

MESSALINA

a play of Temperance

by

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Dramatis Personæ

GAVIN a man in his 30's
SARAH a woman in her 30's
FABRIZIA a woman in her 20's
BORIS a man in his late 30's
IRENE a woman in her 30's
JACK a man of 30

The action of the play is intended to be precise, deliberate, extreme and emblematic.

Every effort should be made to accurately track the consumption of alcohol within the play, as far as it might influence the actions and their character. At the same time, such consumption should never be seen as in any kind of explanation for or answer to whatever questions that might arise.

It is vastly preferable that *Messalina* be played with a curtain. When the curtain is drawn, the actors can be visible in dim light, or simply in blackness until the lights are raised full, at the director's discretion.

Author's Preface

Messalina is a play about a dinner party, and as such falls into a long tradition of plays with a general claim to represent the literal manner in which we live, and which, further, suggest that this representation provides insight in such a way that actually experiencing normal life doesn't. Which is all to say that it falls under the blurred and bleary category of "realism". This kind of play carries a built-in kind of contradiction: it's an "accurate" presentation of life (whose source of authority is its accuracy) that also happens to be a constructed, leveraged, artficed document. Because the conventions of realistic dramatic narrative tend to be transparent (as they assert that ways we are accustomed to think of ourselves are also "natural"), we don't really think about this question a whole lot when we see such a play. These plays seem to have adopted a default-style of theatricality, which – wrongly – often appears to be no real style at all. For example, *Messalina* is a play that, over one continuous act, conflates a playing time of perhaps two hours with the course of an entire drunken evening, from before the guests arrive to the host and hostess turning out the lights to sleep. So, already, something's being finessed: two hours is being presented as at least four hours, though there aren't any blackouts or intervals to account for the missing time – it just slips in between the cracks.

Further, style seeming to be a non-issue, the simple questions – what the play is about? what happens? – unfortunately move us farther away from simple appraisal. This is because asking these questions of a realistic play is the same as asking them of our lives. What kind of incident merits significance? Or is it merely a case of a writer's ability to convey the vitality of the given slice of life set before the audience? A man dies of cancer, his family in turmoil around him. A women loses her grip on sanity, unable to bear the weight of a sorrowful past. An affable group of acquaintances have a rambling conversation and get hammered while watching the news. How do we measure the value of these stories, aside from truthfulness, aside from sensationalism? One assumption is that such a narrative is successful almost to the degree that something else is asserted to be happening at the same time. It's a story of coal miners, but it's really about class struggle. It's a story of two sisters, but really it's about politics and repression. A homeless woman gropes toward stability, but it's really a religious allegory of redemption. Again, this begs the question of how we find meaning in the intimate experience of our own lives, and not by the grace of some external knowledge, interpretive net, or symbolic rebus puzzle.

Like most plays, *Messalina* is about all kinds of things, but only because our time is one of complexity. The action of the play explicitly raises issues – within the context of contemporary America, because that's where the people are, and they're very interested in talking about themselves – about ancient Rome and present-day America, about republic and empire, and, perhaps most thoroughly, about what more constitutes decadence, indulgence or passivity. But an honest play isn't about these things at the expense of a literal story – unless we believe that the literal stories of our lives are unable to contain these questions. And when we try to describe "what happens" in a play like this, we often run into another block – one which undermines much of what we think we do when we write about real life: we focus on the serious, sensational incident. This is because we look for the serious incident to justify the play, to somehow authorize its worth – the play is more important because someone dies, or a marriage is broken up, or at the very least, someone has a blow-out fight.

The fact is, we look for these elements like we look for a coat rack. We use them to hang up our suspended worries and then sit back with the knowledge that we know more securely what the play is going to tell us: we're following sign posts, and waiting for a

destination. The problem with this is that it allows us, just like the superstructure of allegory or interpretation, to experience the play with only part of our attention. Usually this is the part of us that finds humor or surprise, or low-level recognition. It's often the part of us that conveys a great deal of enjoyment, but equally often then finds its experience trumped by some higher analysis when we make sense of, when we *evaluate*, the experience of the play as a whole.

Narrative is only sequence and then, perforce, some interpretation of that sequence. A realistic play is, by definition, about how we find meaning within the intimate details of our lives – within the *accrual* of these details, that this accrual is a narrative of enactment, of *demonstration*. In the case of *Messalina*, it's quite easy to say that “nothing” happens: the ostensible plot comes to no resolution and several potentially troubling incidents are equally unresolved. And yet, moment to moment, no end of things happen in the play: people eat, drink, disagree, make out, spill things, laugh, despair – frankly, it's almost embarrassing how so much gets crammed into such a small span of time. But from some perspectives these events are invisible, because it's so easy to move past them with one eye on what supposedly is *really* going on in the play. In *Messalina*, they are what's really going on – the experience of the play, moment by moment, is the substance of the play. Without focusing on this rolling snowball of domestic incident, the thematic issues that inhabit the play cannot be fully inhabited in any persuasive way – that is, they do not arise from the things that we do, the choices we make, or inform us about the world we construct on a daily basis.

A low, carpeted room, ringed with windows, covered with elegant, pale curtains.

In the center of the room is a large, low bed, hastily made. To either side of the bed is an elegant, low, side table, covered with books and magazines. Downstage is a low cabinet with a television, VCR, etc. The floor is littered with many, discreet piles of books, and others of clothing, papers, videotapes, cds.

The walls are bare. In the center of the ceiling is an ornate light fixture, without any light bulbs. The room is lit by the television, and several small lamps. The lamps are dim enough that flickering from changing channels registers in the room.

The single entrance is an empty doorframe, the hinges still visible.

GAVIN sits on the bed, watching the muted television, a remote control in one hand, a cellular telephone in the other. Next to him, on the floor, on a book, is a glass of red wine and an open bottle. He is barefoot, in a dark shirt and linen pants.

GAVIN: I'm still working it out, trying to reconcile – it's complicated. Complicated to *work* on, not complicated to understand. I mean, it's staring us in the face. So I think it's worthwhile. Uh huh. Of course it's *entertaining*. Didn't you –

He listens for a moment, takes a sip of wine, watches the screen.

But there is also this other thing. Uh huh. Entertaining. I was reading, about enlightenment. Imagine. You've heard of *mantras*, right? People use them to meditate, but what they are – a mantra is a kind of perfect sound, it's sort of like an aural symbol, which is why people chant them – a mantra functions like a sound *key*, opening a door to higher consciousness. Okay, and there are also things called *yantras*, sort of the same thing only they're images, like pictograms, and again, people meditate with them, holding this perfect image in their mind's eye –

He listens for a moment, takes a sip of wine, watches the screen.

According to thousands of years of spiritual tradition. In India. I'm asking if you understand it, Boris, not if you believe it – I'm not finished – because what *are* those? They're two senses, sound and vision, and what if instead of those you had something else, like ... taste.

He stops speaking for a moment, watching the screen.

Nothing, sorry. The news. Anyway. Exactly. Taste. It's funnier. So, this is the story I think we can pitch: our main character is a woman whose – for some reason, junior year abroad in Tibet – whose vaginal secretions are the equivalent of a mantra or a yantra, only for taste, and upon tasting them, a person explodes into a higher consciousness so developed that they transcend the need for physical pleasure. It's like a secret superhero talent – and –

He listens for a moment, takes a sip of wine, watches the screen.

Exactly. As soon as someone starts to go down on her they have this big explosion and never want to finish the job. She's like a sexually frustrated Jesus, or Buddha – or something, you get the picture – leading the masses to nirvana, but never, you know, getting – right, her own ride to the airport. It's a metaphysical sex farce. No, I know. It's a barebones idea – it can go anywhere –

He listens for a moment, takes a sip of wine, watches the screen.

Receiving oral sex is apparently very popular among women. (*Laughs.*) I know we don't see

too much of it in the media – it's a hidden demographic. I don't have a title. *Blissed Off? Down with the Lord? Bodhislotva?* I don't want to be *vulgar* right out of the box, right ...

He listens for a moment, takes a sip of wine, watches the screen.

But seriously, the main thing is the other one. No, I just need to explain it. It doesn't matter if you think it's been done before, or if it *has* been done before, because *we're* in a different place. And we're Americans – that changes everything. Of course I'll let you talk to her. No, she's not here yet. I don't know. Just a minute.

GAVIN *turns to the doorway, where SARAH hovers. He puts his other hand over the phone.*

What?

Slight pause.

Are you okay? What's wrong?

Slight pause. GAVIN speaks into the phone.

I'll call you back. Where are you? If you're not here already I'll call you back.

GAVIN *hangs up, tosses the phone onto the bed. He sits on the bed and picks up his glass of wine. He takes a sip and pats the bed next to him. SARAH remains in the doorway.*

SARAH: I'm trying to clean.

Slight pause.

I can't. It still smells. The chemicals to get rid of the smell. It smells like *them*.

GAVIN: Come in here.

SARAH: You're working. I'm trying to –

GAVIN: I'm just keeping out of your way. I can come help.

SARAH: No, I don't want that.

Slight pause.

Really, it's just – the air, I'm just ... overwhelmed ... I'm just overwhelmed by what I'm breathing, what I know we're all breathing.

Slight pause.

I know I should be able to just do this.

GAVIN *stands, drains his glass of wine, reaches for the phone, puts it in his pocket.*

GAVIN: Okay –

He stops mid-sentence, his eye caught by the television. He glances to SARAH, who's watching as well. He turns back to the screen.

Wow.

SARAH stares at the television, then abruptly steps back out of the doorway, disappearing from view. GAVIN cocks his head, looking after her for a moment.

GAVIN turns back to the screen. After a moment, as he watches, he digs the phone from his pocket and hits the re-dial button.

Hi. Me. No, nothing. Anyway. The Roman thing. No, I like it. No, I don't have a *title*.

He pours more wine, drinks.

Look, no – it *is* sensational – the historical facts – just what these people *did* – you couldn't get it on late-night cable porn! Well, you probably could *now* –

He listens, drinks more wine, nods.

No, that's exactly what I'm saying. It's like, "what if they had camcorders in the 1st Century" – no, I *know* that sounds stupid, but what – what I'm getting at is intimacy, when all this really intense stuff could be happening. Because you can't film "now" – you only recognize it later – like x-rays will find black lumps in our lungs from all the shit we've breathed in. But history can get around that – no, not a documentary – have you even read what I sent you? Jesus Christ, Boris – what I'm saying is you would love it. Because, okay, here – Seutonius describes the emperor Tiberius as having "very strong hands", but the *way* he describes it is to say "he could push his finger through an apple, or an *infant's skull* –"

He listens, drinks more wine, nods.

Right! And you don't even need Tiberius, you've got Caligula, Claudius, Messalina, Nero – no, no, it could be small, that's the whole point, it's not about spectacle, it's about socio-political context and sensational corrode-the-videotape emotion –

GAVIN looks up. SARAH is again standing in the doorway.

(Into phone.) I'll call you back. Or just get here. Okay.

GAVIN hangs up. Slight pause. GAVIN tosses the phone onto the bed.

Boris didn't even read what I sent him. Jesus Christ.

Slight pause.

Do you want to sit down for a minute?

SARAH: I will.

She doesn't move. Slight pause. Abruptly GAVIN walks past her through the door. She turns, watching him in the other room.

You don't – I don't want you to –

GAVIN: *(Off.)* SIT DOWN AND DRINK SOME WINE, SARAH.

Slight pause. SARAH stands. After a moment, her gaze is caught by the television. Still watching, she sits on the bed. After a moment, she sees the bottle of wine. She picks it up and, still watching the screen, drinks deeply, several gulping swallows.

SARAH *puts the bottle back where it was, wipes her mouth with her hand, breathing. She wipes her hand on the bed. She covers her eyes, each with the palm of one hand. She sighs. GAVIN reappears in the doorway, watches her.*

You're not drinking.

SARAH *lowers her hands, smiles, gestures at the room.*

SARAH: There's no glass.

GAVIN: I can get you a glass.

SARAH: I'm fine.

Slight pause.

GAVIN: Because they're here.

SARAH: Then let them in. I can let them in.

GAVIN: You don't know them.

Slight pause. GAVIN's phone rings, on the bed. He lets it ring. SARAH picks it up and tosses it to him. He answers it.

(Into phone.) Yeah. I can't buzz you in. I have to come down.

GAVIN *hangs up the phone, pockets it. Slight pause.*

SARAH: Go. Go let them in. Please. I know – I just don't know what I'm doing. What anyone's doing. It all seems like a waste of time.

GAVIN: It's not a waste –

SARAH: *Bodhislotva* isn't a waste of time?

Slight pause.

We have shoes, wine, telephones – breath – 24 hour news and all that we're *witnessing* – I've got 50 pounds of stone on my chest. I can barely talk.

Slight pause.

Who are you? Who are these people?

GAVIN: Friends. They're friends. They're waiting in the street.

SARAH: Then go.

Slight pause.

You need to let them in.

GAVIN *goes. SARAH sits. She takes another slug of wine. She puts the bottle back on the floor. SARAH finds the remote control and changes channels, repeatedly. Finally she stops, throws the remote back where she found it, watches.*

BORIS *appears in the doorway, with two wine glasses, takes in the screen.*

BORIS: Jesus. Gavin said there was an attack.

SARAH: I guess so.

BORIS: Where?

SARAH: It all looks like the same desert.

BORIS: O. I thought it was *here*.

SARAH: Uh uh.

Slight pause. They watch for a moment.

BORIS: Gavin also said you need a glass. I know I do. Getting here was a fucking nightmare.

SARAH: Why?

BORIS: I get distracted so easily. Look at me – I'm already watching TV and talking to you – I've totally abandoned Irene.

SARAH: Who's Irene?

BORIS: She's a doctor.

SARAH: Do we need a doctor?

BORIS: I think Western medicine is fucked. So does Irene – that's what brought us together. She has this attitude. *Sardonic*. That's such a good word, and no one ever uses it in conversation. I'm just interested in having a good day.

Slight pause.

SARAH: I'm Sarah.

BORIS: I guessed that. Boris.

SARAH: I guessed that too.

BORIS: Gavin wants to sell me some ideas so I can sell them to someone else who'll try to sell them to *everyone you know*.

SARAH: I don't know too many people.

BORIS: That's so sweet. I'm also counting on food and wine. And pulchritude ... though I guess she isn't here yet ...

BORIS finds the bottle and pours them each a glass of wine. SARAH drinks her entire glass. BORIS laughs and refills her glass. IRENE appears in the doorway, holding a wine glass. She wears a skirt and blouse. BORIS sees her.

BORIS: There you are! Where's Gavin?

IRENE: Getting the door.

SARAH: The buzzer's broken. You have to go down.

BORIS: Irene, Sarah. Sarah, Irene.

IRENE: Hi.

They smile at each other. Slight pause. BORIS leaps up, fills IRENE's glass and tops off his own, finishing the bottle.

BORIS: There you go.

BORIS kisses IRENE passionately, his tongue working at length in her mouth. IRENE is taken by surprise, but doesn't resist. BORIS spins away, indicates the empty bottle.

State of emergency ... civic duties call ...

He leaves. Slight pause. IRENE, still at the door, looks around the room.

IRENE: You have a lot of books.

SARAH: Boris says you're disillusioned about Western medicine.

IRENE: Really?

SARAH: That's what he says.

IRENE: Well, it's actually a pretty complicated, and as much social – as it is, you know, scientific. I've been very tense – and questioning – I guess who hasn't?

SARAH drains her glass and sets it down on a stack of books. Slight pause. IRENE sits on the bed, then drains her own glass, smiles quickly.

I met Boris yesterday. At the airport.

SARAH: Huh.

IRENE: I was meeting a flight. A shipment of drugs. Experimental drugs. From Europe. Vaccines. The work I do is research. We split a cab. We met in the taxi line. My van broke down. The airport was a *mess*. It took me *all day*. He just flew in from Los Angeles. I'm not from here. I don't really know anyone. That's not true. I know a great many people – from my work, from my daily life – but he's very charming. So far. It's always so far, but so far he does seem very charming. Have you known him long?

SARAH: About four minutes.

IRENE: O. That's funny.

SARAH: He seems charming to me too. Sorta rakish.

IRENE: He's a good kisser.

Slight pause.

So, you and Gavin –

SARAH: What are the vaccines for?

IRENE: Beg pardon?

SARAH: The vaccines. What diseases.

IRENE: Rabies.

SARAH: Rabies?

IRENE: We make a lot of foamy-mouth jokes around the lab.

Slight pause.

So, you and Gavin – Boris said you were married.

SARAH: Did he?

IRENE: I thought so.

Slight pause.

SARAH: It's – actually, huh – I'm very difficult. I'm very difficult for myself. God knows. Do you smell anything?

IRENE: Like what?

SARAH: Chemicals. The clean-up chemicals, to break-up all the oil in the smoke –

GAVIN re-enters with an open bottle of wine. He refills their glasses as they speak.

GAVIN: This looks cozy. What are you two talking about?

SARAH: Where's Boris?

GAVIN: He's trying to mix drinks. Fabrizia and Jack –

SARAH: Who's Jack?

GAVIN: Fabrizia's friend.

IRENE: Who's Fabrizia?

GAVIN: She's a business acquaintance of Boris. And she and Jack are keen to drink an entire bottle of something very green between them. Boris has taken it upon himself to invent a green-based blender-made triumph.

SARAH: I will stick to wine.

SARAH takes a big swig of wine. She lies back on the bed, facing the ceiling. IRENE smiles at her, turns to GAVIN.

IRENE: I'm developing vaccines against mutated strains of rabies.

GAVIN: Really?

IRENE: And I feel like I'm just about drunk already.

SARAH: Lie down. It helps.

IRENE *lies back on the bed next to SARAH. IRENE giggles.*

IRENE: Everything's moving so fast. Don't you feel that way? I feel my whole life is, like, locked in concrete, but at the same time things are going 100 miles per hour.

SARAH: Uh huh.

IRENE: *(To GAVIN.)* Is this your bed? It's very soft.

GAVIN: That's the general idea.

IRENE: So what's the thing with Fabrizia? Is she Italian?

GAVIN: At some point. At this point she is of the world.

IRENE: What does that mean?

GAVIN: She's very wealthy.

IRENE: *(Laughs.)* Have I heard of her?

GAVIN: *(Laughs.)* I don't know.

GAVIN pours more wine for himself, and for IRENE as she offers her glass. His gaze is caught by the screen and he watches for a moment.

So what's the story on this rabies?

SARAH: Why don't you turn that off? There are human beings here.

GAVIN: I'm waiting for the weather.

IRENE: Let me guess – unseasonably hot, or unseasonably cold – or unseasonably flooding!

GAVIN looks down at the two women.

GAVIN: The food is in the other room.

IRENE: *(Darkly.)* So is the green blender

SARAH: What food?

GAVIN: I got food.

SARAH: When?

GAVIN: This morning.

SARAH: Where?

GAVIN: I went out.

SARAH: Really?

IRENE: *(Laughs.)* Weren't we coming over for dinner?

SARAH: What did you get?

GAVIN: Why don't you come into the other room and see?

IRENE: I'm just trying to guess what that green booze is – Crème de Menthe?

GAVIN: Apparently it's from the South American rain forests.

IRENE: Is anyone actually from South America? I'm unconvinced.

IRENE lurches up, looks around her.

You have a lot of books.

GAVIN: We like to read. We're vicarious that way.

IRENE: They're all on the floor. You know, I had a couple of drinks before I got here. In the cab, it was a very long ride. Boris has a flask. Big mistake. I don't often drink much at all.

GAVIN: Are you okay?

IRENE: O sure, sure, please – it's not – I'm just – I'm just *talking* – which I also never do – and to strangers – which I never – I pretty much just *work* –

SARAH: The books are in piles so we can watch TV and eat off them.

Slight pause.

IRENE: That's charming! I'm going to get something to eat myself ... gotta have something to get rid of later ...

IRENE lurches to her feet, holding on to her empty glass, and exits. Slight pause.

SARAH: I'll be out in a minute.

GAVIN: I know.

SARAH: Irene seems very nice.

GAVIN: Really?

SARAH: It's my opinion so far.

Slight pause.

GAVIN: You can stay here. I just need to talk to Boris, and to try and make sure that after he talks to me he talks to Fabrizia, and then I need to talk to Fabrizia to make sure that Boris didn't say anything to piss her off.

SARAH: Isn't talking to people like her what he does for money?

GAVIN: In theory.

Slight pause.

SARAH: I'm fine. I had a little wine. It helped. I was just tense.

GAVIN: That's not a crime.

SARAH: Depends on what you're tense about, doesn't it?

Slight pause. GAVIN bends over to a pile, picks up a book, holds it.

GAVIN: When the emperor Claudius was young, he was the family geek. He was ugly, he stuttered, he walked funny, he was a bookworm, he was shy – anyway, when he was a young simpleton, Claudius was taken for the first time to see the games, the gladiatorial games, and of course he sat, as a family member, in the imperial box, with his grandfather Augustus, with a hundred thousand eyes upon him. And at his first sight of blood he got violently sick and fainted dead away. Can you imagine? It was a scandal. In our eyes this makes him sympathetic. And my point is that 50 years later, by the time he was emperor, he was commissioning huge gladiatorial spectacles, hundreds of men at a time, each a more complicated killing machine than the last. He couldn't get enough of it.

SARAH: Gavin –

GAVIN: So it's okay ... not to get used to things ... and to be tense.

Slight pause. GAVIN drops the book back onto the pile, exits. SARAH scoots to the edge of the bed, as if to follow, stops. She looks around the floor for her wine glass, finds it, takes a sip. She looks for the remote, finds it, looks at the screen for a moment. She tosses the remote back behind her on the bed. SARAH leans forward and picks up the book GAVIN was holding, from atop the pile of books.

At the door, JACK, followed by BORIS, both holding large glasses of a frothy green beverage. JACK wears expensive casual clothing, sandals. He speaks with an unplaceable European accent.

JACK: Are you watching the news? I heard there was something new.

BORIS: Jack, Sarah. Sarah, Jack.

JACK: You are Mrs. Gavin?

SARAH smiles, indicates the screen.

SARAH: I'm Sarah. Help yourself. I was just going to get something to eat.

JACK climbs past her on the bed, picks up the remote, sits next to SARAH.

JACK: *(Referring to the screen.)* They are just getting pounded.

BORIS: Where is that?

JACK: I don't know. You're the ones pounding them.

JACK is working the remote without success.

BORIS: Jack's just back from South America. He says the whole place smells like sewage.

JACK: It does.

SARAH: The sound doesn't work.

JACK continues to work the remote.

JACK: How can you *live* like this? You're out of touch.

SARAH: (*Smiles.*) We're not, we live *here* –

BORIS: You could get sub-titles for the deaf, like they have in bars – bars being mainly full of deaf alcoholics.

SARAH: This one was here. I'm used to it. It's less intrusive.

JACK: You get this place furnished? You still need a bookcase –

SARAH: What ever are you drinking?

JACK: (*To BORIS.*) What did you call it – a whipped – (*To SARAH.*) it's from Brazil –

BORIS: A “frozen extinction.”

JACK laughs, nods. Slight pause.

Because species in Brazil are disappearing by the second –

JACK: And it's very bad for brain cells –

SARAH: Yeah, I get it –

BORIS: Yes, but you have to explain bad jokes, just to prove that you know they aren't funny either – you're just doing your part for the war effort.

SARAH: For which side?

JACK: I thought it was funny.

BORIS: Now I'm getting charity. I'm not proud. I just want a Campari on the lanai. And a lanai.

He drinks, grimaces. JACK laughs.

Like salt in a sucking chest wound, but it's growing on me.

He drinks again, grimaces, smiles.

Jack just got back from Brazil. Well not just back – just back by way of Rome and Morocco.

JACK: (*To SARAH.*) Fabrizia was working at Cinecittá.

BORIS: Fabrizia is an actress. Penetrating drama? Penetrating comedy? Penetrating children's film? Be big in Amsterdam –

JACK: It was a costume drama, with gladiators –

BORIS: Roman?

SARAH: As opposed to Canadian.

BORIS: (*Laughs.*) “We who are *aboot* to die salute you.”

JACK: It was science fiction – silver bodypaint and high heeled boots, very *Barbarella*, for Italian TV. (To SARAH.) In Brazil there is a great deal of pollution. I had never been there. Everyone says the beaches are great, but the air – it stinks, you know?

SARAH: Well, the air here –

JACK: Everywhere is bad. That's the way it is.

Slight pause. JACK studies SARAH.

That's a nice dress.

SARAH: Is it?

JACK: It looks good. The weave.

BORIS: Jack was just in Morocco. He's an expert on weave.

JACK: Morocco is great. A lot of people get freaked out, but as Islamic countries go, it's pretty cool. We went into the mountains. Into the desert. It's amazing.

BORIS: Did you smoke a lot of hash?

JACK: (Laughs.) No.

BORIS: Isn't that what non-Moroccans do in Morocco? I thought it was required.

JACK: (Laughs.) I don't need drugs.

BORIS: Don't we all? Not need them?

BORIS pointedly drinks, slurping. SARAH laughs.

SARAH: What were you doing in Morocco?

JACK: Just seeing it.

SARAH: Is that what you're doing here?

BORIS: Where is Fabrizio, anyway? I haven't properly emphasized the flattering nature of her dress, what with her so shy and in need of encouragement.

SARAH: Maybe she doesn't want to come into the bedroom?

BORIS: Hasn't stopped her before ...

*BORIS turns to look out the door. Something catches his eye and he abruptly exits.
Slight pause. SARAH begins to scoot herself off the bed, toward the door.*

JACK: Can I ask you something?

SARAH: What?

JACK: What are you doing here?

Slight pause.

SARAH: Well, I'm sort of – I wasn't feeling too great earlier – I know I should act like the hostess –

JACK: No no, here. This city. This country. Your marriage.

Slight pause.

SARAH: Why?

JACK: I'm curious. I'm not from here.

SARAH: I was here already. Not in this apartment. It seems like almost nobody's in their same apartment – I know statistically the number of people who've been displaced isn't really – and then the number of people who want to come back, who are able to come back –

JACK: What about the marriage?

SARAH: What?

JACK: It must be hard for things to hold together.

Slight pause.

SARAH: You're pretty sure of yourself.

JACK: I'm usually right.

SARAH: Drink your extinction.

SARAH gets up and exits. JACK watches her, drinks. He places his glass onto a stack of books and stands. He walks over to the television cabinet and kneels. Quickly and methodically, he searches through the various shelves, careful to replace what he moves, apparently finding nothing. He stands again, walks back near the door, glancing out. He quickly steps past the doorway, to the side of the bed, and kneels again, looking under the bed. He reaches an arm underneath, gropes, and comes out with several more books, a couple of pens, a magazine. He tosses them all back under the bed. He sorts through the pile on the end table, again finding nothing.

JACK stands and quickly peeks behind several of the curtains, steps back.

JACK sighs with annoyance and sits on the bed. He turns his head and finds his abandoned drink, and stretches across the bed toward the glass. He's just able to grab it, at the limit of his reach, and pulls it to him, drinking, as he lays across the bed. He looks up to see FABRIZIA, smiling at him from the doorway. She wears a wisp of a dress and a fair amount of jewelry. She holds a glass of the green drink in one hand, and her shoes in the other. She drops the shoes on the floor.

FABRIZIA: What are you doing in here?

JACK smiles. FABRIZIA walks to the bed, then onto it, stepping so she has a foot on either side of JACK's waist. He leans back, drinks.

JACK: Who wants to know?

FABRIZIA: Anything fun?

JACK: I don't think there's anything fun to find.

FABRIZIA *sits down over his pelvis, fluffing her dress so it's out of the way. She squirms playfully, as if getting comfortable, rubbing back and forth.*

FABRIZIA: I guess that depends on where you look. Anyway, we don't have to stay long.

JACK: I thought you had to talk to Boris –

FABRIZIA: There's a party downtown, in one of the sealed-off subway tunnels. They found a way in – everybody gets a gas mask, it's supposed to be great, and they set up showers – no one here will want to go, and I don't want to go with them, neither do you – it'll be like the catacombs –

JACK's hands go under her dress. FABRIZIA squirms more, affably.

Boris will understand. He's a very old acquaintance. I love your thumbs.

JACK looks to the door. From his angle he can't quite see out of it, but FABRIZIA can. He nods to it.

JACK: What's going on out there?

FABRIZIA: Something with Irene.

JACK: Like what, bending her over a chair?

FABRIZIA: No, she cut herself. *Mmmmn.*

JACK: Really?

FABRIZIA: Trying to slice limes. You didn't hear her?

JACK: Is she okay?

FABRIZIA: I guess so. Am I okay?

JACK: What do *you* think?

FABRIZIA: No, what do *you* think?

JACK: Don't you know what I think?

FABRIZIA: But I want to hear you *say* it.

GAVIN knocks on the doorframe, looking in. Behind him, her hand wrapped in a white towel, IRENE.

GAVIN: So that's where you are –

FABRIZIA: (*Not moving from on top of JACK.*) We are just horsing around.

JACK: How is Irene?

IRENE smiles, shows them her wrapped hand.

IRENE: I'm fine. Watch out for those limes, though.

GAVIN: I thought she might lie down for a minute.

IRENE: I feel really stupid – it’s really okay –

JACK: Nonsense, climb aboard ...

JACK and FABRIZIA scoot over, making room.

FABRIZIA: It’s a very comfortable bed.

FABRIZIA fluffs a pillow for IRENE. IRENE lays down, her head next to JACK’s feet, her feet near JACK’s head, FABRIZIA still in the middle.

GAVIN: (*To IRENE.*) How’s that? Do you want something to drink?

IRENE: (*Smiles.*) Maybe later ... in February ...

GAVIN: I meant some water. I’ll be right back.

GAVIN leaves. FABRIZIA looks down at IRENE.

FABRIZIA: You’ve got something on your blouse.

IRENE: That’s blood. Just about any stain from a bodily fluid will get broken down by saliva.

IRENE puts the stained part of the shirt in her mouth, sucks on it. Slight pause.

You two look comfortable.

FABRIZIA: I’m in my favorite chair.

IRENE: Did you just get here? In the city? Everyone says it’s changed so much – I wouldn’t know, but everyone tells me.

FABRIZIA: We are just here for two days. I’m to California and Jack is to somewhere he hasn’t decided to tell me ...

She laughs and pokes him.

But I am from Europe. When I was a girl, and when my mother was a girl, there were still buildings ruined from the war, or the war before that, or the wars 500 years before that, or from 2000 years. All that gets into your bones.

FABRIZIA takes a big drink, bounces a little on JACK.

Do you know I have someone who loves me very much in Roma? And Tokyo. And Mexico City. But I’m here, in a strange apartment, with a man I know only a little, who is quite lovely. This is actually the way normal people live.

IRENE: Gavin said you’re an actress.

FABRIZIA: I am of the world. We all are, actually. Borders are not so important.

IRENE looks up, suddenly, at the screen. The others turn.

IRENE: Is that from earlier, or is that happening now?

FABRIZIA: Turn on the sound.

JACK: It doesn't work.

FABRIZIA: This is like *Mexico*.

IRENE: I think that's St. Louis.

JACK: What's in St. Louis?

IRENE: The river. The river.

Slight pause. They watch.

JACK: It's probably just pesticide runoff or acid rain, normal contamination.

FABRIZIA: Look at all those fish.

JACK: You can't tell without the sound, it's pointless –

IRENE: Where's the remote?

JACK: It doesn't work, Sarah told me –

IRENE finds the remote. She changes the channel. She drops the remote, leans back on the pillow.

FABRIZIA: Good decision.

IRENE: I get enough of this at work. I was trying to have fun. (*Laughs.*) Until the *fucking* limes ...

FABRIZIA: Have some of this.

FABRIZIA gives IRENE some of her drink. IRENE winces.

IRENE: That tastes like a week-old acid bath. Wow. (*Calls.*) Hey, Boris! Boris!

BORIS appears, drink in one hand, canapé in another, chewing.

You abandoned me, man.

BORIS: Did I? I thought you had withdrawn to a life of contemplation and silence. But instead I see you're in the throes of Old World debauchery. Do you want a drink?

IRENE: A glass of the green stuff. And you could talk to me. And what are you eating?

BORIS: God knows – throw anything at me and I'll wolf it down – I'm like a big *dog*.

BORIS pops the last bit of food into his mouth and goes.

IRENE: I didn't realize I was so hungry.

JACK: Do you want to smell my thumb?

IRENE: Beg pardon?

JACK holds out his hand. IRENE bends forward, sniffs.

My goodness.

FABRIZIA: (*Smiles.*) Fresh out of the oven.

GAVIN *enters, with a glass of water, which he hands to IRENE, and a bottle of wine. Behind him is BORIS, with the pitcher and extra glasses. BORIS fills an extra glass and hands it to IRENE, then tops off the others.*

BORIS: Back with everything mankind requires ...

GAVIN: There's more of everything, especially food –

FABRIZIA: Did you see the dead fish?

IRENE: The Mississippi.

JACK: We weren't quite paying attention, and we couldn't *hear* –

GAVIN: Are they still showing it?

IRENE: I changed the channel.

They turn to the screen. IRENE finds the remote, switches it back. They watch.

BORIS: Well, I don't care what she says, those breasts are not real.

GAVIN: Maybe they'll come back to it.

IRENE: If they don't, it probably means it wasn't serious, or it was last year – if it was a crisis now they'd be showing it now.

JACK: They were showing it.

IRENE: Then they'll show it again.

Slight pause.

I don't think those are real either.

BORIS: The fact is, if it's broadcast you can't trust it.

GAVIN: I thought that if the President said it you can't trust it.

SARAH: What President?

GAVIN *turns to see SARAH standing in the door, chewing, with a glass of wine.*

IRENE: If it's the President being broadcast do the two negatives cancel out?

SARAH: No, they add up to one big sucking vortex of suck.

Slight pause.

GAVIN: I cannot bear that man.

Slight pause.

BORIS: Well –

GAVIN: (*Referring to the screen.*) Can you imagine having the power of life and death? Really living with having that power, that your decisions could kill people, or whole countries –

JACK: Someone has to.

GAVIN: But I'd think it would be difficult – a burden. That it would make you think twice. You'd think, wouldn't you think, if you had the power of life and death you wouldn't spend your time using it just to make yourself even more sickeningly rich than you already are –

IRENE: But who else would want the job? Why else?

GAVIN: But isn't the point of having a democracy that these people don't get elected?

BORIS: They *don't*.

Everyone laughs.

GAVIN: Okay, did you know that the last Roman emperor wasn't even killed? The Visigoths let him live out his days on a farm. No one bothered to drum up a replacement. It was an idea whose time had crapped out. (*Smiles.*) I'm just saying.

FABRIZIA: I used to live in Rome.

IRENE: The nearest I've been to Rome is a layover at Da Vinci airport.

BORIS: Rome has Gavin worked up. I didn't think it was politics, I thought it was lurid stories.

GAVIN: It is. It's full of them –

FABRIZIA: Like what?

GAVIN: But it's lurid stuff in context – take Tiberius, the second emperor, he's this dutiful –

BORIS: Tell us a lurid story!

GAVIN: I am –

BORIS: No, lurid is “pumping hot”, it isn't “dutiful” –

GAVIN: Shut up – Tiberius, he's a dutiful drudge all his life, and by the time he finally does become emperor he's old, and it's the last thing he cares about –

JACK: I'm afraid I agree with Boris –

GAVIN: What he *does* care about is best illustrated by his specially trained “minnows” – little boys whose Imperial Duty is to jump naked into the water whenever the emperor goes swimming and dart around underneath him, “delicately nibbling and suckling the old man's privates.”

IRENE: Ewww.

GAVIN: Tiberius was emperor when Jesus was crucified. When Jesus says “render unto Caesar” this is the man. That's only the tip of his iceberg –

BORIS: O come on – if you could do anything, and you were a bitter old fuck who couldn't get it up, wouldn't you take drastic measures?

IRENE: But that's not *lurid*, it's just gross – old men pretending to be fish food is not hot.

GAVIN: Except, the thing is, to me, that Tiberius – the people who came after him took the empire for granted, took their *inheritance* for granted. Tiberius is the guy who works like a dog to make CEO and cuts loose indulging every repressed desire. But someone like Nero – and there are a lot of Neros – who's in power just because he's somebody's *son*, grows up convinced that whatever desire they have is the most natural thing in the world –

BORIS: What are you possibly getting at?

Slight pause.

He could do whatever he wanted, right? Who needs to go further than that? I'm not defending his aquatic sports, but why shouldn't it be extreme? No one wants real life. Now? Why?

FABRIZIA: (*Laughs.*) Boris, I am in *love* with my life!

BORIS: But your life is *all about* pretending to be someone else, especially a neon underwear space pirate – who wouldn't love it?

FABRIZIA: You are so funny. Life isn't that, it's *this*. And my work isn't that either. Most of it is gossip and bottled water while someone's doing my hair. And then I get to come here and meet lovely people I don't know.

FABRIZIA *finishes her drink, holds out her glass for more.* GAVIN *pours.*

SARAH: Well, you're also rich.

FABRIZIA: Sure, but that is hardly the thing.

SARAH: Really?

FABRIZIA: Sarah, no, it is like making love. Money is exactly like making love. If you do not know, if you are a virgin, it seems like it will change everything. And it can, or it doesn't at all. And it can be any kind of love you like, or it can be nothing, or it can be worse than nothing. Money can be what you want as well. It all comes back to you.

BORIS: What do you think, Jack?

FABRIZIA: Jack thinks I am *wonderful*.

They laugh. Slight pause.

IRENE: You have totally lost me. If real life – if it's a choice between real and – it still seems to me that we're in the middle of all kinds of ostensibly interesting shit.

BORIS: We are.

IRENE: So why aren't you guys making movies about, I don't know –

BORIS: A beautiful toxicologist working against the clock to find a cure for a virus about to ravage the world and the dashing entertainment executive risking his life fielding multiple calls while attempting to drive across Manhattan?

IRENE: Something like that.

BORIS: (*Smiles.*) I thought people made that movie all the time.

GAVIN *stands with the bottle of wine and the half-full blender, pours generally.*

GAVIN: Who needs what?

JACK: I'm going to get more to eat.

JACK *climbs off the bed and goes through the door. GAVIN calls after him.*

GAVIN: Just bring it in. It seems like people are comfortable ...

FABRIZIA: Tell another lurid story.

BORIS: We still haven't heard what people would do if they could do anything. There's that urban legend about the woman who thinks she's alone, and her German shepherd, and the peanut butter, and then the surprise party –

IRENE: I've heard that story – it's just *terrible!*

FABRIZIA: No, Gavin. Tell another story.

IRENE: Not involving old men.

GAVIN: Okay – the empress Agrippina's hat trick of incest.

BORIS: Can't you do better than "hat trick"? You're supposedly the writer – how about "she pulls the incest trifecta" – or what rhymes with hat – cat trick? Shat trick? Frat trick? (*Pronouncing it to rhyme.*) Twat trick? I like the name though. *Agrippeena*. Sounds obscene all by itself – or like some medical procedure – or what's that joke, doctor says to the husband, "I have to tell you, your wife has acute angina" and the guy says, "Well, I know that, but is there something wrong with her heart?"

GAVIN: Are you completely finished?

BORIS: (*Laughs, drinking.*) Some time ago, yes.

GAVIN: As a teenager Agrippina sleeps with her brother, the insane emperor Caligula, in order to keep on his good side. She seduces the next emperor, her uncle Claudius, and gets him to rewrite the incest laws so they can marry and then gets him to name *her* son Nero as his heir instead of his own son Britannicus. Then she poisons Claudius, poisons Britannicus, and starts sleeping with Nero in order to control *him*. She was very determined. When Nero finally had enough and ordered *her* murder it took something like four tries. She just kept surviving.

IRENE: Wow.

GAVIN: Or Messalina –

IRENE: I lose track of these names –

GAVIN: Claudius's previous wife. When she's fifteen Caligula, as a joke, marries her to his 50 year old stuttering, twitching uncle. When she's nineteen Caligula dies and out of the blue Messalina becomes queen of the world. A lot people have called her a nymphomaniac –

FABRIZIA: (*Laughs.*) No one is a nymphomaniac.

GAVIN: She supposedly staged a contest with Rome's most celebrated prostitute for who could stay the longest in the saddle. The prostitute lost, claiming "that woman must be made of leather –"

IRENE: Is this true?

GAVIN: Who knows? Some of it. *They* thought so. Do you believe Nancy Reagan had an affair with Frank Sinatra in the White House?

IRENE: Really?

BORIS: It's an established fact. There's probably even video if you know who to call.

SARAH: It's pretty tabloid, isn't it? Messalina.

BORIS: Isn't that the point?

GAVIN: It's *a* point – I mean, she's a spoiled, fucked up teenager, but at the same time –

BORIS: Probably came from a broken home.

IRENE: O who doesn't?

BORIS: Peer pressure, diet pills, gas-huffing –

GAVIN: O who wouldn't – right – listen: Tiberius, he's got his minnows, but he's very old school and dies with a huge surplus in the bank. Two years later Caligula's burned through the whole thing and starts auctioning off national treasures to the highest bidder. How different is that from turning a \$5 trillion surplus into a \$5 trillion deficit, or from allowing corporations to pillage private citizens more efficiently than an army of Visigoths? 30 years before it was sacked Rome still had the largest and most effective standing army in the world. But a lot can happen in 30 years.

Slight pause.

SARAH: Or four.

Slight pause.

FABRIZIA: All this is very serious.

GAVIN: I don't mean it to be, or not *only* –

FABRIZIA: No, life is serious.

GAVIN: And it's also – the stories are also –

FABRIZIA: Passionate.

GAVIN: They are.

IRENE: *The Old Man and the Sea Monkeys.*

Slight pause.

SARAH: (*To FABRIZIA.*) What are you working on next?

FABRIZIA: *Double Indemnity.* It's a love story, on a film set. I am an actress who discovers that her husband, the director, plans to have her killed in a filming "accident" for the insurance. She

can only trust her identical stunt-double, also played by me – or can she trust her? It's very silly but also romantic and thrilling, very old-fashioned. The original is in black and white.

SARAH: (*To GAVIN.*) Did you tell her about *Bodhislotva*?

FABRIZIA: What is that?

BORIS: Where is Jack?

FABRIZIA: Jack is probably eating. Or on his phone. (*She calls.*) Jack?

No response. GAVIN stands and looks out through the door.

Maybe he stepped outside for better reception.

GAVIN: It's not the best neighborhood to go wandering. (*He calls.*) Jack?

No response. GAVIN exits.

FABRIZIA: Perhaps he is indisposed.

SARAH: The water pressure comes and goes now, so you kind of have to time things. It doesn't always flush. Sometimes it comes back at you.

Slight pause.

I'll go get some food.

SARAH exits. Slight pause. BORIS picks up the blender, pours.

BORIS: The Roman stuff. It's interesting.

FABRIZIA: It is.

BORIS: But I wonder, to me, if the material – can it be heard now? Shoot it from eight angles, edit the hell out of it, mortgage your kids for a hot soundtrack, but that doesn't change the fundamental object.

FABRIZIA: I am always thinking things should be as creative as possible.

BORIS: Gavin's got some great ideas.

FABRIZIA: When people are thinking about their work, it's great.

Slight pause.

IRENE: When did you two meet?

FABRIZIA: (*Laughs.*) O, I don't even remember. When did *you* meet?

IRENE: Yesterday.

FABRIZIA: (*Laughs.*) Gavin is right – nothing changes!

IRENE: Look at that.

They look at the screen.

Wow.

BORIS: Is this what you saw before?

IRENE: No.

Slight pause.

My hand is hurting like a motherfucker.

BORIS: Do you have anything for pain?

IRENE: Maybe in my purse.

BORIS: If I were a doctor I'd prescribe all kinds of shit for myself.

IRENE: *(Calls.)* Sarah?

IRENE calls exactly as SARAH walks in, holding a tray of food. IRENE laughs.

O, there you are ...

SARAH: I've got bread, some pate, and what looks like cheddar and some kind of blue, and something a little more stinky – hopefully it's supposed to be stinky –

SARAH puts the tray down on the bed as she speaks, and the others gather round.

BORIS: Fabulous.

IRENE: I was actually going to ask if you could find my purse – while you were out there. It's got some painkillers in it, for my hand.

BORIS: *(Mouth full.)* It's really beginning to hurt, huh?

FABRIZIA: *(Mouth full.)* Once the adrenaline wears off, everything is bad.

SARAH: Sure. I can get it.

BORIS: Where's Gavin?

SARAH: Looking for Jack? Or opening more wine –

BORIS picks up the empty blender.

BORIS: Speaking of which.

SARAH: You guys are really sucking that down.

BORIS: If the disappearance of the rainforest teaches us anything, it is the impermanence of all things, and that we must indeed seize the blender.

IRENE: Carpe blendum. Frappum? Liquifium?

BORIS goes.

SARAH: Where's your purse?

IRENE: By the door? Or if you've got something I could just take that. Whatever.

SARAH *goes. Slight pause. FABRIZIA and IRENE eat.*

Boris seems very ... I don't know ... sort of rakish.

FABRIZIA *laughs in agreement, then starts to cough, her mouth full. She continues to cough, choking on something. IRENE sits up.*

Are you okay?

FABRIZIA *keeps coughing, her face red. IRENE leans over to slap her back, but the nearest hand is her injured one, and the other hand is holding food. She pops the food into her mouth and then reaches awkwardly with her good hand and slaps FABRIZIA on the back, ineffectually. FABRIZIA keeps coughing. IRENE shifts her position and whacks her on the back, dislodging the food in her throat. FABRIZIA gasps, swallows, exhales. IRENE sits back.*

There you go.

FABRIZIA: Thank you.

IRENE: Happens all the time. Someone chokes to death every five minutes in New York alone.

Slight pause. FABRIZIA clears her throat.

What do you think of playing a character like that, the competing with the prostitute –

FABRIZIA: To play a character you must find the way to love them. And of course a great script, a sensitive director –

IRENE: An attractive soccer team for your co-stars.

FABRIZIA: *(Laughs.)* Yes, of course!

IRENE: All those rehearsals.

FABRIZIA: Actually those scenes are just terrible to do.

IRENE: Gangbangs?

BORIS enters with a refilled blender, chewing.

BORIS: These dumplings are delicious.

IRENE: Fabrizia just about choked.

BORIS: Really? You're supposed to *swallow* ...

He pours more for all of them. The women both drink deeply.

FABRIZIA: This drink makes my tongue numb.

SARAH appears in the doorway, a bottle in one hand and a half-full glass in the other.

SARAH: Irene, I'm sorry, I can't find your purse anywhere.

IRENE: It's not by the door?

SARAH: Not by the door, not on the counter, not by the coats, not in the bathroom –

BORIS: I thought Gavin was in the bathroom.

SARAH: He isn't. He was – there's water everywhere – but I didn't see him –

SARAH finishes her glass in a swallow, pours more.

FABRIZIA: He is with Jack.

IRENE: My hand hurts like fucking hell. (*To SARAH.*) Do you have anything?

SARAH: That's why I was in the bathroom – we don't, we've got peroxide, tea tree oil –

BORIS: Drink up, that'll help.

IRENE: I am drinking up. But my purse has to be somewhere ...

IRENE climbs off the bed and past SARAH, out the door. SARAH drinks half of her glass, refills it, and follows her out. BORIS looks after them. He sits on the bed with FABRIZIA. Slight pause.

BORIS: We've been abandoned.

Slight pause.

FABRIZIA: How are your children?

BORIS: Just fine. At school. Away. Paolo?

FABRIZIA: Paolo's great.

Slight pause.

BORIS: This is a good idea. Getting together. It's been too long.

Slight pause. They both drink.

And Gavin's got some good ideas. One takes off from that game everyone plays, in subway cars, or buses, or elevators, when you try to pick out the person you'd want to be marooned with, if there was some catastrophe, like if you were stranded on a desert island, or if there was a meteor, or an earthquake –

FABRIZIA: Or a terrorist attack. That would be topical.

BORIS: It would, and that might work, except the fun of the game is that as you're deciding who's the hottest thing in the car, the doors open and maybe your hot thing leaves or maybe five more even hotter candidates dive into the pool, so the structure of the film is episodic, little apocalyptic fantasy scenarios with a succession of babes –

FABRIZIA: And I would be one of these babes?

BORIS: No, you'd be the babe playing the game! It's *women's* desire – *that's* what's important – so we could even have an episode where the hottest person is another woman and get points for

diversity *and* points for smut. And the sweetest thing – and it is sweet – is that at the end of the ride our heroine, after all these temptations and fantasies, gets off the train ... to meet her husband! She's totally in love, maybe she has kids – we can spin it for family values *and* as a flagrant endorsement of a woman's right to an unfettered imagination.

Slight pause.

FABRIZIA: Would you change it to another city?

BORIS: We'd probably have to. Boston. Or Chicago.

FABRIZIA: But if it was New York – instead of an earthquake, if it was a car bomb or a gas attack –

BORIS: Uh huh, except part of the point is that the result of the catastrophe is you being stranded with a stranger you're imagining in their underwear. Or not even, because it's so *hot*.

FABRIZIA: Uh huh.

Slight pause.

BORIS: But maybe frivolous sexual daydreaming *should* enter the realm of car bombs and gas attacks. Maybe that's our statement – life goes on, and comedy liberates. And beauty.

FABRIZIA: It is ultimately quite serious.

FABRIZIA *drinks deeply.*

And passionate, I feel this, as a woman separated from her home –

GAVIN *enters with sleeves rolled up, a bottle of wine in one hand, a glass in his other.*

GAVIN: Hey.

BORIS: Where have you been? It's getting desperate – the two of us parched and starving, left here to talk business of all things –

FABRIZIA: Where is Jack?

GAVIN: I haven't a clue. Did he just leave?

FABRIZIA: *Pah.* He can pay for his own breakfast.

GAVIN: There *is* a curfew, and an occasionally humorless police presence.

GAVIN *nods at the screen.*

Did whatever it was come back on?

BORIS: No. This cheese is good.

FABRIZIA: It is delicious. We were just discussing *Desert Island*.

GAVIN: Also known as *Apocalypse Plow*.

BORIS: Fabrizio's got some great ideas to rework it. Open it up and get some *substance*.

GAVIN: Okay.

BORIS: Like maybe the woman's actually a nurse, and starts off on her way to a hospital –

GAVIN: Okay.

FABRIZIA: It could be beautiful.

BORIS: Besides, who doesn't think those white dresses are hot?

IRENE and SARAH enter, both with their glasses, SARAH with the bottle.

IRENE: It's fucking disappeared.

BORIS: What was in it?

IRENE: What do you think? Money, my keys, my ID –

SARAH: *(To GAVIN.)* Did you find Jack?

GAVIN: No.

IRENE: Jesus fuck.

BORIS: We'll work it out, don't worry.

IRENE drops onto the bed.

IRENE: You don't understand, my clinic is high security – if anyone loses their ID it's a *problem*.

Slight pause. IRENE empties her glass in a swallow.

It's just that I spend all my job trying to undo what someone else just like me has spent their "job" doing. And what I come up with, the *knowledge*, will benefit that person doing *their* "job" as much as it will benefit anyone trying to do mine! And what – I mean – what I'm – you'd think, because I'm the researcher – they wouldn't give me such a bad time, but they do!

She holds out her wine glass. BORIS fills it from the blender. She drinks.

GAVIN: O, Irene, I totally forgot, I have something for your hand –

GAVIN digs for a small bottle of pills, opens it, and shakes two pills into her hand.

It's some kind of heavy duty pain thing, but I thought, even with the alcohol –

IRENE: *(Throwing back the pills, drinking.)* It's perfect. Mmn. Thanks.

SARAH: *(To GAVIN.)* You went downstairs?

GAVIN: I was looking for Jack.

SARAH: Where did you go?

GAVIN: Downstairs. And then I thought of Irene and remembered 3B's medicine cabinet –

FABRIZIA: Did you see Jack?

GAVIN: No. The apartments are empty. The doors are locked.

FABRIZIA: They are just abandoned?

GAVIN: For a lot of different reasons. Anyway.

Slight pause.

IRENE: Where did you two meet?

GAVIN: Well –

SARAH: I'd been living under the stairs for three days.

Slight pause.

GAVIN: My apartment was on the first floor – you saw the first floor when you came in. I ran into Sarah. The fourth floor was free. It's no secret. It's happened all over town.

Slight pause.

IRENE: *(To SARAH.)* Where did *you* live?

SARAH: *(Indicating the screen.)* I'm sorry, does anyone know where that is?

FABRIZIA: Irene said St. Louis.

BORIS: That's not St. Louis.

GAVIN: Maybe it's a different story.

SARAH: Shit.

BORIS: What?

SARAH: That! *This*.

BORIS: O, right – no, I just thought you meant something else –

FABRIZIA: But isn't that the river?

IRENE: It could be New Orleans. Or Minneapolis.

BORIS: Or nothing, nothing serious – it could be Ecuador.

Slight pause.

The river's not that wide in Minneapolis –

GAVIN: Anyone need more wine?

SARAH: Jesus Christ.

There's a sharp, electric "pop" sound from the television. As indicated by the light, the channel has changed to silent static. They stare at it for a moment.

IRENE: What happened?

GAVIN: It looks like we lost our signal.

BORIS: Try changing the channel.

IRENE digs for the remote, tries several channels without success. GAVIN reaches behind the screen to check the wiring.

IRENE: Nothing. They're all dead.

BORIS: Is something unplugged?

GAVIN: No. It's fine.

IRENE: But it isn't fine. I mean, what the fuck?

BORIS: Something's wrong with your cable.

GAVIN: We don't have cable, this is just broadcast signal –

BORIS: You don't have *cable*?

IRENE: Then it's the TV. Why did we hear a sound if the sound doesn't work?

SARAH: We have sound.

IRENE: No you didn't.

SARAH: What's broken is the mute function on the remote. We can't seem to un-mute it. But there's nothing wrong with the sound.

IRENE: That's totally stupid. I'm sorry, are you people living in a goddam *cave*?

BORIS: Irene –

IRENE: It's the TV! Because nothing could have happened to the signal on every channel being broadcast in the New York area! We would know about it!

SARAH: How?

IRENE: Well if I had my purse I could take out my phone and fucking *call someone*!

JACK pokes his head into the doorway, a glass of wine in his hand.

JACK: What's going on?

Slight pause.

FABRIZIA: We didn't know where you were.

JACK: O. I'm sorry.

FABRIZIA: Gavin went looking.

JACK: I just went downstairs, outside, to make a call. My phone couldn't get a signal here. *(To GAVIN.)* Did you look outside?

GAVIN: I did. I must have missed you.

JACK: Sorry to have worried anyone. What's with the television?

BORIS: We don't exactly know.

FABRIZIA: Who did you need to call?

JACK: Just checking messages. And I needed to call Oskar.

IRENE: Did you see my purse?

JACK: I don't think so.

GAVIN: How did you get back in?

JACK: What?

GAVIN: If you went out, how did you get back in without buzzing us?

JACK: The door was open. You must have left it unlocked when you came down to look.

GAVIN: I guess I must have.

Slight pause.

Anyway. I've been meaning to try that cheese and haven't had a chance all night. It's supposed to go really well with the wine –

SARAH: If there isn't a signal can't we at least turn it off?

IRENE: But then how will we know if it comes back on?

BORIS: *(To GAVIN.)* What do you think?

GAVIN: It's fabulous. This is the best cheese in history.

JACK climbs over the bed to sit with FABRIZIA, taking some cheese on the way.

JACK: Where is it from?

GAVIN: Spain – apparently it's very hard to import, because of the weather, or what's happened to the weather –

JACK: *(Eating.)* I have had this – in Madrid. *(To FABRIZIA.)* Do you like it?

FABRIZIA: Where did you go?

JACK: I went right here.

He puts his arms around her.

(To IRENE.) How's your hand?

IRENE: It's better. Thank you.

BORIS: You know everything is going to be fine.

IRENE: It doesn't seem that way.

BORIS: But it is. Look at us – we've got everything you'd possibly need. Come here.

IRENE: What?

BORIS: Come here ...

BORIS crawls toward her, over the bed, then up her body.

IRENE: Watch out for my hand –

BORIS kisses her gently at first, then with more intensity. IRENE leans back on the bed, BORIS following her down until he's on top of her. They make out at length.

GAVIN: Uh ... Boris.

Slight pause. FABRIZIA giggles.

Hey Boris?

BORIS: *(Not looking up.)* What?

GAVIN: You want to rent a room?

BORIS: Got anything with a mirrored ceiling?

BORIS rolls off of IRENE, who's blushing. He gropes for his drink.

Comforting the sick is thirsty work ...

GAVIN: Mother Theresa said the same thing.

BORIS: I bet she did. How'd she handle it?

GAVIN: Rubber gloves?

BORIS: To comfort the flesh, one must understand the flesh. Ask anyone I haven't been married to.

He holds his empty glass out to GAVIN, who fills it with wine.

Thank you. The thing is – and I believe this is a genuine philosophical position – tomorrow we'll be in different rooms. Our lives are frescoes, painted in the time they take to dry. Can we in conscience ask for more? I think not. I think we get what we're sharing right here, and we should count ourselves lucky.

IRENE: We could be under a staircase.

BORIS: We could. We've all spent our time there, if we're honest.

Slight pause.

SARAH: I'm sorry, Boris. I know what you mean, but that ... that's just bullshit.

BORIS: Is it?

SARAH: Yes.

BORIS: No, you're right. I'm sure it is.

FABRIZIA: But we are all, we *are* all going away, we are all dying all the time, we will disappear and the cities will outlast us, even if they are in ruins.

SARAH: Jesus Christ.

GAVIN: Sarah –

SARAH walks out of the room. After a moment, GAVIN goes after her. Slight pause.

IRENE: I bet she's never really cried. I've had that problem, when things have happened – it's the terriblest thing.

BORIS: *Terriblest?*

IRENE: Shut up. I'm still right.

Slight pause.

I'm also high as a fucking kite.

They all laugh. FABRIZIA turns to JACK.

FABRIZIA: You missed the Roman stories.

JACK: I heard them.

FABRIZIA: You heard some of them. You missed the best one.

JACK: What was it?

FABRIZIA: It was about a pair of very bad girls.

JACK: What did they do?

FABRIZIA: What do you think they did?

JACK: Did they do the terriblest things?

FABRIZIA: The *terriblest*.

JACK: How terrible were they?

IRENE: O they were bad.

FABRIZIA: They broke *taboos*.

JACK pulls her to him. IRENE laughs.

JACK: Which ones?

FABRIZIA: The sexy ones.

JACK: Like fucking who you're not supposed to fuck, because you're married?

FABRIZIA: Only she did it a *lot*.

JACK: That's okay.

FABRIZIA: Or fucking who you're not supposed to fuck because they're your brother.

IRENE: Or your uncle.

FABRIZIA: Or your son.

JACK: That's okay.

FABRIZIA: Why is that okay?

JACK: Because I bet it made sense at the time.

JACK kisses her. FABRIZIA runs her hands through his hair, holds him to her, kissing him back. Watching them, BORIS discreetly caresses IRENE's breast. She smiles, pulls him to her, kisses him. Both couples make out, occasionally glancing at each other with a smile.

The lights in the room suddenly snap out, leaving them in darkness. They stop, look up.

BORIS: Gavin?

FABRIZIA bursts into giggles.

(Calling.) Gavin?

BORIS struggles to his feet and over to the wall switch. He turns it on and off, nothing.

Well, that's cute as shit.

A beam of light moves across BORIS, and GAVIN appears in the doorway, with a flashlight and a small cardboard box. He puts the box on the bed.

What's going on?

GAVIN: I don't know. Our power's out.

BORIS: Did we blow a fuse?

GAVIN: I'm about to go look. Here are some candles and some matches, I'll be right back. Sorry about this –

BORIS: Where's Sarah?

GAVIN: She's all right.

GAVIN goes. BORIS kneels by the box and takes out four thick candles, handing them to each of the others, who scoot near him on the bed.

JACK: Should we light all of them?

BORIS: Of course we should, we're guests.

BORIS lights a match and lights each candle in turn. The room brightens.

IRENE: That's pretty.

FABRIZIA: I love candlelight.

IRENE: Me too. *Ow!*

Wax has dripped onto IRENE's good hand. She winces, but doesn't know where to put it down. JACK laughs, and takes her candle from her. IRENE blows on her hand.

That's both of them. Fuck. I can't believe people drip wax on themselves on purpose.

BORIS: Do they?

IRENE: Of course they do. On very sensitive areas.

JACK: It's actually not so bad.

They laugh and look to JACK. He laughs.

It isn't! *(To FABRIZIA.)* Here, stick out your hand.

FABRIZIA: No!

JACK: She is always a baby ... I'll do it first –

FABRIZIA: I'm not doing it at all.

JACK drips wax onto his hand. He winces, but keeps his hand steady.

JACK: See? It's intense – the pain is actually exciting –

He drips again.

IRENE: *(To FABRIZIA.)* Your candle –

FABRIZIA: *(Laughing.)* O no ...

FABRIZIA's candle has dripped all over the bed spread. She tries ineffectually to wipe it off, or pry it up, but just smears things. She playfully swats JACK's arm.

See what you make me do ...

JACK: Sit on it, so they won't see –

FABRIZIA: I don't want wax on my dress!

BORIS: First – allow me –

BORIS takes FABRIZIA's candle and places it on an end table.

JACK: You should just take the dress off. I could pour it all over you and then peel it off like a spider's web – you would be squirming!

FABRIZIA: Be quiet –

JACK: You told me you liked squirming ...

BORIS: (To JACK, re: his candles.) Finished?

JACK: I guess I am ...

JACK hands BORIS the candles. BORIS puts them on the other end table.

(To FABRIZIA.) Look, I'm not burned – I'm telling you it's the best –

GAVIN enters, with SARAH behind him. FABRIZIA scoots on top of the wax stain. She and JACK, and IRENE giggle.

BORIS: (To GAVIN.) What's up?

GAVIN: I don't know. Fuses look okay.

BORIS: Would you know the difference?

IRENE: I wouldn't know a bad fuse if it stole my purse and bit me on the ass.

GAVIN: Well none of them looks burned out. Looks *burned*.

BORIS: Is that what they look like?

GAVIN: I don't fucking know, Boris –

SARAH: It's not the fuses. Lights are out all down the street.

IRENE: Really? Jesus Christ ...

FABRIZIA and IRENE go to look out the window.

SARAH: You can't – you can't see from here –

They pull back the curtains. Plywood covers the windows.

FABRIZIA: What happened to your bedroom?

GAVIN: We just had a lot of broken glass. I'd rather look at curtains anyway. The downside is that we don't have any plants. A good houseplant changes the way you experience a room. And they generate good Qi. Still. (To SARAH.) You're sure lights are off?

SARAH: The signs are off. At the corner, those are on all night.

Slight pause.

They used to keep me awake.

Slight pause.

When I slept in the living room.

BORIS: Do you have a radio?

GAVIN: Not that uses batteries.

BORIS: Should we call someone?

GAVIN: We could.

BORIS: It'll probably come back any minute.

BORIS *pulls out his cell phone, turns it on, dials, listens, re-dials, listens, turns it off.*

No signal.

BORIS *finds his glass, empties it, pockets his phone.*

How are you, Sarah?

SARAH: I'm okay.

BORIS: I'm serious.

SARAH: I know. Is there any more wine?

GAVIN *finds the bottle, pours more for her and for BORIS. GAVIN sits, and then pats the carpet next to him. SARAH sits. Slight pause.*

BORIS: Well this is cozy and pre-industrial.

IRENE: A friend of mine in college grew up in a yurt.

GAVIN: Really?

IRENE: Boy was *she* fucked up.

FABRIZIA: What is a yurt?

BORIS: It's a portable health drink. Should we be worried about this?

GAVIN: I don't know. Power outages do happen.

BORIS: But the TV signal too.

GAVIN: If there were a real problem, wouldn't there be an emergency broadcast signal?

BORIS: I don't know.

GAVIN: I don't either.

BORIS: But if there's no emergency broadcast, is that good, or is that catastrophically worse?

FABRIZIA: What are you talking about?

GAVIN: Nothing. We'll get woken up at 4am when the lights come back on. And we'll find out what's up in the morning papers.

IRENE: Unless *we're* the morning papers.

GAVIN: I meant the fish. We'll find out about the fish.

BORIS: (*Gesturing around them.*) None of *this* is about fish!

GAVIN: We don't know what this is about – if it's about anything –

BORIS: No, we don't.

GAVIN: That's what I'm saying, we don't –

FABRIZIA: How could a whole river be poisoned?

IRENE: All sorts of ways, actually –

BORIS: But, okay, if something *has* happened –

FABRIZIA: Something chemical?

BORIS: Just something – anything –

GAVIN: I don't know, we stay put, we stay put until we know –

IRENE: Do you have any vinegar?

GAVIN: What? Why? Should we?

IRENE: It can neutralize some immediate effects – soak a rag in vinegar, cover your face –

GAVIN: I don't know if we have any. (*To SARAH.*) Do we?

SARAH: We could also fill the tub with water –

BORIS: Can we stop talking about it?

GAVIN: You brought it up.

BORIS: I brought it up so we could put it to bed, not dress it up in fancy clothes and sing *Alleluia*.

Slight pause.

SARAH: Would you like some more wine?

BORIS: No I don't want any more *wine*. I mean, of course I want more wine – where's the fucking bottle – I'm going to be drinking all the wine I can possibly drink –

BORIS finds the bottle, pours, drinks, pours again.

But my point here, my *concern* here – I've fucking totally lost my train of thought –

GAVIN: Look, no one knows what's happened, or if anything's happened –

BORIS: Okay, right, – right – and we're *here*, and where is everyone else? Are we connected to them? I don't know. You call me and you talk about *Rome* – I mean, what is that? I'm not making fun of you, I'm asking, because I really don't know what that has to do with my life any more than Victorian poetry does, or flute music from the Andes, or advertising in restaurant bathrooms that you only read when you're standing there taking a piss. That's the only time you're acquainted with that person's product. And it's not like the product is piss-related, it's for some online service, or a leather jacket, or a movie – but in your mind it's always going to be linked to a urinal. And my reaction is where do you even *begin*?

BORIS drinks. Slight pause.

You can only see as far as you can reach. I can't see past the living room. We live where there are people, where bodies take up space. How can we measure a non-existent television signal or a chemical weapon in terms of what our own bed feels like at the end of the day?

Slight pause. BORIS pours more wine, sits.

GAVIN: Isn't that what making sense of this would mean?

BORIS: But we can't, Gavin – I mean, these are exact opposites.

Slight pause.

They are.

GAVIN: But people just don't realize –

BORIS: *Everyone* realizes! They know what happened in Rome! They know their shoes are made in sweatshops! They know the government's made of liars! They know! EVERYONE KNOWS! They just don't feel – *any of it* – is actually part of their lives!

Slight pause.

The fact is that there's an exact lack of connection!

Long pause.

GAVIN: Boris –

BORIS: Look, here's something, we never did this earlier, we never settled what we'd all do if we were emperor, if we could do anything.

FABRIZIA: I would have the lights on.

JACK: Why?

He grabs her suggestively. She giggles.

BORIS: Seriously!

SARAH: Seriously?

BORIS: No, not *seriously*, but seriously at least to play the goddamned game!

GAVIN: Then you start. What would *you* want?

BORIS: Excellent question! First – this could go on a while, get comfortable – first I'd like my own worldwide cable network – make my own movies, my own sadistic game shows, and all kinds of political content, like I'd have newscasters read out the Amnesty International reports – except I'd have the people reading them be these beautiful topless women – (*As he demonstrates.*) and all doing this kind of *shimmy* dance –

GAVIN: That is terrible.

BORIS: People would watch! “Did you see those torture statistics from Uzbekistan? They were *sweet!*” What would *you* do?

GAVIN: I don't have the first idea.

BORIS: Can I say that's indicative of larger issues?

GAVIN: Boris –

BORIS: Irene, what about you?

IRENE: I would donate lots of money for world peace and world health, and I would live on some beautiful *island*, with white sand beaches and chlorine blue water, and bananas and pineapples and guavas, and lots of magazines to read by the pool –

BORIS: Pool boy?

IRENE: Shit, there'd be a pool *team*.

They laugh. Slight pause.

JACK: I would build a completely life-like robot girlfriend, who can do anything – see through walls, bend metal bars, pick up radio waves so I can listen to music – or like *anything* –

IRENE: Who would she look like?

JACK: (*Looking at FABRIZIA.*) She could look like anyone I wanted.

FABRIZIA: That is also terrible.

JACK: What about you?

FABRIZIA: I am already fine.

JACK: O sure you are. (*Imitates FABRIZIA.*) “O do we have to? O I hate these parties, I hate this dress, I hate everyone staring, O no one's looking at me at all!”

FABRIZIA swats his arm. He laughs.

FABRIZIA: Shut *up*!

BORIS: So what would you do, Fabrizia?

FABRIZIA: I would want to wipe that smile off Mr. Fancypants.

SARAH: Like that would be hard.

Slight pause.

JACK: (*Warily.*) What does that mean?

SARAH: See, it's gone already.

They laugh, JACK with a fixed smile.

BORIS: *Bella*, you weren't finished.

FABRIZIA: No. I would like ... I would like a time machine.

JACK: (*Laughs.*) O, no you wouldn't!

GAVIN: Fabrizia, science-fiction has taught us that never works.

JACK: And where would you go? To see Cleopatra? You don't speak her language –

GAVIN: You'd be accused of witchcraft, tied to a tree –

JACK: They'd cut off your head – *eventually*, they'd cut off your head –

FABRIZIA: You are vulgar. What I want is just to see things about my own life. I want to see my mother when she was a girl. I want to see their house that was torn down. I want to feel my grandmother's hands when she was a beautiful woman.

Slight pause.

IRENE: (*Sniffs.*) That's really beautiful.

FABRIZIA: (*Sniffs.*) I miss them all so much.

IRENE: That would be so much better than the pool.

BORIS: Irene, it's a game, you can have them both.

IRENE: I can't, because I didn't think of it.

BORIS: You can. Time machine and the island.

JACK: And the robot pool boys.

IRENE: Okay – I would feel so self-conscious – but okay.

Slight pause.

BORIS: What about you, Sarah?

Slight pause.

SARAH: Wow. I don't know. It all sounds good.

GAVIN: What about –

BORIS: Hey, you blew your turn – no talking.

Slight pause.

SARAH: I'd like to fly. Like a bird.

BORIS: That sounds fun.

JACK: Like Wonder Woman.

SARAH: No, I read this book, there was a part of it where a man turned into a bear. As a disguise, but then he turned into a bear all the way. In his heart, so he forgot himself.

Slight pause.

So I'd be on the roof, and take my clothes off, and raise my arms and stand on my toes, and I'd just rise. And the farther I got from the ground, the more I'd look like a bird, and my thoughts would be only full of wind and sunlight and feathers, just my little bird brain and my little bird's heart. I'd be a speck in the sky.

Slight pause.

BORIS: What would you eat?

SARAH: (*Laughs.*) I don't know. I'd eat before I go.

SARAH reaches for some cheese, eats.

GAVIN: It's good isn't it?

SARAH: I don't know how you found it.

GAVIN: Turned over the right rocks.

Slight pause.

Anyone need anything?

JACK: Just the robot.

FABRIZIA: You are relentlessly bad. Give me your phone.

JACK: Why? There's no signal – I had to go outside –

FABRIZIA: I have a way with phones. (*To BORIS.*) What time is it?

BORIS: (*Glancing at his watch.*) About one.

FABRIZIA gets the phone, dials, drinks, listens.

JACK: Who is it?

FABRIZIA: Message from Cosima.

FABRIZIA listens, punches a button, redials, listens to it pick up.

Cosima? Si. Dove sei? Que cosa succede? No abbiamo nessun' idea. Veramente? Siamo pronti, pui passare a prenderci? Si, lo stesso indirizzo. Cinque minuti? Bene. Ciao.

FABRIZIA hangs up the phone, hands it to JACK.

I told you, I am magic.

Slight pause.

(*To JACK.*) Are you about ready?

JACK: Sure. Whenever.

GAVIN: You have to go?

FABRIZIA: I know. This has been wonderful, but I did promise that we'd meet another friend for a late drink. (*To BORIS.*) Do you know Cosima?

BORIS: Fabrizia, maybe you should stay –

FABRIZIA: We will be fine, really. Jack will protect me.

JACK: Absolutely.

BORIS: But we don't know –

FABRIZIA: It is fine – they are coming with a car, a very big car.

BORIS: Well I guess that changes everything.

FABRIZIA: Don't be pouty. It has been fun. Very much.

FABRIZIA digs around for her shoes, slips them on.

GAVIN: Well I'm glad you were able to stop by. I'm sorry for all the – I don't even know, for the electricity –

FABRIZIA: No no, what can you do? Irene, Sarah, it has been lovely to meet you.

FABRIZIA has climbed off the bed and does the kiss-kiss to each of the women.

IRENE: Will you guys be okay?

FABRIZIA: Of course. We are careful.

BORIS: They have a big car.

GAVIN: Okay, then. Jack, it's been a pleasure.

JACK: Yes, thank you. Good night to all of you. Irene, Sarah.

IRENE: Good night.

FABRIZIA: We must see each other again. I will talk to Boris. Good night – *ciao!*

BORIS and GAVIN walk them out. Pause.

IRENE: Was that sort of sudden?

SARAH: I don't know.

IRENE: She seems sweet.

SARAH: She does.

Slight pause.

IRENE: They didn't really talk much about any movie.

SARAH: Nope.

Slight pause.

IRENE: Is it safe, them leaving with all the lights out?

SARAH: I don't know. Gavin and Boris will wait with them.

IRENE: It feels very lonely here.

SARAH: Does it?

Slight pause.

IRENE: It's the end of the evening. But it feels like the end of the evening all over.

SARAH: Maybe it's the plywood.

IRENE: Don't you feel lonely?

SARAH: What do you feel lonely for?

IRENE: You are totally not answering my question.

Slight pause.

Doesn't Gavin help?

SARAH: Gavin's very kind. He actually is.

IRENE: Do you guys sleep together?

SARAH: Do we have *sex*?

IRENE: Yeah.

SARAH: It's happened.

Slight pause.

IRENE: When? I mean, how long after he found you in the stairwell?

SARAH: Jesus, Irene –

IRENE: Do you think you'd be together otherwise? Would you be together if the two of you met in, like, Phoenix?

SARAH: I don't know. I'm not *in*, like, Phoenix –

IRENE: Couldn't you be?

SARAH: It's not that simple.

IRENE: Three days on a bus.

SARAH: I am trying to put things together here.

IRENE: Is that why you're sleeping with the guy who took you in from the hallway?

SARAH: He didn't live here either. No one lives here. *We* live here. What the fuck is it to you?

Slight pause.

IRENE: Come on. It's not like I'll ever see you again.

SARAH: Gavin and Boris talk all the time.

IRENE: Boris is leaving tomorrow.

SARAH: I'm sure he'll call you –

IRENE: He'll call in two years when he's coming back to town.

IRENE *drinks*. *Slight pause.*

This feels like we're in the woods. In the past.

SARAH: There's so much that's so much worse, all over the world.

IRENE: I know. Can I tell you what's eating me? Ancient Rome. Isn't that funny? I was in Rome. I was in Da Vinci airport. Four hour layover. Killing time in a bookstore. I don't speak Italian – or French, or Spanish, or German – there wasn't a lot to read. I was looking at picture books. Travel books. Glories of the ancient world.

Slight pause.

SARAH: Uh huh.

IRENE: And then I came across this – painting, in a book, maybe from Pompeii ... and it was ... obscene, it was this sexual scene some fat-ass Roman had on his bedroom wall –

SARAH: What was it?

IRENE: Nothing. It was a woman sucking a guy's cock, while another guy fucked her from behind. They all had these big smiles. It was very *seize the day*.

Slight pause.

SARAH: Uh huh.

IRENE: The thing is, I've never done that – in my life. The ancient world is in tatters, but it's got one over me.

SARAH: Irene –

IRENE: I don't think I'd even want to do that, I'm not a slut – I try to give each thing its due – *but my life is so small*. It is. It's fucking desperate. The world was simpler then. Was pleasure enough?

Slight pause.

Anyway, for some reason it really got under my skin.

SARAH: What did you do? In the airport.

IRENE: What do you think? I went to the ladies room, masturbated in a stall, washed my hands, got a cup of coffee, and caught my plane.

Slight pause.

So there, I'm not trying to be nosy, I'm just fucked up. And fucking *parched*.

IRENE *gropes for a wine bottle, finds it, can't find her glass.*

Do you mind?

SARAH: We're on a frontier.

IRENE *drinks from the bottle, wipes her mouth, hands it to SARAH, who drinks.*
GAVIN and BORIS *appear in the doorway, BORIS with IRENE's purse.*

IRENE: O my God! O my God, where did you find it? We looked everywhere!

BORIS: It was by the door, under Jack's coat –

IRENE: We looked under every coat!

SARAH: Jack's coat wasn't there –

IRENE: O Thank you Boris, thank you so much.

She stands and gives him a big kiss.

I cannot tell you what this means. I was freaking!

SARAH: They get off okay?

GAVIN: No problem. It's really strange to see all the lights out.

BORIS: It's disturbing.

GAVIN: You can even see the stars.

Slight pause.

IRENE: Do you know what's going on?

GAVIN: No. The streets are empty.

IRENE: Any cabs?

GAVIN: No. We were talking – you two should probably just crash here. We have plenty of space. The couch folds out, or you can use one of the other apartments – they don't have electricity, but neither do we.

BORIS: *(To IRENE.)* What do you think?

IRENE: I'd rather stay here. Maybe the lights will come back and we'll figure out what's going on.

IRENE *wobbles on her feet. BORIS catches her.*

BORIS: You okay?

IRENE: I'm fine. Excuse me. I just need to kneel down for a minute ...

IRENE *leaves*. SARAH *stands, hands GAVIN the bottle*.

SARAH: Is she okay?

BORIS: She's fine.

Slight pause.

SARAH: I'll go set up the sofa.

SARAH *leaves*. *Slight pause*. GAVIN *drinks, hands the bottle to BORIS, who drinks, hands it back*.

BORIS: I really like her.

GAVIN: So do I.

BORIS: What do you think of Irene?

GAVIN: I think you should be nice to her.

BORIS: Thank you, mother.

GAVIN: She seems nice. A little impulsive.

BORIS: But I like that.

GAVIN: You do.

GAVIN *glances at the bed, finds the remote, aims it at the screen, clicks several buttons*. *Nothing changes*. *He tosses the remote back onto the bed*. *Slight pause*.

Anyway.

BORIS: Write a few scenes for Fabrizia. I'll make sure she reads them. Whatever you want. The teenage nymphomaniac.

GAVIN: Messalina.

BORIS: Whoever.

GAVIN: She's actually sort of sympathetic. She did terrible things, but they all seem like ... groping, like she can't see past herself. She's just young.

BORIS: It gets better by the minute.

SARAH *returns*.

SARAH: Okay, everything's set up. Irene's already lying down.

BORIS: Is she okay?

SARAH: I think so.

BORIS: Then good night. We'll talk tomorrow.

BORIS goes. They turn back to the room.

SARAH: I left the window open in the bathroom. It ... uh ... needs to air out.

GAVIN: This whole place is a bombed site.

SARAH: It's not that bad.

SARAH begins to collect bottles and glasses. GAVIN piles up the food plates, napkins, scraps, etc.

GAVIN: How are you?

SARAH: I don't know –

GAVIN: Jesus Christ.

SARAH: What?

GAVIN: They spilled wax all over the spread.

SARAH: We'll deal with it tomorrow.

GAVIN: Is it okay that they're staying?

SARAH: Where else can they go?

GAVIN: I know, but –

SARAH: It's fine. Of course it's fine.

Slight pause.

GAVIN: What were you and Irene talking about?

SARAH: Her time at Da Vinci airport.

GAVIN: Boris thinks it all went very well.

SARAH: I'm glad.

GAVIN: I can't read these things at all.

SARAH: She seemed nice.

They've each collected an armload. They move to the doorway and stop. Slight pause.

(Whispers.) O my God.

Slight pause.

GAVIN: *(Whispers.)* What do we do?

SARAH: *(Whispers.)* Nothing, just put it down.

They back up and speak quietly.

GAVIN: We can't just walk past them.

SARAH: I know.

GAVIN: Didn't he just go out there?

SARAH: I know.

GAVIN: Wasn't she just throwing up?

SARAH: I know.

Slight pause. They put their armloads down in a pile. They stand for a moment. GAVIN leans over the bed, brushing off crumbs, and pulls back the covers.

GAVIN: This place is a wreck.

SARAH: Ssssh.

SARAH sits at the end of the bed and kicks off her shoes. She leans over and blows out the nearest candle.

GAVIN: I'm exhausted. Are you?

SARAH: Uh huh.

GAVIN sits on the side of the bed. He pulls off his shirt and pants, and lies back on the bed in his boxer shorts. SARAH unzips her dress and climbs onto the bed in her underwear.

GAVIN: The candles are nice.

SARAH: They are. It's quiet.

GAVIN: *They're* quiet.

SARAH: Maybe they're finished.

GAVIN: Maybe they passed out in the middle and didn't notice.

SARAH blows out the other candle on her side. GAVIN turns to blow on his.

SARAH: Leave one.

GAVIN wets his fingers and snuffs one of the candles. Slight pause.

The thing is, it's still – whatever happens, whoever it doesn't happen to just shrugs it off.

Slight pause.

Irene says our lives are small.

GAVIN: Us?

SARAH: People.

GAVIN: What do you want me to say?

Slight pause.

SARAH: Tell me a story.

GAVIN: Sarah.

SARAH: Make something up.

GAVIN: Sarah.

Slight pause.

Recently scientists have discovered a whole new facet of birdlife, in the upper reaches of the atmosphere. It was discovered by the Space Shuttle. One day they opened the airlock and found a frozen pelican floating outside. When they took it in and thawed it out, it came to life – like it had been in suspended animation. When they ran tests they discovered that the pelican was actually over a hundred years old. Since then they’ve found more – big birds, owls, eagles, sea birds – that have flown so high that they pass into a layer of air so cold that it snap-freezes them, but yet somehow allows them to maintain a kind of orbit ... so they just circle the earth, until a Space Shuttle, or I don’t know what, causes them to drop lower, where they thaw out and return to life ...

Slight pause.

It could explain a great deal about bird evolution.

Slight pause.

SARAH: Are they awake? When they’re frozen?

GAVIN: That’s the thing, they think they are.

Slight pause.

Or they’re dreaming.

Slight pause.

SARAH: Or they aren’t really birds at all.

Slight pause.

Gavin?

He’s asleep. SARAH sits up. Slight pause. She feels for the remote, aims it at the screen. Nothing. She tosses it back on the bed. Slight pause. SARAH scoots carefully off the bed, then reaches across GAVIN and picks up the remaining candle. She moves to the floor at the end of the bed and sits, placing the candle on top of a stack of books. She takes a book from the other stack – the book GAVIN had picked up earlier – and opens it.

After a moment, SARAH lowers the book and rubs her eyes. She attempts to read again. After another moment, she lowers the book. She riffles randomly through the book and stops at a page. She looks at it.

At the close of that terrible year, there were signs of impending evils. A calf was born beside the road with its head fastened to one of its legs. Soothsayers deduced that a new head was being prepared for the world, but it would be neither powerful nor secret since it had been deformed in the womb and given birth by the roadside.

SARAH rips the page out of the book. She holds it over the candle until it catches, then watches it burn, finally dropping it onto one of the empty food plates. When it finishes burning, she riffles randomly through the book again, and rips out another page, looking at it.

Whether it was accidental or caused by a criminal act on the part of the emperor is uncertain – both versions have supporters. Now started the most terrible and destructive fire which Rome had ever experienced ...

SARAH holds the page over the candle until it catches, then watches it burn, finally dropping it onto one of the empty food plates. When it finishes burning, she riffles randomly through the book again, and rips out another page, looking at it.

She was still weeping and moaning when the men violently broke down the door. Then, for the first time, it dawned on Messalina what her position really was. Terrified, she took a dagger and put it to her throat and then her breast – but could not do it. And so the officer ran her through. The body was left with her mother.

SARAH burns the page, again dropping it onto the plate. Slight pause. She holds the book open so the pages are facing down, and lowers them onto the candle. The book catches fire, slowly at first. SARAH moves the book in her hand, so the flames climb up the pages. When the flame is burning fully, she drops the book, open, onto the plate.

SARAH watches it burn for a moment, then reaches over and snuffs the candle. As the book still burns she climbs back onto the bed and lies down next to GAVIN.

The book burns out, sputtering into darkness.

BLACKOUT.