

THE POLITICS OF FABULOUSNESS

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A full-length play

By Judy Klass

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## CAST OF CHARACTERS

GARY: Late twenties, white, gentle, usually low-key, but not when he assumes his cabaret-act persona.

EYTAN: Thirties, white, tightly wound, confrontational, sarcastic. Perhaps a touch of an Israeli accent.

KAY: Thirties, white, tightly wound, confrontational and vulnerable by turns.

CURTIS: A little older than KAY, African-American, gentle, generally calm.

## TIME

The Present.

## SETTING

Kansas City. Scenes take place in GARY and EYTAN's living room, guest room and backyard -- with characters in other scenes addressing the audience directly, or as a speaker or singer in another venue.

There are three original songs in this play. Simple, rough recordings of them can be heard at:

[www.judy-klass.com/the-politics-of-fabulousness.html](http://www.judy-klass.com/the-politics-of-fabulousness.html)

SYNOPSIS: Gary hopes to re-connect with his sister Kay. Gary lives with Eytan, her high school best friend; now Eytan and Kay hate each other. Eytan and Gary write songs Gary sings as a character called Ovaria Strange. Kay considers men performing in drag misogynist: caricatures of women/minstrel shows. Eytan considers Kay a humorless feminist, ridiculously teaching African-American studies, though white, (married to Curtis, who's black), and teaching Women & Gender Studies when but too uptight/homophobic to discuss gender. Gary offers Kay money their mother left; she refuses - Mom left it to Gary. Eytan sees Curtis as a "Magical Negro" building his life around a white person. Kay gives a conference paper on Harlem Renaissance writers; Gary and Eytan don't come. Kay and Curtis see Gary perform in a club. Curtis is offended by Gary's songs mocking religious Christian women -- like women in his family. Eytan bristles at the possible implication that he, a Jew, can't engage in satire/write certain songs. Eytan thinks Kay's hostility to Eytan and Gary comes from Eytan's metaphorical teenage romantic rejection of her; she tells Curtis she can't deal with her brother because their mother loved him, not her. Re: politics - everybody's right and everybody's wrong.

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE

AT RISE: EYTAN sits on the living room couch and watches GARY moving around cleaning, kicking stray objects under the couch and sifting through a mountain of junk mail on the coffee table.

GARY

Do we want to use these coupons?

EYTAN

No, we don't. We don't eat that nasty food.

GARY

I'll recycle 'em.

(HE picks up a pile of coupons and heads off stage into a kitchen area. EYTAN calls after him:)

EYTAN

You're going to do this one category of junk mail at a time?

GARY

(returning)

You have a problem with my methodical, OCD approach?

EYTAN

We don't want to apply for these credit cards either.

GARY

Those have plastic film windows. I cut those out with a scissors, the plastic goes in the garbage. They're next.

(HE picks the envelopes from the credit card companies out of the pile of junk mail.)

EYTAN

Is she worth all this trouble?

GARY

It's always good to clean house.

EYTAN

Tell me again why she has to stay with us.

GARY

She's my sister and she's coming to town --

EYTAN

For an academic convention. So, won't she want to be in the hotel with all her colleagues? Comparing notes in the bar?

GARY

The hotel is expensive, the conference is not until tomorrow, she's renting a car -- and I think it will be good for us to spend some time with her and Curtis. Two couples, hanging out...

(GARY uses the stack of envelopes in his hand to sweep crumbs off the coffee table into his other hand. EYTAN does not remove his feet from the table, so GARY works around him.)

EYTAN

Why is he even coming? He's a gardener, right?

GARY

Um. Landscaping or something.

EYTAN

Is he full of literary insight?

GARY

He seems like a nice guy. I've met him exactly twice, you know?

EYTAN

He's not an academic. Is she just bringing him in for Show and Tell? "Hey, look, I may not have any business teaching African-American Studies, but I married an actual black guy" --

GARY

Eytan, please don't be an asshole, to Curtis or to Kay. You said you wouldn't.

EYTAN

That was a month ago. It seemed far away. I thought it would fall through. I thought maybe the world would end, I wouldn't have to deal with it, it was easier to say yes.

GARY

Well, you're out of luck, the world didn't end, so let's just deal with it. I'll park these envelopes in the kitchen, I'll cut them up later...

(Again HE EXITS. EYTAN calls after him:)

EYTAN

Sorting them into plastic film to throw out and paper parts to recycle. Speaking of OCD...

(GARY returns with a broom. HE sweeps dirt from the floor and the rug under the couch.)

GARY

It's fine, it's all fine. If I was properly OCD, I'd do a better job of cleaning than this -- I'd get the vacuum cleaner fixed.

EYTAN

Why are you bothering to clean for her at all?

GARY

If people come over for drinks, we clean a little, yes? If my sister and her husband come to stay with us --

EYTAN

You become the nervous, apologetic little brother, afraid of her temper, and it's sad to watch.

GARY

Eytan, she's it. She's all the family I have at this point. You said you'd try.

EYTAN

You were foolish to believe me. You've seen me at my worst. And as it happens, my worst was when I was friends with her. What completely smug, obnoxious sixteen-year-olds we were, and how we laughed and sneered at everyone and broke every promise we made. And what utter shits we were to you! And why would you want to bring all of that back?

GARY

As you say, you were sixteen. I'm over it, maybe you should get over it also.

EYTAN

That's the biggest thing wrong with you, Gary. You're too forgiving. Too understanding. With your witch/harpie mother and your witch/harpie sister --

GARY

A, my mother is dead and don't talk about her that way, and B, my sister is an entirely different kind of witch/harpie, you're wrong to conflate the two of them.

(HE leans the broom against the couch and sits down, not too close to EYTAN.)

EYTAN

And you're too understanding with me, also. That's why selfish, vicious, wilful, dishonest people like me and Kay take advantage of you. You invite it. You make it so easy for us.

GARY

Why do you try so hard to make me see you as all of those things?

EYTAN

Listen to yourself, Gary. You're so loving and forgiving you think I'm trying to hide my gentle, tender heart, when all I'm doing is being honest.

GARY

No, you're not, but go ahead, strike a pose. Isn't that what Madonna told you people to do?

EYTAN

I'm not old enough to remember Madonna telling young people to Vogue, you sonofabitch!

GARY

See? I can hear how warm and fuzzy you are, underneath it all.

EYTAN

And by the way, are we sharing your alter ego with Kay? Are we taking her out to the bar, to see you perform?

GARY

We're -- playing it by ear.

EYTAN

Do we really want to hear her turgid, politically formulated pronouncements on the act? Are we allowed to stand up to her and tell her to suck it, if she disapproves?

GARY

We hope she'll be open-minded and maybe enjoy it. We hope she'll be proud and pleased. But we'll give her some time to relax and be our guest, before we spring it on her.

EYTAN

You really don't see that this is your mother all over again? With you soft-pedaling your identity and somehow hoping you'll get her approval --

GARY

Eytan. One more time. Kay is all I've got left. It's part of my life, so if she stays with us, she'll probably learn about it. And I'm okay with that.

EYTAN

You're setting yourself up for disappointment and heartbreak. You're playing out the same patterns, again and again.

GARY

Well, I ultimately re-connected with my mother, so --

EYTAN

Sure, she gave you permission to move back in, and wipe drool off her chin, and to coax her to take her pills, and to dress her and change the sheets and listen to her complain, and give up your own life for a year -- and all you had to do for this great privilege was considerately hide every aspect of who you are that she didn't like to think about. And so now, maybe you'll strike the same kind of bargain with your harpie-viper sister.

GARY

Yeah, I don't think Kay wants me to feed her pills -- or hide who I am at this point. I think she wants to re-connect, too. It's been a long time.

EYTAN

It sure has. And now, finally, she's ready to step into the Mom role.

GARY

And now, finally, she's ready to forgive me for eclipsing her and having the end with Mom turn out to be all about me.

EYTAN

(incredulous)

What? Are you some kind of saint or holy fool or something? She's ready to "forgive" you for being there for your mother every day for over a year, while Kay was miles away and you took care of the most horrible phase in any child's --

GARY

From Kay's point of view. I eclipsed her. I performed the role she might have wanted --

EYTAN

You invent these stories.

GARY

Mom wouldn't have let her do it. They weren't talking, and I stepped in -- look, it's complicated. Family is insane, why try to understand someone else's family?

EYTAN

You're setting yourself up for a weekend of horror.

GARY

No. *You're* setting me up for a weekend of horror. You're the one making scenes, you've apparently got your heart set on making this whole thing as awkward and grisly as possible.

EYTAN

Well, as you yourself admitted when we connected again: me and Kay are two of a kind. You were properly wary of me. And I freely admit, other than the fact that I have some poetry in my soul, and all she has in hers is steel-wool and statistics, Kay and I were almost the same person at one point. You hooking up with me was a gargantuan act of masochism.

GARY

Mmm. So, according to your logic, if you're Kay and Kay is Mom, that puts you in a Mom role, right? So, do me a favor, Mom, and put a sock in it. For the duration. I mean it.

EYTAN

I'll be lovely to her. I'll be a perfect gentleman.

GARY

God help us.

EYTAN

There is no God.

GARY

I'm in big trouble.

EYTAN

It'll be a charming weekend. We'll all have a wonderful time.

GARY

What kind of condition is the bathroom in? Ours, I mean, the main one, I've spruced up the guest one --

EYTAN

Functional.

GARY

I cleaned it on Tuesday, but I'd just like to give it another --

EYTAN

How harshly were you toilet-trained? Did Kay and your mother supervise the process together? Did they stand over you and make critical remarks?

GARY

I don't remember. It doesn't sound like something they'd want to be involved with. They probably left it to Margarita.

EYTAN

Margarita. I could use one right now.

GARY

I wish I could have Margarita around every day of my life.

EYTAN

She was perfectly nice. She's dead?

GARY

Yeah.

(beat)

I wonder if Kay knows?

EYTAN

I wonder if Kay would care?

GARY

How about the kitchen. Maybe I should --

(The doorbell buzzes.)

EYTAN

Too late. Saved by the bell from a cleaning jag.

GARY

(rising)

You were the "Saved By the Bell" generation.

EYTAN

Me and Kay. It's good to have some identity.

(GARY goes to the door, OFF-STAGE, to answer it.)

GARY (O.S.)

Hey! You found it!

KAY (O.S.)

We found it!

GARY (O.S.)

It's so good to see you guys. Was parking okay?

(HE comes back with KAY and CURTIS -- CURTIS carries the bags for both of them.)

KAY

Right out front.

GARY

It's not so bad around here.

KAY

I like this street.

GARY

Yeah, we like it. Mostly residential but there's a dumpling fusion place down the block.

KAY

That looked promising.

(EYTAN rises from the couch.)

KAY

Hey, Eytan. How are you?

EYTAN

Doing all right, Kay.

KAY

It's good to see you. This is Curtis.

(CURTIS sets down one bag, and CURTIS and EYTAN shake hands.)

CURTIS

Good to know you.

EYTAN

Yes.

(There is an awkward pause.)

GARY

So, uh, you got a decent rental car?

KAY

Yeah, it's a nice little car.

CURTIS

Hey, listen, Gary --

GARY

Yes?

CURTIS

Are we going to be staying in here? 'Cause I can just put the bags by the couch --

GARY

Oh no, duh, I'm sorry, this is not a fold-out couch situation, let me show you the room where you guys are staying...

(leads CURTIS almost off-stage,  
points)

Right down the hall, the door on the left.

CURTIS

Sounds good.

(CURTIS EXITS.)

KAY

Curtis drove us, of course. I get freaked out, outside my comfort zone. I hate airports and dislocation, I don't like driving a car that's not mine, and I tense up driving in a city I don't know.

EYTAN

He seems to take very good care of you.

KAY

(after a beat)

He does take good care of me.

EYTAN

I wasn't trying to --

KAY

It's okay, I don't care if you were being snarky or not. It's true that Curtis takes very good care of me.

GARY

(warm, bright, to cut tension)

Well, you should both let *us* take care of you for a few days. We can either whip up some kind of dinner here, or we could check out the dumpling shop.

KAY

Either sounds great. Maybe dumplings -- Merillion is such a parochial little college town, they're kind of hurting when it comes to Chinese food.

GARY

Well, Kansas City isn't known for Asian food either, but the dumpling place is decent.

(CURTIS returns, minus the bags.)

CURTIS

Hey, that's a nice little room.

GARY

Yeah, we've had guests tell us the bed's pretty comfortable.

CURTIS

And are those clothes on the bed -- are those things you want to give to Kay? I'm not sure they'd fit her.

GARY

What -- clothes on the bed?

CURTIS

There's, like, a skirt and top all covered with spangles...

GARY

(alarmed, dismayed by this)

Why would that have been on the bed? It wasn't on the bed twenty minutes ago when I was last in the room.

EYTAN

Oops. I guess it's something that I left there. It's something I've been sewing, you know. I should have put it away.

KAY

Really. You've taken up sewing, Eytan?

EYTAN

It's wonderful, the things you can create. I'm very proud of that ensemble with the bead-work.

KAY

Do you sell the clothes you make?

EYTAN

No. I'm afraid they're not for sale.

KAY

So. Have you become a trans-gender person?

EYTAN

Mmmm, no. They're not for me, either.

GARY

The clothes are for me, Kay. I dress in drag sometimes. I sing in a cabaret act. I was probably going to tell you about it at some point this weekend. But it seems Eytan has decided to fuck with me a little, and start things off with a bang.

KAY

That would sound very much in character for Eytan.

GARY

I'm so sorry. I'll go get my things off of your bed.

(HE EXITS. EYTAN beams at KAY.)

KAY

So. Gary sings in drag and you make all his outfits?

EYTAN

He helps design them. And we write the songs together.

KAY

Oh. So, he's not doing cover tunes?

EYTAN

No, no. It's an all-original act.

KAY

Well ... great.

EYTAN

Yes, it is great. He's wonderful.

KAY

Does he have a stage name?

EYTAN

He does. It's Ovaria Strange.

KAY

That's ... precious.

EYTAN

I'm glad you like it.

KAY

And what is it you do these days, Eytan?

EYTAN

I play second violin in a symphony orchestra. That doesn't pay the bills, so I also teach music in a high school.

KAY

Same school as Gary?

EYTAN

No, no, he's middle school. Fifth grade this year.  
Thirty kids in the class.

KAY

Yes, middle-school, that's right.

(GARY re-enters)

GARY

Okay, so, the stuff is out of your room, and hopefully  
nothing else that's odd or out of place will be  
surfacing in there. Will it, Eytan?

EYTAN

Absolutely not.

GARY

Great.

KAY

Well, maybe we'll take a moment to freshen up.

GARY

Sure, there's a bathroom right off of the guest room,  
it's got a shower and everything ...

KAY

Awesome.

(SHE and CURTIS head for their room.)

GARY

Let's reconvene in forty minutes, or whenever, for a  
dumpling run.

(Once KAY and CURTIS EXIT, GARY turns on  
EYTAN.)

GARY

Why?

EYTAN

(shrugs)

You get sooo closet-y around women in your family --

GARY

You said you wouldn't.

EYTAN

I said I wouldn't be rude, I wouldn't attack her. And I haven't.

GARY

No, but you wanted to create tension, you're looking to make trouble, you're looking to ruin things --

EYTAN

Why are you ashamed of who you are? After all these years?

GARY

*Don't* pretend this is about being queer and proud, or about empowering me and liberating me from my family or whatever horse shit! Your motives aren't even *close* to that noble!

EYTAN

See? At last you're learning. I'm a bastard, just like Kay.

(LIGHTS DOWN.)

END OF SCENE ONE

SCENE TWO

LIGHTS UP on the guest room space. It contains a double bed with a comforter. The bags CURTIS carried are by the bed. CURTIS sits on the bed going through things in his bag. KAY paces.

KAY

It was a bad idea. It's not worth the money we're saving.

CURTIS

Um yeah -- you may be forgetting how much those hotel rooms cost.

KAY

I know, that was ridiculous, *that's* their idea of a "bargain rate" for those who are not only attending but also *speaking* at the conference?

CURTIS

Your brother seems to be trying.

KAY

Sure, Gary means well. But why let Eytan back into my life? Why give him a chance to mess with me?

CURTIS

Laugh it off, don't let him get to you.

KAY

And I'm not sure how I feel about this drag business. Do you ever watch *RuPaul's Drag Race*?

CURTIS

RuPaul is doing NASCAR stuff?

KAY

No. On Logo, the gay channel. It's -- like *Project Runway*, but for gay men, in drag.

CURTIS

Mmm. Can't say I've seen it.

KAY

Well, I hate it. It's so insipid and shallow. I hate every female wannabe on the show, and I wind up hating RuPaul.

CURTIS

But you also hate *Project Runway*, right?

KAY

Well, sure.

CURTIS

So. This only proves you don't like reality shows.

KAY

I like *Animal Cops: Houston*.

CURTIS

On Animal Planet.

KAY

Right. I just think the animal cops and the vets and even the dogs and cats and horses have so much more depth and self-awareness and poetry in their souls than any Kardashians, including "Cait," who thinks that what makes someone a woman is wearing nail polish long enough for it to chip, and more than any *Real Housewife* --

CURTIS

But if that's the only one you can handle -- don't hold it against your brother that there's a reality show about men in dresses that you're not into.

KAY

But it makes Logo as a station so degrading, in a way, for gay men, the way BET is for people of color, you know? Like it's designed to thwart its own potential and just be superficial, and reinforce caricatured stereotypes. It's not *just* that it's a reality show, it's -- grating. I watch those men dressing up, and pretending to be women, and then advising real, biological women sometimes on how to be more feminine or vampy, and mocking us, reiterating all those tired old campy tropes, tossing off these bitchy, supposedly witty comments at each other -- and I just feel my blood boil!

CURTIS

Well -- maybe we don't tell your brother that you feel that way.

KAY

No. I mean, obviously, of course not.

CURTIS

Especially if Eytan is trying to sabotage this visit and make trouble between you and Gary -- why take the bait? Why allow him to do that?

KAY

You're right.

CURTIS

When you knew coming in what his m.o. would be.

KAY

It was my m.o. too, once. We imprinted on each other during our most insufferable teenage years.

CURTIS

Well, you outgrew it.

KAY

Not entirely.

CURTIS

It's nice that they -- you know, that they're happy and they're doing creative stuff together. Even if you think it's shallow.

KAY

Well. Eytan is always on the lookout for someone to collaborate with. When we were in high school we were going to write a world-shattering rock musical together. Lyrics by me, music by him. It was going to be some kind of *Bonnie and Clyde* update, about two ruthless, clever people -- maybe in high school, maybe older, out in the art world, who destroy the people in power and help the tortured weaklings ...

CURTIS

That's ... nice ...

KAY

In our minds we'd be heroic revolutionaries, but really it would have just been an excuse for us to be sadistic and superior and live large.

CURTIS

You got any songs from it you could show me?

KAY

Nope. Not even one. I'm not a lyricist. Or any kind of artist. That was when I was starting to realize -- I can write *about* texts, and analyze them, but I can't create them. I wonder if my brother can.

CURTIS

It's not a competition.

KAY

No, it's not.

CURTIS

You gotta let all that stuff go.

KAY

Don't worry, Curtis. It's been a long time since I've dreamed of writing a rock and roll musical.

CURTIS

You want to take a shower?

KAY

No, I'm good. I'll wash my face, run a comb through my hair ...

CURTIS

How 'bout little back rub, to help you relax?

KAY

That sounds perfect.

(SHE sits and closes her eyes as HE massages her back and shoulders.)

CURTIS

Whoa. *Big* knots you got back here, lots of tension, gotta work it on out.

KAY

Mmm. Thank you. That really helps.

CURTIS

Yeah, it does. Along with Zen thoughts.

KAY

Mmm. Zen thoughts. And then I can serenely eat my dumplings and let Eytan snark away.

(LIGHTS DOWN.)

END OF SCENE TWO

SCENE THREE

LIGHTS COME UP on GARY, standing alone, near the edge of the stage, addressing the audience:

GARY

Margarita lived with us. And I liked to hide out in her room. After Dad left, my mom was so depressed, she kind of shut down. And she was never a warm and fuzzy mom, you know, never a hugger. So, Margarita was raising me, at that point, more than ever. Kay didn't have much use for her. Margarita taught me *español*, she had a warm, Dominican accent -- but Kay could never be bothered to learn. That was okay. Spanish became our secret language. Margarita didn't mind if I hid out in her room when she wasn't there. I liked her closet the best. My mother's clothes were all beige and gray and preppy and tasteful -- and mostly harsh to touch. You know, working at the bank she wore linen blouses, and tweed skirts, and all these scratchy wool things, with a strand of pearls ... Margarita's clothes were soft cotton and nylon and polyester and taffeta, and they were all in these vibrant sunset colors: orange and red and yellow, burgundy, hot pink and violet, in these exploding sunburst combinations, sometimes. When you were small, you could stand up in that closet and be lost in those dresses. They smelled like her perfume, and some of them had fun stuff hanging on them that clanked and clicked. And when she found me in there, with a dress part-way on -- she thought it was strange, maybe, but she didn't kick me out. And when she found me at her vanity, trying on the lipstick that was also in those bright, wild colors -- she was worried she might get fired -- but she wasn't out to condemn me or betray me. When I was a teen, when Kay was off at college and Mom was gone for hours -- Margarita eventually became okay with me trying on the clothes and the make-up. And I was someone else. I could escape from that cold, nasty house and be fabulous. *Hablando mi otra idioma, y escuchando a mi propia musica en mi mente*. Just lost in a world of my own. There are worse ways to get through adolescence.

(LIGHTS DOWN.)

END OF SCENE THREE

SCENE FOUR

LIGHTS COME UP on the living room area. The meal is winding down. CURTIS and KAY sit on the couch and GARY and EYTAN sit on the floor. Everyone has chopsticks and water or soda to drink. Plates holding a few last pot-stickers are on the table, along with dipping sauce.

GARY

And can you really imagine spending your lives in that town?

KAY

Well, downtown Merillion isn't all that exciting, but then, you do get some good energy, and a few interesting shops, in a college town. And since tenure-track jobs aren't easy to come by -- if I do get tenure, it's hard to imagine giving it up and going back to Adjunct Hell.

GARY

And you like it there, Curtis?

CURTIS

Yeah, I've pretty much got our house in shape. We're renting, but we could buy. I've been making little improvements to the property, you know, so it would be a good investment. I've got some ideas about changing up the house itself. And I've got some steady clients in the area now.

EYTAN

You tend their gardens for them? Prune their hedges?

CURTIS

Well, it's often a lot more than that. People come to me and ask me to reconceive all of their outdoor space: Japanese rock gardens, gazebos, a copse of trees, water running through the property ...

EYTAN

Sounds like you got some pretty rich people out there.

CURTIS

Those are usually the ones who give me a call. Well. Some people are one-offs, they just need some emergency garden therapy.

EYTAN

And what is it exactly that you're teaching these days, Kay?

KAY

I teach for two programs -- the Women & Gender Studies Program and the African-American Studies Program.

KAY (CONT'D)

But I have some inter-disciplinary courses, that appeal to students involved with both -- there's actually a lot of theoretical overlap.

EYTAN

Is that right? Because I've been wondering how you wound up teaching African-American Studies --

KAY

Well, my first book was about Fannie Hurst.

EYTAN

Who?

KAY

Fannie Hurst. She was a very popular writer early in the Twentieth Century. Till she went out of fashion. She wrote *Imitation of Life*.

GARY

What's that?

KAY

Well -- did you ever see it as a film? There are two film versions, the one from the thirties with Claudette Colbert and Louise Beavers, and then the Douglas Sirk one from 1959, with Lana Turner and Juanita Moore.

GARY

Nope. Sorry.

CURTIS

You never saw that film? Damn. When I was growing up, the women in my family all liked to watch that, every time it came on TV. The ending, the funeral scene -- my moms used to really tear up at that.

EYTAN

I think I've seen the Douglas Sirk one. Did it have Gidget as the obnoxious blonde daughter?

KAY

Sandra Dee, yes.

EYTAN

Then I've seen it. And I believe there was a drag parody of it -- *Imitation of Imitation of Life*, it was called.

KAY

Well, there have been a lot of parodies of it. Langston -- Langston Hughes -- wrote one called *Limitations of Life*, back in the 1930s, where the rich woman is black, and she has an Oxford accent, and her servile, mammy-like maid is a white woman who wouldn't dream of accepting her fair share of profits of the business she's helped the rich woman build. It was a pretty biting satire. Though Langston considered Fannie Hurst a friend, to some degree.

EYTAN

Well, you know, you can't be thin-skinned when your friends parody you...

KAY

So, in my doctoral dissertation, which became my first book, I examined the politics of that novel, how well-intentioned Hurst was, how progressive she saw herself as being, but still, all the privileging binaries of our cultural discourse she drew on, reinforcing the ur-myth of a devoted "mammy" figure taking care of a white family, and then the politics of the plot about the daughter trying to pass as white -- the old melodrama trope of the person with one drop of black blood.

GARY

Wait. I'm confused now. Sandra Dee plays a black person?

KAY

No, I mean the other daughter, the black woman's daughter.

EYTAN

Sandra Dee plays Lana Turner's daughter, out to steal her mother's man, and they're both blonde hell cats.

(Snarls, extends fingers like  
claws)

Meow!

KAY

Well, yeah, that's Douglas Sirk for you. Punish a woman for being a single working mother with ambition -- turn her into a grasping, selfish monster. Position her to earn the audience's disapproval. I know I'm supposed to see his films as playing with artifice, and deconstructing gender roles -- as ironic, like a Roy Lichtenstein painting or a Cindy Sherman movie still. But I'm not convinced. Anyhow, the novel doesn't posit the mother in such a negative light. Exactly.

KAY (CONT'D)

I mean, in the novel, the daughter does get the man, so in a sense the mother is "punished" for stepping outside the traditional female sphere, and for desiring a younger, less powerful male. But the novel is sympathetic to her -- she's more of a tragic figure.

GARY

So, this writer . . .

KAY

Fannie Hurst.

GARY

Is a great, overlooked author that you're helping to rediscover?

KAY

She wasn't overlooked in the 1910s and '20s and '30s. She was one of the most famous and celebrated writers in the country! And then modernism came along, and the ideal of the macho Ernest Hemingway kind of writer. And so Hurst was dismissed by critics as too female and emotional, and as apolitical. But of course, she *wasn't* apolitical, she was feminist -- but the male critics ignored that, just like Richard Wright dismissed Zora as apolitical -- he had no use for feminism either.

EYTAN

Zora?

KAY

Zora Neale Hurston. She wrote *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

EYTAN

Oh, yes, of course, Zora. I'm just not on a first-name basis with her.

KAY

She was good friends with Fannie Hurst, as it happens. But the friendship was -- complicated ...

GARY

But it's great that you're helping to bring back this wonderful person and her book.

KAY

Well. You know, I wish I could say that. People write mean songs about her.

KAY (CONT'D)

Mel Brooks has a song in a movie: "Hope for the best, expect the worst/You could be Tolstoy or Fannie Hurst." Mike Nichols and some guy had a song in a revue: "You're kippers and caviar, I'm liverwurst/You're Shakespeare, you're Shaw, and I'm Fannie Hurst." Something like that. I wish I could say they were wrong --

EYTAN

So, she's terrible?

KAY

She's not terrible. She built elaborate plots, with a lot of momentum, she tackled social issues that others were afraid of --

EYTAN

But her prose is excrement?

KAY

No, not excrement. A few mixed metaphors, a little bit of repetition, some unlikely scenarios, some not so felicitous phrases --

EYTAN

So, she's deservedly forgotten?

KAY

She opens a window on another time in American history: both the aesthetics of that moment, and the sociopolitical realities -- she's valuable for that. Anyhow. I wrote about her, and *Imitation of Life*, especially, and an academic press put the book out -- and Merillion is a small college, they like people who can pinch-hit in several departments, they were looking to expand both Women & Gender Studies and African-American Studies ... And I applied at the right time.

GARY

Well, that's great. It's great you're tenure-track. I mean, teaching school kids is rough now, in some ways, it's got its insecurities, but it's nothing like I hear the job market is for college professors.

KAY

Yes, it sucks, I got lucky.

EYTAN

And are you continuing to work this angle? Is your talk at the conference tomorrow going to be on Fannie Hurst?

KAY

She only comes up once in the paper I'm giving -- 'cause she was friends with Zora and Langston.

KAY (CONT'D)

I'll be on a postmodernism and gender panel, and one on Langston's influence on Afro-Caribbean writers, but the paper that I'm giving is on *Mule Bone*. That's -- a play that Langston and Zora wrote.

EYTAN

*Mule Bone*.

KAY

Yes. It wasn't produced until sixty years after they wrote it. There was a whole -- falling out over it. It destroyed their friendship.

EYTAN

With Fannie Hurst?

KAY

With each other. Zora claimed she wrote it by herself -- she copyrighted it in her name. We have a lot of angry correspondence between them, and third-party accounts -- it's kind of a mystery what happened. It had to do with Charlotte Osgood Mason, a rich older white woman who was a patron to both of them. She made all of the Harlem Renaissance writers that she gave money to, and advice -- she had them all call her "Godmother." And Alain Locke -- he was another of her "godchildren." He was generally pretty openly and cheerfully misogynist, but in this case, he helped Zora shut Langston out of Godmother's good graces. Perhaps because Langston had spurned him romantically -- but we can't know these things for sure.

EYTAN

Had Langston spurned Zora romantically?

KAY

Well, they'd known each other for years, they traveled through the South together at one point, Zora said she loved him like a brother. It's hard to know. There was another woman involved, in a sense -- Louise Thompson. She was paid a little by Godmother to type for Langston and Zora, when they were boarders in a house in New Jersey. But she was not paid to type the play, the play was kind of a secret, because Godmother didn't approve. So, Langston suggested cutting Louise in for some of the profits, or making her the play's business manager. Zora felt Louise and Langston were conspiring behind her back, and she overreacted. Carlo thought Zora was jealous of Louise. Carl Van Vechten, that is. He was another of the rich white people Zora and Wallace Thurman called Negrotarians -- they were all about helping and promoting Negro artists. He spent a lot of time uptown and he wrote a sort of infamous novel ...

CURTIS

*Nigger Heaven.*

KAY

Yeah. About Harlem. A lot of people were offended by the title, and the way it made life uptown sound wild. But Zora and Langston both liked the book. Langston just thought it was a poorly chosen title, like his own book of poems, *Clothes to the Jew*.

EYTAN

*Clothes to the Jew?*

KAY

Yes. He meant a pawn shop. Relax, Eytan, Langston liked Jews, his high school buddies in Cleveland were Jews, he was one eighth Jewish himself.

EYTAN

Mmm. Was Langston Hughes gay?

KAY

The jury is still out. His biographer Arnold Rampersad thought he had more of a ... kind of a Michael Jackson thing going on.

EYTAN

Excuse me?

KAY

I just mean -- in the sense that he presented himself at all times as childlike and innocent and naive, he saw himself as a kind of Peter Pan. Most of his friends never figured out what his sexuality was or if he had one. Most of the guys involved in the Harlem Renaissance were gay, most of the -- well. Zora and Thurman came up with a name for the whole group of them ...

CURTIS

The Niggerati.

KAY

Right, that was their ironic spin on "literati."

EYTAN

That's very tactful how he does that for you.

(to CURTIS)

Do you get up and do that for her when she presents a paper?

CURTIS

No, I do not.

KAY

There's no need, those terms don't come up in my paper. Anyhow, most of the guys -- Locke, and Thurman himself -- who was actually married to Louise Thompson for a while, before she found out he was gay -- and Countee Cullen and Claude McKay, and Carlo, who hung out in Harlem a lot. Langston may have played mind games with Locke and Cullen -- and maybe even Zora, who knows. He was never involved with Louise.

EYTAN

So Zora wasn't gay?

KAY

Well, she might have had a thing for a while with Ethel Waters, who knows. She wrote some ambiguous things about her. But not primarily.

EYTAN

It sounds like quite a little Peyton Place.

KAY

Yes, but obviously I don't get into all that in my paper.

EYTAN

That's too bad. What do you get into?

KAY

Well, if you really want to hear about it . . .

EYTAN

Oh, I do, I do!

KAY

For one thing, I look at what Zora and Langston were trying to achieve in *Mule Bone*, in terms of reconceiving ethnography. Zora trained as an anthropologist under Franz Boas at Columbia when she was a Barnard student, and she went down South to gather songs and folklore and examples of local idiom, and she studied how to conjure, but ultimately she eschewed the illusion of objectivity in social science, and she deliberately blurred distinctions between different kinds of texts -- the scholarly and the creative, for example. Even in her scholarly work, she embraced subjectivity and reflexivity --

EYTAN

She had good reflexes, you mean?

KAY

She recognized that she brought her own subjective views to her research.

KAY (CONT'D)

And she acknowledged that her presence in a room full of people she was observing affected what happened in that room.

EYTAN

Aha. Couldn't you say that?

KAY

I just did.

EYTAN

Oh, sorry I couldn't keep up. For a moment it just sounded like a jumble of jargon and bullshit theory to me.

KAY

I'll try to dumb things down for you.

EYTAN

Thanks so much. So, your paper is about anthropology?

KAY

Well, it's also about the play and the socioeconomic ... About the various pressures that led to the breach between Langston and Zora as the Great Depression started. I'm looking at the dialogic -- In a sense, their text, their play, is in a dialogue with other texts, but *also* with the actual events in their lives, and so I look at -- the dialectic of real and imagined worlds.

EYTAN

The dialectical dialogical dialogue?

KAY

If you like.

GARY

It actually sounds really interesting, Kay. I didn't know about any of that stuff -- it's amazing, actually, how much I don't know about the Harlem Renaissance. I probably know a few Langston Hughes poems, "a dream deferred is a raisin in the sun," or whatever -- and that's about it.

KAY

They were both really good writers, Langston and Zora. It was shame they had such an ugly falling out.

(beat)

But Eytan may be right, enough about all my silly postmodernist theory. Tell me about the character you become when you go to drag clubs, Gary. It's the same character every time?

GARY

Well. It's evolving. She's becoming less glitzy and sexy, more of a country singer -- we may have to do away with the name Ovaria Strange. We may wind up calling her Tammy something, or Misty-Rae.

KAY

Yeah. I guess you weren't aware that I have Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome. Just a touch of it. Which has messed with my fertility in a big way, and my health. So, I guess I don't find it rip-roaringly funny that you call yourself Ovaria. Strange. But -- you know. Whatever.

CURTIS

Kay, they could not have known that.

GARY

No, we didn't know that. Um. Well. I guess that's further incentive for us to look around for a new name for the character, then.

EYTAN

But not a reason for us to panic or apologize, since we didn't know anything about it.

CURTIS

And you're into country music?

GARY

Well. We aren't, necessarily.

EYTAN

But Ovaria is.

GARY

The character is.

KAY

Could we hear one of your songs?

GARY

Now?

KAY

I'm really curious.

GARY

Well, I don't know -- I mean, I rehearse here with Eytan, but when I perform as Ovar -- as the character -- I get into costume --

KAY

Well, let's just see how you rehearse. Keep it informal.

EYTAN

You should try the Idaho song. It needs work. We could use the feedback.

GARY

Really? I'd rather play something we've got polished up and feel strong about --

EYTAN

They'll say what they think, and then we can polish it up. Or give it the axe.

(EYTAN either plays a track on a boombox or a small keyboard. GARY reads lyrics for the new song from a piece of paper, and after an opening riff, GARY sings, in the voice of his character, a southern woman, in this case a girl who has been wronged.)

GARY

(sings)

Are you shocked to see me dressing like a ho?  
I was all buttoned up not long ago  
I sure was different when you last were in this state  
But you've come back much too late

(EYTAN joins him on the chorus.)

GARY &amp; EYTAN

YOU CAME THROUGH IDAHO AND TOLD ME PRETTY LIES  
YOU TOOK MY INNOCENCE, LEFT ME COLD AS OLD FRENCH FRIES  
MY DREAM WAS A SPUD THAT PROVED A DUD  
I YIELDED, LOVE WAS BLIND, BUT  
IDAHO YOU LEFT BEHIND

GARY

Now my reputation's down the drain  
You mashed my hopes and filled my heart with pain  
I got the name so I got the game, I turn tricks on the side  
I'm salty, thanks to all the tears I cried

GARY &amp; EYTAN

YOU CAME THROUGH IDAHO AND TOLD ME PRETTY LIES  
YOU TOOK MY INNOCENCE, LEFT ME COLD AS OLD FRENCH FRIES  
ONCE I WAS YOUR HOT LITTLE TATER TOT  
YOU SEEMED SO WARM AND KIND, BUT  
IDAHO YOU LEFT BEHIND

GARY

every potato has its eye  
every ruined bad girl can thank one skanky guy

GARY & EYTAN

YOU CAME THROUGH IDAHO AND TOLD ME PRETTY LIES  
 YOU TOOK MY INNOCENCE, LEFT ME COLD AS OLD FRENCH FRIES  
 NOW I'M LOADED AND BAKED, FULL OF METH, YOU SNAKE  
 AND I BET THAT YOU DON'T MIND -- 'CAUSE  
 IDAHO, IDAHO, IDAHO YOU LEFT BEHIND

(As the song ends, CURTIS applauds, and after  
 a beat KAY joins him.)

CURTIS

That's cute. I like that.

KAY

Well, it doesn't sound -- unpolished, as you said. It  
 sounds like you've worked on it.

GARY

Yes, I pretty much think it is what it is, at this  
 point. For better or worse.

KAY

I see that you're not just making fun of women -- it's  
 people in rural America, also, that you're going after.

EYTAN

Ah, here we go. That's my Kay. Here it comes!

GARY

We're not "going after" anybody. It's a silly little  
 novelty song.

KAY

But the source of the humor -- is to look down your nose  
 and mock a few different groups: young women who get  
 used by the first men they date, and people who live in  
 an unglamorous state like Idaho --

GARY

The source of the humor is a ridiculous pun on the word  
 "Idaho" --

KAY

Yes, I did get that --

GARY

And a bunch of potato metaphors, which don't usually  
 come up in broken-hearted love songs, but they do here  
 because people associate potatoes with that state. And --  
 that's about it, really.

EYTAN

See, Gary, why are you wasting your time trying to explain a funny song to an essentially humorless person like your sister? She'll only analyze it for the dialectical ethnographic reflexivity.

KAY

I'm more likely to analyze it as a big old Eytan *sneer*, writ large. I'm just curious about all the different kinds of people you're sneering at. And yeah, I guess I don't see the humor in sneering anymore. So, I am pretty humorless in this context.

GARY

Look, it's not all *that* funny a song, but it's certainly not an attack on women.

KAY

Well. No more than drag is, generally.

GARY

Come again?

KAY

I mean, in some sense, drag is, obviously, a parody of woman, of the female. That's the whole point. Whether it says something about some kind of intrinsic misogyny in gay culture in general, or not.

EYTAN

Hooray! No more holding back. Homophobic, uptight man-haters, start your engines!

KAY

Of course, I don't for a minute pretend that all gay men are as misogynist as you are, Eytan.

EYTAN

Very few of them, in fact.

KAY

But if we look at the names drag queens take, if we look at the jokes and the behavior, we can see a grotesque, exaggerated male view of the female --

CURTIS

Hey, Kay, take it easy --

KAY

I know, I said I wouldn't, but it's beyond the issue of Eytan winding me up. I'm just curious about -- what my brother thinks he's doing here, exactly.

GARY

What I'm doing is -- expressing something inside of me that has no other outlet. Something that perhaps I was born with, or that I learned from Margarita, something positive that celebrates the feminine ... It's so sad that you can't see that. I mean, you've only heard one song, you haven't seen me in that persona --

KAY

As Ovaria Strange.

GARY

You haven't seen me transformed ... But it *does* feel like a transformation. And there are men -- men who are a whole lot more inhibited and repressed than I am, and after growing up in our home I certainly do have my inhibited and repressed side --

KAY

So do I, that has nothing to do with gender.

GARY

But I'm saying -- there are men with a sense that being a "real man" means you never show emotion, never flirt, never make certain jokes, never cry, never show love or pain in public. And they are able -- not only to express -- but access all of those feelings through drag. And you -- Do you really have to go and project all of this ugliness and anger onto it? I'm sorry, Kay, but couldn't that say more about you than it does about drag?

KAY

You know, white men in minstrel shows felt the same way about what they were "expressing." That's one reason Langston and Zora wrote *Mule Bone*, to counterbalance vaudeville shows by whites which depicted blacks, in overalls, singing happy songs out in "de fields," and to get past white performers with cork on their faces. Someone like Al Jolson -- he felt he was accessing an innocent, primitive, joyful side of himself when he put on blackface -- expressing feelings he couldn't claim as his own, anywhere else. Those men in 1880 or 1920 could be sexual once they corked up, they could laugh, they could cry, they could sing about "Mammy" -- and they felt transformed, they felt so authentic! And yet -- they really weren't black men at all. They just thought they were.

EYTAN

And that's what you think drag is? A minstrel show?

KAY

Could you explain to me the difference?

EYTAN

Sure, Kay, I'd be glad to, only -- wow. This is impressive, even for you. This level of closed-minded, wilful ignorance. Where to start? Let's see.

(beat)

There are some people who are born with both a penis and a vagina. Some choose to keep both. Some others choose to be male and some choose to be female, and have one set of organs removed. Are they wrong when they do that, are they part of a minstrel show?

KAY

There are also biracial people -- they don't really have to choose to be one thing or another anymore. People don't "pass" like the girl in *Imitation of Life*.

EYTAN

People don't play down some part of their ethnic or racial origin?

KAY

Some people may, and if they do they're probably limiting themselves, but it's none of my business --

EYTAN

None of this is any of your business. People should be whoever they want to be. But let me ask you this. What about people who are born biologically male or biologically female who go through life, from early childhood, sensing that the gender assigned to them is wrong, it's an accident of nature, they need to be the opposite gender. Some have painful, radical surgery in order to change genders. Are those people all just grinning, and waving their hands in white gloves, and singing and dancing in a minstrel show, in your eyes? Is that what you tell your students in your Women & Gender Studies classes -- that there is no such thing as a trans-gendered person? It's all made up?

KAY

I never said anything like that --

EYTAN

You did. If you *really* see drag as a minstrel show. I don't think there were too many white guys in 1910 who felt a biological need to be black. That was the main form of entertainment then, so that's what they did.

KAY

So, my brother feels a biological need to dress up in drag?

EYTAN

Your brother may have some kind of need, yes. He may have an androgynous side he wants to explore, lots of people do.

KAY

Look, we're conflating a number of things here. Gender and race are both social constructs, they are both metaphors -- but our bodies are also marked, in real terms, by gender and race.

EYTAN

Would that be the "dialectic" of the real and the imaginary?

KAY

You're damned right. And yes, gender may be more mutable and complicated than race, in biological terms. But let's not ignore the sociological side of this. We do live in a society where white men occupy positions of power and privilege and generally control media and entertainment and the cultural narrative, just as in the Twentieth Century. And it *is* a kind of a game for men to dress up as women, and appropriate our voices and images, and parody us, still, as it was for whites to put on blackface and do the buck and wing, or play Bones and Tambo, a hundred years ago. The paradigms are similar. You're being wilfully ignorant if you pretend not to see that, just as you're dishonest if you ignore the misogynist aspect of drag.

EYTAN

The misogynist aspect of *some* drag acts, Kay. Let's not make sweeping generalizations. It's true that there may be *some* drag queens who share my general lack of patience with the way *some* biological women behave. But then there are people like Gary who have nothing against women, however much justification there would be, given the women in his family, for him to morph into a raving misogynist serial killer.

KAY

Thanks so much. That's almost redundant, by the way, given how many serial killers are raving misogynists. But how about acknowledging for once the position of power and sense of entitlement men feel in relation to women -- whether the men dress as women and identify with them, or not?

EYTAN

Really, Kay. Really? How shall I break this to you? Men in drag and trans-gender women have very little power in our society. They're lucky to get through high school alive.

EYTAN (CONT'D)

At the moment, the government is pushing back on their rather humble wish to use a bathroom stall that is right for them. They're often shamed and rejected by their families, they're bashed and killed in record numbers. Or do you pretend not to know that?

KAY

Of course. But a man can grow up feeling trans-gender and still have subconsciously absorbed a sense of male entitlement. Parents interrupt their daughters twice as often as they interrupt their sons -- and subtle aspects of socialization like that affect everyone who is born male. They think it all revolves around them. So, when Martha Plimpton stages an event to protect abortion rights in Texas called Night of A Thousand Vaginas, she gets attacked on Twitter for being cis-sexist and alienating trans-gender women don't have vaginas! God forbid women for whom reproductive rights are a real issue try to come together and fight that battle themselves! And I want to know how those people born men, who insist they're women too and they have to be included in the battle for reproductive rights -- how are they any different from all the men in Congress lecturing women on what we may and may not do with our bodies? What do they know about any of it?

EYTAN

You said the fear of getting pregnant is not a real issue for you, either. Should you be included?

CURTIS

Watch it! You stay away from that subject!

KAY

It's all right, Curtis, it's the kind of cheap shot I'd expect from him. I have been trying to get pregnant, yes, but I defend every woman's right to choose, and only a male idiot like you would find that confusing, or something to joke about. You and some Republican who's part of the current dominant order -- I don't really see a difference.

EYTAN

Well, you always did have trouble with fine distinctions. Now that you mention it, you're sounding to me like the bigots and intolerant morons who are part of the current regime yourself.

KAY

All I'm saying is, the issue of trans people is complicated -- and so is drag. Will you really not say what you know, and admit there's an overall trend toward hostility toward women when it comes to drag?

EYTAN

Gladly. What the hell. If you will admit an overall trend in feminism toward man-hating, and self-righteous humorlessness, and a puritanical hatred of sex and fun and glitter and spangles and perfume and fabulousness, and a marked tendency toward homophobia directed at gay men who see through you, and call you on all of the above.

KAY

A distaste toward gay men who caricature women?

EYTAN

Who reflect the fabulous potential and also the cattiness of women that you don't want to see.

KAY

Who think they're embodying women, except they bring to it a level of testosterone-driven aggression, and competitive schoolyard little-boy meanness that no woman has ever felt -- and they call *that* a reflection of femininity.

EYTAN

Oh, now, honey, you've got more testosterone-driven aggression in one little finger --

CURTIS

Hey, guys, come on, take it easy now.

GARY

Yeah, Curtis and I are gonna have to separate you, we're gonna give you a time-out if you don't stop. Eytan, down. Kay -- down!

EYTAN

Notice, Gary -- I may have twitted her -- I may have made a few remarks about her silly theoretical Newspeak -- but I did not take her on directly until she launched a direct attack on the act -- after asking to hear you sing a song.

GARY

Well, let me try to ... give her a different perspective. About drag. And maybe it'll leave the atmosphere a little less "charged" than when the two of you duke it out.

EYTAN

Go ahead.

KAY

Yes, Gary, I'd be glad to hear how you see it.

GARY

Great. Thanks.

(Tentative, trying to be gentle,  
and careful)

I guess I'd say -- it doesn't sound like a good idea,  
now, for you to come out to the bar tomorrow night and  
see the act --

KAY

You're performing Saturday night?

GARY

I'm scheduled to, yes, I don't know if you have events  
relating to your conference --

KAY

Nothing so far --

GARY

Or -- I didn't know even before this if it would be a  
good idea. But *if* you came to the bar -- you'd see some  
things, I'm sure, you'd find objectionable. You'd hear  
some jokes you don't like. And you'd see some performers  
... You'd just find puerile. I mean, here we are in  
Kansas City. And the Midwest -- is not like New York and  
New Jersey. Out here, if a man puts on a dress, it's  
seen as wildly outrageous, hilarious, it's kind of sad  
how taboo and naughty people think it is. But over time  
-- they may grow up, they may get more comfortable with  
how -- fluid these things can be. Being male, being  
female. *I* see it as fluid. I see racial differences as  
more fluid now. That, maybe, everybody's a metaphor for  
everybody else now -- you were talking about race and  
gender as metaphors -- and maybe we all can have fun,  
and play. I don't think that it's more fluid now because  
there were minstrel shows back in the day -- I think it  
may be because of white people dancing badly to rock and  
roll for years and finally discovering their hips and  
learning to dance well.

KAY

I love rock and roll -- that's not a minstrel show.

GARY

Well, it is and it isn't, according to your definition.  
It's cultural appropriation of a black form. I mean,  
Eytan makes a case -- never mind. But anyhow, what I'm  
saying about the bar is -- you would see drag kings as  
well as queens.

GARY (CONT'D)

You'd see women who dress up as men, gay and straight women, you'd see women with drag queen best friends and they share clothes and make-up, you might hear some bad acts but also some witty, genuinely good ones -- you might see women being empowered and old gender stereotypes being shaken up and questioned -- you might see creative, hopeful things.

EYTAN

She'd only see what she wants to see. It's just as you said when she first launched into this stuff: she'd project her own inner ugliness on everyone around her. She's far too dried-out and rigid to understand playfulness and self-invention.

KAY

Eytan, tell me this. When we were in high school, why did it piss you off so much to see Italians and others playing Jews all the time in films? Why can't everyone just "invent" themselves and play any role? Why can't white actors put on blackface anymore, or play Asians with eye make-up, if it's all about self-invention?

EYTAN

I admit, I got tired of seeing other people playing Jews because there weren't many roles for Jews and there weren't that many famous Jewish actors --

KAY

And how about three-dimensional roles for strong women, are there lots of those?

EYTAN

But I would beat up anyone who would re-cast the HBO film of *Angels in America*, with Al Pacino playing Roy Cohn and Meryl Streep playing Ethel Rosenberg. I wouldn't change a thing about it because they were amazing. And I could handle Meryl in drag playing an Orthodox rabbi with a beard in that, and I was fine with Pacino playing Shylock in *Merchant of Venice*. And so the answer is that if you're good, you can get away with it -- with appropriation, with trying to channel somebody from the Other, alien group.

KAY

That's what a lot of my research is about -- appropriation and the perception of the Other.

EYTAN

Good for you. My point is, if you're bad, if you fail, you deserve to fail, you deserve to fall flat on your face because you took the risk.

EYTAN (CONT'D)

But if it works, then of *course* it works, and it's not a minstrel show after all, and you had every right to do it. That Idaho song -- maybe it doesn't work, maybe it's not ready for prime time. But I *dare* you to come to the bar tomorrow night and hear the songs that Gary has in his act, the songs of ours that we *know* work. I dare you to dismiss us after that.

KAY

But if I disagree with the basic premise of what you're doing --

EYTAN

What we're doing -- what Gary is doing -- is no different than any other form of art. *All* art is a drag act. Hell, maybe all art is a minstrel show. Unless it's strictly autobiographical -- how dare Tolstoy write *Anna Karenina*? How dare he get into the head of a woman?

KAY

He didn't believe women were capable of intellectual thought, actually, he didn't --

EYTAN

How dare he try? How dare Sophocles write *Antigone*? How dare young men play her on stage long ago, or Juliet, how dare theater exist as it did for thousands of years? How dare Ibsen write *A Doll House*? How dare Virginia Woolf get into the head of Septimus Smith as well as Mrs. Dalloway? Why don't we censor and ban everything except strictly autobiographical non-fiction, how dare *anybody* try to capture any part of the human experience they haven't lived personally themselves? Huh? Let's stamp out every attempt at empathy and imagination and discovering human universals! Right, Kay?

KAY

I never said any of that. But writing is different from acting or vamping or whatever you call --

EYTAN

I don't see the difference. If I write for a woman or a black person and the performer is from the group I'm writing for -- I'm just using that performer as a ventriloquist's dummy, aren't I? For my white male minstrel show?

KAY

Obviously, it's complicated. When there's a history as distorted as the history of white people appropriating the voices of black people -- a writer needs to think twice.

CURTIS

Yeah, I don't know.

KAY

You disagree?

CURTIS

James Baldwin would disagree. He said everybody in America should be writing about racial stuff that makes us all uncomfortable. Everybody, black and white, should be taking risks. He wrote what he felt he had to write -- he didn't want to think too much about the politics of what he *should* be writing. And later, when he tried to write overtly political novels it hurt them. He started out with *Go Tell It On the Mountain*, about a messed-up, poor family in Harlem, and black people got mad at him for washing dirty linen in public. Then he confused everybody by writing *Giovanni's Room*. Right there in the 1950s, a black man writes a gay novel, and all the characters are European and American white men. And the readers and the critics are all going: "Huh?" He freaked them out. Then, when black writers went after his friend William Styron for writing *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, Baldwin said hey, if you don't like Bill Styron's Nat Turner, go write your own.

EYTAN

(surprised)

So, you ... you're involved with literature also.

CURTIS

Yeah, try not to sound too surprised.

EYTAN

What I mean is -- I didn't realize you were in academia.

CURTIS

I'm not. I'm a landscaper. I have about one year's worth of credits at a community college -- that's as far as I got. But Kay has a lot of books on her shelves, and I browse around, and I've read some good stuff. I don't really go in for theory -- that's more her thing. But maybe I do agree with her that a writer should be careful. They should think about what they're doing, when they write in the voice of somebody very different. Maybe they should go and do it anyway -- but first they should *think* about it, long and hard. They should be extra careful when it's somebody from a group, like women or people of color, who have had their voices stolen in the past. Maybe that's all Kay is saying -- is that you should think about what you're doing here a little harder.

EYTAN

No, that's not what Kay is doing. Her mission in life is simple.

(He puts on a computerized voice,  
like a Borg or a Dalek)

Annihilate. Immolate. Eradicate. Destroy.

(Normal voice)

That's about as constructive as her criticism gets.

KAY

You know the movie that always makes me think of you, Eytan? The re-make of *The Stepford Wives*. I use it in one of my courses. It's set in a universe that sees women as a problem. In the universe of that film, you have women controlling entertainment, producing all the TV shows, and the shows all degrade men, and a humiliated male guest from a reality show that Nicole Kidman produces tries to kill her, and her husband Matthew Broderick tells her she deserves it, basically, and they move to Stepford, but the whole plot has been reduced to a joke, and we're meant to sympathize with bitchy, arch characters we don't like at all, or the movie can't decide if we should sympathize with them, and it can't decide if the Stepford wives are robots or people with microchips in their brains, and we're told that gay relationships are just as likely to go in a Stepford Wives direction as straight ones, and it seems like Christopher Walken is in charge, but then it turns out the *real* villainess is Glenn Close, of course, controlling everything, imposing the retro rules of Stepford on everyone else --

EYTAN

This was a bad film that nobody cares about. Why do you?

KAY

Because of course, women are all-controlling monsters with tremendous power, and there's no need for feminism, it's all a giggle and a joke. Like when I was a day-camp counselor at eighteen, and a creepy guy was looking through a peephole into the adult women's changing room, and you thought it was such a joke, you asked if he was hot, you told me to flirt with him -- the *Stepford Wives* re-make is a film that takes violence toward women exactly that seriously. And who made this film? It was produced by Scott Rudin, who's gay. And directed by Frank Oz, who thinks he knows women because he speaks in the voice of Miss Piggy.

KAY (CONT'D)

And it was written by Paul Rudnick who's gay and used to do a movie column in the voice of a woman, so I guess he knows all about women, too -- and I guess this group of powerful men didn't see the irony of creating a movie in which women have all the power and run the entertainment industry, and the women invent male chauvinist oppression, and impose it on themselves.

EYTAN

Didn't Paul Rudnick write *Sister Act*? That was sort of cute. Nuns are a fun kind of drag.

KAY

He gets credit for it. But Carrie Fisher did the re-write and redeemed it!

GARY

And why are you so violently anti-Frank Oz? Leave the poor man alone. He's wonderful as Miss Piggy, and Yoda, and Cookie Monster --

KAY

And they said in interviews, when they did research for the film, these men were *amazed* to learn that there are actually hetero men who liked to gather in groups and keep women out and keep women down. They thought they had discovered some wild aberration! They didn't see a political need for *The Stepford Wives*, how in a serious form it shows the real situation of women --

EYTAN

Well, of course, because a woman wrote it, or -- no, wait a minute ...

(with sarcastic surprise)

Wasn't it Ira Levin?

KAY

It was Ira Levin exploring something dark in heterosexual men, in terms of how they relate to heterosexual women. Maybe playing on women's fear that if they're smart and interesting and talented, none of that matters to the men they're with, the men would rather be with Barbie. A lot of them. But it was worth exploring, and kudos to Levin for doing it.

EYTAN

And also for exploring fears of giving birth to the spawn of Satan, I *hate* when that happens.

KAY

So, as Curtis says, you can write about the Other, you can get into the head of someone different -- if you think hard, if you understand the implications, if you're not a jerk about it. It's when thoughtless white males, gay or straight, appropriate the experience of women or of people of color --

EYTAN

Um, Kay?

KAY

What?

EYTAN

I'm just curious. Since you say it's ironic these men didn't realize that they're patriarchal male oppressors. Do you have any idea how ridiculous you sound, earnestly lecturing us about putting on a minstrel show, and going on and on about the concerns of people of color and -- and teaching African-American Studies in the first place? I mean, what are you but a big, flaming drag act, and a tap-dancing, buck-and-wing minstrel show with bells on?

(KAY looks at him, wounded. SHE does not answer. CURTIS addresses EYTAN.)

CURTIS

You know, I really do think you need to take it easy, here. You haven't read her books, you don't know anything about her paper or her research or --

EYTAN

Oh, don't worry, Kay's a feminist, she doesn't want a man protecting her, that's patronizing, she can fight her own battles --

GARY

There's no need to fight any battles, we can try to keep this a civil discussion --

EYTAN

That's not what Kay, wants, is it, Kay? She decided to *bring* it, she decided to throw down. So, tell us, Kay, sweetheart, exactly what business do you have talking about "Langston" and "Zora," and what business did you have in high school lecturing me about Motown and Stax Records, and how Michael Jackson put the black and white of rock and roll back together with his *Thriller* album, and please explain *why* can't you see yourself as the ridiculous, uptight, holier-than-thou hypocrite that you are?

KAY

I said that things are complicated. They are. I teach about race and gender because different races and genders are tangled together in our country's history. I don't write or perform in the voice of a black person.

EYTAN

But why even presume to teach gender studies when you hate men, and gay men especially --

KAY

Only some --

EYTAN

Some personally, but by extrapolation you hate all --

KAY

Only when I'm around you, Eytan. Only right now.

(to GARY)

Excuse me, I'm going to go lie down. The first panel I'm on is pretty early tomorrow morning, and then I'll be presenting my jargon-filled, bullshit minstrel show paper to an auditorium full of people tomorrow afternoon.

(KAY EXITS.)

CURTIS

(to EYTAN)

As it happens, Kay's a hell of a good teacher. And writer.

EYTAN

Despite all the theory. And the jargon.

CURTIS

Yes. I can't keep track of what some of the terminology means and I don't always want to, but she knows what she's saying and she has good things to say. I learn a lot just talking things through with her.

EYTAN

Well, it's probably a matter of taste. I guess I'm not as inclined to sit at her feet and learn.

CURTIS

I guess what I'm saying is I don't like to see her mocked.

EYTAN

Well, if she can't stand the heat she should get out of the kitchen. And oh, she just did. But really, it's simple: if she can't take it, she shouldn't dish it out.

EYTAN (CONT'D)

Tell me, Curtis, is that your role here, to give your blessing and make it okay for her to teach courses about black people?

CURTIS

My role is to be her husband and protect her when people are beating up on her.

EYTAN

That's a laugh. She was the instigator, every step -- almost every step -- of the way, and I think we all know that she can take care of herself.

CURTIS

She tries to seem that way, she tries to be tough, but she's actually pretty fragile.

EYTAN

(laughs)

Sure. As fragile as a Sherman tank. As fragile as the Kraken.

(EYTAN makes a cawing monster sound.)

CURTIS

She loves what she does and she's good at it. There's no need to mock her life work and make her feel like it's shit.

EYTAN

There is every need to do that when she's doing the same thing to Gary. He loves what he does too, and he's good at it.

CURTIS

Yeah, okay, whatever. Good night.

GARY

Good night.

(CURTIS EXITS. GARY gives EYTAN a baleful look.)

EYTAN

What? Was it something I said?

LIGHTS DOWN

END OF SCENE FOUR

SCENE FIVE

LIGHTS COME UP on KAY, alone, at the edge of the stage, addressing the audience.

KAY

Before I became friends with Eytan, I had one good friend in school. She was a black girl named Yvette Robinson. We were twelve, thirteen years old. It was a prissy New Jersey private school on the Palisades, and she was one of the token black kids -- there was one black boy and one black girl in every grade. It was good to hang with Yvette because she hadn't gone to private schools all her life. She could be irreverent and funny, and she showed me there was something outside of the stale atmosphere of my house, around my mother, and the stale atmosphere of my school. I could breathe around Yvette. I don't think she felt comfortable the few times I brought her home. And I did not feel comfortable in my home. Finally, she took me to her apartment, in Englewood's third ward. I got to meet her mother, Claudine. Her mother was funnier, she was louder, she was more direct and, in a way, cooler than Yvette. She put old vinyl records on her turn-table, and turned it up, till music poured out of her stereo speakers in waves of sound. She told us to listen. I remember the first time I came over, she put on Aretha Franklin's *Lady Soul* album. I had never heard Aretha sing before. I'd never heard "Chain of Fools" or "Natural Woman." She played Motown records for us.

(A Motown beat, and maybe a bass line, starts up under her words as she talks)

Yvette got bored sometimes, listening to her mother talk and play music, but not me. Claudine gave me a sense of which songs Smoky Robinson wrote, and which songs were by Holland, Dozier, Holland, and how fabulous The Supremes were, and how The Temptations had a vibe that was so different from the Four Tops. I felt like I entered another kingdom when I was with Claudine, hearing her music. I had escaped. It was music a deaf person would register -- you could feel the vibrations, the beat of the drums and the pulse of the bass line rising up from the floor into your body. I'd grown up in a house where we didn't play the radio, where my mother played classical music, and light classical and opera -- I had never heard anything like this before. Claudine turned me on to music from the early seventies -- The Chi-Lites and The Stylistics and the O'Jays. And I drank in everything she played, I listened to her stories about growing up in Chicago -- and I could feel a window open. I saw light, I saw a way out of the narrow life Mom had planned for me. I wouldn't be a banker like her.

## KAY (CONT'D)

There was more to life than my GPA and getting the highest SAT score, when the time came to take it, there was more than going to business school. I was too damaged, maybe, I already suspected, to pursue music or some kind of creation myself -- but there was this rich music to listen to -- there was this rich, amazing culture to explore. Raw and visceral, vibrating with life, the way the floor and table and chairs in that apartment vibrated with music. And Yvette and I -- we drifted apart. Maybe she sensed that I was more focused on her mom than her -- that Claudine gave me something I never got in my house -- warm laughter and somebody I could talk to, who fed me good food and ideas I was hungry for ... Maybe Yvette resented my interest in black culture, who knows. Maybe she saw me as a cultural tourist. I didn't want to go to the mall with her, or the movies anymore -- I just wanted to hang out with her mom. And the time came when we just stopped seeing each other. But the need for rock and roll, and R&B and jazz, soul and gospel -- hell, every form of music invented in the Americas comes out of black culture in some way ... That stayed with me. And I discovered books by African-American authors. Some books were texts, like those old songs, that seemed to vibrate when I touched them. And I began to invent myself. I began to set myself free.

(SHE EXITS, as the FUNKY MUSIC GROWS LOUDER.)

END OF ACT ONE

ACT TWOSCENE ONE

AT RISE: GARY is cleaning up the living room after the meal we saw the night before. EYTAN enters, sleepy, in a bathrobe, and watches him.

EYTAN

Morning.

GARY

Morning.

EYTAN

How long you been up?

GARY

A while.

(HE EXITS into the kitchen with stacked things from the coffee table. EYTAN calls after him.)

EYTAN

Do we still have guests?

GARY (O.S.)

Not right now.

EYTAN

I drove them away?

(GARY ENTERS)

GARY

Stop sounding so hopeful. They both went out. Curtis drove Kay to the hotel where her conference is.

EYTAN

Is he coming back?

GARY

I think he's going to drive around most of the day. He said he wanted to check out the Powell Gardens -- and architecture -- some buildings he's read about. Then he's going to hear Kay give her paper at the hotel. We're invited. In spite of everything.

EYTAN

What time?

GARY

Four in the afternoon.

EYTAN

Darn. I'll be washing my hair at that time.

GARY

In all honesty, I don't really want to go either. I'm a bad brother. I'm not asking for a copy of that book of hers, on -- whoever.

EYTAN

Fannie Hurst.

GARY

I didn't ask about her other books -- I don't even know if she has other books.

EYTAN

Google her.

GARY

I don't think I'd read them. I'm a bad brother.

EYTAN

Oh well. Is she still feeling sorry for herself?

GARY

I couldn't tell how she was feeling. We talked about her paper a little.

EYTAN

On *Mule Bone*.

GARY

Apparently, it's not a very good play.

EYTAN

All the more reason to write papers about it.

GARY

Or it's interesting and full of quaint, folkloric touches and amusing local color but it needed more work, or it's aging in a problematic way. She added lots of qualifiers. I wasn't really paying attention. Kay asked me to tell you ...

EYTAN

Yes?

GARY

That she's sorry for last night. She thinks it was her fault, she did start the fight. She was too critical of our song. She doesn't know enough about drag to comment on it.

EYTAN

All of this is true.

GARY

She said she'd like to come along tonight to the bar, to hear me perform.

EYTAN

Oh no.

GARY

I think it's a nice gesture. She's trying.

EYTAN

Well. As long as we don't have to go hear the talk on *Mule Bone*.

GARY

I think she'd like us to come. But there's no quid pro quo.

EYTAN

Then I can handle her coming tonight. They're leaving tomorrow, right?

GARY

Yes. And she'll have Curtis there, when she gives her paper.

EYTAN

I wonder if she's ever written a paper on the topic of The Magical Negro.

GARY

The Magical Negro?

EYTAN

Well, yes. Because, in a sense, she's married to one.

GARY

You lost me.

EYTAN

I don't know that he's got any supernatural powers. And I think Magical Negroes mainly hang out with white men, not white women. But maybe not. It's not all that far removed from that black woman in *Imitation of Life* who lets Lana Turner make all the money on their business. It's not far removed from Mammy -- it's a black person who lives for white people. Simple. Pure at heart. Close to the land. Takes care of the white folks, worries about their problems, doesn't really have a personal life. No dreams, no goals ...

GARY

We don't know any of that about Curtis. I think he's good for her. He's a calming influence, he supports her.

EYTAN

Exactly.

GARY

I'm glad to see Kay in a good relationship. I think she had some rough, lonely years.

EYTAN

Like the rest of us.

GARY

I like him.

EYTAN

I'll be glad to be shut of the two of them.

GARY

I've got to find a moment to talk to Kay alone, about financial stuff.

EYTAN

You owe her nothing. You're a poor schoolteacher.

GARY

She's a poor college teacher.

EYTAN

Tenure track.

GARY

That's still not security. Half the money belongs to her.

EYTAN

No. Your mother left it to you, and you earned it, putting up with wretchedness and horror, while Kay was larking around, out of the picture.

GARY

I wish there was a way I could convince Kay that Mom wanted her to have the money --

EYTAN

She didn't, and there isn't.

GARY

The lawyers say Kay and I have to work together to pull this transfer off.

EYTAN

I completely disapprove.

GARY

I know.

EYTAN

I was thinking ... about how she and I used to torture you. We'd promise to take you with us to the movies or the mall, and snub you, just to see your startled face, just to make you cry. Or that time we locked you in her closet, and made you say humiliating things about yourself ...

GARY

I'm a worm, I'm an insect, I'm a slime mold, I'm a garden slug, I'm pond scum, I'm lower than excrement.

EYTAN

You still remember? And you still say it in that calm voice.

GARY

Hey, it got me out of the closet. In a sense.

EYTAN

Well, I wasn't out of mine yet. Entirely. But why are you *with me*, when I was that much of a shit to you? And why are you still trying to have a relationship with a sister like Kay?

GARY

You're not those teenagers anymore. I've moved on, and I figure you have also.

EYTAN

You know that I'm the reason for her outburst last night, don't you? The primal source of her rage? I'm her evil twin, who didn't work out as a life partner. The gay man who rejected her, as Langston rejected Zora or whatever nonsense, the boy who infuriated her by finally coming out and being who I was, who she always knew, deep down, I was. And so now she hates all gay men, you included -- and there's no way to reach her. Not that she's worth reaching.

GARY

Well, maybe. It does seem like the two of you still have issues.

EYTAN

Oh, yeah? Really? You think so?

GARY

So, in some sense, I guess neither of you really *has* moved on.

EYTAN

Worm. Insect. Did Curtis really say he'd be gone all day?

GARY

For the next few hours at least.

EYTAN

Let's fuck out here. Maybe they'll walk in on us. Kay will be outraged, she's a member of the Anti-Sex League. She wants to eradicate the orgasm.

GARY

You know, Eytan ... I always feel like ... living room sex is great in theory ... But kind of uncomfortable in practice.

EYTAN

Along with sex in the shower, and outdoor sex . . .

GARY

Pretty much, yeah. I'm big on beds. Beds are wonderful for sex! It's like they're made for it.

EYTAN

Let's go do it in the guest room, then. They might walk in on that.

GARY

No, I really don't want to jizz on their things or whatever you have in mind. Sorry.

EYTAN

Such a gentleman. Fine. I'll see you in our room.

(HE EXITS. GARY moves to finish cleaning.)

GARY

See you there!

LIGHTS DOWN

END OF SCENE ONE

SCENE TWO

KAY, near the edge of the stage, holding her notes in her shaky hands (with or without a lectern and a glass of water to sip) is in the midst of presenting her paper on *Mule Bone*. The audience is now, to her, an auditorium full of academics that SHE is addressing. KAY appears vulnerable, nervous, shy -- we see a side of her we have not seen before, and perhaps understand better why CURTIS said SHE is fragile:

## KAY

Of course, bell hooks and others have commented on the paucity of analysis, within postmodernism as a discursive practice, of texts by people of color, particularly women of color, until recent decades -- and yet Henry Louis Gates, Madhu Dubey and others have traced the precursors of postmodernism in the works of Zora Neale Hurston and other key Harlem Renaissance figures. Within the modernisms employed by these writers, we find the double consciousness that W.E.B. DuBois famously spoke of, a sense of "always looking at one's self through the eyes of others." In the writings of Hurston and Langston Hughes, we encounter the crisis of representation, the fragmentation of identity (and, occasionally, of narrative), the deliberate blurring of the lines between "high" and "low" culture, as well as a critique of the rigid dichotomies of dualism and binarism, and a defiant embrace of mininarratives over the prevailing, normative metanarratives of white society. Both Hughes and Hurston felt caught between various worlds, and both were, in a sense, self-created. Hughes was raised by his grandmother and her friends, his mother in and out of his life, his father a stranger until his adolescent trip to Mexico, when Hughes found the man cold, obsessed with money, contemptuous of other African Americans -- and ultimately someone a son could not be close to. When Hurston was thirteen, she lost a loving mother and was then cast aside by an indifferent father; each of these writers was to some degree culturally as well as emotionally orphaned. Hurston's childhood in the all-black town of Eatonville did not expose her to the dangers and indignities of the Jim Crow South that loomed outside it. Hughes grew up hearing of great men in his family from his grandmother, and he was close to white friends in his Cleveland high school. As with Hurston, his fellowship with working-class people of color was less a natural progression than a deliberate choice.

## KAY (CONT'D)

When Hurston first toured the South, gathering anthropological information on the culture, idioms, folklore songs and hoodoo beliefs, few people would talk to her -- put off as they were by her "Barnard" way of speaking. Even when she returned to her hometown of Eatonville, her template society, she was in some sense alien and Other, unwittingly cast in the role, almost, of colonialist observer and tourist, if not missionary for the larger white society of commerce and academia. In subsequent trips she modified her approach and won acceptance, explaining away her car and store-bought clothes as the spoils of a career as a bootlegger, and worked in the fields with those she interviewed. She trained in the art of hoodoo with famous conjurers in New Orleans. She learned to defy the protocols of ethnographic studies by embracing a reflexive immersion in the communities she entered -- and yet she never got past the paradox of representation -- as she commingled scholarship with the search for identity. Similarly, as she and Hughes collaborated on *Mule Bone*, they adhered to ideals he delineated in his essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." They sought to be playful, irreverent and defiantly "low brow" instead of uplifting -- to create dramatic art that was the equivalent of Bessie Smith singing the blues. They were tired of white representations of African Americans in stage revues like *Shuffle Along*, or, even more egregiously, in minstrel shows.

(sips water)

And yet -- they were and were not the people they wished to represent on stage -- else Hurston's conscious immersion in such communities during her research trips would not have been necessary. The other crucial paradox for them, in terms of identity, was their relationship with their white "Godmother," Charlotte Mason, who both enabled and compromised their artistic endeavors, who nurtured their talent and poisoned them with her condescending theories about Negro "primitivism," and how it could renew the arid civilization of whites. In the intersection of Hurston and Hughes' orphaned cultural sense of self -- with their orphaned sense of self in terms of actual family -- we may find the source of the tension that drove them apart -- as they competed for Godmother's good graces, and wrestled with the contradictions of their shared artistic vision. Hurston may have been more cynical about the foolish old woman -- and yet her need for the approval of Godmother, beyond issues of economic necessity, may have been as real as his. Hughes maintained a childlike identity, and had felt crushed two times when he was growing up.

## KAY (CONT'D)

The first time was when he misunderstood the adult promise that if he were "Saved," Christ would appear to him and be with him always -- the boy took that promise as literal, the promise of Christ appearing to him as a comforting, parental protector -- almost as the promise of an imaginary friend made real. The second time Langston Hughes was shattered was when he went to live with his father in Mexico and found his father was unlovable and had no love to give. Hughes who had received affirmation from neither biological parent was the one who clung to the maternal aspect of "Godmother" most desperately -- and it was Hughes who suffered most deeply, as the inherent contradictions of authenticity, identity, representation and reflexivity destroyed his collaboration and friendship with Hurston. He writes in his autobiography *The Big Sea* about the horror and anguish of his final conversation with Godmother, in her big, bright drawing room on Park Avenue, as he was banished, and stumblingly made his way to the elevator and the street. Physical illness followed, and acrimonious exchanges with Hurston, involving a theater company that hoped to produce *Mule Bone* in that year of 1931. Hughes writes: "That spring for me (and, I guess, all of us), was the end of the Harlem Renaissance. We were no longer in vogue, we Negroes. Sophisticated New Yorkers turned to Noel Coward. Colored actors began to go hungry, publishers politely rejected new manuscripts, and patrons found other uses for their money. The cycle that had charlestoned into being on the dancing heels of *Shuffle Along* now ended in *Green Pastures* with De Lawd." Clearly, for him, the opportunity to wrest entertainment and a joyous representation of the black experience on stage free from the stranglehold of the white establishment was inexorably slipping away ...

LIGHTS DOWN

END OF SCENE TWO

SCENE THREE

LIGHTS UP on the guest room. CURTIS paces around, and speaks to KAY, who is in the guest bathroom.

CURTIS

Baby, I'm serious. Let's find you a doctor. Maybe there's someone at the hotel, working with the conference. We can just get you checked out. Flying is dangerous, people pick up bugs in airports and airplanes all the time.

KAY (O.S.)

It's not a bug. It's nerves. It's flying out here, and giving the paper, and staying in this house -- and everything else. I don't think I'm going to throw up. I'd just like -- to hang out with this toilet and sink close by. Just in case.

CURTIS

Well, then, you stay there as long as you like. Do you need your insulin?

KAY (O.S.)

No, I'm good.

CURTIS

You want me to run out and get you a Diet Coke?

KAY (O.S.)

Why?

CURTIS

To settle your stomach.

(KAY sticks her head back into the room, hovering between the bathroom and the bedroom. SHE looks upset and unwell. But SHE speaks to CURTIS in a fond, amused way.)

KAY

That seems to be your favorite home remedy. For everything.

CURTIS

That's what my moms believed in. Somebody felt sick, she'd pour this stuff called Coca Cola Syrup over ice. She'd tuck me up in bed and give me a glass. And a lot of the time, it worked. And so for me now -- Coke is this magical stuff. You know, like chicken soup is for a lot of people.

(KAY comes into the room, fully.)

KAY

Well, thank you for taking care of me the way your mother took care of you. It's bizarre, actually, having someone nurture me like this. I guess I tell you that a lot, but that's because -- the novelty hasn't worn off.

CURTIS

That's what I'm here for.

KAY

I know. It's kind of surreal. It makes a lot of the bad stuff go away.

CURTIS

Good. But if you want we can move to the hotel --

KAY

No, no, we're fine here for one more night --

CURTIS

And we do not have to go to this performance of your brother's. I mean, it's not really our kind of thing, they didn't come hear your paper, you don't feel well, so -- fuck 'em.

KAY

If I'd listened to you, and not shot my mouth off last night, that might have been an option. As it is ... I think we need to go.

CURTIS

You think you hurt Gary's feelings?

KAY

Well, that and so I can prove I'm not the closed-minded bigot Eytan says I am. Even if I am, I'd like to generate evidence to the contrary.

CURTIS

You spend a lot of mental energy worrying about that guy.

KAY

When I'm under this roof.

CURTIS

Everywhere. I think he really damaged you.

KAY

He thinks he's a bigger source of damage in my life than he is. Other people got there first.

(beat)

I think he has it in for you.

KAY (CONT'D)

He's sizing you up, looking for weak spots, looking for a way to go after you.

CURTIS

Well, I'm not exactly warming to him either, so I'll give him a fight if he wants one.

KAY

I can't tell if he's just angry at you for being the man he wasn't. You know, he told me in high school that I'd wind up as a mad old woman in a house full of cats. He thought it was so ironic that my mother and I didn't get along -- he said we were interchangeable, and every day he could see me turning into her. Since he couldn't bring himself to be attracted to me, it had to be my fault, I had to be intrinsically repulsive, and prematurely withered, no man could want me. So, it's either that -- or else he thinks you're hot.

CURTIS

Oh, snap. I hope it's option number one, then.

KAY

I don't mean that he's hot for you himself. Necessarily. I mean -- if he thinks I've somehow "won" and wound up with a better life than he has -- that could make him want to tear you down. Maybe he resents you because you take care of me in a way he expects Gary to do for him ... since he's as difficult a diva as I am. Like I said, he's very competitive. Or, he could have some deep-seated racist feelings I wasn't aware of before. Some feeling about inter-racial couples.

CURTIS

Or he could just be an asshole.

KAY

Yes. I guess that's always a possibility.

(beat)

So, we're eating at the bar?

CURTIS

Yeah, Gary said it's a dinner theater kind of lay-out, and the food is decent.

KAY

Well, I'm sure they've got Diet Coke there.

CURTIS

You know what? I'm gonna go out and get you a bottle right now.

CURTIS (CONT'D)

From that wall fridge full of sodas at the dumpling place. And if you still feel this lousy an hour from now -- we're just not going. I'm gonna tuck you up in bed for real.

KAY

Okay, sweetie. Thank you.

(EYTAN KNOCKS on the door of the room and ENTERS. The atmosphere is tense.)

EYTAN

Hey. How did your paper go?

KAY

It went okay.

CURTIS

On the other hand, maybe I'll stick around here.

KAY

No, sweetie, really, would you go get me that soda? I think it would do me good.

CURTIS

You sure?

KAY

I'm sure.

(CURTIS glares at EYTAN for a second.)

CURTIS

Be back soon.

(HE EXITS.)

EYTAN

You're not feeling well?

KAY

No. I'm not feeling well.

EYTAN

I'm sorry to hear it.

KAY

I'll bet.

EYTAN

I just came to tell you that Gary would like to talk to you, maybe outside -- we have a backyard we share with the people upstairs in the duplex.

KAY

Why does Gary want to talk to me in your backyard?

EYTAN

I guess he didn't know that Curtis was going out, and it's kind of private out there -- away from me and everyone else.

KAY

What does he want to talk about?

EYTAN

I guess he'll tell you. He probably would resent me offering an opinion on these things --

KAY

Did he tell you to call me?

EYTAN

No, he'll be heading in here soon. I preempted him.

KAY

Well, then. Go for broke. Say whatever asinine thing it is you want to say.

EYTAN

You're not entitled to any of his money. The inheritance.

KAY

I know that.

EYTAN

He's going to be noble and try to offer you half. I just wanted to say I find that revolting and unjust. To Gary.

KAY

I agree. Is that all?

EYTAN

That's all.

KAY

Good. Get out. And tell him I'll meet him in the backyard.

EYTAN

Don't take too long. He has to get to the bar ahead of the rest of us.

KAY

To transform himself.

Exactly.

EYTAN

LIGHTS DOWN

END OF SCENE THREE

SCENE FOUR

LIGHTS COME UP on CURTIS, alone at the edge of the stage, addressing the audience.

## CURTIS

I first met Sakiko when I was twenty-five. I was working in a tree nursery in Chicago. She was nineteen -- she had been in the US for two weeks. She barely spoke English. We met in a club, and I was really into animé at the time, and Japanese manga titles were hard to find in comic book stores. I blitzed her with questions about otaku culture, and my favorite manga artists, and the films of Miyazaki, and superflat stuff by Takashi Murakami. She couldn't tell me anything -- she wasn't into any of it. I was trying out some phrases in Japanese I got from, you know, that world, and old Godzilla films, and she was trying out her high school English on me, and giggling with her friend. But she gave me her number and we started dating. And, you know, I think for her, at first, it was all about defying her family. She'd been brought up as this rich, spoiled girl in Kyoto -- very "bryko," very childlike, with the Mickey Mouse pencil case and the Hello, Kitty lunch-box -- you know, grown women who talk baby-talk and act like little girls. But she hated her father, her Oto-o San, he was this cold, controlling businessman, and she wanted to upset him as much as possible. Coming to America and dating a black guy seemed like the way. She expected me to be a bad-ass, I think -- she was amazed that I'm so soft-hearted. She projected all this stuff onto me, and it was pretty much that shallow for me too, at the start. Sakiko was cute, this pretty Japanese girl with wide eyes like in an animé drawing -- I just liked the way she talked. And then ... You get in a relationship with somebody ... No matter how superficial it is to begin with, you're gonna find out something more. You see layers, you start to see the whole person. I think it surprised me, 'cause I'd never gotten serious with anyone before. And it surprised her, too -- I wasn't just this adolescent rebellion. I was her man. And yeah, I was still the "Other," as Kay would say. I was her window into American culture, and she was my window into Japan, even though I've still never been there. By the time we got married, she actually hoped she could talk her folks into flying over. She was proud of us, as a couple, she wanted Oto-o San to meet me. On some level, which was so sad, she wanted his approval -- that's all she ever wanted. She tried to act tough. She smoked to upset him.

## CURTIS (CONT'D)

She used crude language to upset him. She got an irezumi, a tattoo, and messed up her high school exams, to upset him. But all she was doing was trying to get the man's attention. Anyhow, her folks wouldn't fly over. Even if we had gone there to have the ceremony, they wouldn't have attended. Once they couldn't talk her out of the marriage -- they just stopped talking. By phone or email. Her Oka-a San just did whatever Oto-o San said. So, we had a small wedding at my mom's church, and my Uncle Jeff gave Sakiko away. She and my family got along pretty good, she was learning English, I went to work for a landscaper and I was thinking about starting my own company ... And two years into the marriage she found the lump. And it happened quick. And she didn't have citizenship yet, and me taking out loans, and trying to pay for the medical treatments, and her so scared, contacting relatives in Japan, telling them what was going on, me trying to contact her people and begging them to help or at least speak with her, in my lousy fifty words of Japanese ... Me holding her through the night, with the cancer eating her up inside, wishing I could heal her, wishing I could save her, wishing I could push in Oto-o San's smug, Shibui face, 'cause I couldn't see a difference between him and the cancer, I felt like he had done this to her, he was what was eating her up inside! He was the tumors, growing, the cancer sneaking through the blood in her veins, attacking every system. And in the end, she's lying there in a hospital bed on a morphine drip, I couldn't even hold her hand properly with the IV line and all the stuff going into her ... my wife, the person who knew me best, who I knew best, and I was useless! I could nurse a tree or a garden back to life, I could raise an abandoned baby squirrel, and help it go back into the wild. But I couldn't protect her. I couldn't save her.

(beat)

It was like an open wound, for so many years. The lack of her. And my inadequacy, how I failed her. Some people turn on a dime, they start a new relationship. I could not go to clubs, I could not try to meet people on-line. Everyone else had abandoned Sakiko. I was gonna be true to her. And then Kay contacted me about the roses in her yard that would not grow. There was no way for them to grow, in the shadow of the house -- they were not getting their six hours a day of sun. I dug them up and moved them, I helped her with Diplodia Blight on her evergreen shrubs. She invited me in for coffee and talked a blue streak, trying to impress me, asking about African-American authors I had never read, some I never heard of. Talking semiotics and signs and signifiers. And I thought it was cute, and a little sad. It reminded me of me and Sakiko, that first night in the bar. Projecting weird shit on each other.

CURTIS (CONT'D)

So, once I had her yard in shape, I called her, and asked her out to dinner. And it's been ... It's been good. I don't feel like I've betrayed Sakiko, 'cause there are echoes of me and Sakiko all over our relationship. I mean, it's different, we're different people. But I think my first wife, wherever she is, must know that I'm still honoring her memory every day. And sometimes it feels like I'm still trying to save her. Kay has her health challenges, and she's got this pain and anger burning her up, just like Sakiko. I can't save her -- I can't save anybody. But I can soothe her. And it closes that wound in me to try to close some of hers. I can help her with the ache. I can make it better. And as far as I'm concerned, that's the basic dynamic of our marriage.

LIGHTS DOWN

END OF SCENE FOUR

SCENE FIVE

LIGHTS UP on GARY out in the backyard. There are occasional sounds of birdsong, and car motors and horns. HE slaps at mosquitoes, as KAY joins him.

KAY

Hey, Gary.

GARY

Hey. It's buggy out here. You want to go in for some bug spray?

KAY

No, we can probably wrap this up pretty quickly.

GARY

I was hoping -- to have a real talk with you. I mean, while you're in town ...

KAY

I'm happy to talk but I don't want half the money. Mom didn't leave it to me, she left it to you, you deserve it, you were there for her, so screw it. End of discussion.

GARY

There were years she shut me out and we didn't talk at all. It's entirely random that she allowed me back into her life at the end, her mind wasn't really in great shape those last few years, and as executor of her estate, I get to decide --

KAY

Gary, it's yours. It was hers and now it's yours.

GARY

As executor and as your brother I want you to have half. She built in catches, so it's tricky. But there is a straightforward, legal way to do it, if you'll work with me --

KAY

But I won't. I'm doing well, so is Curtis, we don't need your charity.

GARY

It's not charity, it's justice, and it's -- it's family, Kay. I would like to be family with you.

KAY

That's not something you should pay for.

GARY

I feel like it's one reason for the tension, and the space between us.

KAY

Those things were there long before Mom kicked off and I heard the details of her will. I've always been a lousy sister to you, and you never resented me for it properly, and it's ridiculous for you to offer me money that belongs to you, to try to make up for what I lack.

GARY

Well, then, what's the answer? We go back to not speaking, for years and years? We just count our losses and give up?

KAY

I agreed to stay here ... I contacted you when we were heading to town, and I said yes when you offered to put me up ... I wanted to try. I knew you wanted to be close, it's a sweet impulse, you're a nice guy, I thought I'd try to be a good sister. When I view things from a distance, I think it might be nice to have a family also ...

GARY

But when you view things up close?

KAY

I'm still not very good at it. And I think the whole Eytan situation makes things impossible.

GARY

Obviously, that's going to take time.

KAY

Time isn't going to do a damn thing to it. We're poison to each other. I'm glad you found someone you like, God bless, but aside from his toxic personality -- I guess it's creepy for me, and, somehow, incestuous to find you shackled up with this ghost from my past. This horrible adolescent phase that I went through like acne. I can't get past it. I'm guessing he feels the same way.

GARY

Your trip isn't going the way I'd hoped.

KAY

It's not going to get better. I mean, we're coming tonight, I said I would --

GARY

You don't have to --

KAY

I'm not just going because I'm your sister. Eytan may be right. I teach gender studies, you want to show me a different side of drag -- I'm willing to learn. And, again, I salute you as a lovely human being -- from a distance that I don't think I'm ever going to cross.

GARY

Well, it doesn't have to happen all at once, on one trip. Think about it. And think about the money.

KAY

Gary, I'm being as clear and consistent as I know how --

GARY

Don't be consistent, be flexible, keep an open mind about everything. I'm going to the bar now. Wish me luck?

KAY

I wish you luck.

GARY

It means a lot to me that you're coming.

KAY

I know you're going to be fabulous.

(HE almost moves to hug her, but it doesn't feel quite right.)

GARY

Thanks. I better go.

(HE EXITS.)

KAY

Oh, God. One more night.

(SHE rubs her arms. CURTIS enters, carrying a small bottle of Diet Coke.)

CURTIS

Hey. I got it. I guess Gary's heading to the bar?

KAY

Yeah.

CURTIS

(Handing her the soda)  
You cold?

KAY

No, it's just the bugs. I mean, I've got a little chill running through me, but it's psychosomatic.

CURTIS

You want to head back into the house?

KAY

I'd get more psychosomatic in the house. With emphasis on the psycho.

(sips the soda)

That's good. That does make me feel better. Thank you, baby.

CURTIS

My moms knew what she was doing.

KAY

Yeah.

CURTIS

So, what did you and Gary talk about?

KAY

He wants to give me half the money he inherited. I said no, we're doing okay. He wants a close, wonderful sister/brother relationship. I told him it sounds nice, but I don't think I can do it.

(beat)

I've been thinking about encounters I had with him, you know, when I was in high school and he wasn't even in junior high, yet. Encounters me and Eytan had with him. Mostly I ignored him, you know, I left him to Margarita. I wonder if he's still in touch with her ... Most of the interactions I had with him, before I left for college, were with Eytan. Gary would tag along, he'd want us to include him. And there was this one time -- we told him he could hang out with us, he could be in my room, if he acted out this scenario. Eytan and I were in this honors English class on Russian literature, they had courses like that at the Academy -- but the teacher, Mr. Phipps, this toadying little middle-aged man, was an asshole. He saw himself as this revolutionary nonconformist. But he ruined these great books for us, ruined Dostoevsky's *Notes From Underground*. And *The Devils*, that one especially. He taught it as if Dostoevsky approved of the anarchist young people in the book, you know? And Dostoevsky wrote it after he had a nervous breakdown and got religion. He was *satirizing* the characters, he was condemning them, and that never came up in class. There was one older character who thought he was such a revolutionary -- he thought the government was after him. And he lived out in the provinces, no one could care less about him.

KAY (CONT'D)

He wrote this opera once, he thought it was so bold, with all these people chasing death, because they wanted to die. And a mineral bursts into song! It was a parody, but Phipps didn't seem to get that, he took the character seriously. And all the young characters who prefigured the mindless violence of the coming Russian Revolution -- who were just empty nihilists -- Phipps taught the book as if Dostoevsky wanted the reader to admire them. And so, when we were talking about writing our Bonnie and Clyde rock opera, Eytan told Gary he had to play the role of Phipps, and we'd take the school hostage -- this was before there was so much violence in schools, you could joke about that stuff -- we would become "the devils" and go nihilistic on his ass and see how he liked it. We tied Gary to a chair in my room --

CURTIS

With what?

KAY

With -- I don't know. With, like, the terry-cloth belt to my bathrobe, probably.

CURTIS

Okay. It was starting to sound a little intense.

KAY

It actually *was* intense. We were trying to humiliate him. We were trying to scare the crap out of him, so he would quit bothering us. And once he was tied up, Eytan was up in his face, yelling at him, asking what it was like to be an English teacher who got paid every day to come in and ruin great literature for a room full of kids. He splashed a glass of water in Gary's face. He was pulling on his ear, he grabbed him by the hair and pulled his head back, so he'd look Eytan in the eye as he stood over him, shouting insults. And Gary ... my brother can be so passive, you know? So mild. He just -- absorbs this kind of stuff. It rolls off of him. I mean, he was probably scared. But he'd heard us talking about Phipps and imitating him -- and so he started using all these Phipps catch-phrases, and vocal mannerisms. He starts, like, generating dialogue with Eytan, for our play, which was supposedly what we were after. And you know, Eytan and I would try to do improv -- I'm no good. I can't do that. But something in the room shifted, it was like ... one moment Eytan and I were doing terrible things to my kid brother, and the next minute ... They were ... doing improv, while I stood on the sidelines and watched. We're, like, seventeen, Gary was, like twelve.

CURTIS

And so that's how they first connected.

KAY

No. Not really. I don't think so. It was the end of the term, Eytan's family took him back to Israel for the summer. Eytan and me maybe talked about how my brother had flipped the script on us when we were messing with him. But we never talked about that -- moment between them. That I *thought* had happened between them. And Eytan and I kept fighting senior year, we didn't spend time together. I don't think there was anymore contact between them ... Until the last few years. I'd forgotten about that thing with Gary playing Phipps -- until this trip. And I guess what bothers me is -- I couldn't do improv with Eytan. I couldn't really collaborate the way he wanted. I couldn't write lyrics. I tell myself I was damaged by my mother, and that's why I'm not creative. But maybe Eytan's right, maybe I'm just this dry, unimaginative, closed-off woman like my mother --

CURTIS

You're incredibly creative. You're a good writer.

KAY

I write *about* texts, I can't create them.

CURTIS

That's creative.

KAY

I *deconstruct* texts, I can't construct them.

CURTIS

Do not let him get to you.

KAY

Even when I'm analyzing and dissecting a text, I don't get it right. There were a thousand things wrong with that paper today. Not just the jargon that Eytan laughs at. I didn't talk about -- Zora implied to Godmother that Langston and Louise were involved, thinking Godmother would fire Louise, but instead Godmother also reacted like a jilted lover. She turned on Langston in a fury, and Zora didn't dare, in the midst of the Depression, to defend him. That's important, all of the gossip and background was important, maybe I *should* have spelled it out.

CURTIS

You gave them context, everybody got what you were saying.

KAY

And maybe my whole point about the link between their search for cultural identity and competing for Godmother as a parent figure -- it's forced, it's just a load of cerebral nonsense --

CURTIS

Sssshhh. You did good. I was proud of you.

KAY

Well, it's over, anyway. One more panel tomorrow I can practically sleepwalk my way through, and then we can get on the plane and get out of here.

CURTIS

It'll be good to go home.

KAY

Yeah.

(EYTAN JOINS THEM outside.)

EYTAN

Hey. You guys having second thoughts about going?

(CURTIS looks at KAY. SHE smiles and shakes her head to EYTAN.)

KAY

No, we're psyched. Whenever you say we should head out.

EYTAN

Is it okay if we go in your rental car? Gary took ours. It's less than two miles away.

CURTIS

Sounds good. Just give me directions.

LIGHTS DOWN

END OF SCENE FIVE

SCENE SIX

BEFORE LIGHTS COME UP, we hear a male voice:

MALE VOICE (O.S.)

And now ... Veronica's Hideaway is proud to present once again: The Queen of Corn Pone, the Princess of Grits, the love child of Dolly Parton, Loretta Lynn and a Carrie Underwood impersonator -- Miss Ovaria Strange!

(LIGHTS UP on GARY, in a dress, wig and makeup, standing at a mic on a stand, transformed into a more confident and theatrical persona. He/She now speaks to the audience as if they are patrons in the bar.)

GARY

Thank you, ladies and gentlemen. You know, you can be a girl who thinks she's seen it all -- and then, one day, you see the light of God. You think you've done it all -- and then He gets inside of you, and moves within you, and gets you reacting in ways you never dreamed you would. I know, because I once laughed at true believers. And then one day it happened to me -- and I am here to testify.

(MUSIC SWELLS -- canned or live. It's slow, bluesy country, with a touch of gospel. GARY sings:)

GARY (CONT'D)

It seemed I had a new man every day  
I hit my knees, but it was not to pray  
But then You filled my life with love  
That didn't come with sleaze  
Lord, You gave me a new reason  
To get down on my knees

I've known men in the bathroom of a bar  
Or in the bushes, right behind my car  
Now I may catch a glimpse of Grace  
Instead of STDs  
Lord, You gave me a new reason  
To get down on my knees

You're all I know and I won't stray again  
Now all I blow are new chances to sin

Yes, you're the One who really takes me there  
I yield to You now, as I kneel in prayer  
I'm going down to be raised up  
It's You I want to please  
Lord, You gave me a new reason  
To get down on my knees

GARY (CONT'D)

Yes, You gave me a new reason  
To get down on my knees

(As the song ends, GARY takes a bow.)

GARY (CONT'D)

Thank you. Thank you. For my next song, I'd like to channel, if I may, the late great Tammy Wynette. Tammy sang a lot of songs back in the seventies, when Marabel Morgan had a book out about *The Total Woman*. She told housewives how to make their marriage come alive! And Tammy sang songs about that, about how it was okay to enjoy sex, even for a good Christian woman, and it was okay, it was holy even, to try some kinky things, if it helped a woman keep her husband, if it meant she could stand by her man and avoid a D.I.V.O.R.C.E. But there's one kind of loving that Tammy never sang about -- until she spoke through me.

(MUSIC for a down-home country song begins, as GARY SINGS:)

GARY (CONT'D)

I'M NOT A WHORE, BUT I LET HIM USE THE BACK DOOR  
IF IT KEEPS A MARRIAGE STRONG, IT'S NOT A SIN  
NO, IT'S NO CHORE WHEN I LET HIM USE THE BACK DOOR  
IT'S JUST ANOTHER WAY TO LET LOVE IN

Well, I stand by my man  
Try to love him the best I can  
I try to swing the way he's swingin'  
And his good girl's gonna go bad  
If that's what makes him glad  
Whatever part of me where he's clingin'

And when he loves me late at night  
It's all wrong but it's all right

I'M NOT A WHORE, BUT I LET HIM USE THE BACK DOOR  
IF IT KEEPS A MARRIAGE STRONG, IT'S NOT A SIN  
I KNOW THE SCORE, SO I LET HIM USE THE BACK DOOR  
IT'S JUST ANOTHER WAY TO LET LOVE IN

I don't get sore, I just pour on K.Y. Jelly  
Some wives live their lives on their backs  
But I spend mine on my belly

I'M NOT A WHORE  
(Spoken)  
Everybody!

GARY (CONT'D)

(singing)

BUT I LET HIM USE THE BACK DOOR  
IF IT KEEPS A MARRIAGE STRONG, IT'S NOT A SIN  
THAT'S NOT WHAT IT'S FOR, BUT I LET HIM USE THE BACK DOOR  
IT'S JUST ANOTHER WAY TO LET LOVE IN  
IT'S JUST ANOTHER WAY TO LET LOVE IN

(The MUSIC ENDS, and GARY takes a bow.)

LIGHTS DOWN

END OF SCENE SIX

SCENE SEVEN

LIGHTS DO NOT COME UP on the living room, but it is partially illuminated by a hall light. GARY ENTERS, still in his performance outfit.

GARY

I've got the lights.

(HE hits a switch and the LIGHTS COME UP.  
EYTAN, KAY and CURTIS ENTER.)

GARY (CONT'D)

Hey. I won't be a minute. I'm gonna go change, and then I want to hear what you thought about each act, in detail.

(HE EXITS.)

EYTAN

And we can give you all the behind-the-scenes dirt.

CURTIS

If some of those women were guys ... I find that downright disturbing.

EYTAN

Why?

CURTIS

Because they were so damned beautiful.

EYTAN

Did you find that disturbing, Kay?

KAY

Not really.

EYTAN

No one there struck you as beautiful?

KAY

It's not my aesthetic.

CURTIS

Those two blondes who sang the duet. They're both guys?

EYTAN

One's a guy, one's in transition.

CURTIS

Damn.

EYTAN

We take no blame for the Valkyrie person.

CURTIS

Yeah, I didn't really get what he was doing.

EYTAN

It would be all right if she could sing. She thinks she's being intentionally funny -- but she's not quite in on the joke. Especially when she's had a few.

KAY

Yup, that was one drunken Valkyrie.

GARY (O.S.)

So, what did you think of our songs, Kay? Be honest.

KAY

Yours were definitely the best. The best original songs.

GARY (O.S.)

All perfect rhymes, did you notice? Eytan's a stickler for that.

EYTAN

Well. Some daring rhymes here and there. And lots of internal rhymes -- too many, in places.

KAY

They were well-crafted songs.

(GARY RE-ENTERS, now barefoot and without a wig, in jeans and a tee shirt, still cleaning makeup off his face.)

GARY

So, do you see what we're doing in a different way now?

KAY

I see that it gives you a lot of pleasure. I think you're both lucky -- to have something like this that you share.

EYTAN

She sounds awfully diplomatic.

KAY

It was fine, it was interesting, it was ... tuneful. It's not my thing, but that's okay.

EYTAN

But are we woman-hating monsters because we're involved in this?

KAY

I don't think Gary really hates anybody. He's anger-challenged. And you -- gotta be you.

GARY

And Curtis? What's your verdict?

CURTIS

You know, it was interesting, like Kay said. You had the best songs that weren't cover tunes, hands down. And I actually thought a lot of your stuff was very funny. I just --

GARY

What?

CURTIS

Every song in your set -- it seemed you had to take a swipe at Christians. In the song or in the patter, or both.

GARY

Were you brought up in the church?

CURTIS

The Baptist Church, yes.

EYTAN

Really. Well, you know, it's a funny thing, but if you're a committed, religious Baptist, you probably shouldn't go to gay bars with drag queen entertainers. You might hear and see some things you find offensive.

CURTIS

I'm not bothered by all that. I'm not religious. I told you -- just about my favorite author on Kay's bookshelf is James Baldwin. I'm saying -- people in my family -- my moms, her sisters, my gran -- they felt very seriously about the things you turned into punch-lines. You were making a joke out of good Christian women -- and I've known a few too many to laugh.

EYTAN

Well -- I tend to feel that we have a license to make fun of those who hate us and pass laws against us. Now more than ever.

CURTIS

The women in my family -- they were like what Kay said about Gary here. They didn't know how to hate anybody. They were as loving and as gentle as anybody could be, and that was part of their faith.

EYTAN

Oh, they "hated the sin, not the sinner"?

CURTIS

There were maybe things that puzzled them, things they knew they didn't understand -- but they wouldn't get up in anybody's face about sin or anything else. Only if somebody came after their own, after one of their kids -- then you saw how strong they were. That was the only time.

EYTAN

But given the way Baptists and most religious Christians behave in the larger American society, can you understand why I do not give a rat's ass if our songs offend them?

CURTIS

I just think -- it's one more thing you ought to be careful about. Like what we said last night. Maybe you need to be *more* careful with faith than with race or gender, because it's -- different.

EYTAN

Oh, not for me! I'm a Jew and nobody knows what the fuck that means. It's not a gender. It could be a race. It's supposed to be a religion except that I don't practice it and I don't believe in it, and lots of rabbis would spit on me for being who I am, so how am I a Jew? And still, of course I'm a Jew. So, go figure.

CURTIS

Well, I don't know about all that. But maybe you do need to think, if you wrote those songs about a group you're not part of -- really think hard before you denigrate a whole different set of people. People out in the heartland who like country music -- like what Kay was saying last night, about your Idaho song. Or black people of faith -- 'cause some of your songs have a touch of gospel to them, frankly. Maybe you should stay away from people you know nothing about. Write more about what you know.

EYTAN

Oh, but isn't that what Jews always do? We have no authenticity, we have no originality and passion and artistry, we can only appropriate and imitate, that's what Wagner wrote in his essay of 1850, because he was jealous of Meyerbeer's success. And maybe Wagner was overcompensating, he was afraid he might be the illegitimate son of a Jew. But people said it over and over again throughout the Twentieth Century -- the Jews take other people's music, they don't belong anywhere, they insert themselves in the narrative. All those minstrel shows you talk about, Kay.

KAY

Well, yes, Al Jolson --

EYTAN

Al Jolson was Jewish, I know, I've seen *The Jazz Singer*. And I don't mean the Neil Diamond version, though unfortunately I've seen that too. And it wasn't just Jolson -- it was George Jessel and Eddie Cantor and George Burns before he met Gracie. It was Sophie Tucker, for years, because they thought she was too fat and ugly to get on stage and sing unless she was corked up. And then, look at the Jews writing the songs for these shows -- Gershwin writing "Swanee." Irving Berlin writing "Blue Skies." Or Irving Berlin bringing ragtime into the mainstream, with "Alexander's Ragtime Band." They used to say he had a, quote unquote, little colored boy who lived in a cabinet who wrote his songs for him, 'cause how else could he be ragging his tunes? People saw Jews as existing somewhere between whites and blacks, they weren't seen as quite human, there were plenty of country clubs and resorts and colleges that didn't want them, but hey, they must have been out to exploit blacks anyhow, they must have been in control. And if they tried to be progressive, if they tried to write a show that championed the humanity of African-Americans, well too bad, it still was racist in the end. If Kerns and Hammerstein wrote *Showboat*, based on a novel by Edna Ferber, it was still an offense. Or if the Gershwins wrote *Porgy & Bess* -- we have to bring in lots of African-American writers to work on it and fix it, we have to apologize for it when we revive it. Just like it's an embarrassment how Jews founded the NAACP, and I'll bet some of those "Negrotarians" you were telling us about, Kay, were Jewish.

KAY

They were.

EYTAN

And as ridiculous as they may have been --  
 (struck by a thought)  
 Was Fannie Hurst Jewish?

KAY

She was. She was from a self-hating German Jewish family. Her mother always warned her not to marry a "Kike." And she used to hate it when she was growing up when her family met new people and her mother told them the Hursts were Jewish. So, the black daughter in *Imitation of Life* who's trying to pass -- she might be a metaphor for Hurst herself.

EYTAN

Well, there you go. But still, we should condemn Hurst for writing it, we should see her as a racist.

KAY

Well, Zora always felt that Fannie Hurst liked to be seen in public with her because she made Hurst seem white. But I wouldn't say --

EYTAN

No, no, whatever kind of progressive show Jews write, they're really creating racist caricatures. When Rodgers and Hammerstein tried to present Asians as people in *South Pacific*, or *The King and I*, or *Flower Drum Song*, it was laughable, it was racist!

CURTIS

Well. It was, a little.

GARY

Yeah, be fair, Eytan. I mean, that girl in *South Pacific* can't talk English, she doesn't even get to sing. She just gets to frame her face with her hands --

(demonstrates, beaming, his thumbs  
under his chin, his palms at the  
sides of his face)

And symbolize happy talk.

KAY

And reinforce the *Madame Butterfly* myth -- she gets to do that too.

GARY

I think they've banned *The King and I* in Thailand. And they had to bring in David Henry Hwang to spruce up *Flower Drum Song*.

EYTAN

Sure, apologize for it, ignore what they were trying to do, ignore how brave and rare it was when they did it. Or Leonard Bernstein, Stephen Sondheim, Arthur Lawrence and Jerome Robbins. Four Jewish gay boys. They were going to turn *Romeo and Juliet* into a Jewish-Catholic romance on the Lower East Side, and call it *East Side Story*. And then they decided to make it about Puerto Rican immigrants in Hell's Kitchen and call it *West Side Story*. And to this day you've got people blasting them for it, and saying they stereotype Latinos, as if the Sharks were any worse than the Jets, as if they weren't writing about the absurdity of bigotry, and identifying with the immigrants themselves, as if they weren't writing about themselves as persecuted little gay Jews when they wrote the song "Somewhere."

GARY

(sings, with exaggerated  
poignancy)

There's a place for --

EYTAN

Shut up, Gary. I'm just saying, why shouldn't the people who tried to give African-Americans and Asians and Latinos their first voice, their first complex characters and relationships in theater, ever, why shouldn't they be asked to apologize for it? What business did they have writing anything, outside of *Fiddler on the Roof*? When everything else they touched was a minstrel show -- because when Rodgers and Hammerstein wrote about farmers and cowboys in *Oklahoma!*, it was just as exotic for them as a king in Siam or when Hammerstein created *Carmen Jones* for actors like Belafonte and Dorothy Dandridge. So, shame on vaudeville and everything that came after it, shame on the Jews for inventing the Broadway musical, 'cause that's what they did -- them and a few gay men like Cole Porter. And of course, a lot of the Jews were gay -- 2% of 2% of the population. Larry Hart and Sondheim and Bernstein and Jerry Herman and Kander and Ebb -- shame on them for writing the "great American songbook" and so many shows that seem as American as apple pie. Just like Jews invented all the superheroes -- but really, it was all inauthentic, it was *all* appropriation.

KAY

It sounds like you have some issues here, Eytan.

EYTAN

Ya think?

KAY

Is there a point, or are you just venting at Curtis because you can't get through an evening without attacking a guest?

EYTAN

I'm saying that musical theater might seem well-crafted and commercial -- but it's also outsider art. It's a gay, Jewish form, it's freaks using other minority groups and other people standing in for themselves to tell their own stories. Because they're the only ones who *get* that there are human universals, because they have to. And when people go after those songwriters, or when they go after later Brill Building writers like Carole King and Gerry Goffin, and Ellie Greenwich and Phil Spector --

KAY

You do have a winning personality like Phil Spector.

EYTAN

And say they exploited the black singers who had hits with their songs -- when a lot of the writers got paid next to nothing also. When they go after Paul Simon for making *Graceland*, how dare he go to South Africa during apartheid without asking the ANC for permission, how dare he work with those great musicians and bring them new fans and invent world music?

CURTIS

He could have worked with the ANC and gotten the same album made.

EYTAN

Well, why doesn't he spend his life apologizing for that, then? I'm saying, people who have a problem with all of these songwriters for their "racism" and their acts of appropriation -- nine times out of ten, they're having a Wagner problem. They're having a problem with them for being Jews. They're saying it taints everything they create. How dare Amy Winehouse bring back that soul sound, how dare Jews rap?

CURTIS

Well -- except Drake. He's allowed.

EYTAN

Exactly, thank you. And how dare Jews touch on Christian themes, how dare Irving Berlin write "White Christmas," or Johnny Marks write "Rudolph the Red Nosed" --

CURTIS

Touch on Christian themes all you want, write about reindeer all you want, but don't attack my mother's faith and expect me to laugh, that's all I'm saying. It's like Kay said, you know? Maybe you should take this personally. Maybe I just have a problem with *you*, not the group you belong to.

EYTAN

Well, you don't need to have a problem with me anymore. I'm going to bed. Good night, all. Thanks so much for coming out and seeing the show.

(EYTAN EXITS.)

KAY

(calls after him, with sarcastic cheer)

Good night!

GARY

Yeah. You know, when he got his degree in music, this stuff is what he wrote about -- though he's never had his undergraduate senior essay published. He probably should ... It's a subject he's a little touchy about.

KAY

Is that right?

GARY

I'm sorry your trip is ending on this note ...

KAY

Well, it started on this note. You can't say we didn't give it a try, Gar.

GARY

Obviously, I was hoping it would turn out differently. But I'll admit defeat. What time is your flight tomorrow?

KAY

I'm on one more panel at the conference at eleven. We'll just take our stuff and go there. Our flight's late afternoon. Gary --

GARY

Yeah.

KAY

You were good. Tonight was -- the show was interesting.

CURTIS

Yeah, it was good. I was impressed.

KAY

You should feel good about it. I mean, I'm not sorry we went ...

GARY

Thanks. Get some sleep.

LIGHTS DOWN

END OF SCENE SEVEN

SCENE EIGHT

LIGHTS COME UP on EYTAN, standing alone, near the edge of the stage, addressing the audience:

EYTAN

I'm a Sabra, but I don't remember much about my early years in Israel. I remember a quality of sunlight on white buildings in Jerusalem. I remember a beautiful beach. A few images like photo stills of our old apartment. My mother's a Sabra, my father was from Brooklyn, so English came as easy as Hebrew. But in all the years I was growing up in New Jersey it was understood -- someday I'd make them proud and undo our family yerida, our shameful descent. I would make aliyah and move home! They put me through college here, but after that they used the promise of graduate school and future financial support as bait. And so I went back, for more than a summer. I did my two years of military service. And I hated it. I hated army life, hated the machismo, for all that they let gay soldiers come out there before they did here -- you keep your head down, for the most part, you just make it through. I hated some of what our military was doing, and I hated the people on the other side for *making* us do it, offering us no constructive way out. I hated those people on the other side for making the reactionary Likud politicians that I hated sound reasonable and just. It should have been a comfort to be among such large numbers of Jews all of a sudden ... It wasn't. I missed the suburban bratdom of the New Jersey town where I grew up, I missed Oberlin where Jews were not a big part of the population, I didn't need everyone around me to be as intense and rude and self-absorbed as I am. So, once I'd stuck it out and earned the right to spend my adulthood there -- I left and I knew I'd never go back. I made yerida, and followed my parents' example, and broke a mother's heart, but -- what can you do. I chose that moment to come out to them -- just to give the knife a twist. And I decided to make aliyah as a gay man, and move to San Francisco. And once again ... I was part of that in-gathering for all of two years. I hated the drizzle and chill. I got laid, I went to political events, I played music, but ... Some people just belong in Diaspora. Some groups, maybe. It brings out the best in them. When they get to go home -- they lose something. That's how I felt there. The gay community shouldn't be in charge, shouldn't feel too safe, shouldn't feel too comfortable. Jews also. It's like another self-hating Jew I knew at Oberlin used to say: we're like manure. It's not good to have tons in one place. But you sprinkle a little bit here and a little bit there -- and nice things grow. I feel it with Jews and I feel it with gays.

## EYTAN (CONT'D)

So, once again, I stepped down, like a bar-mitzvah boy descending from the bima, and my bar mitzvah was the last time I've been up on any damn bima in a shul. I embraced my yerida. I bummed around, I tried Hollywood and NYC. I visited in Nashville and felt a little too exotic there, even for my taste. And now I find myself in Kansas City, of all random places, as bland and solid and Midwestern as the food, where many of the men who feel a need to dress in drag have wives or girlfriends who crack the whip and run their lives outside the gay bars, plus kids they run home to, and take to Little League, and they couldn't imagine raising kids with another man, they could never leave the gyno-controlled universe behind, they go to church and skulk around and repent for every furtive act of transgression. Or they congratulate themselves for small, furtive acts of transgression, they can't make up their minds. It's not an edifying spectacle, but it doesn't affect me directly. I'm in a good relationship, which is, again, quite random, shackled up with the despised kid brother of my high school best friend. Meanwhile, my parents have retired to Tel Aviv, and we keep contact to a minimum. I write songs with Gary, silly songs, sillier than Tom Lehrer songs, for Gary to perform in drag in a gay bar -- and it's not a credit anyone wants to see on a resume, and we make even less money doing that than we do at our other jobs. I'm not comfortable here, I'm not happy, I'm not assimilated -- but I'm not angry or unhappy enough to leave. And so -- maybe that means I'm home.

LIGHTS DOWN

END OF SCENE EIGHT

SCENE NINE

LIGHTS ARE LOW on the guest bedroom; we can barely see the outlines of CURTIS and KAY in the DARK. HE lies in bed. SHE sits huddled near the foot of the bed. HE wakes up, becomes aware of where she is.

CURTIS

Kay?

KAY

Yeah.

CURTIS

(sits up)

You okay, baby?

KAY

Yeah, I'm ... restless. I thought I'd be less likely to wake you if I moved down here.

CURTIS

You feel sick? You need your insulin?

KAY

No, I'm fine.

CURTIS

You bugged about Eytan?

KAY

You handled him fine. I'm afraid my brother will think -- it's Eytan, that's why we couldn't re-connect. And maybe it's easiest to blame Eytan. It's a way out. Because I *should* want to re-connect with Gary more than I do. A guy gets up on-stage, he puts himself out there ...

CURTIS

(yawns)

Maybe someday they'll break up, and you and Gary will get close.

KAY

I don't see that happening. I don't think it would matter.

CURTIS

Well, maybe you should take the money if it makes him feel better.

KAY

I'm not touching the money. And I can't be a big sister who supports him and delights in him and turns to him with news. It's too late. Too late to start.

KAY (CONT'D)

Since he was little, I saw how Mom delighted in him. I saw the difference, I knew: that's what a son means. That's what it means for a parent to love a child. She'd look at me, and -- I look a lot like her, you know, but she hated that, hated getting older and having me replace her in some sense. She was most vicious on the days when I felt happy and looked good. There was something broken, something missing, in her touch -- if she touched me at all. In the way she looked at me, her tone of voice. A hardness, a coldness. And something in me has to make sure there's something missing from how I feel about Gary. It goes back to that basic, primal ache ...

(breaks down, crying)

My mother didn't love me!

CURTIS

(holds her)

Sssshhhh. Baby, stop.

KAY

My mother didn't love me! It's a void, it's a vacuum, you can't breathe in it, nothing you do matters, everything you touch turns to shit, what's the point of being alive, when something so basic --

CURTIS

Come back to bed, baby. It's gonna be all right.

KAY

I see him happy, I see him successful at something, and I think -- spoils to the victor, spoils to the male child, this is how she meant it to be --

CURTIS

Hush. You want me to sing to you?

KAY

(lying down next to him)

Sure. That would be nice.

CURTIS

(sings, with an indefinite,  
slightly R&B tune)

La la la, la, la, la la la. La la la, la, la, la la ...

END OF SCENE NINE

SCENE TEN

LIGHTS UP on the yard outside. EYTAN is dressed, stretching. There is birdsong. CURTIS COMES OUTSIDE.

CURTIS

Hey.

EYTAN

Hey.

CURTIS

We're gonna be taking off. I just thought we should find somebody to say goodbye to.

EYTAN

Gary isn't up yet. I stepped outside to let him sleep in.  
(beat)

Sorry I went off on you last night. I should take your word for it that it's me you have a problem with, not all Jews writing songs.

CURTIS

Well, there you go.

(beat)

So, you spend any time on this yard? I see you got a garden.

EYTAN

Well, the people upstairs never come out here, so it's basically ours. The landlord sends somebody to mow the lawn. I tried a garden, but I can't get the tomato plants to give us a single goddamned tomato.

(CURTIS gets down low, squints at the space where the garden is.)

CURTIS

Yeah, I was noticing that. I think your problem is aphids. Get the garden store to sell you some ladybugs, it should clear it up.

EYTAN

Ladybugs? What the hell.

(KAY COMES OUT.)

KAY

Hey, Curtis.

CURTIS

Your brother's still in bed.

KAY

Well, then. Will you thank him, for us, for the place to stay?

EYTAN

Sure thing.

KAY

And thank you also ...

EYTAN

For the hospitality?

KAY

As warm as ever.

(GARY JOINS THEM.)

GARY

So, this is where the action is?

EYTAN

Not a whole lot of action at this hour.

GARY

(hopeful)

But you guys were hanging out?

KAY

We were just saying goodbye.

GARY

You up for some breakfast? I can do French toast.

KAY

That sounds great, but we'll just grab something at the hotel.

GARY

Oh. Okay. Well, Kay, I was going to ask you -- would you send me a copy of that book of yours? On Fannie Hurst?

KAY

Gary, you don't want to read that book.

EYTAN

You're right, he doesn't.

GARY

Send it anyway. And please, think about what I said.

KAY

Gary --

GARY

Just think about it!

KAY

I just wanted to say: you're a good brother. I'm a lousy sister --

GARY

No, don't start with --

KAY

But a lot of families -- they're what you build, not what you get. You guys have built something, we're building something ... Let's be happy for each other, and give up.

EYTAN

That's very wise, Kay. That's beautiful.

GARY

I'll call you.

KAY

(sighs)  
Okay.

GARY

Curtis, it was good seeing you.

CURTIS

Be good.

KAY

Eytan ...

EYTAN

So long!

(KAY and CURTIS LEAVE.)

EYTAN (CONT'D)

So, what about me? Don't I get any French toast?

GARY

I don't know.

EYTAN

Don't be blue. I had a good idea for a song this morning. Remember how I said your sister wanted to bring it, she wanted to throw down?

GARY

Eytan, don't. This isn't the time.

EYTAN

All I'm saying is: "throw down" rhymes with hoedown. And "Ho Down" is an awesome hook. We spell it as two words, H-O and down.

GARY

I ... Not now.

EYTAN

It's a major cat fight in a honky-tonk bar. Girls yanking hair and screaming, and beer bottles flying, and the crowd cheering every time there's another ho down --

GARY

Enough.

EYTAN

It's not my fault, Gary, that it didn't work. It's not just because I deliberately sabotaged it. I mean, it was an organic thing. A chemical reaction.

GARY

Yeah.

EYTAN

It's good they're happy and doing what they do. Let's salute them from across the huge canyon or chasm between us -- and get on with our lives.

GARY

Yeah.

(long beat)

"Ho Down," huh?

EYTAN

"Ho Down."

LIGHTS DOWN

END OF PLAY