt.

MICHAEL

What, may I ask, possessed you to be so friendly in the first place?

WERNER

That's a fair question.

MICHAEL

And?

WERNER

I'm at a crucial point in my life.

MICHAEL

What do you mean?

WERNER

I trust my instincts implicitly.

MICHAEL

And how does this apply to me?

WERNER

You're a good man.

MICHAEL

There are many good men.

WERNER

True, but your life has a special redolence where I'm concerned.

MICHAEL

How so?

WERNER

Your presence in my midst points the way, one could say.

MICHAEL

Yes?

WERNER

I find that my sense of purpose has been revived.

MICHAEL

In what respect?

WERNER

I should be more of service...to other human beings.

MICHAEL

Sounds a bit abstract. Diffuse even.

WERNER

I imagine so. But my intentions are genuine, my approach consistent.

MICHAEL

Do tell.

WERNER

Think of me as a mirror, reflecting each person's truth.

MICHAEL

How virtuous of you.

WERNER

My friend--

MICHAEL

Not so fast.

WERNER

We don't have much time left.

MICHAEL

So?

WERNER

We should be prudent.

MICHAEL

I suppose this has something to do with expunging your past.

WERNER

I already told you, I'm not looking for redemption.

MICHAEL

What are you looking for?

WERNER

Fulfillment.

MICHAEL

(mordant)

Glad I could be of service.

(DR. JOAN WITHERS beckons CHARLES to her table, waving her hand, catching his eye, her lips parted, the corners of her mouth curled upward. He makes his way over. WERNER contemplates his plate like a statue, his fork immersed in his lox and eggs, MICHAEL's eyes trained on him.)

CHARLES

Yes. What can I do for you? Is everything okay?

DR. JOAN WITHERS

(nodding)

Everything is just fine.

CHARLES

Great.

DR. JOAN WITHERS

(averts face  
momentarily)

Kind of a funny question.

CHARLES

(winningly)

No question is too funny.

(indicates room  
gallantly)

This is Pentimento.

DR. JOAN WITHERS

I don't know how you feel about...

(lowers voice)

...socializing with customers.

CHARLES

That can be delicate.

DR. JOAN WITHERS

I imagine so.



CHARLES

Why do you ask?

DR. JOAN WITHERS

Well...I have tickets to Ailey next week, and something has come up for the friend I was supposed to go with.

(pause)

I find myself...without a date.

(intimate)

And you've been so kind whenever I've been here. I wanted to make the gesture.

(CHARLES wasn't expecting this. He opens his mouth, but nothing comes out, so he collects his thoughts.)

DR. JOAN WITHERS

But I don't want to be inappropriate...make you uncomfortable.

(pause)

That's the last thing I want to do.

CHARLES

That's a lovely invitation.

(cocks head coyly)

Don't take this the wrong way. I'm just curious.

(soft)

Did someone put you up to this?

DR. JOAN WITHERS

(befuddled)

No.

CHARLES

I'm sorry. That was rude. I'm overthinking it.

(leans in)

In my defense, it's not every day that a customer asks me to join her at the ballet.

DR. JOAN WITHERS

Really? I would think--

CHARLES

It's just weird, because the other day, one of my regulars--

DR. JOAN WITHERS

Never mind. Really. I love this place.

(confidential)

I don't want to make it complicated.

CHARLES

It's not.

(EDUARDO and JULIE begin chattering. CHARLES hovers over DR. JOAN WITHERS, momentarily paralyzed in vacillation. She looks up at him, her neck gracefully craned.)

JULIE

So that's what I'm thinking. I'll give two weeks notice.

EDUARDO

(spiteful)

To work with that...sleazebag?

JULIE

He wants to give me an opportunity. I really believe that.

EDUARDO

You're pretty naive if you think this is going to turn into some artistic venture.

JULIE

I want to give it a shot.

EDUARDO

Oh, suit yourself. What do I know? I'm just a...freaking guy who--

JULIE

What?

EDUARDO

I fucking love you.

JULIE

Oh, come on.

EDUARDO

From the first fucking day.

JULIE

(vehement)

Come. On. You don't mean that. It's...ridiculous. Just a way to--

EDUARDO

What?

JULIE

To, like--

(XIAO PING has entered Pentimento suddenly, after stealthily passing us through the center aisle and mounting the stage. He stands there for a moment, swiveling his head as though he's casing the room--but maybe he's just searching for a seat--and then he glimpses WERNER. XIAO PING's eyes widen in what he instinctively believes to be recognition, and after a moment's uneasy pause, he makes a concerted, if somewhat unsteady beeline for WERNER. While he advances, WERNER turns toward him, startled, as if his center of gravity has been destabilized. WERNER shrinks back defensively. MICHAEL brings his attention to XIAO PING, as well, his mouth orotund, as though he's trying to swallow what he's seeing, to digest it. He seems perplexed.)

XIAO PING

I know you.

WERNER

I'm sure you're mistaken. I've never seen you before in my life.

XIAO PING

You look a little different in the light of day.

WERNER

(insouciant)

That's often the case.

(pause)

Really, I have no idea what you're talking about.

XIAO PING

I didn't think you were this old.

WERNER

I didn't either.

(indignant)

But that's beside the point. You have the wrong man. Now, would you mind? We're having brunch. And you're making me uncomfortable.

XIAO PING

I thought you'd at least have the decency to apologize.

WERNER

(sighs)

Let me try a different approach here. What is it that I'm supposed to apologize for?

XIAO PING

I shouldn't have to tell you.

WERNER

Just play along.

XIAO PING

That's what you said Saturday night.

MICHAEL

I'm sure there's a perfectly good explanation--

WERNER

(raises hand, as  
if to stave

MICHAEL off)

For argument's sake, I had a good bit of wine that night, and my memory of the evening is hazy. Could you kindly remind me of the context?

XIAO PING

You can't humiliate a man and expect to walk away unscathed. That's a deliberate act that breeds

resentment, and resentment is a corrosive force that can only be contained for so long--

WERNER

I know whereof you speak. I too have felt shame, have felt unworthy of this world. I too have felt I didn't belong. You are not alone in this, my friend. Come, join us, and we'll sort this through thoughtfully, like grown men--

XIAO PING

You're not listening to me! You can't comprehend what I'm trying to convey to you, because you're not capable of it. You don't know how it feels to be a normal man in our society, because you insist on seeing yourself as special.

MICHAEL

(gets up,  
incited, steps  
toward XIAO PING)

Normal? Is that what you call yourself, normal? Your sense of entitlement sickens me.

XIAO PING

(cold)

I recognize the inherent privilege in so-called normalcy.

MICHAEL

Then what? What is it? Why this absurd rant? Why can't you leave us alone? Do you have any idea of what we've been through? You already know our life stories, you're a mind reader, a preternatural empath, is that it?

(howls, face  
contorted in  
anger)

Leavvve. Usss. Alonnne.

(Trembling, MICHAEL breaks down, sobbing. He sags and begins to crumple toward the floor, but WERNER gets up, wraps his arm around MICHAEL's shoulders, holds him upright, with all the energy his aging body can muster. XIAO PING stands there for a long beat, seething, watching WERNER and MICHAEL, his

lips quavering. Then, as if resigned to his fate, he turns and exits the restaurant--whose denizens once again spring to life. He descends the steps offstage, passing us once again, fading haltingly into the background. DR. JOAN WITHERS watches XIAO PING--who was unaware of her presence--walk away. She has recognized him, but keeps this to herself. Haunted and yet resolute, she watches over us, as if beholding her future. Then she gazes down at her plate, her body shaking. CHARLES rests a hand tenderly on her shoulder. She reaches up, places her hand on his, her shoulders bowed. EDUARDO charges into the room, looking around, disoriented. JULIE emerges, pausing in the doorway that leads toward the kitchen, poised in that interstitial space, as if in the process of becoming. She watches EDUARDO.)

MICHAEL

(with effort, to  
WERNER)

A Jew does not stand idly by!

WERNER considers MICHAEL, his face smooth, uncorrupted, like the placid surface of a secluded mountain lake.

EDUARDO looks over his shoulder. His eyes meet with JULIE's.

(BLACKOUT)

SCENE SEVEN

*Darkness. A mother's voice.*

A MOTHER'S VOICE

Hey. It's me. I know. Who else could it be? I was thinking of you, and wanted to reach out. Remember when you invited me to come to the city for lunch, and I politely declined? Said I was busy--not that it wasn't true.

(pause)

Seriously, though, I wanted to say I'm sorry. Life catches up with us. We only realize in hindsight that the things that seem urgent could have been put aside in deference to what's really important. And that's you, as far as I'm concerned. I know you've never believed me when I say that. I don't understand why. I'll keep saying it until I get through to you.

(pause)

You seemed so disappointed when I didn't show up, and I felt really guilty. But you always told me that guilt is a wasted emotion, and in my most abject moments, I try to hang onto that sentiment.

(pause)

When I started to decline, you told me you wanted to bring me closer to you, you asked me to come home. I resisted with every fiber of my being, but eventually, I listened. I'm not too proud to admit you were right. It felt so good to be nearby in those final years. But did it mean something to you in the end, all that time we spent together while my powers waned? In all honesty, I couldn't tell.

(pause)

Now that I'm gone, I want to know. I realize that might surprise you. You might think it didn't matter to me whether you cared about me or not, but it did. I used to tell you to not to be so sensitive, and you'd get so aggravated. I don't blame you. But maybe I can put it more sympathetically now.

(pause)

Don't judge by appearances. Look a little deeper. People are more complex than they pretend to be. Start from that assumption. Have some patience.

(pause)

Can you forgive me for the way I treated you sometimes? Please understand--I simply couldn't help myself. I tried

to change. I really wanted to. Don't underestimate the healing power of letting that go. It can alter the impact of so many of the wrongs we do to one another in life.

(pause)

Have you noticed? There's lingering power in a mother's presence. Even when I'm gone.

(pause)

I'll always love you.

(John Lennon's "Mother" peals jaggedly into the negative space, a strident statement of yearning, and yet a somehow redemptive requiem.)

(BLACKOUT)

(CURTAIN)



## APPENDIX

Beginning in the form of Socratic, roundtable colloquy—inherent to the Novella course that introduced me to advisor Professor Alan Lelchuk—the ebullient dialogues Lelchuk and I have cultivated since that time *vis a vis* literary and cultural critique have continued apace with vigor, centering around the readings he has assigned me as advisor to both my Independent Study and thesis projects. As part of my IS, which manifested through two substantial pieces of short fiction, I furnished written responses to works he had suggested including in my syllabus, and we've continued that practice at the thesis stage. Our spirited, sometimes enjoyably disputatious exchanges around literary structure, including the mechanics of characterization and the intrinsic components of an effective scene, be it novelistic or theatrical, and more nuanced and subjective interrogations of theme, such as contextualizing a given work—and its philosophical fundamentals—with respect to the historical period it was written in, have illuminated my own process, grounding and propelling my writing, and expanding my purview and worldly concerns as an author. In that way, our ongoing discourse has been integral to the writing of this thesis, and deserves inclusion here. See selected commentaries below.

### A. On Leskov's novella *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, and the recent film adaptation, *Lady Macbeth*:

The adaptation is faithful, with its twists focusing the narrative, making it obdurate, as unyielding as obsidian, more binary, and Hawthornian in that sense. Both the film and the story are austere, but the novella eventually unleashes its tragic protagonist on the outside world, magnifying Leskov's vision, making it more of a sociopolitical commentary, while the film stays enclosed, claustrophobic, a tense, unwavering chamber piece. It's austere while the novella can be florid, partly a function of not only the distinctions between prose and filmmaking, and the inherent challenges in adapting literary work cinematically, but likely, independent filmmaking's constraints. But they're both cynical, or *realistic*, depending on your perspective, with their Malthusian visions of humankind, human beings' primal, inexorable urges. The suggestion, perhaps, is that love will compel us to do anything in its name, including malevolent, and even murderous acts. While I might, if I'm being generous to myself, echo Leskov's lyrical floridity at times, I'm more of an optimist, I believe not only in humankind's capability for redemption, transcendence, but also love's purity--I believe, in fact, that initially succumbing to our baser urges is educational, necessary, leading us ultimately toward the light. Leskov, and the film adapting his work, seem to embrace the antithesis. But these are compelling, major pieces, regardless of this philosophical divergence and my personal feelings.

### B. On Durrenmatt's play *The Physicists*:

Read Durrenmatt's impeccably constructed *The Physicists*. A darkly cerebral farce, if you will. Like Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* turned on its ear. A play about ideas, masculine hegemony, its fantasies and frailty, female sublimation to the masculine drive, man's ultimate inability to exist without the female. Many of the works you've

assigned me since the novella course, and I suppose many fictional narratives generally, seem to turn on a violent, often murderous fulcrum. This is a machination I try to resist in my own work, which in part is about transcending violence. I prefer to home in on the violence within, the violence that pervades all human interaction, and how it might be channeled, resolved, cast off. Regardless, this is brilliantly executed writing, that has no doubt fueled spirited productions. As you have noted, in so many words, there are few public intellectuals in the theater anymore--with Stoppard and others being notable exceptions. Today's works are often about relationships, or identity issues. This one feels more macrocosmic, reverberant on a grand scale. Durrenmatt is a very interesting thinker, and the work, while certainly of its time, resonates viscerally amidst today's fraught, divisive sociopolitical climate.

C. On Schnitzler's play *Flirtations*:

Schnitzler's drama, like Durrenmatt's is new to me--my closest prior exposure was through *Eyes Wide Shut*, Kubrick's adaptation of Schnitzler's novella *Dream Story*. That work and the play *Flirtations* were produced at opposite ends of Schnitzler's primary output, a time of radical cultural shift, which may explain the latter's comparatively restrained, even priggish outlook on sexuality and romance. And yet discontent lurks beneath the surface of the lively bon mots and clever, ostensibly platitudinous dialogue--what might appear to be elevated banalities don't quite disguise restive millennial melancholy. The dialogue is rapid-fire, staccato, brimming with life, and the play is structurally seamless, planting the seeds of its blunt force climactic event early on and allowing them to simmer, ferment. Schnitzler was apparently a womanizer, and the women are viewed through a fairly staid lens, not lacking for personality, but unambitious, content to coquet in man's shadow. To be fair, in this tragicomedy of manners, the men aren't particularly three-dimensional either--these are classically hail-fellows-well-met, who embody the traditionally masculine, embrace its conventions, follow its impulses, with the exception of Christine's father, a more pensive, saturnine figure who moons over his daughter in an Electra complex mode. One might say his repressive drives seal her fate. Expertly executed, like a Chekhovian world that's somewhat hermetically sealed, more viscerally intimate but less cosmically expansive, *smaller*, *Flirtations* pulls the heartstrings more than it expands the mind.

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