

ALL BE DAMNED

(Four iconic plays reimagined)

ACT I: WOLF OUT THE DOOR

In which two couples vie without mercy

ACT II: BEG PARDON

In which a pair of lovers get each other's goat

ACT III: OTTO-DA-FÉ

In which rash impiety plays a pivotal role in a relationship

ACT IV: ZEUS TALE

In which strangers take lives into their own hands

ACT I: WOLF OUT THE DOOR

Characters

PETAL, an early modern woman
FURRY WOLF, her mate
HOWLING TEMPEST, their clan chief
SHIMMY, the chief's mate

Costumes

All wear fur clothing, with Tempest's and Shimmy's notably more flattering. Tempest also sports a web of tattoos, as befits his higher stature.

Time

100,000 years ago, give or take.

Setting

Bare rock walls forming a rough cave. A small fire in a circle of rocks. A rough table formed by a round slab of rock balanced on a rock base. Loose rocks lying around. Rocks.

PETAL sits, watching the fire, enthralled. FURRY WOLF enters, a leather bag in hand.

PETAL

Wolf! Ahoy! I've been waiting for you!

WOLF pulls a handful of acorns from the bag and offers them.

WOLF

For gods' sake, Petal, I picked as fast as I could. Since when are you so keen on acorns?

PETAL

I'm not. They're way too hard to open.

WOLF

Then what's your hurry--?

WOLF stops, sniffing warily while PETAL hops excitedly.

PETAL

Well? What do you think?

WOLF

What's that smell?

PETAL
A surprise! Look!

WOLF's eyes widen in alarm at the sight of the fire. He drops his bag and pushes PETAL behind him protectively.

WOLF
What menace is this?

PETAL
It's ok, relax.

WOLF
Has it hurt you?

PETAL
No, it's harmless.

WOLF
I'll be the judge of that.

PETAL pries the rock from WOLF's hand, tossing it aside.

PETAL
You are such an idiot sometimes. Listen to me.

WOLF
Petal, that, that, thing might not have harmed you, but it's dangerous, an omen. Like the story the old ones tell about the virgins glowing in the night sky!

PETAL
It's not what you think, Wolf.

WOLF
Oh, yeah? Tell that to the sky hunter who is condemned to chase maidens among the winter stars, forever.

PETAL
You're the only one who's afraid of virgins, Wolf. Forget that old story.

WOLF
You're crazy. When the gods are pissed, they're really pissed. This cavern isn't safe until we dislodge the intruder.

PETAL
No, just listen, damn it. This isn't an omen--or a menace. It's a... companion. It belongs here now. It's ours.

WOLF

How did this creature come to be here?

PETAL

How do you think?

WOLF edges closer to the fire.

PETAL (CONT'D)

(Proudly.)

I brought it in.

WOLF

You? How?

PETAL

While you were collecting acorns, I went to fetch water. By the time I reached the lake the sky had become dark and angry. Suddenly there was a flash of light, then an overpowering roar from above that threw me to the ground.

WOLF

A-hoy. Like I said: The gods. Certainly you recognize the grand belch of their divine commands.

*WOLF peers into the fire as
PETAL acts out her tale.*

PETAL

OK, sure, but when I opened my eyes, this being was peering at me from the blasted remains of a nearby tree. I wanted to flee but it was so beautiful, so eager for attention. The way it waved its tiny limbs at me and winked, I couldn't resist. So I picked up the branch to which it clung and carried it home to live with us.

(Beat, awestruck.)

It looks like a gorgeous flower, don't you agree? Or some phantasmagorical bird.

(Beat.)

Go ahead, Wolf. Pet it. I know you want to.

*WOLF does, then jumps back,
clutching his burned fingers.*

WOLF

Damn! Fuck! What the fucking hell?

PETAL

(Delighted.)

I know, I know. It bit me too! Isn't that great?

WOLF

Damn it! Why didn't you warn me?

PETAL

I wanted to share it with you.

WOLF

Well, that's enough with the sharing. Get rid of it.

PETAL

No. I won't.

WOLF

You certainly can't keep it here.

PETAL

Why not? All it eats are sticks and bark. And, accidentally, your socks.

PETAL shows a charred sock.

WOLF

With those teeth, it's a great hazard, Petal.

PETAL

Not if you're careful. I think it can help us. I think it should be called... Consumer.

WOLF

What good is it?

PETAL

See the way it waves to you, Wolf. Hear the pitter patter of its little paws. Wouldn't you like to have it welcome you home at the end of day?

WOLF

It looks like it's giving me the finger.

WOLF brandishes both of his middle fingers at the fire.

WOLF (CONT'D)

You little shit!

PETAL

That's insulting, Wolf. Knock it off.

WOLF

I don't trust it.

PETAL

That's because you have no imagination.

WOLF

Is that all it does, just sit there, eating?

PETAL

Hardly. It's a guest bearing gifts.

WOLF

Gifts--like what?

PETAL

Warmth. And the power to transform mere sustenance into fine cuisine.

Grinning, PETAL pulls a fur bundle from under the table and unwraps it. The sight and scent of a charred hunk of meat both repel and attract WOLF. He approaches, sniffing cautiously.

WOLF

What's this?

PETAL

I call it *Châteaubriand*, which means "it's what's for dinner".

WOLF

You expect me to eat that?

PETAL

I already have.

WOLF

Are you insane? It's... it's... is that meat?

PETAL

Uh-huh. Beef. The very same thunderbolt that knocked me down also stunned a bison, which I finished off with a rock and butchered.

WOLF

You. You did all that?

PETAL

Is it so hard to believe? Now shut up and have a taste.

PETAL offers him a piece, but he only peers at it.

WOLF

What happened to it?

PETAL

This is another thing that is so cool: I set the beef down next to Consumer while I went out for water. And when I returned, the meat was making a buzzing sound and smelled so wonderful that I licked it. Here, you try.

WOLF licks the meat, which pleases him. He snatches the piece from PETAL's hand and gulps it down.

PETAL (CONT'D)

I know! Beef-a-licious.

WOLF grabs another chunk of meat, but stops himself.

WOLF

No. Not yet.

PETAL

What? We're hungry, let's eat.

WOLF

We have more guests coming.

PETAL

Who?

WOLF

Howling Tempest.

PETAL

That Neanderthal?

WOLF

Watch it. You know how sensitive the chief is about his mother.

PETAL

As he should be. Bastard blowhard son of a nomad. Yesterday he decreed that henceforth his feces, as an essential part of his legacy, must be buried for future generations to worship.

WOLF

(Unconvincingly.)

He's a great man. His movements are mysterious.

PETAL

(Snickers.)

Listen to you put the scat in eschatology.

WOLF

Why is it wrong to concern myself with our fate?

PETAL

Concern is one thing. Concede is another.

(Scoffs.)

I take back what I said: You do have an imagination, a shit eater's imagination, like that of a dung beetle or a mouse.

(MORE)

PETAL (CONT'D)

(Beat.)

Speaking of rodents, I suppose he's bringing his bimbo too.

WOLF

Of course. Shimmy and Tempest go hand in hand.

PETAL takes the meat from WOLF's hand, rewrapping and storing it.

PETAL

Well, I'm not letting them get their hands on this.

WOLF

Yes, you will.

(Beat.)

Do we have any sour juice left? We'll need to serve it with the meat.

PETAL shakes WOLF's leather bag and tosses it on the table.

PETAL

Let them eat acorns. Say it's the latest Paleolithic diet.

WOLF

Don't push me, Petal!

PETAL

Oooh, I love it when you sound like the gods, all grand and belch-y.

TEMPEST (O.S.)

--Ahoy! Ahoy there!

WOLF

Tempest comes! Just shut up and follow my lead.

PETAL

Squeak.

HOWLING TEMPEST enters, followed by SHIMMY. WOLF bows while PETAL watches with disgust.

TEMPEST

Furry Wolf! Ahoy!

WOLF

Welcome, Chief! Come in! My cavern is your cavern.

TEMPEST

And what about your woman--haven't you taught her the proper way to greet a chief?

WOLF gestures until PETAL bows half-heartedly. TEMPEST commandeers the largest rock.

TEMPEST (CONT'D)

You may now sit before me.

PETAL doesn't. SHIMMY admires her perch.

SHIMMY

Oh, Petal. I love what you've done with the place. Is this new?

PETAL

Quarried yesterday. Just in time to be queried about today.

SHIMMY

I don't... get it.

PETAL

No one expects you to, dear. Just be pretty.

WOLF

Petal, why don't you get our guests some juice?

SHIMMY

Oh, I'd like that.

WOLF

It's sour-licious.

PETAL

With lingering notes of toady subservience.

PETAL sullenly pours liquid from a bladder into wooden cups, which WOLF distributes. The booze will hit SHIMMY hardest.

WOLF

Well? What do you think, Chief?

TEMPEST

Not the best, but it'll do. I...

TEMPEST notices the fire.

TEMPEST (CONT'D)

What in blazes is that?

WOLF

This? Just a little something I call... Fear.

Fire?
 TEMPEST
 Uh, no. Fear.
 WOLF
 What I said: Fire.
 TEMPEST
 Sure, sure... fire. You got it.
 WOLF
 Aw, so cute. Where'd it come from?
 SHIMMY
 I trapped it in the forest. Quite dangerous, actually.
 WOLF
 Now just a minute. He's not--
 PETAL
 --not exaggerating, not a bit. As you can see, it's a flickery devil, won't stay still for a moment.
 WOLF
 What good is it, this Fire?
 TEMPEST
 Well, after I tamed it, it became as you see here--warm and cuddly.
 WOLF
TEMPEST peers without getting too close. SHIMMY waves at the fire as if to a baby.
 SHIMMY
 Hi there, Fiery. Oh, you're such a little darling. Yes, 'ou are.
 SHIMMY
 You can pet it if you want--
 PETAL
SHIMMY leans in to do so, her hair coming dangerously close to the flames. WOLF pulls her back.
 WOLF
 --No, no. It's a mere babe. Startles easily.
 WOLF
 What does it eat?
 SHIMMY

PETAL

Kiss it and find out, Sugar Lips--

WOLF

--Sticks--it eats sticks! Yes! Twigs. And branches.

WOLF demonstrates. Flames grow.

SHIMMY

Oooh!

TEMPEST

So what? Shimmy would eat branches if I told her to.

SHIMMY

Honey, no. Oh. You're joking, right?

PETAL

Well, how else would you keep those shapely limbs of yours?

SHIMMY

I guess.

WOLF heads for the table.

WOLF

You must be hungry, Chief. You're going to love this.

PETAL shakes the bag of acorns while trying to keep WOLF from the meat under the table.

PETAL

Have some acorns. Fresh picked by human hands.

WOLF

Oh, but we have something much better.

WOLF offers the bloody, greasy, blackened meat. TEMPEST and SHIMMY edge closer, inhaling tentatively, then deeply.

PETAL

Please. That old thing. I call it *Châteaubriand*, which means "sole of a filthy moccasin".

WOLF

Petal's being modest. Don't listen to her. Just taste.

TEMPEST slaps SHIMMY's hands away to take the meat first. SHIMMY whines.

When TEMPEST drops a shred, she eats it off the floor.

WOLF (CONT'D)

What do you think? Huh? Huh?

TEMPEST grunts and takes the whole chunk of meat to gnaw on, keeping his eye on PETAL. SHIMMY gathers dropped orts and tries to catch the dripping grease in her mouth.

SHIMMY

Mmmm. How'd this meat get so warm and crusty?

WOLF

Fire did it.

TEMPEST

Fire... ? That fire?

WOLF

Yeah. I set the beef next to the flames, which blessed the meat with deliciousness.

SHIMMY shows signs of tipsiness.

SHIMMY

This is so yummy. You have to give me your recipe.

PETAL

Add a pinch of E. coli and a dash of salmonella. Your guests will gush.

WOLF

Joke. Petal's just joking.

TEMPEST

I want this Fire.

SHIMMY

Oh yes, Tempest, yes. Let's get some. Can we?

WOLF

You can take it with you. My compliments.

PETAL

Well, this fire's... used, Chief. You deserve a new fire, a bigger one, one that's yours and yours alone. Wolf will get it for you, won't you, Wolf? Tell Tempest how you'll get him a new, bigger fire.

WOLF

I'd, uh... capture it.

PETAL

Like you captured this one. Tell us how you managed that.

WOLF

Uh, I'll track it down in the acorn forest. By the water.

PETAL

We want details. How'll you subdue the flickery devil?

WOLF

(Angrily.)

Just leave that to me! I did it once; I'll do it again!

SHIMMY

I'm so excited. Our own fire. It'll look perfect beside our wardrobe.

PETAL

Even better in your wardrobe.

WOLF

She's joking again. Aren't you, Petal?

PETAL

What do I know? You're the expert.

WOLF

Just be careful. It eats socks if you give it the chance.

TEMPEST

Enough chatter. I accept your gift.

TEMPEST carries the beef to a rock, where he sits. SHIMMY gets to her feet unsteadily.

SHIMMY

(Beginning to slur.)

Oh, this is so thrilling! Wait 'til the girls see my very own fire. I know! I'll throw a party, a coming-out party.

PETAL

Where you'll come out from under your rock.

TEMPEST chuckles. WOLF glares at PETAL, then brightens.

WOLF

You'll be a lovely hostess, Shimmy, as always. It'll be the event of the year, an exciting new festival.

SHIMMY

Yes!

WOLF

With you as the Fire Priestess.

SHIMMY

Oh, I can't wait to show everyone. Especially those girly interns that Tempest claims help him with affairs of state.

TEMPEST

I've told you before. I need interns to deal with routine administrative tasks. Like announcing my daily decrees and recording the output of my bowels.

SHIMMY

Of course, love. Someone has to preserve your shit and keep your pencil sharp.

TEMPEST gives SHIMMY a threatening look.

WOLF

Let's celebrate. Another drink, anyone?

SHIMMY

Yeah, gimme. Make it a dribble--I mean a double.

WOLF

You, Chief? You won't turn down some more sour juice, eh?

TEMPEST waves assent. PETAL pours and serves. SHIMMY twirls dreamily.

SHIMMY

Turn, turn, turn.

(Giggling, groggy.)

The intern drew the attention of everyone in turn before turning in for the night.

The others watch SHIMMY's self-destruction with expressions of alarm and disgust.

SHIMMY (CONT'D)

(Beat, trying to think.)

Be all ye forewarned: Where there's hotness, there's a temp... Where there's anger, there's a temper... Where there's a storm, there's a Tempest! Hah!

TEMPEST

Cut the juice, Shimmy. No one wants to listen to you bray.

SHIMMY

(With sudden energy.)

I know! Let's play a game. Here's a new one I learned. It's called charades.

TEMPEST

I don't think--

SHIMMY

--No, it'll be fun! Each person pretends to be someone and the others guess who it is. I'll go first.

SHIMMY unsteadily picks a smouldering stick, which she tucks between her thighs. Hands over her head, she sashays about, making the smoking stick swing back and forth.

SHIMMY (CONT'D)

Now guess, everybody. Who am I?

PETAL barks a laugh. WOLF recoils. TEMPEST glowers.

PETAL

An administrator!

WOLF, annoyed, hushes her.

SHIMMY

No, silly. Do you need a hint? Here's a hint...

(Beat, while she gets in character. Then, with lowered voice and thrusting hips...)

Look at me, all you limited-term, unpaid minions! I got the biggest stick in the forest!

PETAL

A candidate!

SHIMMY

(Her voice.)

No-oh. Listen:

(Her character's voice.)

Calling all interns! Hear my command! Bow you down and kiss my scepter.

PETAL

An incumbent!

SHIMMY

(In groggy sing-song.)

You're get-ting warm-er.

PETAL

(Breathless with laughter.)

And if you're not careful you're going to put somebody's eye out with that big cock of yours.

TEMPEST

That's enough!

TEMPEST leaps to his feet, pulling the stick from SHIMMY's thighs and burning himself.

TEMPEST (CONT'D)

Shit!

TEMPEST throws the stick down and grabs SHIMMY, shaking her.

SHIMMY

(Giggling.)

Ahoy, King Shit!

TEMPEST

You're going to regret this, Shimmy.

SHIMMY

(Over her shoulder at WOLF.)

Give up? I'm pretending to be this hunk right here. My very own strongman.

TEMPEST

Shut up!

SHIMMY

(Giggling, leaning heavily against TEMPEST.)

That's right. Listen to the big chief, he's got a good head on his shoulders--mine!

(Beat, as she notices the room spinning.)

Oh... I don't feel so good...

PETAL

Too much adulation, no doubt.

SHIMMY vomits into TEMPEST's embrace, then collapses on him with giggles.

TEMPEST

Gods damn it!

WOLF

Ewww...

PETAL

Oh, yeah.

WOLF

There's a bucket of water outside, Chief. For cleanup.

SHIMMY

Clean... erp...

More retching. When PETAL laughs again, TEMPEST turns on WOLF.

TEMPEST

I won't warn you again, Wolf. I'm going to teach my woman a lesson. And if you don't control yours by the time I get back, I will.

TEMPEST exits, dragging the stumbling SHIMMY.

PETAL

Poor Shimmy. When she lost the game she'd eaten, she won the game she'd beaten.

WOLF

Not funny.

PETAL

Sure it is. Nothing reveals the true character of the high and mighty so much as strong drink.

WOLF

Why did you provoke the chief?

PETAL

Just being a good host. Putting our guests in the spotlight.

WOLF

You never think of the consequences.

PETAL

Shimmy will sleep it off. She won't remember a thing.

WOLF

And Tempest? He won't forget.

PETAL

What of it? His own wife makes him look foolish. Picture him now, steering her to the bushes, trying to pass off her rubbery meandering as a sign of her infatuation with his magnificence.

WOLF

He'll never forgive us.

PETAL

I'm not afraid of Tempest. Are you?

WOLF

Of course! You know what he's capable of.

PETAL

He's ready to be taken down by some big, strapping mouse.

WOLF

I can't challenge him.

PETAL

Oooh, the idea of your weakness makes my crotch-fur bristle.

WOLF

Be careful, woman.

PETAL

No, caution is your specialty. Trust me, the chief isn't captivated by your squeaky ingratiating. If you were a warrior instead of a worrier you'd seize the moment. That's how it's done. Unless you're a mouse, of course.

WOLF

I--

(Beat.)

Wait a second. He impresses you.

PETAL

Who--Tempest? I have to admit he doesn't act like he became bipedal only yesterday.

WOLF

That's it, isn't it: You admire him. I see it now.

PETAL

Don't be ridiculous.

WOLF

During the game. The way you teased him. Going on about his "big cock."

PETAL

You are out of your mind. I was playing along with Shimmy.

WOLF

But that's not who you were playing to.

PETAL

(Laughs scornfully.)

Well, I guess we can now add insecurity to your seductive talents.

WOLF

Then there's the way you prance in his presence.

PETAL

Oh, like this?

PETAL exaggerates SHIMMY's hip-swaying locomotion. WOLF grabs PETAL by the arm.

WOLF

Stop.

PETAL breaks his grip.

PETAL

What are you going to do? My moves make all the Magnons crow.

WOLF

Stop mocking me!

PETAL

Then how will I express my true feelings?

WOLF

Damn you.

WOLF paces in frustration.

PETAL

You know, Wolfie, I didn't always feel this way.

(Beat.)

Remember how it was in the beginning? You didn't owe anybody anything, not your attention and certainly not your fawning deference. What you did do was radiate a muscular potential, a raw, undirected power in need only of some focus.

PETAL approaches him gently.

WOLF

And then you appeared.

PETAL

And then I appeared.

PETAL has a hand on his chest.

PETAL (CONT'D)

(Quoting herself, coyly.)

And the sky became dark and angry.

WOLF

... angry...

PETAL

(Moving in.)

And a thunderbolt knocked you on your ass.

WOLF

(His mouth dry with lust.)

... my ass...

PETAL

And thus human nature was born. Modern man. Wise. Invincible.
A Homo with the sapiens to rule the world.

*PETAL kisses WOLF passionately,
but then, at the height of his
response, she pushes him away.*

WOLF

Hey!

PETAL

So what happened to that Wolf, huh?

WOLF

You can't do that!

PETAL

Oh?

WOLF

You can't treat me like some old Neanderthal off the street.
You're my woman! My. Woman.

PETAL

Wouldn't know it from the way you kiss up to Tempest.

WOLF

Give me time. Our gift of fire will get things started.

PETAL

Really. It seemed to me you had a chance to stand up to him
just now and you passed like the wind.

WOLF

Damn it, Petal! Did that thunderbolt addle your brains? You
don't understand anything about getting ahead.

PETAL

I understand that eating is becoming and that you don't become
a hunter by stalking acorns.

WOLF

Easy for you to say. What do you know about shedding blood?

PETAL

You're kidding, right? I'm a woman. Bleeding is my stock in trade.

WOLF

That's not the same and you know it. And it's not so simple. I'm threatened by many rivals.

PETAL

Some threat. You clan boys are like a playground gang, taking turns chasing each other with a turd on a stick.

WOLF

I know how to make my move. Carefully.

PETAL

Spoken like a mousy playground politician. Squeak, squeak!

WOLF

There you go again. I told you--

PETAL

Oh, that's right, your subservience is only an act. Once you get Tempest to make you his pet mouse you'll unleash your inner saber-toothed tiger.

WOLF

Your naked ambition is going to get us both killed.

PETAL

Just the opposite, if you'll only listen. Together we're smarter and far more deserving. The gods have given us the chance of a lifetime. Let's use it. Let's wield this advantage to claim the chieftainship.

WOLF

You're talking treason! I won't stand for it!

PETAL

So to squeak.

WOLF

I'm warning you, Petal! Don't do anything to spoil this.

PETAL

Like you, throwing your integrity away.

WOLF

I haven't--

PETAL

--taken credit for something you didn't do?

WOLF

I...

PETAL

Which you would never have dared.

WOLF

Oh...

PETAL

Much less could repeat.

WOLF

I had good reason to tell the fire story my way.

PETAL

I don't doubt it, Squeaky.

WOLF

Do you think Tempest would've been impressed by the truth of your accomplishments? In case you haven't noticed, Petal, he doesn't consider any woman to be a threat.

PETAL

Well, I'm ready to disabuse him of that notion, starting with our demonstration of fire power to all the elders.

WOLF

That sort of recklessness won't be necessary if... if...
(Beat, thinking...)
 ... if we... gave Tempest an even better gift than fire.

PETAL

Spare me more lickspittle, Mousie.

WOLF

You underestimate Tempest's desire. But that's ok.

PETAL

Is that your idea of a compliment? Now I'm suspicious.

WOLF

Tempest wants you. The most desirable possession of all.

PETAL

(Stunned.)
 You'd serve me up to him?

WOLF

(Matter-of-factly.)
 I'd share you, yes.

PETAL

Like a chunk of fired meat?

WOLF

Don't you see, Petal. You easily outshine Shimmy. You'd be the chief's favorite and I'd be his... his second-in-command.

PETAL

Do you think so little of me?

WOLF

No, I want the best for you and this is the way to get it--the best food, the furriest skins, the sharpest tools.

PETAL

In other words, Tempest gets his paws on me and you get the inked skin markings of privilege. My tit for your tat'.

WOLF

Think of it as a business deal. A trade.

PETAL

It's a sale.

WOLF

Words. The point is, we'd both have a better life.

PETAL

I won't do it.

WOLF

Of course you will.

PETAL

Wolf, I'll help you slit Tempest's throat in his sleep. But I will not be his wet dream come true.

WOLF

I can't believe this. This is so like you!

PETAL

What--to refuse to be treated like refuse?

WOLF

All I ask is for a little support.

PETAL

Support? Sacrifice is more like it. And what's yours?

WOLF

I'd be a cuckold. But I'm willing to suffer that indignity if it means security for both of us.

PETAL

I was wrong about you.

WOLF

Oh? Wrong to say that I'm weak, not willing to act, when all I needed a plan.

PETAL

No, wrong to think that Tempest's mother is the only evolutionary dead-end around here. You're nothing but a zero, a flop.

WOLF, suddenly enraged, advances on PETAL, raising his fist. PETAL hoists a rock and retreats defensively.

PETAL (CONT'D)

Think twice. I killed a bison today. A second brute will be no problem.

WOLF stops short, glaring at PETAL. Then he upends the tabletop, scattering the acorns.

WOLF

You disgrace me, Petal. You treat me like the little finger of your hand. How can I protect you if all the other men view me as the tiniest bone in your fist?

WOLF exits. PETAL sighs and stoops by the fire. After a few moments she begins gently feeding it sticks.

PETAL

(To the fire, dreamily.)

So hungry... You gobble up whatever you get your nimble little fingers on... Whatever's in reach--whether it's allowed or not... I'll have to keep my eye on you... You've got teeth, that's for sure. But if I never forget that, we can be great friends, you and I.

TEMPEST enters. He pauses to look PETAL over. Then he grunts and approaches.

PETAL (CONT'D)

I see you checked your mate at the door. I chucked mine entirely.

TEMPEST

The two of them like overripe fruit--all mushy inside.

PETAL

Wolf has some value. He takes out the trash.

TEMPEST

Wolf is browbeaten and servile. You need a real man.

PETAL

Oh?

TEMPEST

A real man to possess you, to take you at the point of his spear.

PETAL

I get it: Me Jane, you *Homo erectus*.

TEMPEST

Nice sass. I like your bite.

TEMPEST advances on PETAL, who maneuvers to keep the fire between them.

PETAL

This fire bites. You like that? Playing with fire?

TEMPEST

Fire is a pretty diversion. I desire a real test of my abilities.

PETAL

Then you should work on your manners. I've been watching you.

TEMPEST

I bet you have.

PETAL

No, not that way. More like I might watch a bear shit in the woods.

TEMPEST

(Puffing up.)

I must attend to ritual. Whatever the head man does becomes the example for all.

PETAL

But you show such lack of creativity. Every man you approach, you approach with bluster, every woman with your cock in your hand.

TEMPEST

That's what they expect. Hierarchy exists for the good of the people. It reminds them of their lesser roles.

PETAL

Allowing you to take what you will.

TEMPEST

Someone has to suffer the perks of the office.

PETAL

Such as all those interns? You go through them like ripe berries. Why eat one at a time when you hold a handful?

TEMPEST

Interns have limited talents. Thus, their appeal is short-term.

PETAL

(Laughs.)

Your needs are so simple and obvious.

TEMPEST

I took power by being unpredictable; I stay in power by just the opposite.

PETAL

(Beat, coyly.)

You'd like to have me under you, wouldn't you? Like another compliant intern.

TEMPEST nods, salivating.

TEMPEST

Wolf didn't capture the fire creature, did he? You did.

PETAL

What difference does it make?

TEMPEST

You're demanding. Yet you ignore Wolf's flaws.

PETAL

Of course. Without the excuses women make for men, civilization would be impossible.

TEMPEST

(Laughs.)

You're very sure of yourself. You'd look good beside me.

PETAL

What about your current woman?

TEMPEST

Shimmy's dry as an acorn. Not at all like you.

PETAL

Don't be so unimaginative. Shimmy and I could be pastry and fruit. *Ménage a tartes*, anyone?

TEMPEST

(Lasciviously.)

Oh, taming you will be the most delightful foreplay.

TEMPEST reaches for PETAL, who dodges his grasp. She pulls a heavy stick from the fire, its tip glowing red. She waves it at TEMPEST, who laughs and grabs the hot end...

TEMPEST (CONT'D)

Fucking bloody hell! Fuck, fuck, fuck!

PETAL

Now I got you fired up.

When TEMPEST rushes her, PETAL swings the stick like a club, catching him full on the side of his head. TEMPEST falls back, screaming, cursing, while PETAL follows, battering him to the floor and finishing him off. PETAL steps back, breathing heavily.

PETAL (CONT'D)

Huh. That was easy.

PETAL drops the stick to rummage for a stone knife. WOLF enters.

WOLF

Shimmy passed out. I'll take a robe to cover her...

(Beat, noticing...)

What's going on? What's with Tempest? Did the juice go to his head too?

PETAL

I'd say it's more like tête à tête became bâton à tête.

PETAL mimes the killing blow by touching the handle of the knife lightly to her temple. WOLF kicks TEMPEST's body.

WOLF

What evil have you done?

PETAL

I call it "succession planning".

PETAL pushes WOLF aside. She kneels beside TEMPEST and goes to work with the knife.

WOLF

Oh... now we are traitors! We are doomed!

PETAL

Don't be a fool.

WOLF

But you've killed him! Once your crime is discovered, we'll both be executed.

PETAL

Not if I have my way.

WOLF

Are you insane! How do you expect to get away with this?

PETAL

In bits and pieces.

PETAL holds up TEMPEST's bloody heart.

PETAL (CONT'D)

You wanted influence, Wolf. Here's that and more. The heart of power.

WOLF

(Recoiling.)

What am I supposed to do with that?

PETAL

Take it in. Absorb its courage, its stature. Become the chief.

WOLF's hand goes to his mouth.

WOLF

(Beat, as he gapes.)

You don't expect me to... You... you heartless monster.

PETAL laughs, hoisting her bloody handful.

PETAL

If anything, I have too much heart. You'll have to help me rectify that.

PETAL sets Tempest's heart next to the fire. The hot rocks make the blood sizzle. WOLF backs up, gagging.

WOLF
(Choking, horrified.)
 ... I couldn't.

PETAL
(Laughs.)
 Of course not, doofus. Not raw.
(Gestures.)
 But we have fire now! Now it'll be tender and tasty!

WOLF
 I need... I need to get away from this... madness...

WOLF exits unsteadily.

PETAL
 Don't go too far. It's almost dinner time.

PETAL begins to tidy up. She pulls the tabletop away from the wall and rolls it on edge toward its base. In the process the heavy round stone makes an unexpected popping sound, which PETAL investigates. Rolling the tabletop back and forth over the acorns, PETAL realizes that they are being ground underneath.

PETAL (CONT'D)
(Beat, then to herself.)
 Now this... this is an omen.
(Giggles, then shouting.)
 Wolfie! Come here! Quick! I've got something to show you!

PETAL is mesmerized by the sight and SOUND of shells being crushed as she feeds WOLF's nuts to the grindstone one by one.

Fade to black.

END OF ACT I

ACT II: BEG PARDON

Characters

THOMAS JEFFERSON, white, age 70, a wealthy landowner

SALLY HEMINGS, black, age 40, a slave in Thomas' household

BEVERLY, black, age 14, Sally's oldest mixed-race son, also a slave

Costumes

Thomas is dressed as an early 19th-century American aristocrat. Sally and Beverly are dressed as slaves assigned to Thomas' main house and to his estate grounds, respectively.

Time

1810.

Setting

The study of a ruling class colonial-style house in the early 1800s, with a writing desk and chair and a door upstage, which leads offstage to the rest of the manor.

JEFFERSON is at his desk. There is an offstage interruption.

BEVERLY (O.S.)

Ma-ma!

BEVERLY has an indistinct O.S. exchange with SALLY. When it's over, JEFFERSON extends the fingers of his free hand one by one. At "five" SALLY bursts in.

SALLY

What are you thinking?

JEFFERSON

I'm thinking that a pauper must be the most envied of men--so encumbered as to be of no further interest to his creditors.

SALLY

Don't be flippant. You know what I mean.

Truly. I don't.

JEFFERSON

Sylvie.

SALLY

Who's Sylvie?

JEFFERSON

The goat, the one Beverly just told me will be your dinner.

SALLY

I didn't realize she'd been christened.

JEFFERSON

Eston named her. He loves that goat.

SALLY

So do I. That's why I'll toast her with fennel and shallots at table tonight.

JEFFERSON

Eston couldn't bear to see her eaten. He's a child.

SALLY

He'll be excused.

JEFFERSON

Eston learned to walk holding on to that doe. You'll break his heart. You can't kill her, Thomas. It would be cruel.

SALLY

JEFFERSON rises, approaching.

I do apologize, Sally. I didn't mean to upset you.

JEFFERSON

Think of Eston.

SALLY

JEFFERSON

(Chuckling.)

Oh, I've seen how are together. The big eyes she makes at him. The way he makes her laugh... MMM-bahhhh!

JEFFERSON embraces SALLY from behind. He nuzzles her neck and she stiffens.

Thank you, Thomas.

SALLY

For what?

JEFFERSON

SALLY

For changing your mind and sparing Eston's goat.

JEFFERSON

Who said anything about changing my mind or my menu?

SALLY

But...

JEFFERSON

You jumped to a conclusion, Sally. I merely comforted you. I never acquiesced. I have a hankering for goat and I intend to serve Elias Moreland a savory stew. A savory Sylvi-en stew.

SALLY

No.

JEFFERSON

Sally...

SALLY

I won't allow it... Sir.

JEFFERSON

Mind how you talk to me.

SALLY

No, Thomas. Spare the goat. Serve something else instead. Serve turkey.

JEFFERSON

Turkey?! God no. Moreland would be apoplectic. If he and Franklin had chosen our national bird, baking a turkey would be an act of treason.

SALLY

Please... Sir, please--

JEFFERSON

--That's enough. Moreland will be here in four hours.

SALLY

(Beat.)

Do you recall what Elias Moreland said to me the last time he visited?

JEFFERSON

(Sighs.)

Yes. He called you a "Nubian princess".

SALLY

Did you put him up to it?

JEFFERSON

How can you think that?

SALLY

Well, you must've given him your we-don't-say-that-other-N-word-around-here-fella speech.

JEFFERSON

One of these days I'm going to forbid your insolence entirely.

SALLY

You know your problem, Thomas? You think that fraternizing with the livestock makes you a gentleman.

JEFFERSON

I'm appalled that you would say that about our relationship.

SALLY

Why not? You don't improve my legal standing by putting your hand down my bodice and your tongue up my skirt.

JEFFERSON

Don't be crude.

SALLY

Except when you want me that way.

JEFFERSON

Don't push me, Sally. Your presumption is going too far.

SALLY

I remember when you told me that going too far was our *raison d'être*.

JEFFERSON

I won't have you disrespecting me under my own roof! And in French! I should never have taken you to Paris.

SALLY

Don't treat my opinion as an insult to your authority.

JEFFERSON

What else could it be?

SALLY

Your bleating conscience, which suggests a name for your claim of gentlemanly entitlement over the lower species. Yes... let's call it--sub-humanism.

JEFFERSON

"Sub-humanism"--you don't know what you're talking about.

SALLY

Then let me explain. Broadly speaking, there are two kinds of dog owners--those who treat a dog as a cur, and those who treat a dog as a pet. Guess which kind of attention a dog prefers.

(Beat.)

I'll tell you. The former, because a cur is certain of its treatment from day to day, and can build scars and calluses against it.

JEFFERSON

I do my best for you, Sally. You know that.

SALLY

But a pet. A pet knows that it must beg for its keep and present its belly to be rubbed whenever required. But no matter how well you treat a pet, each time its bowl is late is a reminder of how easily all its privileges can be taken away.

JEFFERSON

You have no such thing to fear from me.

SALLY

In the end, dog ownership is ownership. Fondness might prettify it, but affection is not alchemy.

JEFFERSON

You know me, Sally. You know what's in my heart.

SALLY

No, I can only guess what's in your heart from the evidence of your actions. Moreland is an out-and-out sub-humanist. He can be confronted head on. But you--you greet your pet slaves by name and tickle their children fondly. You give each of your pet families a goose for Christmas. You even ban the word "nigger" in your home, but you won't take steps against the injustice it represents in the outside world.

JEFFERSON

I had no idea you despised me so.

SALLY

You haven't been listening, have you? A privileged sub-humanist such as you hides his timidity behind a posture of victimhood.

JEFFERSON

What would you have me do?

SALLY

Well, start with Eston's goat.

JEFFERSON

(With pent-up self-pity.)

Fuck the goat! The goat's headed for the stew pot!

SALLY

Then give our children what you denied Sylvie--a new life, one with dignity.

JEFFERSON

I can't.

SALLY

(Anguished.)

You promised!

JEFFERSON

It's not that simple.

SALLY

No, it's not. The only thing that can defeat sub-humanism is self-doubt, which requires a rebellious heart.

JEFFERSON

Damn it, Sally! I have obligations. I'm in debt up to the rafters. I've proposed a university and I can't afford to alienate potential donors such as Elias Moreland!

SALLY

Not all obligations are created equal. At least tell your children who they are. Who you are.

JEFFERSON

My hands are tied.

SALLY

That's a self-centered, tactless thing to say, considering my station. And you're supposed to be a world-class diplomat.

JEFFERSON

Will you just let me do what I think best, starting with dinner.

SALLY

How can someone so masterful at statecraft be so inept at household politics? You insist on placing your own interests first. Fair enough. I'll do the same.

JEFFERSON

What's that supposed to mean?

SALLY

Are you prepared to force me to your bed? Because unless you embrace your family entire, you will not get me there otherwise.

*SALLY exits. Moments later,
BEVERLY enters tentatively.*

JEFFERSON

(Impatiently.)

Yes, Beverly, what do you want?

BEVERLY

Nothing, Master Tom. Mama said you wanted to see me.

JEFFERSON

Of course she did... Come here, Beverly. Sit.

BEVERLY sits awkwardly.

JEFFERSON (CONT'D)

I was wrong. About Sylvie.

BEVERLY

Sir?

JEFFERSON

The goat. Eston's goat. I was wrong to tell you to kill it.

BEVERLY

Oh.

(Long beat.)

Is there anything more, Master Tom?

JEFFERSON

You must be wondering why I'm... confessing this.

BEVERLY

No, sir. I mean... I guess so.

JEFFERSON

Do you know who I am, Beverly?

BEVERLY

Of course, sir. You're the Master. You own this place and everyone who lives here.

JEFFERSON

I'm something more. To your mother. And to you.

BEVERLY

Sir?

JEFFERSON

I'm very fond of you, Beverly. Maybe you don't realize that, but I am. Fond of you and your siblings and your mother.

BEVERLY

Yes, sir, you treat us well. I've never complained.

JEFFERSON

Oh, I know that, Beverly. You've been loyal and hard-working.

(Beat, calculating.)

I'm sure that your... father, wherever he may be, is very proud of you.

(Beat.)

That's why I want to do something for you. Something unusual and certainly unexpected.

(Beat.)

Have you ever thought about what it might be like to live as a free man?

BEVERLY

I... I don't know, Master Tom. Like I said, you treat us good.

JEFFERSON

Well, I've decided... that one day in the future, I'm going to manumit you.

BEVERLY

Sir, I don't know what that means. Is it a good thing?

JEFFERSON

Yes, a very good thing. I'll be giving you your freedom then. And you'll have earned it by the time I die. Do you like that idea?

BEVERLY

(Dutiful but unsure.)

Yes sir.

JEFFERSON

Now you mustn't say anything to anyone about this. It'll be our secret as long as I live.

BEVERLY

Excuse me, sir, but I wonder... I wonder how you can free me after you... you know... pass on.

JEFFERSON holds up paper and quill.

JEFFERSON

I'll prepare what's called a last will and testament. It's a sacred document in a court of law. I'll write instructions that you--and Harriet and Madison and Eston, too--that from that day forward you will all be forever free and independent.

BEVERLY

(Unconvinced.)

Thank you, Master Tom... Can I tell my mama?

JEFFERSON

Yes, certainly. But no one else, not even your brothers and your sister.

BEVERLY

Oh, yes, sir. Thank you, sir.

JEFFERSON

Now here's a coin... take Eston into town for candy... Go on.

BEVERLY heads for the door.

JEFFERSON (CONT'D)

And Beverly.

BEVERLY

Sir?

JEFFERSON

Ask your mother to step in here, will you?

BEVERLY

Yes, Master Tom.

BEVERLY exits. JEFFERSON counts five fingers, to no effect. Finally SALLY reappears, clutching her apron.

JEFFERSON

There you are.

SALLY

Beverly said you wanted to see me, Master Thomas.

JEFFERSON

Well, yes, I wanted you to see that I made Beverly happy.

SALLY

So that I could tell you what a wonderful Master you are?

JEFFERSON

What's wrong with expecting a thank you?

SALLY

Nothing. As long as the gratitude doesn't exceed the size of the accomplishment.

JEFFERSON

You're very hard to please, you know that, Sally.

SALLY

I'm pleased. Not quite as pleased as Punch. Pleased as Judy is more like it.

JEFFERSON

Some day you'll understand me and my responsibilities.

SALLY

What did you tell Beverly about us?

JEFFERSON

I said that I would release the four children from bondage with my final instructions.

SALLY

That's it? "Your final instructions"? That's the best you could do for "the four children"?

JEFFERSON

Freedom is the ultimate gift, no matter how much patience it requires to obtain it.

SALLY

And you didn't explain to Beverly why you were going to some day be so generous to him and his sister and brothers?

JEFFERSON

That will come out in the reading of my will.

SALLY

Why wait? Why not follow the example of the man who declared a colony's freedom and simply release your human chattel?

JEFFERSON

You know why--for the good of all who depend on my estate. For my creditors' morale. For the university I want to build.

SALLY

For your own comfort and privilege.

JEFFERSON

It's for the best, Sally. Just appreciate that it will happen.

SALLY

You thought that I'd be satisfied with this arrangement? You're a foolish man, Thomas.

JEFFERSON

Yes, I am. That is why I require your continued love.

SALLY

As you wish--Master.

JEFFERSON

You're being unfair!

SALLY

That is true. I have been the embodiment of unfairness ever since I drew your eye as a child.

JEFFERSON

Damnit! I have to do this my way. For the larger goal.

SALLY

Some goal, whose grandiosity diminishes you.

JEFFERSON

(Beat, as he composes himself.)

We can discuss this later, when I deem it appropriate. In the meantime, there is still the matter of tonight's dinner. I've... decided not to serve the goat after all.

SALLY reveals her bloody apron.

SALLY

(Measured, with nuanced force.)

It's too late. I slaughtered the goat to provide you with a naked sub-human sacrifice--flayed, disjointed, and ready for the fire. The man who is your guest of honor, who mistakes your cowardice for courtesy, will accept your offering. And he will still envy you the curs-ed estate that is your good fortune. But every day hence I'll bleat in your ear a reminder of what that fortune costs you...

(Mocking subservience.)

... MMM-bahhhh.

SALLY exits, leaving JEFFERSON brooding. End of play.

ACT III: OTTO-DA-FÉ

Characters

OTTO, 50s-to-60s, a prosperous businessman, with patrician bearing and refined good looks

HANNAH, his sociable wife of a similar age

ELLE, 20s-to-30s, his reserved young assistant

Costumes

Hannah and Otto wear sporty designer clothing. Elle wears plain business attire.

Time

The present, give or take.

Setting

A private garden with a bench.

Notes

OTTO-DA-FÉ depicts a complete shift in power from one character to another over the course of a brief encounter. After Otto's infidelity is exposed at the play's midpoint (at the palindromic "Noon"), his character "backs out of the scene." Hannah and Elle are left to deliver each other's original lines in reverse order with significantly different meanings that lead to an uneasy conclusion.

The play's reversing structure is inspired by J.S. Bach's "Musical Offering, Canon A 2 Quaerendo Invenietis", as described in *Gödel, Escher, Bach: an Eternal Golden Braid* by Douglas Hofstadter. For further information about this short fugue, see "<https://bit.ly/3gplq62>". Listen to an animated version at "<https://bit.ly/3gk2XKJ>".

In darkness, two performers on separate pianos play Bach's canon sequentially, first forward, then backward. This will take about one minute.

At the end of the second version, the lights come up on the garden where ELLE sits on a bench, deep in thought. After a moment, HANNAH enters.

ELLE
(*Startled from her
preoccupation.*)
Oh, Hannah. It's you.

HANNAH
(*Cheerfully.*)
I didn't expect to find you here today, Elle.

ELLE
I had to see the garden.

HANNAH
Of course.

ELLE
The perfect setting.

HANNAH
(*Playfully rhapsodic.*)
I couldn't agree more. Watching life pass by isn't this garden's only reward, Elle. These flowers are special to me. Months ago, Otto gave me the seeds I planted here, when their triumph was mere possibility. My efforts have now freed all their promised glory. I hope you grasp how much more I enjoy these blossoms that are the result of Otto's act of faith.

ELLE
The sun, the flowers. So restful.

HANNAH
An oasis. Even when you're not alone it offers the peace of solitude.

ELLE
Otto's favorite spot.

HANNAH
I remember the first time that he brought me here.

ELLE
He would've made a show of that. He's the master of planned spontaneity.

HANNAH
(*Laughs.*)
Otto's Otto.

ELLE
(*Politely.*)
I don't know him like you do.

HANNAH
I've been thinking about Otto a lot lately.

ELLE

Please, sit. Spend some time with me. We won't disturb the calm.

*HANNAH sits on the bench
opposite. A pause...*

HANNAH

Elle... I must know. Otto's planning something, isn't he? He's preparing to make some big decision.

ELLE

What are you implying?

HANNAH

I'm not sure that I can say.

ELLE

But you sound as though you believe there's cause to worry.

HANNAH

You have to admit that it's not like him to... muddle about so.

ELLE

So you think he's acting strangely?

HANNAH

Otto's usually able to focus, no matter how much he has on his plate.

ELLE

Acquisitions. Mergers. The business details blur together after a while.

HANNAH

But Otto has the uncanny ability to predict profit and loss.

ELLE

No matter the circumstances, he always finds a way to come out ahead.

HANNAH

(Beat.)

May I be honest with you, Elle? About how Otto's affairs affect us.

ELLE

Certainly.

HANNAH

I've always felt a special bond with you. Perhaps it's only because of Otto, but I perceive that our lives were meant to cross.

ELLE

I know what you mean. I feel it too.

HANNAH

I sense that our fates are overlapping.

ELLE

I count on it.

HANNAH

I know that I can trust you.

ELLE

You're suspicious. As if you suspect your husband has some secret life.

HANNAH

And I'm caught between wanting to know and wanting to remain mercifully ignorant.

ELLE

Maybe that's reason enough to avoid looking more closely.

HANNAH

You said that his distraction was uncharacteristic.

ELLE

(Noncommittally.)

Yes, I wonder what it's all about.

OTTO enters suddenly, purposefully, but his energy dissipates quickly when he sees the two women.

OTTO

Oh, my. Heh, heh.

After a brief, subtle moment of recalibration, OTTO recovers with the bravado of a practiced liar.

OTTO (CONT'D)

(Heartily.)

Look who's having a nice chat in my country garden. What a lovely surprise.

OTTO crosses to HANNAH, who receives him while seated. He kisses her on the cheek with routine marital affection.

OTTO (CONT'D)

All this beauty, with my dear wife as the centerpiece. I hope you both enjoy it. I know I do.

OTTO indicates the expanse with open arms.

OTTO (CONT'D)

I just got up from my desk to stretch my legs, and now I see what I've been missing, right under my nose. I could be out here, enjoying this marvelous day. Instead, I'm wasting my time indoors with charts and tables.

ELLE rises as if to ask a question, but OTTO waves her off.

OTTO (CONT'D)

No, no, Elle, I can finish on my own. Thanks to your usual administrative efficiency, I have everything I need.

OTTO turns to HANNAH.

OTTO

Tell you what, Hannah, my dear, I'll join you for drinks and conversation. Just give me another hour to finish my report to the board.

OTTO consults his cell to learn the time.

OTTO (CONT'D)

Splendid. Yes. That's it...

(Beat.)

Noon.

(Beat, his mind racing.)

That's it, yes, splendid.

(Beat, then urgently, as his bravado begins to fail him.)

My dear Hannah, I'll be finished with my board report in an hour. Then I'll join you for drinks and conversation.

OTTO looks about nervously.

OTTO (CONT'D)

So, Elle, I have everything I need. Thanks to your usual administrative efficiency, I can finish on my own.

OTTO exhibits a growing desperation to escape.

OTTO (CONT'D)

Too bad I'm wasting my time indoors with those charts and tables.

(MORE)

OTTO (CONT'D)

Now that I've gotten up from my desk to stretch my legs, I see what I've been missing. This marvelous day, out here, right under my nose.

With a theatrical flourish.

OTTO (CONT'D)

All this beauty, with my dear wife as the centerpiece. I hope you both enjoy it. I know I do.

OTTO backs away, his hands upraised protectively.

OTTO (CONT'D)

Such a lovely surprise... I'll let you finish your nice chat in my country garden.

OTTO scuttles sideways, like a fleeing crab, his voice composed but his eyes darting.

OTTO (CONT'D)

(With exaggerated heartiness.)

Heh, heh... Oh, my.

OTTO exits. ELLE sits.

HANNAH

I wonder what that was all about?

ELLE

This distraction is so uncharacteristic.

HANNAH

Maybe that's reason enough to avoid looking more closely.

ELLE

Leaving you caught between wanting to remain mercifully ignorant and wanting to know.

HANNAH

I'm suspicious. I suspect that my husband has some... secret life.

ELLE

(Not a question.)

Well, you know you can trust me.

ELLE breaks eye contact.

HANNAH

I count on it.

ELLE

I sense our fates are overlapping.

HANNAH

I know what you mean. I feel it too.

ELLE

I've always felt a special bond with you. Perhaps it's only because of Otto, but I perceive our lives were meant to cross.

HANNAH

Certainly.

ELLE

May I be honest with you, Hannah? About how Otto's affairs affect us.

HANNAH

No matter the circumstances, he always finds a way to come out ahead.

ELLE

Otto has the uncanny ability to predict profit and loss.

HANNAH

Acquisitions. Mergers. The business details blur together after a while.

ELLE

But Otto's usually able to focus, no matter how much he has on his plate.

HANNAH

So you, too, think that he's acting strangely.

ELLE

I admit it's not like him to muddle about so.

HANNAH's growing alarm brings her to her feet.

HANNAH

You sound as though you believe there's cause to worry.

ELLE

I'm not sure what I should say.

HANNAH

What are you implying?

ELLE

(A deep breath before plunging.)

(MORE)

ELLE (CONT'D)

You must know, Hannah. Otto's planning something. He's preparing to make a big decision.

HANNAH

Sit. Take your time. We mustn't disturb the calm.

ELLE

I've been thinking about Otto a lot lately.

HANNAH

I don't know him like you do.

ELLE

(Portentously.)

Otto's Otto.

HANNAH

He's the master of planned spontaneity. He makes a show of it.

ELLE

I remember the first time he brought me here.

HANNAH

Otto's favorite spot.

ELLE

An oasis. Even when you're not alone it offers the peace of solitude.

HANNAH

The sun, the flowers. So restful.

ELLE rises and begins pacing. As she makes her intentions clear, she becomes more and more imperious.

ELLE

I couldn't agree more, Hannah. What's flowered here is special to me too. But I'm no mere passerby. Otto's seed, planted months ago as an act of faith, has rewarded my efforts with every result I could possibly have hoped for. The promised glory is now in my grasp, and I'm free to enjoy life's triumphant blossoming, while you can only watch.

ELLE caresses her belly as she gives HANNAH a smug look.

HANNAH

The perfect setting...

ELLE

Of course.

HANNAH

(Beat, then with growing
apprehension.)

The garden. I had to... see.

*ELLE takes a challenging step
toward HANNAH.*

ELLE

(Coldly deliberate.)

We didn't expect to find you here today, Hannah.

*Slowly HANNAH collapses on her
bench, leaving ELLE to loom over
her.*

HANNAH

Oh, Elle...

(A long beat as comprehension
dawns.)

It's you.

*As lights fade to black, the two
pianists play their respective
versions of Bach's canon once
more, but this time they perform
their versions forward and
backward simultaneously.*

END OF ACT III

ACT IV: ZEUS STORY**Characters**

PETRA, 25-35, female--composed, demure, and proper
JERRY, male--confident, suave, and persuasive
THIEF, male

Costumes

Petra and Jerry wear the standard business attire--formal and casual, respectively--of the future. Petra carries a large bag. Thief wears the worn and scruffy castoffs of seasons past.

Time

20 years from now, give or take.

Setting

Two beat-up, old-style wooden park benches, facing each other at an angle, one with a slat missing. A sleek "futuristic" trash can with the broken end of the bench slat protruding.

PETRA enters with a large bag over her shoulder, sipping a beverage. She crosses to the undamaged bench and sits. She removes a lunch container and a helmet from the bag, which she sets carelessly on the ground beside her. She dons the helmet, lowering an opaque visor that blocks the top half of her face. Small colored lights on the helmet blink to indicate that it's active. PETRA settles in comfortably to eat and engage with the helmet's program, which requires her to make occasional small hand gestures in the air above her lap while she feeds herself under the visor.

After a few moments, THIEF enters. He appraises PETRA for a few moments before approaching her stealthily from behind. Carefully, silently he reaches out toward her bag, grabs it and flees. PETRA turns with alarm, removing her helmet as she rises.

PETRA

Oh! Stop! Stop him! Please help! That's my bag!

JERRY enters, blocking THIEF's exit. They grapple clumsily. JERRY decks THIEF with a wild punch and sends him off empty-handed with an amateurish kick. JERRY returns PETRA's bag.

JERRY

(Winded.)

Yours, I believe.

PETRA takes the bag, feverishly checking the contents.

PETRA

Oh, thank you, thank you.

JERRY

All there?

PETRA

Yes, I think so.

PETRA returns to the bench, where she sits, quite drained. JERRY follows.

JERRY

You ok?

PETRA

Yes. Oh, I'm so grateful. I don't know what I would've done if you hadn't come along.

JERRY

Glad I did.

PETRA

Oh. I'm so... forgive me. I have to catch my breath.

JERRY

(Beat.)

Place sure has changed.

PETRA

Pardon?

JERRY

The park. Used to be you could sit here any time, day or night, without fear.

PETRA
I'm not afraid. I was just... startled.

JERRY
Of course.

PETRA
I carry protection.

PETRA pulls her bag close as if realizing her knight is yet another stranger.

PETRA (CONT'D)
I mean, I'm... armed.

JERRY sits on the second bench.

JERRY
Smart. Can't be too careful.
(Beat.)
That's why you might reconsider wearing that, that--

JERRY spins a finger in the air.

JERRY (CONT'D)
--game cap in public.

PETRA
I forgot to turn on the proximity alarm. That was stupid.

JERRY
No, no. It says something about you. You're a trusting person.

PETRA pulls a compact baton out of her bag.

PETRA
Even though I also carry a shock stick?

JERRY
Well, what's the expression--trust but electrify?

They laugh. The tension eases.

JERRY (CONT'D)
Still, you think the best of people until proven otherwise.
That's admirable.

PETRA
I suppose.

JERRY

Unfortunately in the process you also risk becoming desensitized to danger.

PETRA

I don't know about that.

JERRY

Maybe that creep did you a favor.

PETRA

Huh?

JERRY

I bet you'll remember to use the cap's alarm from now on.

PETRA

You can be sure I will.

JERRY

Yeah, it's good to be reminded of your vulnerability once in a while. Keeps you on your toes.

PETRA

This bag has all my personal stuff. You saved me a great deal of trouble. Thank you.

JERRY

You're welcome.

PETRA

Have you ever had to cancel all your exchanges and cloud new ones?

JERRY

Takes years.

PETRA

Then you have to pay someone to keep checking your webspoor, like every day, forever.

JERRY

A nightmare. An absolute nightmare.

PETRA

Once someone rode my ID for a whole week. Cost me... a lot. Asshole.

(Beat, dismayed.)

Oh, I'm sorry.

JERRY laughs.

PETRA (CONT'D)

I don't usually talk like that.

JERRY

Sometimes no other word will do.

PETRA

It's just, you know, with the bureaucrats and all their...
bullshit, criminals seem to suffer less than their victims.

JERRY

Ain't that the truth.

PETRA

(Giggles.)

I guess I sound like quite the potty mouth.

JERRY

No, no, you're plain-spoken. It's a refreshing quality.

*A pause, which PETRA fills by
rearranging her belongings...*

JERRY (CONT'D)

My name's Jerry, by the way.

PETRA

Petra.

JERRY

Nice place for lunch, isn't it? Except for the occasional
purse-snatching asshole.

PETRA

Yes, it's usually very peaceful.

JERRY

What's the game?

PETRA

I'm sorry... ?

JERRY

You were totally absorbed in your game cap. What were you
playing?

PETRA

Oh, just a sim.

JERRY

Maybe I heard of it.

PETRA

I doubt it. It's not a typical man thing.

JERRY

What's a "typical man thing"?

PETRA

You know... action, adventure...

JERRY

(Enjoying her discomfort.)

Bombs and boobs and blood? Is that what you think?

PETRA

I'm sorry, I shouldn't stereotype. In fact, under the right circumstances, I'm quite handy with a CGI sword or an AK-47.

JERRY

I see. What's the name of this simulation?

PETRA

Laureate.

JERRY

Is that the... "family bootstrap game"?

PETRA

That's it. You start out in poverty with all these Third World disadvantages and you try to produce a Nobel prize-winner in as few generations as possible.

(Beat, not a question.)

You know of it.

JERRY

You're surprised. Presuming again, perhaps.

PETRA

I'm sorry. Again.

JERRY

So how close are you to birthing your little Nobel laureate?

PETRA

Not at all. I'm still living in my original hut. Herding goats and trying to teach my kids to read.

JERRY

Goats reading? How's that work?

PETRA

(Laughs.)

No, human kids. Two boys and a girl.

JERRY

What's the difference? I mean as far as the game goes?

PETRA

It costs more to educate girls but you earn more points when you pull it off.

JERRY

Well, one can always hope.

PETRA

Your mother would be proud of that attitude.

JERRY

(Joking.)

Should be. She beat it into me.

PETRA

(Laughs.)

Whatever works.

JERRY

So how about your children? Your for-real ones.

PETRA

(Beat.)

I don't have any.

JERRY

I'm sorry, that was rude of me.

PETRA

No, that's fine. Small talk. Harmless.

JERRY

(Beat.)

So you like action and adventure games too, huh. Like what?

PETRA

Well, if I'm going to be honest, I have to admit to wasting entire weekends playing *God of Gods*.

JERRY

Oooh, I would not have pegged you as a Greek deity freek.

PETRA

That's because you don't know I teach mythology at one of the anytime universities.

JERRY

Oh, ancient stories of assault and battery. Wonderful.

PETRA

I think of myself as a curator of myth.

JERRY

What's worth preserving about those old tales?

PETRA

Well, it's all about the difference between a story and a myth, you know?

JERRY shrugs elaborately.

PETRA (CONT'D)

It's simple really: A story serves the storyteller and a myth serves the listener.

JERRY

Meaning... ?

PETRA

Meaning myths will always be relevant to a modern audience.

(Beat.)

I can see you're skeptical.

JERRY

Help me out with a for-instance.

PETRA

Ok, you probably know who the "God of Gods" refers to.

JERRY

Sure, Zeus, the top boss on Mount... uh... Olympus.

PETRA

But Zeus wasn't the primary god at first. Zeus became the supreme being by overthrowing his father, who had previously done the same to Zeus' grandfather. How's that for a metaphor of repetitive generational rebellion?

JERRY

Like the second through fifth George Bushes. Each one trying to outmuscle his daddy.

PETRA

There you go: Life mimicking myth. Myth illuminating life.

JERRY

But Zeus was more than that. Quite a stud, too, am I right?

PETRA

Oh, yeah. According to the Greeks, we are all the children of Zeus, linked through his innumerable sexual encounters with other beings, mortal and immortal. Encounters sometimes welcome, sometimes not.

JERRY

He was a rapist, in other words.

PETRA

And a bully and a cheat and a liar.

JERRY

You wouldn't think Zeus would need trickery to get his way. He's a god, after all.

PETRA

What good is omnipotence without self-indulgence. On the bright side, Zeus had sired very notable offspring--Aphrodite, Apollo, Artemis.

JERRY

Even though he was married, right? To Hera.

PETRA

Hera was both Zeus' third wife and third sister. He conned his way into her bedchamber where he violated her.

JERRY

Nasty.

PETRA

Consistently so. Zeus' specialty was disguise. To make the most of his sexual escapades, he appeared to his victims as a cuckoo, or a bull, or a swan, or a satyr, or even a shower of gold.

JERRY

Did he ever change himself into a dog?

PETRA

Not that I know of. Why do you ask?

JERRY

I thought there was a Greek myth about a dog. I like dogs.

PETRA

Cerberes, maybe? The Hound of Hades.

JERRY

I like the sound of that. Hades is hell, I believe.

PETRA

Named after Zeus' brother, the King of the Underworld.

JERRY

Tell me more.

PETRA

You should take my course.

JERRY

Maybe I will. I like learning stuff. Like how Cerberes fits in myth-wise?

PETRA

Through death.

JERRY

Now we're talking: Death is the ultimate "man thing".

PETRA

(Laughs.)

As long as by "man" you mean mankind.

JERRY

"Mean, man, kind". Isn't that a paradox or something?

PETRA

Myths are full of contradiction.

JERRY

Like death being the essential flip side of life.

PETRA

You got it. Zeus had the power to make humans immortal, but he chose not to, thereby making death the inescapable curse that all humans deny.

JERRY

That's bleak. Let's get back to the dog. Dogs always cheer me up.

PETRA

(Laughs.)

Oh, cuddly Cerberus--guard dog with a serpent's tail, a mane of snakes, the claws of a lion, and multiple heads, each one featuring a snarling, slavering, fang-filled maw.

JERRY

Yeah, that one. The perfect pet.

PETRA

A beast so fearsome that its defeat was the last labor Zeus demanded of his son Heracles.

JERRY

Whose job was to kill it, I assume.

PETRA

Worse. He had to capture Cerberus alive, with his bare hands.

JERRY

Then what?

PETRA

After Heracles used the beast to scare the shit out of the king, Heracles returned Cerberus to Hades. There, to this day, the hellhound attends to his guard duties, symbolizing the futility of resisting death.

JERRY

See? If I had a dog like that, I'd rule the whole city. Keep out the rough-raff.

PETRA

Except that Cerberes keeps people in Hades, not out. He makes sure that passage to the Underworld is one-way only.

JERRY

Ah, of course.

PETRA

That's why the Italian poet wrote that the sign on the gates of hell said, "Abandon hope all ye who enter here".

JERRY

Hey, that'd be a good idea for a game, *Escape from Hell*.

PETRA makes to leave.

PETRA

Could be another *God of Gods*.

JERRY

Call it *Dog of Gods*.

(Beat.)

Do you have to go just yet?

PETRA

Oh, you're sweet to have calmed me down after that awful man, but I have to get back to work.

JERRY

Too bad. I felt we were getting close to some universal truth.

PETRA

About the human condition? About being under the control of ancient, capricious gods.

JERRY

(Quietly.)

Something like that. Something that makes you deeply unhappy.

PETRA, disturbed, freezes.

JERRY (CONT'D)

(Pressing.)

Something that feels like you're trapped in an underworld of dead dreams.

(Beat.)

Something that makes you yearn for a better place.

PETRA

(Alarmed.)

A better... do I need to call a cop?

PETRA brandishes her cell.

JERRY

No, no. Sit. I'm no threat to you. And the police are the last people you're going to want to see. Let me explain. Please. I need only a few minutes.

PETRA, torn between fear and curiosity, slowly sits.

JERRY (CONT'D)

What you said about Cerberus got me thinking.

PETRA

(Warily.)

Oh?

JERRY

The way you described the dog... with snakes around a bunch of heads. You didn't say how many heads.

PETRA

(Her mouth dry.)

Up to fifty.

JERRY

Let's pretend only three.

PETRA

Why?

JERRY

To find special meaning in "The Myth of Zeus and the Dog".

PETRA

(Tensely.)

What special meaning?

JERRY

Exemption and escape.

(Beat.)

Hope.

PETRA

I mean it, you're scaring me.

JERRY

Hope is scary sometimes. That's why we don't like to hope alone. That's why I'm offering to share it with you, Petra.

PETRA

(Shocked.)

How do you know my name?

JERRY

(Calmly.)

You told me. I'm Jerry, remember?

PETRA

I... don't need your help.

(Beat, unable to stop herself.)

What makes you think I do?

JERRY

It's quite clear. As if the child-rearing sim you play with your game cap weren't evidence enough, you said you were childless.

PETRA

What business is that of yours?

JERRY

Maybe I'm Heracles.

PETRA

(Unsettled by his light tone.)

Tell me why I shouldn't call the cops. Quickly.

JERRY

Because you want to return from the dead.

PETRA

Don't play with me.

JERRY

I'm trying to put you at ease.

PETRA

Well, you're doing a very shitty job of it. You realize a scream is even faster than a phone call.

JERRY

But then you'd lose all chance of deliverance.

PETRA

Stop with the riddles, damn you!

JERRY

Let me explain then--

PETRA

--make it quick.

JERRY

Ok. What do you know of our current global situation? The plague that has led most of humanity to abandon hope.

PETRA

That it's incurable.

JERRY

And its effects?

PETRA

Near universal male sterility.

JERRY

Near, but not complete.

PETRA

It might as well be, there are so few fertile men that there's a government lottery.

JERRY

A lottery, I surmise, that you've entered but not won.

PETRA

Yes, God damn you! That lottery.

JERRY

Too bad. I'm sorry. But I can do something about that--

PETRA

--Oh, here it is! I'm telling you: I will not be raped!

*PETRA shakes the shock stick,
making it buzz aggressively.*

JERRY

Put your weapon away. You have nothing to fear from me.

*PETRA silences the shock stick,
but keeps it ready.*

PETRA

I suppose you think I'll willingly offer myself to you.

JERRY

Not that either. I am, in truth, like most men, a victim.

PETRA

Oh... I... I see. I'm sorry.

JERRY

There's that fundamental kindness of yours. A character trait that makes me even more determined to assist you.

PETRA

How?

JERRY

By defeating Cerberus. Think of the mythic guard dog as our modern three-headed government: One head arbitrarily subjects you to a capricious game of chance. Another head unfairly gives you, who is extremely gentle and loving, the same odds of winning as women who are unworthy of motherhood. And the third head callously reminds you every day that no one gives a shit about someone else's empty womb.

PETRA

(Quietly, sadly.)

You're right.

JERRY

The Greeks didn't tell the whole story. There are many kinds of death besides the literal. There's the death of chivalry. The death of the Oxford comma. The death of a stage actor who has forgot his lines.

PETRA

And the sort of death you're talking about?

JERRY

Barrenness. Death by consignment to an underworld devoid of children's laughter and love. Another land with one entrance and no exit... for most, that is.

PETRA

Most?

JERRY

Yes, some women find a way out of the barren land to the world of new life.

PETRA

What are you saying?

JERRY

That I can sneak you past Cerberus.

PETRA

(Gasps.)

You... you're a broker.

JERRY

Call me Jer-acles.

PETRA

Have you been stalking me?

JERRY

Hardly.

PETRA

What else do you know about me?!

JERRY

Nothing but what you've freely revealed.

PETRA

But why me?

JERRY

Coincidence. I come to the park frequently. To relax, to meditate. I talk to people, as much or as little as they want. Sometimes I get lucky and meet people who have such a spiritual emptiness that their yearning opens them up to utter strangers.

(Beat, very gently.)

That's what happened today. We met courtesy of a petty thief, that's all.

PETRA

(Beat, probing, anxious.)

What you're suggesting I do, it's illegal.

JERRY

As hell. But don't let that distract you from your right to pursue happiness.

PETRA

But...

JERRY

It's perfectly safe. No one will know.

PETRA

But they'll see.

JERRY

My price includes impeccable papers.

(Chuckles.)

All tax-free, of course.

PETRA paces feverishly.

PETRA

I can't.

JERRY

Why not?

PETRA

It's impossible.

JERRY

Not for me.

PETRA

I have to talk to my boyfriend.

JERRY

My offer lasts only as long as this conversation.

PETRA pulls out her cell.

PETRA

I'll call him.

JERRY stays her hand.

JERRY

I'm afraid not. You can't tell anyone anything at all. Ever. Your choice is between a secret and a prison term.

PETRA

But I can't decide by myself. It's too much.

JERRY

That's right. Too much to entrust to anyone but us two.

PETRA

My boyfriend has to know. So he doesn't think I've cheated on him. So he can act like the real father.

JERRY

The best way for him to do that is to actually believe it.

PETRA

Huh?

JERRY

Spontaneous remission. It happens. He'll be so proud.

PETRA

(A sudden thought.)

How do I know... ? How do I know this isn't some scam.

JERRY

A reasonable suspicion. However, you'll have to assume a certain amount of trust. I'm offering you procreation, the closest thing to a mortality loophole that god allows. Isn't that worth the risk?

PETRA

(Beat.)

Who's the donor?

JERRY

He must remain anonymous. Let's call him Zeus.

PETRA stares blankly.

JERRY (CONT'D)

My little joke is justified, don't you think, given the god's potency.

PETRA

What's he like? This... Zeus.

JERRY

Don't worry. He's a philanthropist of the highest character. Somewhat famous in his area of expertise, and widely respected. Very fit for his age, and considered by many to be Hollywood handsome.

(Beat.)

Oh, and you'll be pleased to know that Zeus is a Nobel laureate.

PETRA

What year?

JERRY

(Impishly.)

Oh, no, you don't. I won't tell you that or his field, except that it's one of the hard sciences.

(Beat. Chuckles.)

Another joke.

PETRA

(Beat, then tentatively.)

How much?

JERRY

Twelve thousand. Payable by instant transfer.

(Pause...)

Well?

PETRA

What if... what if I want to change my mind?

JERRY

Once you make the decision to abandon hopelessness, you'll never want to reverse it.

PETRA

(Beat, still wavering.)

All these years. How will I ever learn to have a future again?

JERRY

That's the beauty of it. You have nine months to get used to the idea. And you'll get there. I promise.

PETRA waffles, chewing her lip. She paces, her face scrunched in frantic thought. Suddenly...

PETRA
(With conviction that grows.)

All right.

JERRY
 So thorough, so deliberate. You'll be an excellent mother.

PETRA
 What do I do?

JERRY reaches into his coat pocket and extracts what appears to be an insulated flask. And an envelope. He holds them up.

JERRY
 Pay me, then take immediate possession. I'm always prepared, on the off chance I'll meet someone like you. Here are the documents you need to forge. And all the instructions for doing so... very simple, a child could do it.

PETRA
 There you go, joking again.

PETRA fiddles with her cell, then touches it to JERRY's phone in a gesture somewhat suggestive of a toast. JERRY consults his cell's screen then pockets it.

JERRY
 Done.

JERRY gives her the flask. PETRA, bright-eyed and tearful, cradles it like a newborn.

JERRY (CONT'D)
 Your happiness. And your immortality.

PETRA
(Dazed.)
 Oh my.

JERRY gives her the envelope.

PETRA (CONT'D)
 Thank you. Thank you so much.

JERRY
 My pleasure. Well, Zeus' too, of course.
(Beat.)
 Considering all the gods Zeus sired, you can look forward to becoming part of a very promising lineage.

*PETRA begins to exit hurriedly.
JERRY picks up her helmet.*

JERRY (CONT'D)

Uh, Petra?

She turns.

JERRY (CONT'D)

Your game cap.

PETRA

Oh. Yes. Thanks.

*PETRA takes the helmet, then
hugs JERRY impulsively.*

JERRY

You have no need of that sim any more. Or desire or time, for that matter.

PETRA exits with the buoyancy of joy. JERRY raises his hand briefly, as if returning a wave, not seeing THIEF enter behind him. Stealthily, THIEF approaches the trash can, silently removing the shattered bench slat. Waving it menacingly, THIEF sneaks to within striking distance of JERRY, stopping only when JERRY suddenly turns, flinching...

JERRY (CONT'D)

The fuck, Zee!

THIEF

You got it coming.

JERRY

What're you talking about?

THIEF

What'd you have to hit me so hard for?

JERRY

Come on, that was a perfectly pulled punch.

THIEF

Hell it was. Damn near took out some teeth. You didn't have to hit me for real.

THIEF lowers the broken slat.

JERRY

It had to look convincing.

THIEF

Well, I was convinced. I still am.

THIEF rubs his jaw.

JERRY

Then it worked. What're you complaining about?

THIEF, still angry, whacks JERRY on the shoulder with the flat of the slat. JERRY recoils.

JERRY (CONT'D)

(Not hurt, laughing.)

Ow. What was that for?

THIEF sits. He waves the slat for emphasis, as needed.

THIEF

You seemed to enjoy hitting me a little too much.

JERRY

I'm sorry. I'll be more careful next time.

THIEF

Keep in mind which of us is more important here.

JERRY

We're a team.

THIEF

And I'm the quarterback. Remember that. I'm the one handles the ball.

JERRY

(Laughs.)

Yes, you do. Repeatedly.

THIEF

Could show me a little more respect.

JERRY

(A mock bow.)

Your Potency.

THIEF

So what happened? She went for it, right?

JERRY

She did. Another happy customer.

THIEF

What story did you use this time?

JERRY

A new one, from Greek mythology.

THIEF

All that talk of divine fornication and murder? Charming.

JERRY

My genius as a salesman lies in editing and paraphrase.

THIEF

How much?

JERRY

(Missing the subject change.)

For a man of my talents, very little, judiciously applied.

THIEF

No, dipshit, how much you get out of her?

JERRY

An extra grand--eight gees total.

JERRY keys his cell.

THIEF

How'd you manage that?

JERRY

While you were standing there in Stockholm that one time, did you realize how valuable your Nobel prize would become?

THIEF

(Puzzled.)

My... huh?

(Gets it from JERRY's look.

Roars with laughter.)

No, or I would've kissed the king's ass.

(An afterthought.)

They have a king, don't they?

JERRY

King, god, who cares?

JERRY presents his cell so THIEF can see the screen.

JERRY (CONT'D)

There you go, your half.

THIEF
(Suddenly sober.)
 Make it 60 percent.

JERRY
 That's not our agreement.

THIEF
 The extra covers your lying to me.

JERRY
 Lying? About what?

THIEF
 About how much she paid. It was more than eight, wasn't it?

JERRY
 Come on, Zee. Have I ever cheated you?

*THIEF raises the bench slat
 meaningfully.*

THIEF
 Yeah, so gimme.

JERRY
 I have expenses, you know.

THIEF
 So do I.

JERRY
 Look at you. You don't even know how to spend half.

THIEF
 I'm saving up for when the well runs dry.

JERRY hesitates, a stand-off.

THIEF (CONT'D)
 Oh, I get it. You want to be persuaded. You want me to present to you the prima facie case for a reassignment of gross revenue. Well, I can do that...

*THIEF dramatically flings the
 slat away and draws a mean-
 looking knife.*

THIEF (CONT'D)
 How's this for an irrefutable argument?

*JERRY backs away, his hands
 raised protectively, beginning
 to take THIEF seriously.*

JERRY

Come on, Zee. We got a good collaboration going, a solid partnership.

THIEF

With me in charge. By virtue of owning the means of production.

JERRY

No, Zee, no. We each make an essential contribution: You're manufacturing; I'm sales. We rely on each other, equally.

THIEF

You make a good point. Unfortunately, I'm holding a better one.

(Beat, maneuvering.)

I have the goods, Jerry. You only have words. I can replace you easier than the other way around. How much do you want to fight to pretend that's not true?

JERRY

But I'm the one with the greater exposure. I'm the one keeping your entrepreneurial ass out of some government-run insemination camp.

THIEF

Don't think like a modern American. Think like an ancient Greek. Recognize your place in the grand scheme. You're nothing but an employee, a servant. Your job is to spread my inheritance by providing me with an unending supply of nymphs and goddesses. This isn't a man's world anymore, Jerry; it's a god's. And you need to honor that reality with your full devotion.

THIEF lunges at JERRY, who reaches out defensively. The knife slices across JERRY's palm, causing him to jump back, holding his bloody hand.

JERRY

Ow! Fuck! Goddamn, Zee! What do you think you're--

THIEF

--That's how you make a proper blood sacrifice, Jerry. How you show all due respect.

JERRY

Jesus! Fuck, that hurts! You could've killed me.

THIEF steps back, wiping the knife on his sleeve. JERRY wraps his hand with a handkerchief while dancing in pain.

THIEF

Now. Do we understand each other?

JERRY

Yeah, sure, goddamn it, you crazy asshole!

*JERRY hurriedly, clumsily,
painfully keys his cell again,
and shows THIEF the screen.*

JERRY (CONT'D)

There, sixty percent of eight thou comes to forty-eight hundred. Satisfied?

THIEF

All I care about.

*THIEF pockets his knife, makes
himself comfortable on a bench.
JERRY gives THIEF a long look
before tending to his wound.
From now on, JERRY will speak
with an uneasy mixture of
resentment and resignation,
punctuated with twinges of pain.*

THIEF (CONT'D)

What'd you tell her about me? Besides that Nobel bullshit.

JERRY

You know, the usual.

THIEF

My humanitarian motives?

JERRY

Of course.

THIEF

My pedigree?

JERRY

Such as you can only dream about.

THIEF

If I dreamed, that is.

JERRY

What do you mean, if. Are you saying you don't?

THIEF

Nope.

JERRY

Bullshit. Everybody dreams.

THIEF

Not me. I live and sleep in a dream-free zone.

JERRY

But we deal in dreams for a living.

THIEF

You maybe. I don't. Far as I'm concerned, the job's nothing more than cranking out widgets, albeit tens of millions at a stroke.

JERRY

I pity you.

THIEF

(Snorts derisively.)

Nobody pities me. That'd be like pitying the kid who owns all the ice cream in the world.

JERRY

I'm talking about your lack of human empathy.

THIEF

(Beat, calculating.)

What's her name?

JERRY

Who?

THIEF

The mare. MY WENCH. What was her name?

JERRY

Petra.

THIEF

Now why would you remember that?

JERRY

I just spent half an hour wooing her. Of course I know her name.

THIEF

But once you close the deal, what good is it? It's not like you'll be transforming her into a new sign of the zodiac.

THIEF gestures over their heads.

JERRY

Don't you miss the human connection?

THIEF

Ho, ho, this is rich. The pimp with a squishy heart in a world ruled by the ruthlessness of supply and demand. Let me negotiate your telenovela contract.

JERRY

And the look on Petra's face, there at the end--didn't that mean anything to you?!

THIEF

It meant payday.

JERRY

I don't get it. How can you dismiss the beauty of a lover's touch?

THIEF

I learned a long time ago that the only lover who never disappoints lives up here.

THIEF taps his temple, grinning.

JERRY

You're a cold man, Zee.

THIEF

That's right, a man. In form and function.

JERRY

(That stung.)

You're no different than those lab bacteria that crap insulin.

THIEF

You were a diabetic, you'd have a higher opinion of the little shits. Of the two of us, I bet Petra would consider me to be her savior.

JERRY

I found you, you miserable bastard. Don't forget that. Showed you how to manage your return on assets. Increased your profits tenfold in the first year alone. Without me, you prick, you'd still be living in a cardboard cave behind a liquor store. Talk to me about salvation--fucking wanker, I made you!

THIEF

(Beat, chuckles.)

Feel better now?

JERRY

(Embarrassed by his outburst.)

Like you said: Show some respect.

THIEF

Here. Let me make it up to you.

*THIEF digs in his coat, hands
JERRY a battered plastic water
bottle.*

JERRY

What's this?

THIEF

Man juice, fresh squeezed, otherwise known as mon-ey.

JERRY

What the fuck?... You didn't... Just now?

THIEF

What can I say? I got bored waiting in the bushes all by myself.

JERRY

Jesus, you know I can't sell this, Zee.

*JERRY tries to hand the bottle
back. THIEF refuses to take it.*

THIEF

Why not? It's grade-A. It should be patented.

JERRY

It violates every collection protocol. It's tainted.

THIEF

Well. There's more where that came from. An artesian well of it, you might say.

JERRY

Christ!--

THIEF

--He exclaimed. Or, should I say, ejaculated...

JERRY

(Bitterly appalled.)

You're too much.

THIEF

That's why I'm such a giver. Like Zeus, I've created a shitload of new birthdays. Too many to keep track of, even if I wanted to. But I dutifully generate more whenever I'm asked.

JERRY

You're a regular public servant. I wish I had your altruism.

THIEF

Poor Jerry, being a man ain't what it used to be. No nuts, no glory.

(Beat, new energy.)

Hey, I'm hungry. You?

JERRY

(A deep, resigned sigh.)

Yeah. Sure.

THIEF

Let's celebrate today's sale. Tell you what: I'm in the mood for oysters. How about you take me to lunch?

JERRY

You're the one getting the 60 percent--you can buy.

THIEF

(Laughs.)

That's the spirit. Guys like you, a swagger born of frustration might be your only hope of not going extinct.

Eyes locked on THIEF, JERRY makes a ceremony of disdainfully dropping the water bottle into the trash can. THIEF laughs and puts his arm fraternally around JERRY, who shrugs him off. They exit, THIEF still laughing.

Fade to black.

END OF PLAY